

Tibetan identity and Tibetan Buddhism in trans- regional connection : the contemporary vegetarian movement in pastoral areas of Tibet (China)

*Identité tibétaine et bouddhisme tibétain en relation trans-régionale : le
mouvement végétarien contemporain dans les zones pastorales au Tibet (Chine)*

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Introduction

I felt so embarrassed to see some Tibetan monks eating raw meat in a Tibetan restaurant where there were several people from the West having a meal as well. He could eat anything but raw meat...

A Tibetan man

- 1 On 22 October 2014, during the annual religious gathering of the “Pure land Assembly” (Sukhāvati) of Larung Gar¹, one of the largest and most influential Buddhist institutions in Tibet, two top *khenpos*² of the institute once again expressed their great concern over the consumption of meat by Tibetan people and urged the over two hundred thousand pilgrims to stop eating meat during any types of festivals, including weddings and new year celebrations. This teaching is one of many cases in which Tibetan *khenpos* and lamas have been trying to persuade Tibetans to stop eating meat in various ways. Yet, the

teachings about vegetarianism represent a dilemma for Tibetan pastoralists who herd yaks and sheep. Eating yak meat and mutton have long been a major part of their diet. Meat provides a great deal of energy for Tibetan pastoralists who live on the Tibetan plateau with an average altitude of 4000 meters and very cold temperatures. As an important component of the diet, meat has long been interwoven into many aspects of the cultural practices of Tibetan pastoralists. It is an important cultural element in weddings, festivals, religious gatherings, and religious rituals. Yet, the very practice of eating meat and its related cultural practices have increasingly become problematic for both religious leaders and Tibetans. With the resurgence of Tibetan Buddhism in its contemporary context, the popularity of the vegetarian movement in Tibet can be described as unprecedented, cutting across economic classes, educational levels, ages, genders, and regions. For example, in the 1980s, in a village of over one thousand people in a nomadic area of the Amdo Tibetan Region, there were only a few people who were lifetime vegetarians. In this same village in 2014, there are over 30 villagers who have taken lifetime vegetarian vows. Given the fact that eating meat has been an important part of Tibetan nomadic culture, this paper primarily asks: why have traditional practices of eating meat changed?

- 2 Religious traditions of Tibetan Buddhism that were revived following the liberalisation of Chinese religious policies in the 1980s have played a very important role in fashioning vegetarianism in contemporary Tibet. Yet, religious reasons alone are not sufficient to explain the widespread growth of a Tibetan-style vegetarianism. For one thing, despite the fact that Buddhism has dominated Tibetan society for many centuries, the popularity of vegetarianism has never before reached the current level of popularity (see also Barstow 2013, p. 21). Indeed, the current movement is associated with many complex forces, including an increasing sense of nationalism, trans-regional and globalised connections, Tibetan reactions to economic development, religious resurgence since the 1980s in China, and globalised capitalism that always makes cultural “Others” (Adams 1996). This paper explores one aspect of this complex situation. Focusing on the teachings of the two most prominent Buddhist leaders from Larung Gar – Khenpo Tsultrim Lodro (Mkhan po Tshul khrims blo gros, hereafter, Khenpo Tsullo) and Khenpo Sodarje (Mkhan po Bso dar rgyas)³ – and the response of Tibetans to the movement, I explore how the vegetarian movement is associated with the interactions of these leading Tibetan Buddhist teachers with Chinese Buddhist communities⁴, and in particular, their response to the critiques by Chinese Buddhists regarding the Tibetan Buddhist tradition of widespread meat consumption. In this way, the “Others” of these leaders are distinctly religious and Chinese.
- 3 For the last several decades Tibetans, particularly religious leaders and educated lay Tibetans, have been increasingly concerned about their image of Tibetan-ness and the future path of the Tibetan people (Gayley 2011b), and this is usually associated with their active reflection on others’ assumptions about what Tibetans and Tibetan Buddhism should be like. Indeed, the stereotyped images of Tibetans in the Western mind and its related “mimesis” (Taussig 1993) by Tibetans themselves have been well studied by Dodin & Räther (2001), Huber (1997, 2001), Adams (1996) and Lopez (1998), among others. Relatively few studies have been done about how Tibetans interact with Chinese Buddhist communities and how this interaction informs the formation of Tibetan identity and the reform of Tibetan Buddhist tradition. In the first section of this paper, I present the basic elements of the teachings of Khenpo Tsullo about vegetarianism. The second section

explores how the new generation of Tibetan Buddhist leaders interacts with Chinese Buddhist communities and how this is related to the reinforcement of Tibetan identity, such as becoming “authentic” Tibetans who do not eat meat. In the last section, I present ethnographic studies of how Tibetans interpret their participation in the movement.

