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Au-delà du consensus patrimonial

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The Moral Economy of Cultural Identity

Tibet, Cultural Survival, and the Safeguarding of Cultural Heritage

Martin SAXER

Abstract: *This paper takes as its starting point the conflicting claims about the present condition of Tibetan culture. While the Dalai Lama argues that a “cultural genocide” is going on in Tibet, the Chinese Party State emphasises its efforts to safeguard and promote Tibetan cultural heritage. Regardless of the different meanings the notion of “culture” adopts and the different agendas it serves, both sets of claims rely on a remarkably similar rhetoric, which couches cultural heritage not only in political or economic but also in moral terms. Both the “cultural genocide” thesis and the Party State’s alleged efforts to safeguard Tibetan culture are thereby enmeshed in the larger “ethico-politics” surrounding the “Tibet question” and the rise of China in the world. How to understand the fusion of the economic, the political, and the moral? What happens when the political economy of cultural identity (development, tourism, property and benefits) meets with the ethico-politics of cultural survival? I argue that a new form of moral economy has emerged at the conjuncture of “cultural survival” and “safeguarding cultural heritage” – a moral economy of cultural identity, similar in structure but different in form and style from the classical cases of moral economies.*

Keywords: Tibet, cultural heritage, moral economy, identity, ethico-politics.

Résumé : *Au Tibet, alors que le Dalai Lama dénonce un « génocide culturel » en cours, le Parti d’État chinois souligne ses efforts de sauvegarde et de promotion du patrimoine culturel tibétain. Partant de ces revendications conflictuelles relatives à la culture tibétaine, l’auteur montre que, au-delà des différentes significations de la notion de culture que ces revendications adoptent et des différents agendas qu’elle sert, ces discours se basent sur une rhétorique similaire mobilisant le patrimoine culturel en termes non seulement politiques et économiques, mais aussi moraux. À la fois la thèse du « génocide culturel » et les efforts supposés du Parti d’État s’inscrivent dans l’éthique politique encadrant la plus large question du Tibet ainsi que celle de la montée en puissance de la Chine dans le monde. Comment comprendre cette fusion de l’économique, du politique et du moral ? Qu’arrive-t-il lorsque l’économie politique de l’identité culturelle (développement, tourisme, propriété et bénéfices) rencontre l’éthique politique de la survie du culturel ? L’auteur plaide pour une nouvelle forme d’économie morale située au point de rencontre de « la survie du culturel » et de la « sauvegarde du patrimoine culturel », une économie morale de l’identité culturelle partageant la même structure que les cas classiques d’économie morale mais non leur forme et leur style.*

Mots-clés : Tibet, patrimoine culturel, économie morale, identité, éthique politique.

Over the centuries, Tibetan culture has remained a spiritual pillar for the Tibetan ethnic group. [...] With great enthusiasm and a highly responsible attitude, [...] the Chinese government has dedicated a large amount of manpower, materials and funds to the protection and promotion of fine traditional Tibetan culture.

Information Office of the State Council of the People's Republic of China¹

Today, we are going through a critical period in time. We are a nation with an ancient culture, which is now facing the threat of extinction. We need your help, the international community's help, to protect our culture.

The Dalai Lama²

In March 2008, the Tibetan capital of Lhasa erupted in a brief and sudden unrest. It started when a group of monks from Drepung monastery marched towards the centre of Lhasa on 10 March, the 49th anniversary of the Tibetan uprising in 1959. They were stopped by police outside the city, and around fifty monks were arrested. On 14 March, a small group of monks from the old Ramoche monastery in Lhasa's busy city centre set out for a protest to demand their release. Again, they were soon stopped by police. This time, however, an angry Tibetan crowd sided with the monks and drove the police back.

The episode sparked a rebellious outburst. Over the following hours, Chinese immigrants and their businesses became victims of violent assaults, which left twenty-one people dead. Finally, the People's Armed Police (PAP) moved in and gained control. The ensuing clamp-down caused an unknown number of Tibetan casualties,³ which were never officially acknowledged. The events in Lhasa triggered unrest throughout the Tibetan world. In many places on the Tibetan Plateau, Tibetans took to the streets, displayed the banned Tibetan flag, shouted independence slogans, and demanded the return of the Dalai Lama (*cf.* Barnett 2008).

