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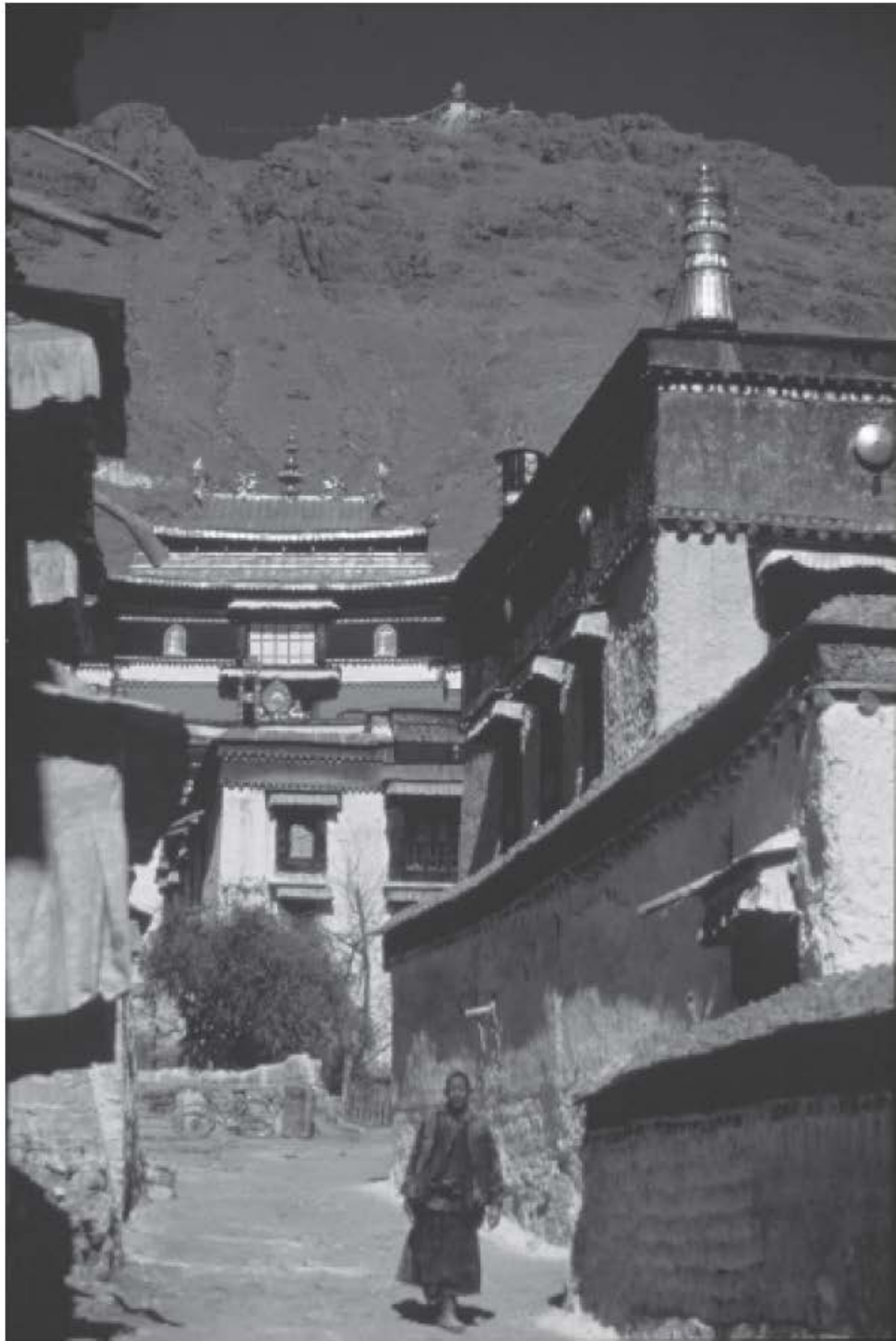
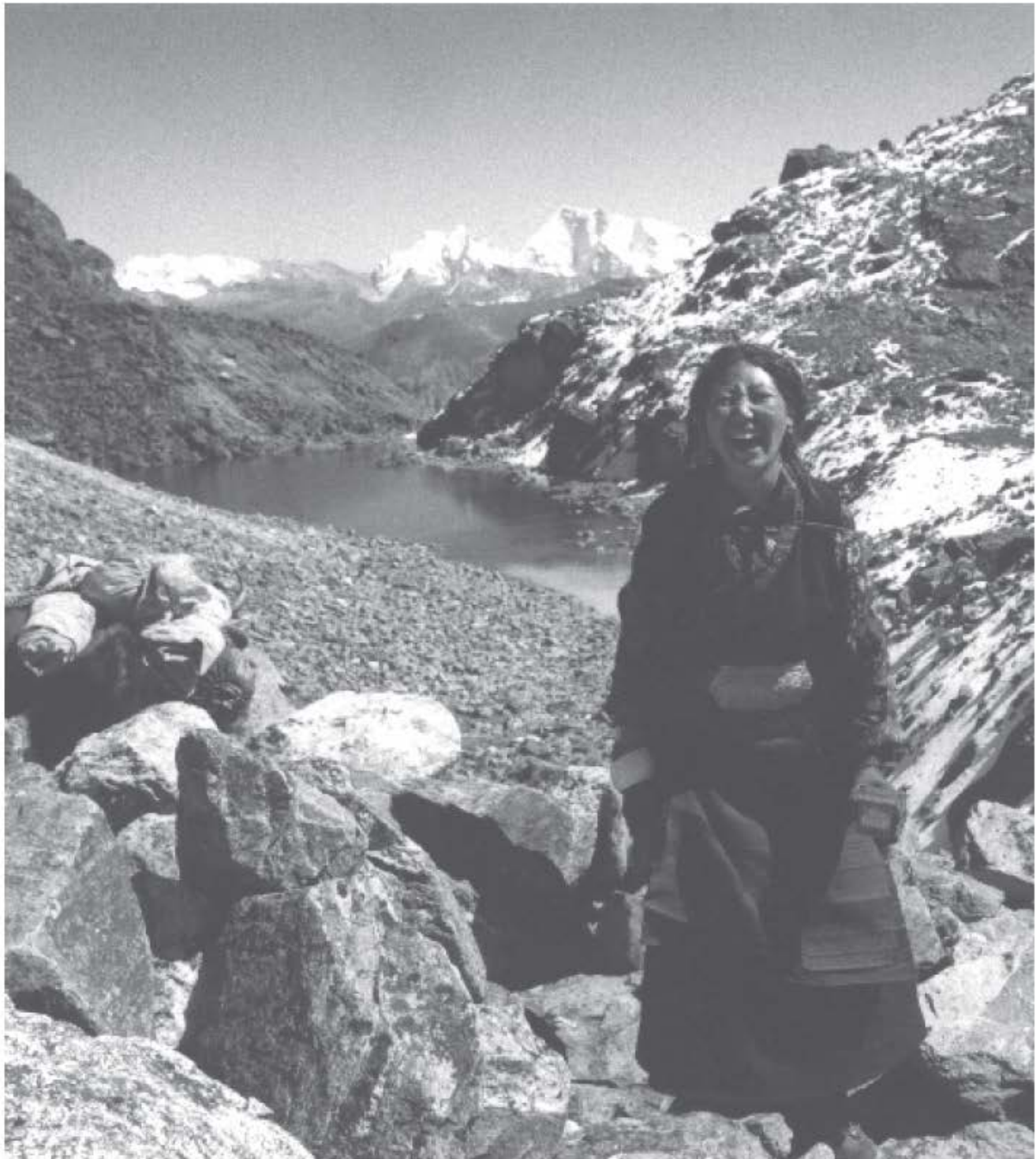