Historical context and religious teachings on vegetarianism

- 4 Despite its marginal role in Tibetan society, vegetarianism has a long tradition in Tibetan history. Barstow (2013, pp. 25, 84) identified a pattern in which vegetarianism was relatively popular in Central Tibet between the 13th and 15th centuries and in Kham from the 19th century onwards. In the 20th century, vegetarianism in Tibet was not significant, and this was particularly true during, and soon after, the period of communes in China. Barstow also suggests that, in early times, vegetarianism was mostly followed by Tibetan religious leaders (Barstow 2013) rather than lay Tibetans. This seems true in many nomadic communities where Tibetan pastoralists herd yaks and sheep from which they produce meat for self-consumption. Along with other foods including barley flour, wheat flour, butter, and cheese, meat has long been an important part of the diet for Tibetan herders. Yet, the intensification of commercial economic development on the Tibetan plateau has brought many changes in food diversity for Tibetan people. Recently, other foods such as vegetables, fruits, rice, and even highly-processed foods have become available and integrated into the diet in many Tibetan-populated regions. This increase in food diversity for Tibetan people has created conditions that have made becoming vegetarian much easier and more feasible for Tibetans. This point is equally important for the vegetarian movement, but I will not discuss it in this paper.
- 5 At the same time, economic liberalisation has brought a significant space for religious freedom in Tibet. In this context, Khenpo Jigme Phuntsog, one of the most influential Nyingma teachers in contemporary Tibet (Germano 1998 ; Phuntso 2004), established Larung Gar in 1980. Larung Gar is one of the largest Buddhist training centres and is now home to over ten thousand Tibetan Buddhist monks who want to study the Tibetan Buddhism of different Tibetan Buddhist schools⁵. The institute has produced many *khenpos* with outstanding achievements in Buddhist study and is now a key centre for the promotion of Tibetan culture and Tibetan Buddhism. Many *khenpos* have been giving religious teachings not only in different areas of the Tibetan plateau, but also in southeastern Chinese cities. As a result of their interactions with other Buddhist communities, this new generation of Buddhist leaders has started to examine their religion and culture, and to mirror outsiders’ expectations and assumptions of them as Buddhist leaders. I demonstrate this in the next section. Among the many moral issues they have observed in Tibetan society is the phenomenon in which massive animals suffer and are slaughtered for meat consumption. This is an urgent issue that they feel requires intervention through their religious influence. The promotion of vegetarianism in pastoral areas is an example of one such intervention by Tibetan *khenpos* and lamas who have been trying to persuade herders to stop eating meat. Among the Tibetan Buddhist leaders who have promoted the vegetarianism movement, Khenpo Tsullo, from Larung Gar, Sertha County, Kandze (Dkar mdzes) Prefecture, Sichuan Province, has been the most influential. Khenpo Tsullo is one of the most prominent students of Khenpo Jigphun and

has placed great emphasis on the vegetarian movement during his teachings in nomadic communities.

- 6 Khenpo Tsulpo's teachings about vegetarianism always go hand-in-hand with his teachings about the anti-slaughter movement (Gaerrang 2012 ; Gayley 2013), which urge herders to stop both selling their livestock to slaughterhouses and using livestock for self consumption. Aspects of his teachings are similar to those of his master and predecessors (Barstow 2013). Khenpo Tsulpo (2006b) cites and discusses various Buddhist teachings about eating meat, different conditions when monks may be allowed to consume meat, karmic consequences of eating meat, compassion for animal suffering, and exceptions in Buddhist rituals. By referring to other teachings in both the *Vinaya* texts and Mahāyāna sutras, Khenpo Tsulpo argues that Buddhist monks are banned from eating meat under any circumstances and for any school⁶. His discussion has also led him to conclude that even the meat for Buddhist offerings (*tshogs skor*) in rituals of Tibetan Vajrayāna Buddhism should only come from animals that died from natural causes rather than from those intentionally killed.

- 7 At the same time, his motivation for this vegetarian movement is similar to that of the anti-slaughter movement because of a concern with the collection of evil deeds associated with killings and compassion toward livestock that suffer during the slaughter process (Khenpo Tsultrim Lodro 2006a, p. 289). In many of his religious teachings in pastoral areas of Tibet⁷, Khenpo Tsulpo has taught herders that, according to the Buddha's teachings, eating meat generates the same level of evil deeds as the actual killing of an animal because the fundamental reason for killing the animal in the market is demand for meat. Therefore, slaughtering animals and eating meat both lead to hell, according to the karmic principle of cause and effect. In contrast with the ordinary Tibetans' understanding that eating meat has less sin than the slaughtering of animals, for Khenpo Tsulpo, there is no difference between the acts of selling livestock to slaughterhouses, of slaughtering for self-consumption, and of eating meat that comes from the market. While the call to renounce eating meat is an important part of his teachings, other issues related to meat consumption are also highlighted in his teachings and writings. For instance, as he thinks that it is impossible for ordinary Tibetans to give up meat entirely, he gives specific suggestions for slaughtering animals in such a way that the animals suffer less (2006a, p. 289). He also shows his great concern about the phenomenon in inner China in which people consume animals in cruel and brutal ways, including eating monkeys' brains while the animals are still alive, cooking living fish in hot water, frying living chickens in hot containers, and stripping off the skin of living frogs (2006a, p. 251). He calls for Tibetans to be aware of these cruel and brutal misconducts and to keep their distance from them (Gayley 2011a).