For a few weeks, the unrest echoed in the global media space. It found its way onto the front pages of news magazines and was extensively covered by the 24-hour news channels. The Western media generally portrayed the riots in Lhasa and the ensuing unrest throughout the Tibetan inhabited areas of the People's Republic of China (PRC) as an unfortunate but ultimately understandable reaction to ongoing repression by the Chinese state. It was argued that many Tibetans felt that they were being disadvantaged against Han Chinese immigrants. Meanwhile, Chinese television aired over and over again the same footage showing a Tibetan mob attacking Han residents in Lhasa. Chinese bloggers and commentators around the globe criticised the Western coverage for being inaccurate, pro-Tibetan, and ignoring the Chinese victims.

Official China was quick to name whom they regarded the obvious culprit: in best party jargon Premier Wen Jiabao made the "Dalai clique" responsible for masterminding the unrest (*cf.* CNN 2008). On 16 March 2008, the Dalai Lama refuted these

1 (IOSC 2008: 2f).

2 [<http://www.tibetanarts.org/index.html>]

3 See [www.tibetinfonet.net/newsticker/entries] for a comprehensive list of reports, eye-witness accounts, and death toll estimates.

claims and said that, whether intentionally or unintentionally, “some kind of cultural genocide” was taking place in Tibet (Eimer and Chamberlain 2008). The Dalai Lama has reiterated the cultural genocide thesis several times since 2008, including in a CNN-IBN interview with Karan Thapar in November 2010.⁴

Although allegations of cultural genocide can be traced back in exile discourse to the early 1960s (Sautman 2003: 196), they have gained new relevance in the light of the Party State’s latest turn in its Tibet strategy. While earlier positions predominantly highlighted development and progress in order legitimise the Party State’s policies, the Party State has recently begun to emphasise its efforts to promote and protect the “fine traditional Tibetan culture” as heritage.

Two government white papers published in 2001 and 2008 illustrate this remarkable shift in official Chinese discourse on Tibet. The 2001 white paper is entitled *Tibet’s March Toward Modernization* (IOSC 2001) and argues for a “historical inevitability” to modernise Tibet. It underscores the region’s rapid social development and lists Tibet’s modernisation achievements.

This line of argument has not lost any of its importance. However, a rhetoric of safeguarding traditional Tibetan culture is now being carefully superimposed onto this erstwhile purely modernist discourse. In September 2008, a white paper entitled *Protection and Development of Tibetan Culture* was published. It was explicitly meant to “expose the lie of the ‘cultural genocide’ in Tibet fabricated by the 14th Dalai Lama and his cohorts” and to “give the international community a better understanding of the reality of the protection and development of Tibetan culture” (IOSC 2008: 3). It does so by enumerating China’s efforts to preserve Tibet’s cultural heritage, including the reconstruction of monasteries, the promotion and development of Tibetan medicine, the official guarantee for religious freedom, and the increasing numbers of books, newspapers and TV programmes in Tibetan language.⁵

In other words, the Party State no longer seems to count on the idea that accelerated development is the answer to all woes in Tibet. It has begun to cast its own vision of authentic Tibetan culture against the cultural genocide thesis. As the Party State in taking on the cultural genocide allegations and actively engages in this formerly exile-dominated field, cultural identity – as difference, as dissent, or as heritage – has emerged as the predominant arena of the “Tibet question”.

I do not intend to substantiate or refute either the Tibetan Government in Exile’s claims or those by the Chinese Party State. My aim is not to discuss whether the cultural genocide thesis is justified or not.⁶ Instead, I intend to show how the two are entangled. Both the “cultural genocide” thesis and the Party State’s alleged efforts

4 Aired on 21 November 2010, 8 p.m.

5 Unlike the Dalai Lama’s statement about cultural genocide, the White Paper largely went unnoticed outside China. A year later, however, the Central Tibetan Administration (the Tibetan Government in Exile) answered with their own White Paper, entitled *China’s attempts to wipe out the language and culture of Tibet* (DIIR 2009), which controverted the Chinese claims.

6 For a discussion of whether a cultural genocide is really happening see Sautman (2003; 2006) as well as Blondeau and Buffetrille’s *Authenticating Tibet: answers to China’s 100 questions* (2008), especially the responses by Barnett (question 22), Blondeau, Heller and Meyer (questions 68-75).

to safeguard Tibetan culture are enmeshed in the larger “ethico-politics” (Rose 1999: 173, 188-196) surrounding the political spectacle of the Tibet question and the rise of China in the world. Both positions rely on a common discursive strategy: Tibet’s ancient culture has to be safeguarded, and the international community should understand the “reality” of what is going on.

Of course, Tibetan activists and the Chinese Communist Party have different visions of what makes Tibetan culture unique and what should be safe-guarded as heritage, and these may differ substantially from anthropological understandings of culture. It is precisely this vagueness of the terms “culture” and “heritage” from which they derive their power: it enables them to accommodate different agendas.

