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TIBET, AND MY TIME SPENT THERE

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Once a powerful military empire,¹ Tibet is home to one of Asia's most venerable civilizations, with a unique culture² and complex history. Presently situated in the western part of the People's Republic of China,³ Tibet has been in news headlines recently due to the reports of protests and crackdowns that have been taking place there. During the Qing dynasty (1644-1912), Tibet, like China, was under the rule of the Manchus, who invaded and conquered China, and later adopted Tibet as a protectorate. Following the collapse of the Qing dynasty in 1912, Tibetan areas enjoyed a period of de-facto independence. Central Tibet was the domain of the Dalai Lama's government, while areas of Eastern Tibet (Kham) and Northeastern Tibet (Amdo) were governed by regional kings, chiefs, and warlords. In 1949, shortly after the Chinese Communist Party rose to power, the People's Liberation Army (PLA) invaded and occupied Tibet. In 1959, Tibetans in the capital city of Lhasa rose up against the PLA, prompting a military backlash. At this time the Tibetan spiritual leader, the Dalai Lama, along with tens of thousands of Tibetans, fled into exile across the Himalayas to India, where the Tibetan government-in-exile is now established in the town of Dharamsala.

The name "Tibet" can have different referents depending on the context. To many Chinese citizens it refers to the Tibet Autonomous Region (TAR) province (*Xi-zang*), which only comprises about half of what might be called historical, or ethnic Tibet.⁴ The parts of ethnic Tibet which lie outside the TAR province are broken up into Tibetan Autonomous Prefectures (TAP) and Counties (TAC) in the provinces of Qinghai, Gansu, Sichuan, and Yunnan. Most of the recent protests have been taking place in the areas lying outside of the TAR province. The geographic distribution of ethnic Tibet corresponds roughly to the boundaries of the Tibetan plateau, the largest high-altitude region on earth, covering an area of approximately 1.2 million square miles with an average altitude of over 12,000 feet. Ethnic Tibet has three major regions: Ü-Tsang (Central Tibet, in which Lhasa is located), Kham (Eastern Tibet), and Amdo (Northeastern Tibet).

Population density on the Tibetan Plateau is very low⁵ because very little of

1 The Tibetan empire (7th-9th centuries) was established by the Yarlung dynasty from Southern Tibet and grew to rival that of Tang China. Tibet (or *Tufan* as it was known to the Tang) conquered a vast area, encompassing the Tibetan Plateau, Himalaya, and parts of modern day India, Nepal, Bhutan, Pakistan, and China. At one point the Tibetan army even seized the ancient Chinese capital of Chang-an (Xian), abandoning it shortly thereafter. *See also* Mathew T. Kapstein, *The Tibetans* (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 2006).

2 Tibetan culture draws on indigenous traditions, Indian Buddhist traditions, and other cultural influences. Tibet has its own language and alphabet which are distinct from Chinese language and characters.

3 Some parts of cultural Tibet now lie in Nepal, Sikkim (India), Ladakh (India), and other areas outside of China

4 Historical, or ethnic Tibet covers virtually all of the Tibetan Plateau as well as the Himalaya, corresponding roughly to the boundaries of the Tibetan empire. *See also* footnote one.

5 The Tibetan Plateau's population density is about three to four people per square mile.

the plateau's surface is habitable—about one percent of the land can sustain regular agricultural activity. Harsh weather conditions, intense erosion, and earthquakes are among the natural obstacles to human habitation and development in Tibet. The total population of Tibetans in cultural Tibet is at present about 5.5 million, yet the geographical area over which Tibetan settlements are distributed is vast, comprising roughly one third of the present day People's Republic of China. The distribution of the relatively small Tibetan population over such a vast land area, along with the high altitude, mountainous terrain, and other environmental factors, poses a serious challenge to the establishment and maintenance of infrastructure, including education.

The recent protests and crackdowns in Tibet did not occur in a vacuum. Their causes lie both in Tibet's history as well as in contemporary policies governing the lives of Tibetans. For example, starting in the early 1990s, not long after violent riots erupted in Lhasa in 1989, the Chinese government has followed a policy of accusing the Dalai Lama of being a separatist. Outside observers say this is an effort to undermine the religious leader's influence among Tibetans, though the recent protests indicate that this policy has been unsuccessful. The policy is still reinforced in Tibetan areas through controversial 'patriotic re-education' campaigns.⁶ The recent protests are in part a reaction to this and other policies that put restrictions on Tibetans' religious freedom, and appear to have a variety of other negative social and cultural effects. Retiring policies like this would be one way for the government to ease tensions.