- 8 While Khenpo Tsulpo deploys the Buddhist ideas of compassion for animals that suffer during slaughter and the karmic consequences of slaughtering animals and eating meat (Khenpo Tsultrim Lodro 2003b, p. 96), in many cases, his articulations are framed in new ways and new language. One example is his emphasis on physical health. As he speaks very good Chinese language and draws extensively on Chinese scientific studies on diet and health, Khenpo Tsulpo has encouraged vegetarianism based on two perspectives. The first is related to what he calls secular health. With the support of scientific research on physical health and the effects of diet, he cites many modern scientific studies to show that many diseases including heart disease, arterial plaque, and high blood pressure are related to the consumption of meat. He also cites a comparative study of two groups of

pigeons by a group of scientists of the former Soviet Union, which demonstrates that eating meat causes animals to have a fiery temper and become easily angered. Moreover, Khenpo Tsullo mentions scientific findings from Columbia University that compares the biological structure of the human body with that of other carnivorous animals. As human beings are omnivores, they have a longer gut than do carnivorous animals, and if they consumed meat, the meat would stay in the gut for a longer time and easily become toxic. Therefore human beings should refrain from eating meat (Khenpo Tsultrim Lodro 2006a, p. 20). Finally, he maintains that many meat products in the current market contain antibiotics and hormones that are very harmful to the human body (Khenpo Tsultrim Lodro 2003b, p. 138).

- 9 Khenpo Tsullo's teachings, including those on the anti-slaughter movement, together with other Buddhist teachings have been heavily circulated among Tibetans through the production of books, posters, VCDs, DVDs and tape recordings. These are also part of a campaign to preserve Tibetan language. Most of Khenpo Tsullo's books are published through official editors with a few exceptions published privately. VCDs, DVDs and tapes on vegetarian teachings are mostly produced by individual monks and lay people. These products are common in the markets of Tibetan communities and many Tibetan herders have been learning the importance of being vegetarian through watching VCDs and DVDs and listening to tapes about the movement. Posters on vegetarianism, along with other posters on the campaign for Tibetan language preservation and the anti-slaughter movement, can be also commonly seen on the walls of streets and in Tibetan-run restaurants in many towns of Kham and Amdo.

Trans-regional connections and cultural identity

- 10 Khenpo Tsullo's promotion of the vegetarian movement is mostly informed by his religiously oriented discussion of Buddha's inconsistent teachings on eating meat, compassion for suffering livestock, karmic cause and effect, and physical health from a scientific perspective. Yet, I suggest that the contemporary vegetarian movement is also a response from Tibetan Buddhist leaders to increasing critiques from outsiders, particularly from Chinese Buddhists, regarding the Tibetan Buddhist tradition of consuming meat. It is thus also a part of the ongoing formation of Tibetan identity, which is a combination of religious and ethnic identity and the idea that becoming "orthodox Buddhists" means becoming "better Tibetans". In other words, the contemporary vegetarian movement is an outcome of the response of Tibetan religious leaders to the asymmetry between assumptions by other Buddhist communities about Tibetan Buddhism and the Tibetan people, and what Tibetan Buddhist leaders observe on the ground in Tibet. In their interactions with Chinese Buddhists, Tibetan *khenpos*, particularly the top ones, have realised that many outsiders make the assumption that Tibetan Buddhist monks take a Bodhisattva vow and do not eat meat. But this assumption is in contrast with the fact that a majority of Tibetan religious elites eat meat.
- 11 This type of concern over the Tibetan Buddhist tradition of meat consumption is reflected also in the conversations between Khenpo Sodarjey and Chinese Buddhist elites. For instance, on the list of nineteen questions raised by the contemporary Chinese Buddhist master Ji Qun 济群 to Khenpo Sodarjey, the very first question is about the tradition of meat consumption in Tibetan Buddhist communities. In response to this concern, Khenpo Sodarjey (2002, p. 4) first expressed his great admiration of the tradition of vegetarianism

in Chinese Buddhism and encouraged Tibetans to follow this tradition. At the same time, he also suggested that rather than criticise the Tibetan Buddhist tradition of meat consumption in general terms, people need to understand the complexity of the situation in a more reflective manner. First, he argued that not all Tibetan Buddhists supported meat consumption; there were many Tibetan Buddhist masters in history who were vegetarians and there has recently been a trend in which more and more Tibetans are becoming vegetarians. On the other hand, he suggested that the phenomenon of meat consumption by some Tibetan masters was something beyond the imagination and judgement of common people, and this was particularly true in the context of the Tantric tradition.

- 12 Yet, his interpretation and clarification have not been very convincing for some Chinese Buddhist believers. For instance, one Chinese Buddhist launched a bitter diatribe against Khenpo Sodarjey's explanations. In his online response to Khenpo Sodarjey, the Chinese Buddhist puts it this way:⁸

The issue of vegetarianism and eating meat have never been that complicated, but some *khenpos* [Khenpo Sodarjey] have made it complicated for the sake of protecting the face of Tibetan people. As a religious leader who always talks about non-attachment, doesn't Khenpo Sodarjey understand that non-attachment is realised through practices? If one achieved non-attachment to the taste, vegetarianism would become something easy and enjoyable; there is nothing complicated and complex in this issue. This is just one of many cases of his skilful beating about the bush [...]