PHOTO: LEO DOSREMEDIOS



Laughing girl, Kharta Valley, Tibet

PHOTO: NANCY GREEN



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SPIRITUALITY, HARMONY, AND PEACE: SITUATING CONTEMPORARY IMAGES OF TIBET

This paper argues that contemporary Western representations of Tibet are remarkably homogeneous and narrowly highlight specific “Tibetan” qualities. These include isolation and disengagement with the world (projected far into Tibet’s past), harmonious relationships with the natural environment, and spirituality. I explore and analyze these representations, arguing that they are historically and culturally specific. I suggest that although such representations appear to fuel Western support for the Tibetan political cause, they dangerously predicate such support on unrealistic fantasies that ultimately demean and dehumanize Tibetans and the real dilemmas and struggles they face today.

Their [Tibetans’] élan, their dogged courage, their undoubted heroism, their occasional acuteness, their more general imbecile folly and vacillation and inability to grasp a situation, make it impossible to say what they will do in any given circumstances. A few dozen men will hurl themselves against hopeless odds, and die to a man fighting desperately... At other times they will forsake a strongly sangared position at the first shot, and thousands will prowling round a camp at night, shouting grotesquely, but too timid to make a determined attack on a vastly outnumbered enemy.

—Candler, 1905

Gone was the virile independence and swashbuckling assurance of the lawless, fearless Khamba, to be gradually replaced by the poverty-stricken obsequiousness of the Lhasa-governed Tibetan. The house outside which we now arrived was a new low in filth and grinding degradation.

—Patterson, 1956

Accordingly, the cultivation of compassion, matched by that of renunciation and wisdom, charged the Tibetan soul. Hunting, fishing and the killing of so much as an insect became anathema...The lay society which supported such a temporally nonremunerative pursuit was feudal yet, owing to Tibet’s severe terrain and the temporizing doctrines of the faith, imbued with an essentially democratic spirit. Tibetans themselves were naturally warm and pragmatic, accepting of their lot, socially conservative but individually tolerant. Their innate love of order had kept the various classes immutably defined for centuries.—Avedon, 1986

INTRODUCTION

The three quotes above suggest the point, central to this paper, that contemporary Western images of Tibet are historically specific; they differ substantially from images Westerners have created about Tibet in the past.¹ There is a long history of Western fascination

with Tibet, and while I shall not summarize that history now, I will refer to various aspects of it as appropriate throughout this paper.² My intention here is to analyze the dominant tropes drawn upon by those who are interested in Tibet now—to explore the way in which Tibet is represented, and to attempt to understand that current-day discourse as

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The essential picture of Tibet that emerges...is of an isolated people naturally—inherently—spiritual, orderly, peaceful, harmonious, and in a relationship of respect and balance with their environment. Contemporary images attribute these qualities to present-day Tibetans and project them deep into Tibet’s past. Few of these qualities, however, were attributed to Tibetans by past Western observers.
”



historically situated and specific.³

In order to examine current images of Tibet, I have drawn together a wide variety of materials—from work by and about the Dalai Lama to novels set in Tibet, from newspapers on Tibetan issues to travel brochures, from political polemics to coffee-table picture books, from newspaper and magazine articles to pamphlets, from television and radio shows to computer “bulletin board” conversations, from calendars to T-shirts, and from scholarly and historical work to travel literature. My project, then, is not to evaluate a scholarly body of literature, nor to arrive at an authoritative reading of Tibet or Tibetan-ness. Rather I wish to explore these varied source materials, to identify and analyze the key components of a widely-shared image of Tibet, and to suggest that the glorification of the “Tibetan spirit” that emerges in these materials is dehumanizing, perhaps no less so than obviously racist characterizations.

For analytical purposes, I will refer to two major interwoven threads of current interest in Tibet: the spiritual, and the political. They are not distinct, and I separate them here for the purpose of analysis only. Indeed, I think that while certain sources show one or the other orientation almost exclusively, the vast majority of representations of Tibet blend the two. The spiritual aspect is most clearly exemplified by what I shall refer to as “new age” representations, those whose appropriations of Tibetan imagery and spirituality have no social or political orientation (for example, the book *Windhorse Woman*, by new age guru Lynn V. Andrews, mentioned towards the end of this paper). The political aspect, on

the other hand, is most *purely* exemplified by human rights organizations (for example, a brochure by Amnesty International which has as its issue human rights violations and doesn’t comment on Tibetan culture). It is, however, most often represented by a Free Tibet activism whose political positions on Tibetan independence and human rights are usually entangled with an argument about Tibet’s spiritual legacy to the world.

