

INVENTING TIBET 2

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The phenomenal success that marked the way Tibetan Buddhism and culture were received in the West was – ironically – the result of Tibet’s disappearance from the political map. Tibet only entered the West’s consciousness after the country had been incorporated in the People’s Republic of China (PRC) in 1950, and especially after its spiritual and temporal leader, Tenzin Gyatso, the 14th Dalai Lama, escaped to India, followed by tens of thousands of fellow Tibetans, in 1959. It was then that a new Tibet was born: the Tibetan Diaspora, which has its center in the Himalayan hill station of Dharamsala in North India. There, the leaders of a community comprising about three percent of the Tibetan people, embarked on a project of constructing Tibetan nationhood, focused on what has become known in the West as Tibet’s unique cultural heritage (TCH). What is that heritage? How was it idealized into a locus of an endangered spiritual wisdom and hybridized to make it relevant to the world’s future and thus an effective resource in mobilizing international support for Tibetan causes?

One of the reasons Tibet had remained almost unnoticed on the map of the world until 1959 is that it had never been colonized. Colonialism, whatever its many sins, has been a great producer of knowledge. It modernized the countries governed by importing technology, laying on infrastructure, establishing colleges, universities and libraries and sending elites for education in the colonial metropolis. Tibet missed all this. Unlike in the case of India, no records, surveys, and research reports on Tibet accumulated in the archives and research institutes of the colonial power, no scholars-officers of the colonial administration pioneered exploring its history and culture; there were no institutions or even a language for production of Western-style knowledge and for communication with the West. The harshness of its landscape and climate and its self-imposed isolation in the wake of British entry into the region in 19th century, added to its reputation as a “forbidden land”. So, until the second half of the 20th century, knowledge about Tibet was, with a few exceptions, the product of adventurers, missionaries, amateur explorers and, following the 1904 British invasion, a few British political officers disguised as trade agents. Many have left records of their experience, impressions and fantasies. In most cases Tibet was mystified, usually demonized, sometimes idealized, reflecting the dominant *Zeitgeist* and the interests and agendas of the authors.

The a-historic, a-political, timeless and idealized view of Tibet was significantly reinforced by the generation of young Europeans and Americans of the 1960s and 70s. Disaffected from Western regimes and alienated from established religions, they longed for a new paradigm of society, based on moral rather than power principles. The predominant fantastic image of Tibet at the time seemed to offer them an attractive alternative to every wrong at home. The image was vague enough to serve as a screen on which the Counterculture and later New Age followers could project their own longings and dreams. Reduced to a few adjectives, it became a kind of eternal truth, detached from history, territory, time and change. It marked a birth of a de-contextualized, de-territorialized reverse-orientalistic utopia, known as the Shangri-La myth.

Shangri-La, a fictional Himalayan valley, is the location of James Hilton’s 1933 novel (and film) *LOST HORIZON*. The novel is about a spiritual community (all white)

hidden in this inaccessible valley, where the most valuable treasures of (Western) civilization are stored to be returned to the world after the Christian faith returns to prevail on earth. Members of the community enjoy extreme longevity as the result of a serene, tranquil, dispassionate life. The novel has a colonial and racist twist: local Tibetans are servants and farm workers, not members of the community, and they do not enjoy its blessings, reserved for white people only. *LOST HORIZON* is a westernized version of an ancient Tibetan myth of *Shambhala*, a mystical kingdom hidden somewhere north of Tibet, where enlightened kings are guarding the most secret core of the Buddhist teachings until such time when their armies destroy the forces of evil and bring in a golden age. Thus, while many Westerners look to Tibet as the mysterious sanctuary of ancient wisdom, the Tibetans themselves have looked elsewhere for such a place. The dream-like Shangri-La stereotype of Tibet has taken hold of the imagination of the Western world and refuses to budge despite ample historic evidence of its discrepancy with reality.