[...] Tantric practitioners are very clear about the fact that animals need to be slaughtered because people need meat to eat. If eating meat while chanting tantric works as compassion, then I would ask those Tibetan practitioners' parents and relatives, if any of you would accept the "compassion" and "salvation" that comes after you are slaughtered and eaten by those tantric practitioners. They always talk about mother-like sentient beings, but they like the taste of those mothers' meat. Who, other than Tibetan lamas, can play such an ironic farce about compassion?

- 13 In Khenpo Sodarjey's teaching, there is a dilemma in the interpretations about the tradition of meat consumption by Tibetan religious elites (Khenpo Sodarjey 1997, p. 220 ; Khenpo Sodarjey 2002). On the one hand, with their increasing interaction with Chinese Buddhists and reference to the teachings of Mahāyāna Buddhism, Tibetan religious elites often feel that there is a great need to promote vegetarianism in Tibet. At the same time, they feel the need to defend Tibetan Buddhist masters' consumption of meat with the idea that the phenomenon of meat consumption by Tibetan Buddhist masters is beyond the judgement of ordinary people.
- 14 Khenpo Sodarjey's teaching is similar to Khenpo Tsullo's response to the question raised by non-Tibetan Buddhists in many aspects, including their presentation of Tibetan masters who were vegetarians, their explanation that the environmental condition of Tibetan plateau does not support vegetables, and their position that Tibetan Buddhist tradition does not support eating meat. In the book *Recovering the Secret Face of Tibetan Buddhism* (*Jiekai zangchuan fojiao de shenmi miansha* 揭开藏传佛教的神秘面纱 2009, p. 54), Khenpo Tsullo states: "Whenever people [outsiders] talk about Tibetan Buddhism, the issue of eating meat by Tibetan Buddhists always comes to mind. In this regard, I have explained before that Tibetan Buddhism does not require the Buddhist clergy to consume meat, but it is related to the living environment of Tibetan people". Admiring the Chinese Buddhist tradition of vegetarianism, he concludes by saying,

[...] yet, in this respect, we have made great efforts to make a common change. Nowadays, with the improvement of transportation, vegetables are available in market and vegetable plantation is possible in many places in Tibet. In the future, even though we may not be able to make all Tibetans vegetarians, which also has not been achieved in the Chinese Buddhist community, we will make sure that the Tibetan Buddhist clergy does not consume meat collectively⁹. This is a huge change, and then the rest of job is up to individuals to make their own decision.

- 15 In sum, these leading Tibetan *khenpos*' interactions with others, particularly with Chinese Buddhists, have put great pressure on them to change the cultural practices of eating meat and its related elements within Tibetan Buddhism.
- 16 The other aspect of the conversations between these Buddhist elites is how their religious identity overlaps with their ethnic identities. In those interactions, Khenpo Tsullo and Khenpo Sodarjey represent not only Buddhist monks in general, but also the Tibetan people, who have a distinct culture. Indeed, their response to both the critiques and the situation on the ground of Tibetan communities is a process in which the confluence of two identities – religious and ethnic – has taken place. For Khenpo Tsullo, the reinforcement of Buddhism in Tibet is equivalent to the maintenance of Tibetan culture and identity. For instance, he stated during a religious teaching near Kokonor Lake: “What is Tibetan culture? Fundamentally, Tibetan culture (*bod gyi rig gnas*) is about ‘not-harming other beings’, which is both our culture as well our religious belief [...] the slaughtering of animals for the sake of our own life goes against both our culture and our religion in the same way”¹⁰. He also said during a religious teaching in Payül Monastery in Dartang, Golog Prefecture that “the most urgent thing for us is to protect our culture including *chos* (Buddhism) and language [...] Tibetan world view (*lta ba*) indeed is a Buddhist world view, if we stick to this world view, we will have a better life in this world and a good one in the next life”¹¹. For Khenpo Tsullo, Tibetan Buddhism and Tibetan culture are the same, and his teachings on the anti-slaughter movement and the vegetarian movement are a way to make Tibetans become better Buddhists at the same time as better Tibetans. In other words, Buddhism lies at the heart of Tibetan culture and determines the characteristic of Tibetan people that originates from their belief in the law of karma and compassion.
- 17 For Khenpo Tsullo and others, the contradictions among the actual practice of Tibetan Buddhist figures (widespread meat consumption among Buddhist monks and leaders), what is required by Buddhist teachings (by the standard of the Bodhisattva vow), and increasingly immoral actions among lay Tibetans (for instance, wholesale selling of animals to the meat market) have become a visible problem with respect to their interaction with Buddhist outsiders. It is these interactions with outsiders and their very response to the assumptions and critiques of these religious “Others” that have motivated them to promote initiatives like the vegetarian movement. Through this process, Tibetan Buddhism and Tibetan cultural identity have become one entity. For Khenpo Tsullo, Tibetan Buddhism is the only source for Tibetan culture and related identity, and for this reason, cultural practices of selling animals to slaughterhouses and eating meat are actions that violate these cultural norms and indicate the loss of Tibetan identity and characteristics (see last section for this concern).