Because I am looking for the crystallization of contemporary Western imaginings about Tibet, I am as interested in promotional literature for a book as I am in its actual content. Such compressed, distilled statements point to what is considered fundamental about the meanings of Tibetan identity. I have found that even when variation is acknowledged in the details of a work, the generalized, extracted images of Tibet are remarkably homogeneous. In other words, contradictions between a generalized image and details that challenge or render it problematic are not used to adjust the image; rather, as Stacy Leigh Pigg has argued (on a related topic) there is a “systematic reduction of the diverse into the generalizable” in which the “understanding of diversity that individuals have consistently dissolves in favor of a more convenient institutional lingua franca” (1992:504). Generalized statements about Tibet are, further, *naturalized*—that is, made to seem inevitable and inherent—and *departicularized*—that is, “emptied of the meanings which tie them to concrete contexts, to definite localities, to distinct groups, and universalized, made the property of all and of no one” (Alonso 1988:45).



View of the Lhasa Valley

PHOTO: JOEL CORREIA

THE IMAGE

The essential picture of Tibet that emerges from the sources I have examined is of an isolated people naturally—*inherently*—spiritual, orderly, peaceful, harmonious, and in a relationship of respect and balance with their environment. Contemporary images attribute these qualities to present-day Tibetans and, further, project them deep into Tibet’s past. (Few of these qualities, however, were attributed to Tibetans by past Western observers). Tibet is seen as a traditional society that was, until the Chinese occupation, frozen in a kind of unchanging stasis, isolated outside of the flow of history.

Isolation and Disengagement

Images of Tibet draw on its geography to suggest that it is literally behind



walls—isolated and alone behind the vast Himalayan mountains—and therefore, almost by definition, at peace with its neighbors.

Tibet had always been one of the world's secret places. For more than 20 centuries, its people had turned their backs on the world at large and resolved to live alone, hidden behind the highest peaks on earth, disengaged from the march of time. (Iyer 1989:45)

Where sources such as this refer to “two millennia of Central Asian solitude” (Avedon 1986:19), or an “isolationist policy before the turn of the century” (Lhalungpa 1990:42), other histories of Tibet, for example Snellgrove and Richardson's *A Cultural History of Tibet*, present a picture of Tibet's active involvement with a large number of Asian countries over the centuries.⁴ Snellgrove and Richardson attribute Tibet's resistance to Western visitors to nineteenth-century Chinese xenophobia and give it a relatively recent origin: “The nineteenth century is the only period when Tibet might justly be described as a ‘forbidden land’” (1968:227). Buddhism, now linked inextricably in our minds with Tibet, was itself of foreign origin, arriving in Tibet fewer than fifteen hundred years ago. An image of two thousand years of isolation, then, is simply not congruent with the historical knowledge we do have of Tibet. Tibet's history is not essentially one of peace, disengagement, and isolation. Rather Tibetans have a long, dynamic history of social, political, religious, and not so infrequently violent contacts, both with each other and with the people around them. For centuries, as well, there was religious competition—conflict as well as coexistence—between indigenous Bon and imported Buddhist religions in Tibet.

Even in work that acknowledges Tibet's historical complexity and diversity, the majority of synthetic statements or generalizations about Tibet—past or present—still tend to reduce this complexity back into the same basic images of a spiritual, harmonious, static people. For example, in a chapter from *White Lotus: An Introduction to Tibetan Culture*, Columbia University's Robert Thurman refers to a “warrior Tibetan” of pre-Buddhist times, but the thrust of the chapter is to describe how, despite that warlike past, Tibet was transformed for the next “cheerful little millennium,” into a “unique Tibetan sacred society [which] was based on peace, nonviolence, a post-modern ‘small-is-beautiful’ economy, and the relative equality of the sexes” (1990:113). Thurman does not project this image back to time immemorial, but he does represent Tibet as a society that was static for centuries before 1949.