In the present case, the notion of cultural heritage serves three distinctive purposes. First, it legitimises *political* claims on both sides: more development to safeguard Tibetan culture versus less interference to protect its remains. Second, it positions culture as a *moral* question: the “threat of extinction”, the “spiritual pillar”. And third, cultural heritage produces *economic* value: it is a crucial aspect in Tibet’s development as a destination for (mainly domestic) mass tourism.

How to understand the fusion of the political, the moral, and the economic? What happens when the political economy of cultural identity (development, tourism, property and benefits) meets with the ethico-politics of cultural survival?

These are the questions I seek to address. I argue that at the conjuncture of “cultural survival” and “safeguarding cultural heritage” a new form of moral economy has emerged – a moral economy of cultural identity.

Moral Economy, revisited

The term “moral economy” requires closer examination. Of course, every economy, including the global market economy, is arguably moral in the sense that it is embedded in a certain set of ethics (Booth 1994). Thus, the concept of “moral economy” could also be described as a moralised political economy. However, doing so would not bring any analytical benefit.

“Moral economy” draws on a long debate in anthropology and political science. Karl Polanyi showed in his seminal book *The Great Transformation* (Polanyi 1957) that industrial capitalism and market economy encountered forms of “embedded economies”, which cannot be understood in terms of *Homo oeconomicus*’ striving to maximise profit. Community and morality have to be taken into account. E. P. Thomson subsequently used the term “moral economy” for his inquiry into the 18th century food riots in Great Britain (Thompson 1971), where exponents of the emerging capitalist society, such as millers and bakers, were accused by the rural poor on moral grounds. The poor couched their grievances against illegitimate capitalist practices in notions based upon widely-held traditional views of obligations and social norms (*ibid.*: 79).

Finally, James Scott took the concept beyond Europe in his book *The Moral Economy of the Peasant: Rebellion and Subsistence in Southeast Asia* (1976). He argues that the Burmese and Vietnamese peasantry responded to being incorporated in more implacable state rule and a larger market economy by revivifying moral

understandings of minimal subsistence rights. This “subsistence ethic”, when under attack, triggers a “reflex of self-protection” (Scott 2005: 397).

Contemporary Tibet is neither an “embedded economy” nor a peasant society, and the Tibetan unrest in 2008 was not a food riot (although the hike in food prices may have played a role). The moral economy I am suggesting here is different in form and scale from the phenomena described by Polanyi, Thompson and Scott; yet, it is similar in structure.

Thompson describes the moral economy as confrontation in a rapidly transforming market-place. In the context of the early 21st century the increasing pervasiveness of the market economy still creates friction and triggers resistance. In the present case, however, the economic good is not grain or livestock but cultural identity reified or “protected” as heritage. The subsistence crisis is not *material* but *cultural*. Yet, as the cultural genocide thesis suggests, this cultural subsistence crisis is equally experienced and expressed as a question of survival. What is nearing extinction, according to the Dalai Lama, is “the religion, culture, language and identity, which successive generations of Tibetans have considered more precious than their lives” (Wong 2009).

Apart from the difference in goods at stake, there is a difference in space. The site of confrontation is no longer bound to a specific market-place as in Thompson’s case. The unrest in Lhasa not only spread across the Plateau, it also triggered pro- and anti-Tibetan demonstrations around the globe. Following Edelman, one can say that Thompson’s “market-place” as site of confrontation has lost its “place” (Edelman 2005: 332). Tibetanness is a global good enmeshed in global debates about morality and politics. Confrontations in this global market without place naturally take a different shape.

Despite these differences in form and scale, the notion of “moral economy” suggests itself for the present case because it highlights a tension that is similar to the one described in the classical moral economy scholarship: the extension of the market economy and its logic (investment, price, profit) to a domain considered critical for subsistence meets with political resistance couched in moral terms and experienced as moral problem.

Revival of “Culture”

In order to understand the making of this new moral economy of cultural identity we first have to look at the context in which Tibetan culture has gained economic value and has become a candidate for the creation of heritage.

Today, as we have seen, the Party State portrays itself not only as bringing the comforts of modern life to Tibet but also as the respectful steward and guardian of authentic Tibetan culture (IOSC 2008: 2). While this may sound cynical to many a Tibetan ear, it hints at the specific historical conjuncture in which Tibetanness has acquired economic value in the People’s Republic. The rise of an economy of Tibetanness has to be seen in relation to the generally positive view of cultural heritage in contemporary China. This, of course, has not always been the case. The positive notion of cultural heritage and tradition stands in stark contrast to the hostility against “old traditions” that characterised the Mao era. Ann Anagnost (1997: 75ff) argues

that in the course of the post-Mao reforms the notions of class and class struggle as organising figures of a national imaginary were gradually pushed aside by the notion of *wenming*, “civilisation” or “civility”.