Dynamic forms of vegetarianism and different interpretations

- 18 In Tibetan, refraining from eating meat is called “ceasing [to eat] meat” (*sha bcad pa*) or “not eating meat” (*sha mi za ba*), the former referring to a long period of time and the latter to a short period of time. These practices have many forms and cultural meanings that the English term “vegetarianism” does not cover with respect to becoming vegetarian in a Tibetan way. A related term used by Khenpo Tsulpo in his teachings is *dkar zas za ba*, which means, “to eat ‘white’ food”; in many Buddhist teachings, it refers mostly to grains, vegetables, and fruits (Khenpo Tsultrim Lodro 2003b; Barstow 2013).
- 19 Many forms of “not eating meat” (*sha mi za ba*) have become popular in recent days; some of them are new and others are old. “Ceasing to eat meat” (*sha bcad pa*), generally speaking, means to stop eating meat for a lifetime or for many years. In the past, very few people took this type of vow, but recently more and more monasteries have participated in banning meat consumption at their monastic sites and an increasing number of individual monks and religious leaders have taken vows of this type. Currently, one widely adopted form of vegetarianism is to stop eating meat during religiously important days and festivals, including religious gatherings and ordinary festivals, such as Tibetan New Year festivals and weddings. More and more Tibetans refrain from eating meat on the 1st, 8th, 10th, 15th, 18th, 21st, 25th, and 30th of each month of the lunar calendar. To give up meat on the most important month of *Sagadawa* (*sa ga zla ba*), the fourth Tibetan month in which Buddha was born and died, is another way of being a vegetarian. Tibetans take vows for these times because those days and months have religious meanings. Another traditionally popular practice in nomadic areas is to stop eating meat on the day that an animal is slaughtered in the belief that the evil deed of eating meat on the day that animals are slaughtered is greater than on other days. Finally, some lamas now suggest that if one stops eating meat every morning or until 12:00 o’clock, it has the same merit as refraining for the whole day. Recently, those daily and monthly practices of refraining from eating meat have become popular not only among Tibetan farmers and herders but also among Tibetan students in high schools and universities, and among Tibetans working for government agencies.
- 20 In addition to different periods of time, vegetarianism in Tibet is also related to different types of meat. Some Tibetans give up meat that comes from livestock killed intentionally for meat consumption, but they do eat meat from livestock that died through natural processes or were killed by predators or other natural forces. For instance, during a religious teaching in Serde’u (Gser rde’u) Township of Kyugchu (Khyug mchu) County, Sichuan Province, most of the elderly herders in the community took vows of different forms. Some took a vow of not eating “meat with evil deeds” (*sdig sha*) or “meat coming from an animal killed intentionally”. Others gave up meat without differentiation for their entire life or for three years. The monastic community led by the local lama, who had studied in Larung Gar, also established an organisation that has thirty members who are obligated to recruit more vegetarians within their community. It is said one requirement to be part of this organisation is to commit to recruit at least five vegetarians per year.
- 21 In addition to this differentiation, a majority of Tibetans do not eat any type of meat other than yak, cow, mutton, and very recently pork. During my field studies, many

Tibetans told me that certain types of living beings are associated with much greater evil deeds than others; for instance, fish is one such sinful food. It is also a taboo for Tibetans to eat dog, fox and any insects. In this sense, it is not the practice of eating meat that is the problem, but rather the type of meat. Eating meat of animals that died naturally is not as serious a problem as eating meat of animals killed intentionally. From a religious perspective, ending life or harming others is considered to be a more serious problem than eating meat itself.

- 22 Despite the popularity of vegetarianism among all Tibetans, the circumstances and cases in which individuals participate in the vegetarian movement are complex and dynamic, and Tibetans take such vows for both religious and physical health reasons. The Tibetans' understanding that vegetarian diet leads to a better physical health condition is influenced not only by religious teachings but also by other sources, including the state media, scientific studies and so forth. For some Tibetans, the loss of loved ones has become the main motivation for becoming vegetarians. Drolma¹², a woman in her sixties from a pastoral area of Kyugchu County, Ngawa (Rnga ba) Prefecture, lost her husband ten years ago. Since then, she has stopped eating meat every morning, believing that she has been collecting good karma for her husband and that he should be receiving the merit in some way in his new form of life. The event of losing a loved one is a very common reason for many Tibetans to participate in the vegetarian movement and other religious practices.
- 23 Another reason that some Tibetans become vegetarians is because of their encounter with religious teachings, either through personal attendance at religious gatherings or watching videos of teachings by religious masters. Karma is a pastoralist in his late thirties in Nagchu (Nag chu) Prefecture. He was among a group of people who raised their hands during a religious teaching by a lama in his community when the latter asked the audience if they were willing to not eat meat for several days in a month. In a similar way, an elderly herder in Ngawa Prefecture in eastern Tibetan plateau raised his hand to stop eating meat for the rest of his life during a religious teaching of his lama. He did so because he saw many other herders of his age raising their hands around him. Renchen is in his thirties and works for an enterprise in downtown Lhasa. He decided to become a vegetarian six years ago after watching a video about the sufferings of animals, particularly during the slaughter process. Today, with the appearance of more vegetarian restaurants and an increasing number of his peers not eating meat, he finds it easier to continue to not eat meat. He has not experienced any health problems associated with not eating meat.
- 24 For others, health has become an important reason to refrain from eating meat, but their practice is also interpreted in terms of religious reasons. For instance, a retired government official in his late sixties had to give up meat for many years because of a health problem. Yet he also thought that this had a religious meaning, namely the collection of merit. Dedrol, from Lhasa, is a government employee in her early forties with a master's degree. She tried to give up meat gradually, starting with *Sagadawa* in 2013 because, in addition to being religious, she found herself suffering from high levels of cholesterol. She believed the benefits of becoming a vegetarian were twofold, allowing her not only to practice her religion, but also to improve her health.
- 25 A new and interesting phenomenon is the increasing number of vegetarians among the educated both Tibetans who work in government administration and young Tibetans at different levels of schooling. A friend of the author, who is working for the commercial