Himalayan View

PHOTO: DAVID LE PAGNE

In rhetorically presenting a case about the evils of Chinese invasion, representations such as those described above replace Tibet's history with an ancient timelessness. The nostalgic idea of a lost Tibet and the emphasis on the dramatic changes brought about under Chinese occupation of the past forty years is juxtaposed with a picture of an unchanging culture that has been irrevocably shattered by the events of the past half century. Although the changes of the late 20th century have certainly been more dramatic, more intense, and more destructive than in previous centuries, it seems a curious move to require the erasure of Tibet's history as a prerequisite to acknowledging the devastation of the current situation. I cannot but see this erasure of history as an explicitly nostalgic construction having more to do with Western preoccupations, utopian visions, and alienation with modern life than with any close historical understanding of Tibet or its relationships with China: “They [Tibetans] were backward in technology, but their society and religion gave them a oneness with their world that most modern people have lost” (Tung 1980:203).

Images of Tibet's isolation are not just connected to Tibet's remote geography, but are also closely connected to the idea of a special relationship between Tibetans and their environment.

Natural Conservationism

The idea that there is an inherent Tibetan spirit of environmental conservation is succinctly stated by Tyrone Danlock in *The Anguish of Tibet*: “Before the Chinese occupation of Tibet, conservation was the natural expression of a peace-oriented social system” (Danlock 1991:227). This position runs through much of the literature on Tibet, but there is



little or no attention in these writings to specific details of the ways Tibetans actually may have interacted with their environments. Rather there is a tendency to appeal to religion as a kind of proof for the assertion. This point (unlike the more general one of spirituality) is often explicitly connected with “pre-Buddhist”⁵ religions as well as with Buddhism *per se*. Tibetan scholar Lhalungpa writes:

All Tibet was once a land of pristine purity due to sparse population and the people’s inbred sense of respect for nature and an ecological balance. The origins of this reverence can be found in Tibet’s early beliefs, the native Bon religion. This pre-Buddhist nature worship propounded the concept of cosmic cohabitation. The physical world was considered not only the heavenly abode of the cosmic deities but also the sacred habitat of all living beings. All mountains, lakes, rivers, trees, and even the elements were sacred dwellings of the spiritual forces; indeed, the entire country was deemed a “sacred realm.” (1990:32)

In this appeal to Bonpo, the ancient provenance of Tibetan’s relationship with nature and the “inbred” or inherent nature of this relationship is emphasized. Photographer Galen Rowell makes precisely the same point about Tibetan

environmentalism, but explains it by referring to a Buddhist instead of a Bonpo ethic:

Before the arrival of the Chinese, Tibet had...the most successful system of environmental protection of any inhabited region in the modern world....Formal protection of wildlife and wildlands was unnecessary in a land where devout Buddhist compassion for all living beings reigned supreme. (Rowell 1990:6)

Whether associated with Bonpo or with Buddhism—and despite major differences between them—the distilled image of Tibetans’ harmonious relationships with the natural world, through time and across space, remains.⁶

In fact, of course, any non-technological group of people who live thinly scattered over a large land area is likely to have a “non-exploitative” relationship with the environment. Densely populated societies, on the other hand, whether Tibetan Buddhist or not, draw criticism from Western environmentalists. Tibetans, who are not at present in control of their territory, provide a convenient object for Western romantic fantasies.⁷

The Dalai Lama has proposed that all of Tibet be transformed into one giant park, that all living things in Tibet, in effect, be considered endangered species.



Cairns commemorating Sherpas lost on Everest

PHOTO: BARBARA BROWER



Prayer flags

PHOTO: MICHELE MCNEIL

It is my dream that the entire Tibetan plateau should become a free refuge where humanity and nature can live in peace and in harmonious balance. It would be a place where people from all over the world could come to seek the true meaning of peace within themselves, away from the tensions and pressures of much of the rest of the world. Tibet could indeed become a creative center for the promotion and development of peace. (Dalai Lama quoted in Atisha 1991:226)

In this proposal, the Dalai Lama appeals directly to Western utopian fantasies. The belief that non-Western spirituality points the way to a more peaceful and integrated relationship between people and with the natural world is part of a larger alienation with Western technological society and a theme that runs through a variety of new age, environmental, and feminist movements in the United States.