Wenming covers a range of meanings. It can denote Chinese civilisation (*zhongguo wenming*) as the nation’s glorious past, but also a dreamed-of “modernity” (*xiandaihua*). The notion of *wenming*, Anagnost argues, “encapsulates what has been called the ‘Janus-facedness’ of the national imaginary, looking toward the past to face the future” (1997).

Whereas revolutionary discourse portrayed the past as something to be overcome at all cost in order to create a better future, the post-Mao reform period has been characterised by a multifaceted reflection on *wenming* and its relation to *wenhua* – culture. It was questioned, for example, whether Chinese culture was responsible for the country’s “backward” status in the global community or whether *wenhua*, on the contrary, was the key to economic success and the new rise of China in the world; or whether the revival of Confucianism might serve as the basis for an alternative modernity (Dirlik 1995; Ong 1996; Wei-ming 1996; Shue 2006; DuBois 2010: 354ff).

The demise of class and the rise of culture and civilisation as guiding notions of political discourse had a direct impact on China’s ethnic minorities. The People’s Republic officially encompasses fifty-six nationalities (*minzu*) – including the Han majority. This inclusion, Dru Gladney (2004: 35) remarks, points to the fact that the notion of *minzu* is intimately connected with the construction of China as a harmonious, orderly, civilised, multi-*minzu* family. Very often, the fifty-five minorities are presented, or actively present themselves, as “living ancestors” that provide a glimpse into the Han majority’s own past, as living fossils of ancient times (Oakes 1998: 188; Oakes 2000: 681; Scott 2009: ix).

Together with rising household incomes and a burgeoning domestic tourism industry, cultural and “ethnic” destinations have seen an unprecedented boom over the last two decades. The new interest in the past has led to the extensive construction of “old towns” and theme parks throughout the country (Anagnost 1997: 161-176; Oakes 1998: 42-59; Gladney 2004: 32-48). Tim Oakes speaks in this respect of a veritable manufacturing of *minzu* culture (Oakes 1998: 140ff). On the one hand, the preservation of culture provides both the “ideological glue to build a national community” and a means for minorities to participate in this ethico-political project; on the other hand, the preservation of culture is pursued in the name of economic development and rural poverty alleviation.

Intangible Cultural Heritage and the Market for Tibetanness

The use of ethnic identity for commercial purposes is, of course, by no means a uniquely Chinese phenomenon. Over the last two decades, “identity economies” and “ethnicity industries” have emerged around the globe (Comaroff and Comaroff 2009). The fusion of cultural preservation and economic interests, as explicitly put forward in the white paper *Preservation and Development of Tibetan Culture* (IOSC 2008), is therefore not the Party State’s invention. It ties in with UNESCO’s concept of “intangible cultural heritage”, which has become a centrepiece in the organisation’s strategy. Unlike UNESCO’s previous emphasis on identifying and protecting world

heritage sites, this new approach extends the UNESCO strategy into the domain of non-material expressions of culture. In 2003, the UNESCO conference in Paris adopted the *Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage* (UNESCO 2003) and China was among the first countries to ratify it in 2004. The convention defines intangible cultural heritage as

the practices, representations, expressions, knowledge, skills – as well as the instruments, objects, artefacts and cultural spaces associated therewith – that communities, groups and, in some cases, individuals recognize as part of their cultural heritage. (ibid.: Art. 2.1)

As the convention's title suggests, this intangible cultural heritage needs to be safeguarded. Safeguarding includes:

measures aimed at ensuring the viability of the intangible cultural heritage, including the identification, documentation, research, preservation, protection, promotion, enhancement, transmission, particularly through formal and non-formal education, as well as the revitalization of the various aspects of such heritage. (ibid.: Art. 2.3)

research, and protection but also for promotion, enhancement, and transmission of cultural heritage, falls perfectly in line with the approaches adopted by the PRC to protect as well as promote and develop cultural heritage. It ties in with older modes of protecting tangible cultural heritage, such as the Potala palace or the Jokhang temple in Lhasa, but widens its scope considerably.⁷ China has set up and is steadily expanding a catalogue of its intangible cultural heritage. In the case of Tibet, committees were established in the TAR and the Tibetan prefectures in other provinces to investigate and identify suitable items for the list. Sixty-one Tibetan “reference works”, including the Gesar Epic, thirty-one eminent people, The fact that the convention not only calls for identification, documentation, and several Tibetan medicines have since been listed (IOSC 2008: 11).