administration office of Nagchu Prefecture, said that she had taken a vow of not eating meat on important religious days a few years ago. She said it had become common for Tibetans working in state administration to give up eating meat on important religious days in the town she lives. Moreover, there has been an underlying social pressure on those not participating in the vows when most of their friends have taken vows.

- 26 The rationale for Tibetans to become vegetarians differs from individual to individual, but for most ordinary Tibetan herders and farmers, spiritual and secular health reasons interweave. Educated Tibetans further interpret the renunciation of meat as a way to express their cultural identity as Tibetans. Some Tibetans working for government offices said that the phenomenon of being vegetarians in government work units only occurs among their Tibetan colleagues, in contrast to their non-Tibetan colleagues who do not take such vows.
- 27 The involvement of Tibetan people in various types of vegetarianism cuts across all classes, genders, ages, educational levels, and regions. The traditional gender differentiation in Tibetan society that is commonly reflected in the division of labour, such as, milking yaks only by women in nomadic places, and Buddhist rituals of offering to deities by men (Makley 2014) is not relevant in the vegetarian movement. The very visible differentiation among Tibetan people working for government, newly emerged entrepreneurs, and herders and farmers is also not important with respect to participation in the movement. Finally, there is no obvious difference in the cultural regions of Tibet with respect to the popularity of vegetarianism. In sum, the increasing sensitivities regarding consumption of meat mark all kinds of Tibetans regardless of their class, age, gender, educational level, and location.
- 28 Having said this, it does not mean that all Tibetans accept vegetarianism. Indeed, the vegetarian movement is debated and discussed widely among Tibetans (Buffetrille 2015, 2016). Some Tibetans support meat consumption by saying that eating meat is a cultural practice of Tibetan people and it needs to be preserved. For instance, a monk in his forties said: “These days, there are two forces that are destroying Tibetan culture, and one of them is Khenpo Tsullo, who has been transforming herders’ way of life through his various religious movements”. It is not common for monks to criticise *khenpos* or their religious work, but this shows the extent to which the Nyingma *khenpos* and their movements have become controversial among Tibetans in regard to the issue of economic development, preservation of traditional culture, and reinforcement of Buddhist teachings. And, in his comment on the recent movements including vegetarian movement, a leading Tibetan scholar, Dorshi Dongdrug Nyemlo (Dor shi gdong drug snyems blo 2014), who is affiliated with the Gelug (Dge lugs) school also suggests that the vegetarian movement violates the Buddhist idea of “Method and Wisdom” (*thabs dang shes rab*) as it goes against the living environment of Tibetan communities. Another case is the recent emergence of a group of Tibetans in Dharamsala, who have initiated a campaign for the reinforcement of the cultural practice of eating meat. Others defend the tradition of eating meat by arguing that Tibetans have got used to eating meat and if they stop it, it will cause health problems (Jamyang Kyi 2015). The recent religious movements and their initiators have been debated not only in the every day life of Tibetans, but also in the cyber space among Tibetans¹³. Thus, I suggest that the unprecedented popularity of the movement has triggered debates and discussion about it among Tibetans of all kinds.