The Shangri-La myth stereotypes Tibet as a sanctuary of an ancient wisdom and a unique spiritual culture under threat of imminent extinction, which it is the duty of the West to save, this culture being a universal asset and the last hope for the rescue of the materially rich but spiritually poor West from the ills of its civilization. It depicts the Tibetans as simple, poor, inherently non-violent and deeply religious people, ruled by an emanation of the Buddha in accordance with the Mahayana Buddhist tenets of benevolence, compassion and the sanctity of all life.

It was convenient for the leadership of the Tibetan Diaspora, troubled, like many other refugee communities, by identity crisis and internal dissent, to adopt the model and to project it back on the past. First of all, it served to bridge over differences within the refugee community. These differences reflected the significant divisions, which existed before 1950 between cultures, languages and political and sectarian affiliations and loyalties of different regions of what is known as Tibet. A model blurring these divisions was essential in the process of inventing a homogenous Tibetan nation, and what became known and venerated in the West as the unique “Tibetan cultural heritage” (TCH). It also conferred a (not-unchallenged) legitimacy on the Tibetan Government in Exile to represent all Tibetan areas, cultures and sects. The image became also a valuable resource in a marketing strategy, designed by the Tibetan Diaspora leadership and their non-Tibetan advisers, to mobilize international support for their causes.

Since early 1960s, Western academics and journalists, moved by sympathy for the Tibetan people and stimulated by the opportunities for research offered by the presence of refugee communities abroad, engaged in an effort to describe and analyze various aspects of Tibet’s history and culture. However, due to the salience of religion in the Tibetan discourse and because Tibetan religious culture had been consistently represented as unique, of global significance and in imminent danger of extinction, the early generations of Western Tibetan scholars gave priority to the task of its preservation over other academic concerns. Consequently, most of the early academic work had been devoted to Tibetan religions, detached from their social context, and to translation of texts, brought out from Tibet by refugee scholar-monks. This work, which enjoyed generous sponsorship by American cultural foundations, further reinforced the tendency to equate ‘Tibetanness’ with religion. The focus on religion, the sacred and the mystical has continued to dominate the Western view of

Tibet. The fact that it contributed little to our understanding of Tibet and that much knowledge of other aspects of its history, society and culture has accumulated in the meantime did not diminish its overwhelming influence on the Western view.

Similar trend was also dominant in the literary output of the Tibetan Diaspora. The Diaspora establishment exerted censorship, selecting for publication only Buddhist religious texts, especially those for Western consumption, hagiographies and materials glorifying the invented past. Forgetting, famously defined by Giuseppe Mezzini as a vital element in constructing a past, was as prominent in the Dharamsala literary output as it was in the choice of past events selected for commemoration. Very few translations from other languages were published and contact with foreign cultures was limited to a small, English-speaking elite.

The last 15 years have marked a watershed in Tibetan research. Historians, anthropologists, political scientists and sociologists have published research findings based on extensive field work, critical reading of original documents and comparative studies, which shed new light on Tibetan history, religion and politics. They revealed, among other things, aspects of the Tibetan regional hegemony and military expansionism in the Tibetan imperial period (7th to late 9th century); the diversity of authority structure in different Tibetan regional “states”; the pragmatic rather than spiritual aspects of Tibet’s relations with the Mongols and the Manchus, and the complexity of Sino-Tibetan relations, showing the inadequacy of treating them in simple “victim vs. villain” terms or ignoring the role of Tibet as agency in its own history. Tibet was, no doubt, a victim but it was not necessarily passive. As Kundera reminds us, victims are not necessarily wiser than their oppressors. The Tibetans’ own share in the responsibility for their fate has been further obscured by the absence of Tibetan critical historiography. The Dharamsala establishment is even now intolerant of critical and reflexive thought and systematically prevents publication of any “alternative voice” in the Tibetan Government-in-Exile-controlled media.