There are probably other factors underlying the recent protests as well. The Cultural Revolution (1966-1976) had a devastating impact on Tibetan people and culture, one whose enduring influence should not be overlooked or underestimated. In more recent times, large-scale migration of Han Chinese and other non-Tibetans into Tibetan areas has become a source of discontent for Tibetans. The fact that economic development in many Tibetan urban areas has benefited Han Chinese and Chinese Muslim migrants more than it has benefited Tibetans has further fueled ethnic tensions. Tibetans also have grievances stemming from inadequate protection and promotion of the Tibetan language, a wide range of educational issues, and industrial degradation of the environment, among others.

I first became aware of Tibet when I was about six years old, while attending Renbrook School in West Hartford, Connecticut. At that time a Tibetan flautist named Ngawang Khechog came to my school as a visiting artist. Years later I learned that my maternal grandmother had been keenly interested in Tibet since the early 1950s, and had traveled through the region in the mid-1980s. These and other early memories no doubt played a role in the evolution of my current academic interest in Tibetan civilization.

In the summer of 2006, while a student at Columbia University, I participated in an intensive Tibetan language program at the University of Virginia (UVa). Following this, in the fall of 2006, I went to Lhasa, TAR to study at Tibet University

⁶ "Patriotic re-education" is the name of a policy enforced in Tibetan areas requiring Tibetans to undergo intensive sessions of political indoctrination, including forced public denunciations of the Dalai Lama. This policy has contributed significantly to the anger and resentment expressed in the recent protests.

as part of a UVa study abroad program. While studying at Tibet University I spent a great deal of time exploring Lhasa, and visiting other areas of Central Tibet, all of which had a great impact on me. Through these experiences I came to understand that education lies at the heart of many problems affecting Tibetans today. The problem is not merely the lack of education, but also the type of education—such as Tibetan-language or Mandarin-language instruction—and the questionable economic benefits the education system can yield for Tibetan students (this is a fragment, not a sentence). I met Tibetan college students who complained that they couldn't find employment and parents in rural areas who spoke of keeping their children at home after primary school in order to teach them practical farming skills. These parents felt that middle and higher education were not worth the trouble because it was too expensive and could not guarantee a job. Moreover, the schools in question were boarding schools, requiring children to be away from the farm for long periods of time. Therefore the children would not learn how to farm, making them “useless” if they couldn't get a job. The problem seemed to lie in the interaction of the educational and economic systems in the TAR province.⁷

After the conclusion of the program in Lhasa, I returned to the U.S. where I was inspired to choose Tibetan education as my thesis topic. I chose this topic in the hope of better understanding the dynamics of education in Tibet. Although I had no experience in the field of educational studies, I felt that my efforts in this direction would be well spent; at minimum I would expand my knowledge of the subject, and at best my research might lead to concrete benefit for Tibetans, perhaps even for other minority ethnic groups as well.

The following summer (2007), I worked as a research intern for the Tibetan and Himalayan Digital Library (THDL),⁸ an institute of UVa dedicated to the preservation and dissemination of Tibetan cultural media. My task for the summer: to conduct research on tourism in the town of Balhagong, Kham for THDL's forthcoming “Geotourism in Tibet” web portal, an extension of THDL's main web platform intended to facilitate and promote locally engaged, socially balanced, and environmentally as well as economically sustainable tourism in Tibetan areas. I was not sure if I would have an opportunity to do research on education, since I knew that there are political sensitivities pertaining to Tibetan schools making formal research difficult.

At the beginning of my journey, after spending a short time in Beijing, I flew to the western Chinese city of Chengdu, in Sichuan Province. After spending one night there, I rode a bus westward for eight hours to the city of Dartsendo (known in Chinese as Kangding). Dartsendo, located in a deep, forested valley and surrounded by dramatic mountains, lies at the foot of the Tibetan plateau on the traditional border between Kham and China. In Dartsendo I met my co-researcher Zach Rowinski, who had already been living in Kham for a year, working on another

⁷ The push for economic development has encouraged the adoption of Chinese as the medium of education for Tibetan children, and a neglect of Tibetan language curriculum. Unfortunately, Tibetan children educated in Chinese-language schools still face serious difficulties when trying to get jobs.