Thus, the notion of safeguarding cultural heritage has reached Tibet in combination with development targets, ethnic tourism, and an ongoing fascination for *minzu* culture. A case in point in the town and county of Gyalthang (or Zhongdian in Chinese), located in Yunnan province. It was officially renamed Shangri-La in 2001. Awarding the place the official name of James Hilton's hidden paradise⁸ promised to promote tourism in the region (Maconi 2007; Kolås 2008: 11ff). The airport nearby and the local Tibetan medicine factory inherited the precious brand. The main road has been substantially improved and now provides easy access for tour groups.

Other Tibetan examples of ethnic tourist destinations include the famous “nine villages” – Dzitsa Degu or Jiuzhaigou – in Ngaba prefecture (Sichuan Province) with an estimated three million mostly domestic visitors per year (DIIR 2007: 205), as

7 See Shepherd (2006) for the politics that surrounded the cultural protection of the Potala palace in Lhasa.

8 The term Shangri-La was coined by James Hilton in his famous novel *Lost Horizon* (1933) to denote a hidden paradise somewhere in Tibet. Shangri-La has ever since fuelled mystical images of Tibet and has served as a name for countless hotels and businesses throughout the Himalayas.

well as an increasing number of smaller theme park-style sites throughout Tibet. In Lhasa, the construction of an “intangible cultural heritage park” has recently started. With a planned reception capacity of 800,000 visitors per year and 1000 staff, the park is envisioned to become “the largest scale one-stop comprehensive cultural tourism destination in Lhasa” once it has been completed in 2014 (CTIC 2010).

The booming interest in minorities, including their tourism potential, has given rise to a pronounced shift in how Tibet is being conceived in China. The images of barbarian customs, feudal cruelty, and a general backwardness that dominated the discourse of Maoist liberation (*cf.* Heberer 2001) have given way to much more positive images of Tibet as a realm of unspoiled nature and as a “lustrous pearl of Chinese culture” (IOSC 2008: 2).

Shoton, Inc.

Building the stage for Lhasa's Shoton festival's opening ceremony, August 2009.

The festival is listed as “intangible cultural heritage” since 2006.

© Martin Saxer 2009.

An example to illustrate this fusion of preservation and promotion is Shoton (shoton), the Yoghurt festival in Lhasa. The name Shoton derives from the custom of serving yoghurt to the monks of Drepung monastery coming back from their summer retreat. The festival starts with a spectacular ceremony at Drepung monastery, in which a huge thanka is unrolled. Shoton draws tens of thousands of Tibetans to Drepung and, over the subsequent days, to the Norbulinka (the summer palace) where performances of *ache lhamo* (Tibetan opera) are shown.⁹

⁹ For two theories about the origin of Shoton see [www.tibetanarts.org/events_shoton.html]. See Richardson 1993 for a description of the festival and Henrion-Dourcy 2012 for a discussion of *ache lhamo*.

Shoton was listed as intangible cultural heritage in 2006 (CIECC 2006), the same year as the railway link to Lhasa was inaugurated. The festival, which usually falls in August, has become a major tourist event and an important stage on which to promote Tibet. Business promotion events during Shoton 2007 were said to have attracted 7.51 billion yuan of investment for forty-one different projects in the TAR, ranging from tourism to Tibetan medicine, science and traditional crafts (Peng 2007).

As a strategy of branding, festival mascots (clearly inspired by the Beijing Olympic mascots) and a logo were designed. The logo depicts a masked Tibetan dancer, a flower-festooned Tibetan girl holding a cup of Yoghurt, and two black yaks with conspicuously red lips. In 2009, the government news agency Xinhua announced that a ritual exchange of mascots between Shoton and the Shanghai World Expo 2010 took place (Xinhua 2009a). Within a few years, Shoton was transformed from just a Tibetan festival, tolerated by the authorities but without any strategic relevance, into a branded and protected key event for tourism and business promotion in Tibet.

The thanka ceremony at Drepung monastery during Shoton 2009.
© Martin Saxer 2009.