Discussion

- 29 Barstow situates the vegetarian movement of the 19th and early 20th centuries in the unstable Tibetan Kham Region, a place characterized by frequent conversions between various religious schools. He suggests that we should take the compassion of Buddhist teachers towards suffering animals seriously¹⁴. Nonetheless, he points out that the emphasis of religious teachers on compassion should also be situated in the context of political and sectarian competition over places and patrons at that time (Barstow 2013, p. 224). In a similar way, the vegetarian movement of contemporary Tibet is concerned with the ethical issue of killing animals from a Buddhist perspective, relating to the norms of compassion, the collection of merit and negation of evil deeds, and the idea of reincarnation. At the same time, I also suggest that Khenpos' teachings about the vegetarian movement need to be situated in an understanding of its contemporary context. It is this contemporary context that is different from that of the past, namely of sectarian competition among different schools of Tibetan Buddhism. I argue, instead, that the recent vegetarian movement is a response by Tibetan *khenpos* from Larung Gar towards Chinese Buddhist critiques about Tibetan Buddhism and its practitioners. That is, observing a gap between what Chinese Buddhists expect from Tibetan Buddhism and the real situation on the ground in Tibetan communities, Tibetan *khenpos* initiated teachings about vegetarianism as a way to make Tibetans become "better Buddhists", which equally means "orthodox Tibetans" for Tibetan *khenpos*. In this sense, the movement is a response to the assumptions and critiques of Chinese Buddhists regarding Tibetan Buddhism and its practitioners.
- 30 Here, what constitutes Tibetan identity and Tibetan Buddhism is critical. With the modernisation of Tibetans and their society, there has been a trend to unify Tibetan Buddhism and the Tibetan people, making Tibetan Buddhism an icon of Tibet and its people (Lopez 1998). In the current vegetarian movement, the linkage between the expression of Tibetan-ness and vegetarianism is clear in Khenpo Tsullo's concerns about endangered Tibetan culture and his unification of Tibetan Buddhism and Tibetan culture. One can also see this connection among Tibetans working for government agencies. Many of them say that, in addition to the religious meanings and health benefits, the practice of refraining from eating meat has a hidden meaning as their expression of cultural identity. This is particularly true when they see their practice of vegetarianism as what differentiates them from non-Tibetan colleagues¹⁵.
- 31 This brings an interesting comparison with what Yasmin Cho (2015) observed with the cultural politics of food consumption between Han-Chinese nuns and Tibetan nuns in Yachen Gar (Ya chen sgar), one of largest Buddhist centres for nuns in Tibet¹⁶. She observed that Han-Chinese nuns refrained from meat consumption and only ate particular vegetables in order to differentiate themselves from *ignorant* Tibetan nuns who did not know how to take care of their bodies (Cho 2015, p. 212). Following Lupton's idea (1996, p. 16, in Cho 2015, p. 200) that food consumption is both natural and cultural, the food consumption habits of Han-Chinese and Tibetan nuns in Yachen were not merely about biological need, but also about cultural practices that were related to cultural identification. Cho suggested that the head lamas' promotion of the vegetarian movement in Yachen Gar was associated with the Tibetan religious masters' interactions with outsiders, mainly the Chinese Buddhist community, where the banning of meat

consumption is seen as a cultural identification of Han-Chinese Buddhist practitioners (Cho 2015, p. 225). This last observation, in comparison with this material, points to differences in context. Tibetans working in government agencies also highlight their ethnic differentiation from Han Chinese yet they do so by becoming vegetarian, because in the context of the government agency, Han Chinese are less motivated to become vegetarian.

- 32 What is notable is the similarity in the production of “Otherness” by both Tibetan and Chinese vegetarians. For the Chinese Buddhists who criticise Khenpo Sodarjey, the tradition of Tibetan Buddhists’ meat consumption is the Otherness of Tibetans, while for Tibetans working in government offices, Han Chinese who consume meat are the Otherness of the Tibetans. Yet, the two groups have one commonality in their production of Otherness, that is, both of them have the same Otherness, namely the ones who consume meat in both ethnic communities. The cultural and political implication of this commonality deserves further study.
- 33 Yet, the irony this production of Otherness is that this new identification of Tibetans-as-vegetarian goes against other Tibetan cultural practices. While some consider the religious movement as a way of reinforcing Tibetan culture, namely the aspect of Buddhist teachings and practices, others see it as a way of destroying other aspects of Tibetan culture, in particular the nomadic culture, with its idealized diet, traditional dress, and so forth. While for Nyingma *khenpos*, the traditional practices of eating meat and wearing animal furs have recently become something that Tibetans should get rid of, other Tibetans (even though in small numbers) have been making the argument for maintaining this culture (Yeh 2013). This kind of debate not only exists for the vegetarian movement, but also in the slaughter renunciation movement (Gaerrang 2015) and in the fur-renunciation movement (Yeh 2013).
- 34 Despite that, practices of eating meat and wearing furs have long been related to the Buddhist teachings of not hurting animals, and these contradictions have been discussed in the past. The current state of these contradictions is magnified because Tibetans have increasingly interacted with the outside world, through religious communities, such as Han Chinese Buddhist communities as well as Western Buddhist communities, through modern scientific studies, such as health, and through new discourses, such as development, modernization, and democracy. In this way, and through analysis of the vegetarian movement, I observe that Tibetans’ increasing access to the outside world, particularly modernization, does not lead to a total displacement of Tibetan culture, but rather to a reinforcement of existing contradictions and competition among different cultural forces of those traditions.

Conclusion

- 35 In contrast with the early forms of vegetarian movements, which were mainly based on religious and political grounds, the contemporary vegetarian movement in Tibet is based on a different interweaving of reasons and rationales. For many Tibetans, belief in the health benefit of being vegetarian is simultaneously a belief in the Buddhist merit collection of giving up meat consumption. Scientific findings of the health benefit of eating vegetable and giving up the meat consumption and the availability of food diversity for Tibetans that is brought by the recent Chinese market economy have become an important support for the current popularization of Tibetan -style

vegetarianism. In short, the contemporary vegetarian movement is a new style of an old tradition, forming Tibetan identity by the process of increased access to other religious communities, a recent surge in Tibetan nationalism, better understanding of modern science and discourses, and a recently intensifying market economy. Finally, the author wants to highlight that, despite of the fact that the interaction between the contemporary Nyingma *khenpos* and Chinese Buddhist community is an important aspect of the contemporary vegetarian movement, a study of a full picture of the contemporary vegetarian movement requires an interdisciplinary approach that synthesises religious studies on Tibetan Buddhism with the political and economic studies of a globalising Tibet and the everyday practices of Tibetans who are experiencing these changes, which is the task of ethnography.