Spirituality

The heart of current discourse on Tibet is Tibetans' perceived spiritual and religious qualities; those qualities form a thread that is inextricably intertwined with contemporary

notions about Tibetan environmental, geographical, and social relationships. Even politically oriented "Free Tibet" paraphernalia relies heavily on religious symbols to represent Tibet: lotus blossoms, Buddha eyes, and stupas. In "Contemporary Tibet: Cultural Genocide in Progress," Anne Klein writes, "since the dawn of its recorded history in the seventh century, religion has suffused every aspect of Tibetan culture" (1990:45). Irishman Glen Mullin, traveling with the monks of the Drepung-Loseling monastery on their 1991-92 tour "Tibetan Sacred Music Sacred Dance for Planetary Healing," and himself extensively schooled in Tibetan Buddhism, stated on KUT (Austin Public Radio): "When we think of Tibet, we get this very strong spiritual mystical element in sort of the atmosphere to the word." This, our own association, is naturalized and projected onto the Tibetans themselves.

Later in the program, Mullin relates this "natural" Tibetan spirituality to a mountain environment. At the same time that spirituality is said to be natural to Tibetans, it is paradoxically given an environmentally deterministic explanation.

Tibet had physically, geographically, a sort of a special circumstance, perhaps one more conducive to spiritual growth or spiritual awareness, sacred awareness, than many places. . . simply its altitude and really just the dramatic kind of effect of so much of the geography. Just sitting on a mountain and looking up ten thousand feet and looking down ten thousand to the rivers and the lakes down in the valley below. Even something with the oxygen and the level of ozone that layer, that level, the closeness to the stars and...that sense of space you get and [that] ice and sky all blended together and so it may've all contributed to making Tibet what it was. But certainly Tibet for the last thousand years has been one of the most intensely spiritual countries.

In *Portrait of Lost Tibet*, Rosemary Tung similarly invokes the physical environment as an explanation for Tibetan spirituality:

It is possible to imagine that the special, interior character of Tibetan religion, with its deep awareness of life, was shaped, in part, by the startling and inescapable beauty of the country. (1980:14)

This is a projection of contemporary Western ideas about mountains, wilderness, solitude and associated spiritual values. It does not attempt to address Tibetan attitudes or practices, but rather imagines the effect mountains might have on them. But mountains have not always been associated with an aesthetic of the sublime—even by Westerners—and there is no reason to take for granted that a mountain environment has such a meaning cross culturally.

Contrasting Images from Other Times and Places

Contemporary representations gloss over social and cultural differences between people now uniformly considered



“Tibetan,” issues of social stratification and serfdom in traditional Tibet, and indeed any kind of diversity or conflict within Tibet. It is interesting to note that travel literature and fiction from the past often provide a richer and more accurate sense of diversity within Tibet than do even many “factual” (journalistic or scholarly) accounts of the present. Tibet is now presented as having always been a unitary, naturally orderly, harmonious, and spiritual society. Even references to the stratified nature of pre-invasion Tibetan society often emphasize harmony and lack of conflict, or—as Avedon does in the quote that heads this paper—attribute social stratification to an “innate love of order” (1986:15) on the part of Tibetans, all presumed to be equally supportive of the system. In the passage that follows, a discussion of stratification and of Tibetan leaders’ own calls for change nonetheless leads into a generalizing statement that implies the historical “agreement” of all to the unchanging, functional, orderly efficiency of the system.

The government in Lhasa was by no means blind to some of the inequities in the Tibetan system in general and the system of land ownership in particular. The Thirteenth Dalai Lama had made some reforms, and the present Dalai Lama, before going into exile, had further reforms under consideration. However, it is difficult to imagine the pattern of Tibetan life changing much from within. The system was agreed upon, and in its own special way it worked. (Tung 1980:97)