Though recent research findings have shattered the mythical, a-historic bubble of Tibet, bringing it down from “the roof of the world” and putting it squarely on the map of the region, de-mystifying it and exploring it as a complex of real geo-political entities in their historic, regional and comparative context, the utopian Shangri-La image of Tibet is continuing to have a wide currency in the West, especially (but not exclusively) in popular view and among activists and supporters of the Tibetan cause. It is beyond the scope of this essay to discuss the discrepancy between the real and the invented Tibet. However, to illustrate my point, I shall briefly refer to a feature figuring most prominently on the roster of traits characterizing the invented Tibet, and responsible more than any other for Tibet’s popularity in the West, namely its putative non-violence.

Even a cursory look at Tibetan history reveals that non-violence has never been a traditional Tibetan practice, or even a traditional norm, nor, for that matter, a feature of Tibetan Buddhism. The picture of Tibet as a nonviolent society is a projection onto past history of the present Dalai Lama’s well deserved image as Nobel peace prize laureate and a tireless champion of nonviolence. However, the present Dalai Lama’s views on nonviolence do not reflect old Tibetan tradition. No Dalai Lama, including the present one, had been on record ever to refer to nonviolence before the present Dalai Lama’s first encounter - as a refugee in India in the 1960s, - with the Gandhian

concept of *ahimsa*. The yogic virtue of *ahimsa*, meaning abstinence from injury to any living creature, was applied by Gandhi to political life as a strategy of passive resistance or a prohibition to kill or use physical force in a political conflict. It has no equivalent in Tibetan Buddhist tradition, in which the dominant Mahayana Buddhist value of compassion (T: *s nying rje* , S: *karuna*) is an important religious and philosophical tenet but (a) means above all the wish to save others from ignorance by imparting to them the Buddhist wisdom; (b) is not known to have been practiced in political life, including internal or external conflicts. Tibet had been engaged in many offensive campaigns against its neighbors, all sanctioned by Dalai Lamas. Tibetan monasteries kept private armies, which were deployed in conflicts with the government, with other monasteries and sometimes even among colleges within the same monastery. Fighting monks (*dobdos*) were known to constitute 15 per cent of the monks of the great *Gelugpa* monasteries in and around Lhasa. Revolts by monasteries (usually concerning disputes over taxation or share in revenues) were ruthlessly suppressed by the Government using the army, sometimes leading to numerous casualties. Political rivalries were often settled by assassination. Some Dalai Lamas may have been kind and compassionate men, but historic record unequivocally contradicts the image of a Dalai Lama preaching or practicing nonviolence before 1960.

To show that even highly reputable academicians with a “Save-the-TCH” agenda are prone to ignore historic evidence, here is a fragment from the autobiography of the great 5th Dalai Lama, whom a professor of Tibetan Studies at Columbia University, describes as “a compassionate and peace-loving ruler who created in Tibet a unilaterally disarmed society”¹. The quoted paragraph contains the 5th Dalai Lama’s instructions to his army commanders, ordered to subdue a rebellion against his government in Tsang in 1660:

*“Make the male lines like trees that have had their roots cut; make the female lines like brooks that have dried up in winter; make the children and grandchildren like eggs smashed against rocks; make the servants and followers like heaps of grass consumed by fire; make their dominion like a lamp whose oil has been exhausted; in short, annihilate any traces of them, even their names”*²

Apart from idealizing the past, the Tibetan Diaspora leadership and its non-Tibetan supporters have acted to enlist international support by deploying culture as a “soft power” resource intended to produce and assert Tibetan presence in international arena and to influence the global agenda on Tibetan issues. Examples of this strategy are the cultural and religious events co-produced by Western activists and Tibetan artists and monks in theatres, museums and parks of the US and other Western countries. These events, most of them starring the Dalai Lama and a Western intellectual (e.g. Robert Thurman) or celebrity (e.g. Richard Gere) and funded by American cultural foundations (e.g. Ford) have a double aim. One is a continued effort to construct the narrative of Tibetanness. The other is to recruit “believers”, who do not just support Tibet but who adopt the TCH as their own and thus unconditionally identify with the Tibetan Diaspora leadership agenda. Similar purpose is served by the Tibetan leader’s attempt to show the