This commodification and branding of “cultural heritage” may be seen as just an extension of capitalist commodity fetishisation to the domain of ethnicity. However, Jean and John Comaroff suggest that the commodification and marketisation of ethnic identity tend to yield more complex outcomes. In their book *Ethnicity, Inc.* (2009), they argue that the market for cultural identity also creates unprecedented opportunities for generating value of various kinds – not only for the well-positioned. Following Chambers (2000), Swain (1990), Geismar (2005), Xie (2003) and others, the Comaroffs contend that any number of minority populations around the globe have “enhanced their autonomy, their political presence, and their material circumstances by adroitly managing their tourist potential – and all that it has come to connote” (Comaroff and Comaroff 2009: 24). In short, the moniker “Ethnicity, Inc.” can stand

for both unfettered exploitation and tactical “ethno-preneurialism” (*ibid.*: 27) serving local economic and political agendas.

The Comaroffs’ thesis raises a set of questions in relation to Tibet: What remains of the “cultural genocide” if and when Tibetans themselves engage as entrepreneurs of their ethnic identity, or when becoming an ethnic tourist dancer trained in Beijing is a career perspective for a Tibetan university graduate? What, when “cultural survival [...] has given way, in many places, to survival through culture”, as the Comaroffs put it (2009)?

Here, two issues intersect. The notion of “cultural survival” emphasises the question: *is it authentic?* “Survival through culture”, on the other hand, foregrounds the question: *who profits?* Thus, possible outcomes at this intersection fall somewhere between “all fake and others profit” and “authentic and economically beneficial for local stakeholders” – with many shades and combinations in between.

In the case of Tibet, one end of this spectrum is marked, for example, by an exhibition on Tibetan medicine in the Tibetan medical college in Lhasa, which had just closed its doors when I started my field research in September 2007. The exhibition, however, had stirred so much anger that it kept coming up in conversations. Pieced together from several accounts this is approximately what happened: a Chinese entrepreneur had rented a space in the college for an exhibition on Tibetan medicine, tailored to Chinese as well as Western tour groups. The exhibition was actively advertised. Visitors to Lhasa were issued with appropriate leaflets on arrival at the airport; travel agents received a financial incentive for every person they brought to the premises. Tibetan medicine, in one form or the other, features on standard tour programmes of most travel agencies, and the exhibition attracted a huge number of people.

“During summer the college looked like a tourist place”, a former student at the Medical College told me. He used to work as a guide in the exhibition. One day he had a Portuguese tour group:

That day, the wife of the Chinese entrepreneur who ran the exhibition was also present. She insisted on doing most of the talking. But as she was not very knowledgeable about Sowa Rigpa [the Tibetan Science of Healing], I sometimes added my thoughts when the things she said were not accurate. Of course, she did not like that at all. At the end of the tour the tourists were always supposed to buy herbs. There was a cabinet with a Tibetan doctor who, in fact, was Chinese and not Tibetan at all. I tried to speak with him in Tibetan but he did not understand. There was an elderly man in my group. He was advised to buy some yartsagunbu¹⁰ to tackle his weight problem. But yartsagunbu is not good for overweight people! So I intervened again. The leader’s wife got very angry and told me to mind my own business. A very unfortunate experience.

The exhibition caused widespread anger and a feeling that a Chinese entrepreneur was capitalising on the Tibetan heritage. Students and teachers were utterly upset about the whole affair and launched a complaint to the relevant government office.

10 Yartsagunbu (dbyar rtswa dgun ‘bu) or *Ophiocordyceps sinensis* is a caterpillar fungus famous as a general tonic and said to possess a virility-boosting effect (see Winkler 2005; 2008; 2010; Olsgard 2009; Sulek 2009).

It was argued that having a fake Tibetan doctor was not helping the cause of Tibetan medicine. Apparently, they were told not to speak about the issue. However, when the entrepreneur's contract ran out it was not renewed and the exhibition closed.

Another case in point is a disenfranchised group of Tibetan nomads on the shores of Qinghai Lake, as recently portrayed in a documentary by the acclaimed Tibetan filmmaker Dorje Tsering Chenaktsang. The nomads live near an ethnic tourist village and the film shows the grim side of theme park culture: Chinese tourists enjoy themselves riding yaks and taking pictures of beautifully dressed Tibetan nomad girls, who earn one yuan per photo. The owners of the site, however, have started charging increasingly high "entrance fees" for the Tibetans "working" inside the fenced area – an area which above all was illegally established on the sacred communal land of the local nomads. When the Tibetans raised their voice against these issues their settlement was raided and their leaders imprisoned.