Comments such as this provide a striking contrast to earlier Western representations of Tibet’s religious-political leadership. Bishop (1989) demonstrates that there was ambivalence

on the part of Westerners about the political role of religion in the eighteenth century; by the middle of the nineteenth century, he argues, ambivalence was turning to “unequivocal antipathy” and “a fantasy was beginning to take shape in which Britain would eventually see itself as a possible liberator of Tibet from the unpopular, oppressive and cruel dictatorship of the high lamas in Lhasa” (Bishop 1989:128). Tibetan religion, argues Bishop, was, in the nineteenth century and earlier, seen to be superstitious and irrational, an incomprehensible and unconscionable waste of energy and resources. Lamas as representatives of political power were seen to be autocratic, cruel, and decadent. A journalist with the 1904 Younghusband “expedition” to Lhasa wrote of one of their military encounters with Tibetans:

But what was the flame that smouldered in these men and lighted them to action? They might have been Paladins or Crusaders. But the Buddhists are not fanatics. They do not stake eternity on a single existence.... Politicians say that they want us in their country, that they are priest-ridden, and hate and fear their Lamas. What, then, drove them on? It was certainly not fear. No people on earth have shown a greater contempt for death. Their Lamas were with them until the final assault. Twenty shaven polls were found hiding in the nullah down which the Tibetans had crept in the dark, and were immediately despatched. What promises and cajoleries and threats the holy men used no one will ever know. But whatever the alternative, their simple followers preferred death. (Candler 1905:150)

Western ambivalence towards Tibetan institutional religion and its political role continued through the middle of the twentieth century and persisted even alongside burgeoning nostalgic fantasies like the one elaborated in the utopian novel *Lost Horizon* (Hilton 1933). In 1956, George Patterson, a Scottish doctor traveling in Tibet, wrote that “religious superstition had kept the people in thrall for centuries and had mercilessly exploited them to its own advantage” (Patterson 1956:119). He also described himself as “repelled” by the “presence and practices” of the lamas; “it was not a religious prejudice on my part either,” he claimed; “I had had to treat too many of them and their acolytes for



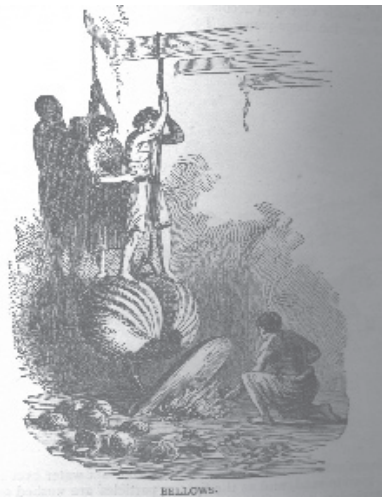
Herder siblings

PHOTO: ANNA URBANSKA



sodomitic and pederastic excesses” (1956:158). A pulp series of the 1930s in the United States relied upon a main character known as the “Green Lama” who held frightening Tibetan superpowers and who strangled the evil attackers of innocent women with a green scarf. As late as 1962, a novel called *The Rose of Tibet*, by Lionel Davidson, portrayed monastic institutions as elite and corrupt, rife with political machinations. The book’s hero is an Englishman who is designated a *trulku*, a reincarnation; the heroine a Chinese woman, the incarnation of a Tibetan goddess. In the book, the Chinese are not portrayed sympathetically,

but its worst villain is a Tibetan medical monk—a torturer so evil that we applaud when the hero is forced to kill him. While there is a long history of Western fascination with Tibetan religion, then, a reverent attitude towards Tibetan monks



J. HOOKER

and monkish practices is a relatively recent phenomenon.

The way that Westerners represented Tibet in the past, emphasizing the political and secular powers exercised by lamas and monastic institutions, reveals an interesting similarity to current Chinese representations of traditional Tibetan society. A particularly vivid example of contemporary Chinese representations can be seen in an exhibit entitled “The Wrath of the Serfs” in Lhasa’s Museum of Revolution; Audrey Topping (1980) provides photographs and descriptions of this exhibit in a book. The exhibit is, according to Topping, “the work of several Han and Tibetan art teachers who traveled five thousand kilometers around Tibet interviewing former serfs about their own experiences in order to create scenes typical of serfdom” (1980:124). The exhibit is a dramatic representation of the cruelty of monks and of an oppressive political system and includes particularly striking visual images—sculpture and bas-relief—of the torture, punishment, and despair of oppressed serfs. Obviously this representation, focusing as it does on the hierarchical, “feudal” dimension of Tibetan religio-political systems, takes place in the context of Chinese justifications for the occupation of Tibet.