¹ Thurman Robert, *ESSENTIAL TIBETAN BUDDHISM*, 1995, pp.3-40

² Sperling Elliot “Orientalism and Aspects of Violence in Tibetan Tradition” in: T.Dodin and H.Raether, *IMAGINING TIBET*, p.317.

Tibetan culture's relevance to the modern world by engaging Western scientists in a joint effort to explore the connections between Tibetan Buddhist thought and Western scientific knowledge.

Using Buddhism to recruit support or protection is not without precedent in Tibetan history. Trading religious services and spiritual guidance for political, military and material protection (*T:cho-yon*, usually translated as patron-lama relationship) had been the hallmark of Tibetan relations with the Mongol and later Manchu rulers of China since the 13th century. It also forms the basis of the present Dalai Lama's relations with the world's rich, powerful and glamorous. Public displays of embodied Buddhism, such as ritual sand-mandala construction by Tibetan monks in a foyers of a museum staging an exhibition of Tibetan art; a mass initiation given by the Dalai Lama in Central Park; or a mass prayer for world peace led by the Dalai Lama, can be plausibly seen as another variant of patron-lama relationship, where the support of mass audience is sought in exchange for offering them an encounter with embodied Tibetan Buddhist culture.

The Dalai Lama has announced on many occasions that he sees his life's mission in "the preservation of the endangered TCH for the sake of all humanity". The claim is based on a fundamental tenet of Mahayana Buddhism: that individual practitioners should strive not solely for their own sake but for the sake of all sentient beings. This principle of universality, embodied in the figure of the bodhisattva of compassion, whose emanation the Dalai Lama is believed to be, is the principle on which the Dalai Lama has based his claim to relevance in the modern world.

What *is* then the Tibetan cultural heritage and how Tibetan is its Dharamsala version?

Though not quite synonymous, TCH and Tibetan Buddhism are to a great extent overlapping. The Tantric form of Buddhism, a late development of the Mahayana school, was brought to Tibet from India, beginning from the 7th century. In the following centuries, especially after the disintegration of the Tibetan Kingdom in the 9th century, Tibet blended indigenous and imported cultural elements into what has become a religious-social-political system known as Tibetan Buddhism, or – in its contemporary Western idiom – the Tibetan Cultural Heritage. By the 11th century Tibetan Buddhism branched off into several monastic orders or lineages, which soon accumulated great wealth, wrested power from princes and local kings and began to compete for political hegemony in Tibetan areas. Like other forms of Buddhism, the Tibetan Buddhism is centered on monasticism, but, unlike them, in Tibet it became mass rather than elite phenomenon. The monastic establishment shared with the aristocracy political and economic power and its hierarchs were prominent in religious and political life of Tibet.

Tibetan religions comprise several strands and orientations. One should be familiar to most readers since it resembles the monastic and scholarly Buddhism found in other Asian societies. It shares with other forms of Buddhism the goal of ultimate enlightenment (buddhahood), and it sees most activity within the cycle of rebirth as irrelevant to it. Its primary mode of activity is scholarship, philosophical analysis and monastic discipline. Its paradigmatic figure is scholar-monk. Among Tibetan Buddhists this orientation is most pronounced in the Gelugug-pa order, though the practice of virtually all Tibetan religious orders contains elements of different orientations.