While such examples are abundant, there is also another reality that causes less of a stir. On the other end of the spectrum, stories of Tibetans successfully competing against Chinese businessmen and clearly profiting from the Tibetanness economy can easily be found. They include Tibetan travel agents in Shangri-la, for example, who have seen their businesses take off since the renaming of the town and county triggered infrastructure developments and an increasing influx of tourists, Tibetan hotel owners in Lhasa who directly profit from the new railway that links Mainland China to the TAR, or Tibetan shareholders of successful Tibetan medicine companies now producing for a nationwide market.

Many of these successful Tibetans are not only clever business people; they also make active use of the space that the official strategy of cultural preservation has created. Adopting the traditional role of a *jindak* (*sbyin bdag*) – a patron or sponsor – in Tibetan society, they support monasteries, build clinics, organise free health camps in remote areas, fund local schools and sponsor local festivals. In short, trying to balance profit with altruism, many successful Tibetans engage in activities with no direct economic gain, simply because such activities are considered to be important for Tibetan culture. Here, economic value is being transformed back into moral and spiritual value. Here, the "ethnicity industry" is understood and practiced as a moral economy in a positive sense – an economy that creates a space for local Tibetan initiatives.

The Moral Economy at Large

The problem is, however, that besides being an important aspect of Tibetan self-understanding, the moral and spiritual value of Tibetanness is also intrinsically linked to the global political spectacle (Debord 1970; McLagan 2002) that surrounds the political status of Tibet and China's rise in the world.

In an insightful report titled *Brand China*, Joshua Cooper Ramo (2007) shows that China's image of herself and other nations' views of her are increasingly diverging. While Chinese have seen their country rapidly changing and their views account for the resulting ambivalences, in the eyes of the world China is often thought of as simultaneously humiliated and arrogant, while seeking to regain its status as world power at all cost. Ramo argues that "China's greatest strategic threat today is its

national image” and that “for a nation obsessed about territorial sovereignty, China has let its ‘image sovereignty’ slip out of its control” (ibid.: 12f). Image sovereignty, however, is a matter of trust and Ramo notes that “until China becomes a more trusted nation, making her a more understood nation is a difficult task” (ibid.: 17).

“Cultural genocide”, the idea that Tibet’s cultural survival is threatened by government-sponsored Chinese encroachment, has become a major stumbling block in this respect. Western politicians meeting Chinese leaders are under constant public vigilance at home whether they show enough courage to admonish the latter for human rights violations. The “cultural subsistence crisis” has taken centre stage on a global scale. The protection of Tibetan cultural heritage is no longer primarily a question of tourism development or the concept of a harmonious family of multi-*minzu* China; it is directly tied to the problem of China’s reputation in the world.

The 2008 Beijing Olympics were regarded a prime opportunity to mark the dawning of a new era in the PRC’s international relations by showing the world the “real” face of China. With the unrest in Tibet and the Party State’s response to it, showing the “real face” proved to be an uphill battle. One episode during the Games’ opening ceremony highlights the problem particularly well: a choir of fifty-six children, one from each *minzu*, performed a song together, a display of unity and harmony. Later, the Western media found out that actually all the children were Han Chinese. The responsible official’s reaction in a television interview was simple and reasonable: “It was a show”, he said – a show for which the best performers were selected. The children were cast as actors; they were playing a role. They were not meant to be representatives of the fifty-six nationalities, but a representation of the ideal of multi-ethnic China as a harmonious family.

The Western media, however, ignored the show’s nature as performance and used the episode as evidence that China’s charm offensive was nothing but propaganda, and that in reality there was no harmony in China. Tibet, and to a lesser extent Xinjiang, often serve as the focal points of this much larger symbolic and moral struggle between rising China and the West.

As Tibetan cultural identity is enmeshed in these larger issues of China’s envisioned new role in the world and the scepticism against it, the moral economy of Tibetanness it is necessarily a moral economy at large.

Resisting Heritage

It is this context in which a new form of civil disobedience has emerged in Tibet. It started already before the unrest of March 2008. In 2006, following an appeal by the Dalai Lama to stop wearing the traditional fur-trimmed festive clothes, for which traditionally tiger, leopard, lynx, otter, or fox pelts are used, people throughout Tibet gathered to burn their burn their exquisite fur-trimmed robes. The authorities regarded this as an act of defiance – regardless of the fact that the Dalai Lama’s appeal was very much in conformity with the PRC’s wildlife protection laws already in place. In 2007, people in Yushu were even ordered to wear their fur-trimmed robes for the annual horse-racing festival, which had become a tourist attraction. Not dressing traditionally Tibetan meant being fined up to 3,000 yuan (Environment News Service 2006; Macartney 2007).