⁸ www.thdl.org

project for THDL. As Zach and I approached the area where cars could be hired for journeys onto the plateau, I tried speaking with a few Tibetans, only to realize that they could barely understand my Lhasa dialect. Indeed, the dialect in that area proved to be distinct from the Lhasa dialect in unexpected ways.⁹ From that moment, with the help of Zach and others, I began learning how I could substitute words, phrases, and pronunciations from Lhasa dialect in order to communicate in the Kham dialect. Over the course of the summer my interest and ability in Kham dialect grew, mainly out of necessity—how else could I talk to people or order food?

We hired a car and drove up to the town of Balhagong, located on the beautiful, hilly grasslands of Kham's Minyak region, in present day Dartsendo county. This is a nomadic area, meaning that the communities surrounding the small town are primarily nomadic herders, rather than farmers, the other main occupation in rural Tibetan areas. We were fortunate to stay in a gold-roofed temple complex known as the Minyak Golden Stupa, the main residence of local lama and philanthropist Dorje Tashi Rinpoche. Each day, Zach and I outlined a research plan and set out with our backpacks, sunglasses, and notebooks. Some days we went into the town to conduct hotel research. Other times we traveled to remote monasteries in the region, talked with the monks, and learned about the history and significance of each monastery. We also did a lot of hiking, including one hike to a glacial lake at the foot of the sacred mountain Shara Latse.¹⁰ The hike took us through a valley that looked like a scene from the Alps, with beautiful evergreen trees, abundant, colorful wildflowers, and massive snowcapped mountains in the background. The lake was beautiful; turquoise in color, with a large waterfall behind it, flowing off the side of the mountain. However, we did see some litter near the lake, exemplary of a wider problem we observed of waste management practices and education not keeping pace with the influx of disposable plastic and cellophane products that have become widely consumed following economic development efforts.

The travel and field research that Zach and I undertook brought us into contact with schools in the Balhagong area. These encounters were usually casual, but valuable nonetheless. For example, we were invited into the Xikang Welfare School for the celebration of Dorje Tashi Rinpoche's birthday. This was rare because the school, a boarding primary and middle school for orphans, typically does not let outsiders in without permission. While inside the school, we played basketball and ping-pong with students, walked through their library, and chatted with students and teachers. This experience gave me a glimpse, however brief, into the school's social life, academic program, and administration. It also made me realize what a delicate balance schools in Tibetan areas must maintain between local Tibetan cultural influences and government educational requirements. For example, daily activities for students included traditional Tibetan singing and dancing, but also the viewing of a

⁹ While the spoken dialects of Tibetan differ from one another in varying degrees, the written script and classical literary language are more or less the same in all Tibetan areas, a legacy of the Tibetan empire. *See also* footnote one.

¹⁰ In Tibetan culture, mythology, teachings of Buddhism, and Bon (the Tibetan pre-Buddhist religion), local deities and other entities are often infused into the landscape itself. *See also* Toni Huber, *Sacred Spaces and Powerful Places in Tibetan Culture* (India. Paljor Publications, 2002).

mandatory video¹¹ on Han Chinese cultural history. I asked if there was a daily video on Tibetan cultural history, and I was told there was not.

Through this experience I gained an appreciation for Kham, its people, life-style, and language. Spending time in Kham also gave me a framework against which I could compare my previous experiences in Lhasa and Amdo, thereby giving me a broader picture of life in different places across the Tibetan plateau. At the time of writing, it is unclear when foreign travelers will be allowed back into these areas. It is my hope that the Chinese government will open a dialogue with the Dalai Lama and his representatives to work toward a sustainable solution for the Tibetan people, whether in the TAR province or in the TAPs and TACs in Qinghai, Gansu, Sichuan and Yunnan; a solution that gives Tibetans the ability to ensure the protection of their cultural and social identities, as well as the environment and human rights.

¹¹ The multi-part video features a teacher of Han Chinese ethnicity who gives lessons about Chinese cultural history.