The specifically “Tibetan” feature of Tibetan Buddhism is the prominence in it of the shamanic component, i.e. the use of psycho-physical techniques to create altered states of consciousness, believed to enable accomplished practitioners to communicate with a mode of reality alternative to and more fundamental than the world of everyday experience. Shamanic techniques are found in various degrees in most societies but Tibet is the only known literate society in which the shamanic component is a central rather than a marginal phenomenon. Tibetan shamanism applies to two distinct though overlapping areas of Tibetan religion: folk religion and shamanic Buddhism. By folk religion I mean the practices of the great majority of Tibetans, whose daily life is dominated by a variety of spirits, populating forests, mountain peaks, lakes, rivers, rocks, caves and house corners. Some hide in people’s armpits, others take a ride on their shoulders. They are neither good nor bad. They help or harm, protect or attack depending on how they are treated: offence makes them dangerous, offerings pacify them. These spirits are irrelevant to spiritual life, enlightenment or buddhahood. Their domain is entirely mundane: health, wealth, crops, road safety, family and community relations. Relations with these spirits, which consist of pleasing, bribing and ransom are mediated by shamanic specialists.

Shamanic Buddhism, on the other hand, ideally strives toward the achievement of buddhahood, conceived as potentiality present in all individuals. It operates in terms of a relationship with an alternative mode of reality, symbolized by Tantric divinities, and formulas such as e.g. the mandala. The alternative mode of reality is evoked through ritual, which includes manipulation of consciousness by means of yoga, meditation, visualization and simulation of the desired states of mind, represented by deities or other symbols. Once achieved, the altered state of consciousness may - and usually is - evoked also for mundane purposes. The central figure in shamanic Buddhism is not a monk but the Tantric lama, who need not be celibate or have formal monastic training, but whose proficiency in ritual and yogic practice (ideally ultimately leading to enlightenment), generates in him shamanic (i.e. “magic”) power, which he subsequently uses on behalf of lay population. He is aware that his clients are concerned mainly with securing a better rebirth or with mundane benefits rather than the attainment of buddhahood. The use by the lama of his practice-generated magic power for the benefit of lay followers, including manipulation of spirits, is an expression of his compassion, a virtue helpful in his own progress toward enlightenment.

Thus, in Tibet, the Tantric techniques for attaining buddhahood function in practice as a means of training shamanic practitioners. This nexus between the pursuit of enlightenment by a small minority and the demand for shamanic services by the great majority is the hallmark of Tibetan Buddhism, distinguishing it from the Buddhism of other societies, where shamanic techniques are marginal and serve only for magical control of everyday life.³

³ I’m using the present tense advisedly. In a just published book, a Chinese born, Oxford-educated anthropologist and documentary film maker, describes the life of a small Tibetan village in the south of the Tibetan Autonomous Region of CPR, where she spent a year (2006) filming. Notwithstanding some technological innovations and the proximity of the village to the second largest urban center in TAR, the life of the village is fully dominated by spirits, observance of rituals dedicated to their appeasement, and by local shamans who compete with the local doctor in providing healing services to the village population, including the doctor herself. At least on the day-to-day level, the life of the villagers resembles life in old Tibet much more than that in the pop-culture and Tibeto-kitch dominated Dharamsala and McLeod Ganj. (Sun Shuyun, *A YEAR IN TIBET*, Harper Collins, London, 2008)

Tibetan Buddhism, an enigma to the outside world only 50 years ago, has become the subject of academic studies in Western universities, and some of its features in innumerable courses, workshops and cultic groups throughout the world. Its symbols, along with some of its practices and vocabulary, have become a part of the way millions of people lead their lives. Its philosophy and techniques have influenced Western medicine, psychology, education and arts. The infusion of Tibetan Buddhist ideas, insights and techniques into the cultural life of the West has enriched it - not only by offering alternative paths of spiritual life but also, and perhaps mainly so, by stimulating a critical reexamination of the accepted assumptions and paradigms in religious, intellectual and scientific thought and practices.