The figure of “resisting culture” became even more pronounced in 2009 during the *losar* festival. Many Tibetans refused to celebrate *losar* (*lo sar*), the Tibetan New Year, as a silent protest against the current situation. This performance of Tibetanness by not celebrating the most important Tibetan festival of the year came to be seen as a threatening act of civil disobedience. Woesser, a Tibetan writer known for her courage and outspokenness, wrote on 24 February 2009:

“Not to celebrate Losar” has been regarded as a serious “separatist” activity, so much so that some Tibetans have been accused of spreading “not to celebrate Losar” rumours and been arrested. (Woesser 2009)

Official China blamed the matter on the “Dalai clique” and the Tibetan Youth Congress (TYC). The TYC had labelled 2009 a black year and had issued a call to join the Tibetans in Tibet in not celebrating *losar* (TYC 2009). Chinese government new agency Xinhua cited a senior Tibetan astrologer to prove the Tibetan Youth Congress wrong. Gongkar Rigzin, a 1957 graduate of the Lhasa Mentsikhang (the institute of Tibetan medicine and astrology) had been responsible for its calendar calculations for over thirty years. He was quoted as saying that the coming year was by no means black but red, which was a sign that it would be “festive and auspicious, but dry” (Xinhua 2009b).

In short, while the Tibetans in Tibet refuse to play Tibetan, China’s government news agency cites a Tibetan expert to tell them that they are wrong and that one should not “‘play politics’ with Tibetan culture” (ibid.) – a remarkable development, given the Party’s history in fighting backward superstition. Now, Tibetan astrology is used to create a moral truth about authentic Tibetanness. To make the argument even more persuasive, the voice of the market was summoned: It was claimed that Gongkar Rigzin’s calendar sold more than 100,000 copies per year, many of them in Nepal and India.

A few months earlier, delivering a lecture at the Indian Institute of Management in Ahmedabad, the Dalai Lama claimed to be a Marxist monk, “because unlike capitalism, Marxism is more ethical” (Express News Service 2008). As one of the examples, not of Marxist ethics, but of ruthless capitalist exploitation, he cited – the People’s Republic of China. Just as the Party State has started criticising and even fining Tibetans for not being authentically Tibetan, the Dalai Lama blames the Chinese leadership for not being authentically communist.

In this context, communism is no longer bad (because anti-religious) *per se*, and Tibetan culture no longer backward. As long as one is an *authentic* Communist or an *authentic* Tibetan, both can be good and honourable. As authenticity is a crucial asset in the moral economy of cultural identity, its creation, maintenance, and defence are logical strategies. Thus, both the emphasis on cultural survival (instead of political independence) and the prominence of safeguarding Tibetan cultural heritage in recent Party discourse are outcomes of the emergence of the same moral economy of Tibetanness.

Conclusions

In summary, two threads come together to produce what I have described as a new form of moral economy – the moral economy of cultural identity.

The first thread represents the fusion of ethnic culture and commerce. In the context of the rising interest for ethnicity and culture in post-Mao China, Tibetanness acquired economic value. The advent of mass tourism with the opening of a railway link to Lhasa in 2006 further fuelled the emergence of a veritable Tibetanness economy.

The second thread fuses cultural identity with global politics and morality. In the run-up to the Beijing Olympic Games 2008 China started pushing more actively for a re-definition of its role in the global sphere. This push is reflected in the notion of China's peaceful rise and the attempt to show a new face to the world. The cultural genocide allegations gained new relevance in this context and the Party State began to emphasise its efforts in protecting Tibetan culture. However, doing so also means agreeing to put the fate of Tibetan cultural identity right at the core of the political debate, which is precisely what the exile notion of "cultural survival" postulates. In other words, paraphrasing Xinhua, the name of the game is now, indeed, "playing politics with Tibetan culture".

What facilitates the entanglement of these two threads is the concept of heritage – or, more precisely: the extension of heritage to the domain of the intangible as put forward in the UNESCO convention on *The Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage*. For the Party State, the concept offers a globally accepted and ethically "certified" answer to both the cultural genocide allegations as well as the problem of combining the protection of "fine traditional Tibetan culture" (IOSC 2008: 3) with accelerated development.

However, as the movement against celebrating certain Tibetan festivals shows, the concept as it is applied in China fails to capture the nuances of morality and the fluidness of cultural identity. Precisely because the notion of heritage entangles culture and commerce with politics and morality, and because the Party State has started playing in this field formerly dominated by exile discourse, notions of what is considered morally right and authentically Tibetan simply moved on. Making market rules for a moral economy of intangible goods is not as easy as the notion of heritage led some to believe.

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