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NOTES

1. Larung Gar is also called Gser rta lnga rig slob gling, which, located in Tibetan Kham region, is one of largest Buddhist training centres in contemporary Tibet.
2. *Khenpo* (*mkhan po*) is the title of the highest degree in the Nyingma (Rnying ma) school of Tibetan Buddhist studies. Ordinary monks can get the degrees of *khenpo* and *geshe* (*dge bshes*) if they have passed all exams and requirements. In Tibetan Buddhism, a *tülku* (*sprul sku*) is a particularly high-ranking spiritual leader, who can choose the manner of his (or her) rebirth. Normally the lama would be reincarnated as a human, and in most cases, the first of each lama's lineage of reincarnations would be a very well known Buddhist scholar. In the Nyingma school, once a monk has received a *khenpo* degree, his degree of influence is similar to that of a *tülku*.
3. One of the best students of Khenpo Jigme Phuntsog (Mkhan po 'Jigs med phun tshogs, 1933-2004), Khenpo Sodarjey has been one of the most influential Tibetan Buddhist teachers not only in Tibet but also in Mainland China.
4. Chinese Buddhist communities refers to the Han-Chinese Buddhist communities.
5. It is also the centre for new religious movements including the "slaughter renunciation" movement, vegetarian movement (Khenpo Tsultrim Lodroe 2006a; Barstow 2013), Tibetan language preservation campaign, and others.
6. See "Sushi de yiyi" 素食的意义 (The signification of becoming vegetarian), an online article by Khenpo Tsullo, URL : <http://www.dymf.cn/Item/1733.aspx>, accessed August 2014.
7. Tape recording of his teaching in Rakor (Ra skor) Village in eastern Tibetan Plateau and videos about his teachings near Kokonor Lake (Mtsho sngon po) and in Payül Monastery (Dpal yul) in Dartang (Dar tang), Pema (Padma) County, Golog (Mgo log) Prefecture.
8. http://blog.sina.com.cn/s/blog_55fc160d0101ewiv.html, accessed May 2015.
9. In Tibetan Buddhist monasteries, monks are frequently provided with meals cooked by patrons.
10. This data is from a video named *Tshe srog la gces srong bya rgyu* (Cherishing life), which shows Khenpo Tsullo's teachings at Kokonor Lake.
11. Another video named *Lugs gnyis bslab bya* (Advice on the Two Systems), which is about Khenpo Tsullo's religious teaching in Payül Monastery in Dartang, Padma County, Golog Prefecture.
12. Pseudonyms are used throughout this section.
13. See, among others : <http://www.khabdha.org/?p=52414>, <http://blog.amdotibet.cn/strayyak/archives/95656.aspx> and <http://www.tsanpo.com/debate/358.html>, all accessed April 2015.
14. In his study of the history of vegetarianism in Tibet, Barstow (2013, pp. 52, 65) observes that other than the emotional response of religious masters to the animals' suffering during slaughtering, the Buddhist emphasis on compassion for all sentient beings and the notion of karmic consequence that the consumption of meat will eventually lead to rebirth in one of the hell realms were regarded as the main rhetoric promoting vegetarianism.
15. According to the Chinese Communist Party's rule, government officials who are members of the Party are not allowed to practice religious activities regardless of their ethnic differentiations, but in many Tibetan-populated regions, this rule works only as guidance for the government officials. Therefore, vegetarianism among Tibetan cadres did not face visible intervention from the government administration.
16. Yachen Gar is located in Baiyu County (Pal yul), Ganzi Prefecture, Sichuan Province.

ABSTRACTS

This article examines the religious teachings of the influential Tibetan Buddhist master Tsultrim Lodro on the tradition of refraining from eating meat. It considers these teachings in light of the social and religious meanings of the current vegetarianism movement, the processes through which it has taken place, the complexity and particularity of its manifestation, and the implications of the movement in transforming Tibetan society and its cultural landscape. It argues that the vegetarian movement is associated with interactions between leading Tibetan Buddhist teachers and Chinese Buddhist communities, particularly in the response of Tibetan Buddhist teachers to critiques by Chinese Buddhists regarding the Tibetan tradition of widespread meat consumption.

Cet article examine les enseignements religieux de l'influent maître bouddhiste tibétain Tsultrim Lodro sur la tradition d'abstinence de la consommation carnée. Il traite ces enseignements à la lumière des significations sociales et religieuses du mouvement actuel de végétarisme, les processus par lesquels ce dernier a eu lieu, la complexité et la particularité de sa manifestation et les conséquences du mouvement pour la transformation de la société tibétaine et son patrimoine culturel. Il soutient que le mouvement végétarien est associé à des interactions entre les principaux enseignants bouddhistes tibétains et les communautés bouddhistes chinois, en particulier dans la réponse des enseignants bouddhistes tibétains aux critiques faites par les bouddhistes chinois en ce qui concerne la tradition tibétaine de la consommation de viande à grande échelle.

INDEX

Mots-clés: Tibet, Chine, bouddhisme, pasteur nomade, communauté, végétarisme, identité, viande, consommation, abattage

Keywords: Tibet, China, Buddhism, nomadic pastoralist, community, vegetarianism, identity, meat, consumption, slaughter

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