The credit for this goes to the 14th Dalai Lama, who has been spectacularly successful in turning Buddhism into one of the world's greatest living religions and a partner in global religious and intellectual discourse. His success in promoting Buddhism in the Western world has been a great achievement for him and a gain for the West. But Buddhism, like other religions, is changing. It has been changing all along its long history, especially following encounter with other religions and cultures in the course of its diffusion throughout Asia. However, the encounter of Tibetan Buddhism with the West was different in several respects from the history of Buddhist expansion in Asia. The fact that Tibetan Buddhism was carried into exile by the head of the Tibetan Church and the spiritual and mundane leader of the Tibetan people, invested the small and poor refugee community surrounding him with the authority of custodian of the authentic Tibetan cultural tradition, as well as the role of the vanguard of the Tibetan struggle for independence. Secondly, it was the first time that Buddhism encountered strong, self-confident cultures and religions and settled in politically and economically stable societies; finally, the situation was further complicated by the fact that since Tibetans had traditionally defined Tibetanness in terms of Buddhism, every change in the nature of one was bound to entail a revision in the other.

The transformation of the TCH in the Diaspora has been the consequence of its deployment as a tool in mobilizing support vital for its survival. The Dharamsala leaders and their Western spin-pundits justified their request for support by emphasizing the TCH's putative power to rescue the doomed Western civilization. But, since such power resides, alas, only in the Shangri-La image of the TCH, this model had to be projected on Tibet's past. Moreover, success of the display of Tibetan cultural artifacts and embodied religion in the West as effective fund-and-support raisers was contingent on a conscious and selective presentation of self to audiences with highly conditioned expectations. Furthermore, since the relevance of the TCH to the Western world is not self-evident, to make it so, the TCH had to be brought in line with the major concerns of the liberal West.

So, first of all, the TCH has gradually incorporated elements, which, while of great concern to Western audiences, had never been part of traditional Tibetan culture, such as non-violence, concern with environment, human rights, world peace, feminism and the like. Secondly, it "universalized" the Buddhist doctrine by shedding its specifically Tibetan features; by weeding out its esoteric and ritualistic elements; by ethicizing it, thus reversing the minor role ethics play in the specifically Tibetan mode of Buddhism. In other words, it incorporated much of the modernist Buddhist agenda. Buddhist modernism, born in 19th century in South Asia, was not known in Tibet. The Dalai Lama adopted it in the late 1960s, as an exile in India, along with the Tolstoy-Gandhi-Martin Luther King style of non-violence and a willingness to dispense with those elements of

Buddhist cosmology that conflicted with scientific rationality. Couched in Western vocabulary, Buddhist modernism became part of the contemporary Buddhist agenda, fit for Western consumption. The Dalai Lama's rhetoric on world peace, ecology and human rights owes a lot to the influence of international Buddhist groups – a range of contemporary Buddhist organizations that try to contribute to solving world's problems, above all violence and materialism, by means of cultivation of Buddhist values.

Gradually, the Dalai Lama's rhetoric has become increasingly dominated by an amorphous agenda of environmental, humanitarian, pacifist and other global issues that concern the liberal Western world but are outside the realm of the Tibetan Buddhist tradition. The ride the Dalai Lama takes on his popularity and authority to promote global liberal causes is laudable and has been justly rewarded by the Nobel prize. He also seems genuinely devoted to the task of keeping alive the Tibetan culture. But here the odds are against him. For a people dependent on others, physical and cultural survival depends on its presentation of self to those who ultimately control their circumstances.. The Tibetan Diaspora leaders know that the chance of their culture's survival in exile depends on its ability to satisfy the Western ideal of Tibetan culture. Thus, the idealized, hybridized and West-attuned representation of TCH has been created and deployed by the Diaspora leadership and its Western strategists to win followers and supporters. It succeeds because it meets the needs and expectations of the Western public. Would it be far fetched to see here a contemporary variety of the traditional patron-lama pattern, which had successfully mediated relations between the Tibetans and their Mongol and Manchu overlords for hundreds of years?