Contemporary Western representations, on the other

hand, do not focus on issues of hierarchy and coercion in Tibet’s past or in the relationship between lay and monastic communities. Rather, they tend to attribute the social importance of monks and monasteries, the extraordinary percentage of population involved in monastic institutions, and the ceremonial and economic relationships between people and monastic institutions, to an innate religious devotion and spirituality on the part of Tibetan people. Thurman writes:

Those who could not enter the Order, either because of obligations or because of unwillingness to give up the pleasures of sexuality, family, ownership, and so forth, were delighted that others could enter the Order and eagerly supported local monasteries and nunneries. These monasteries were centers of peace, leisure, education, research in philosophy, psychology, medicine, and arts, and most importantly, producers of happier, more useful human beings. (1990:110)

Where Chinese representations reflect contemporary Chinese interests, Western representations reflect changing Western interests in Tibet. When Britain found Tibet of interest in the “great game,” and felt its interests were served by military action in the region, representations of Tibetans and Tibetan religion were ambivalent and often negative; when Americans look for a society that can offer hope of redemption from the alienation of modern life, Tibetans are portrayed as dedicated to peace and a positive spirituality.

I have briefly outlined some of the qualities most commonly associated with Tibet and the Tibetan character: isolation, disengagement from the world, harmonious social and environmental relationships, and spirituality. I have contextualized this image by contrasting it with contemporary Chinese and historical Western views of traditional Tibet. Now I want to move on to explore the way these images are interrelated within positions taken on various issues, particularly those related to cultural survival, and to tease out some of their implicit contradictions.

CULTURAL SURVIVAL WITHIN AND WITHOUT

The issue of cultural survival, the maintenance of those practices and values that are subjectively understood to be Tibetan, is clearly an issue for Tibetans both in Tibet and in exile. Concern with preserving the essential qualities of Tibetan-ness has come to be linked with the preservation of particular institutions and practices and tends to privilege official, organized, institutional learning and religious-scholarly activities. Moreover, through a complex process (relating to Chinese targeting of religion, the growth of Tibetan nationalism, the role of the Dalai Lama, and the interests of Westerners), “Tibetan culture” is coming to signify a particular body of official religious and specifically monastic cultural practices and texts. An article in the *Vajradhatu Sun* reports that “there are many young Tibetans who want to



become monks because it is a way in which Tibetans affirm their national identity” (Ackerly 1991:10). The only Tibetan music to have gained any degree of popularity in the West is the chanting of monks (cf. Diehl 2002); there is an incredible emphasis on lamas and their activities in the literature on refugee life; the locus of cultural survival is seen to lie in refugee monastic institutions. Glen Mullin, speaking about the monks’ tour to raise money for the Drepung-Loseling monastery in South India, commented, “the survival of their [Tibetans’] civilization depends upon the survival of institutions like this.” Outside of Tibet, then, “inherent” Tibetan qualities rely upon specific cultural—primarily monastic—practices for their continuance. That which is distinctively Tibetan culture is equated with monastic traditions. Such a view denies regional, historical, and religious differences within Tibet, reifying a great diversity of practices and beliefs into a kind of boxed in, official Tibetan-ness, defined as an inner essence and seen to be expressed primarily through organized religious practices. There is an interesting shift here away from other social practices that had drawn Western interest in the past (e.g. polyandry, mortuary rituals). It could be argued that this is because Tibetans themselves identify Tibetan culture as residing in these official sites, and while I think that this is in fact increasingly true, it does not mean that it was always the case or that a specific cultural process of selection is not involved (cf. Hobsbawm and Ranger 1983, Handler and Linnekin 1984).

However Tibetan culture is defined—and in a phenomenon perhaps not unrelated to its location in monastic sites—there is a striking contradiction between the celebration of the resilience of Tibetan culture in exile and the lamentations of its absolute destruction within Tibet itself. A pamphlet put out by the Bay Area Friends of Tibet succinctly states this contrast: “Whereas their immensely rich spiritual and cultural traditions are being eradicated in their homeland, the refugees are doing their utmost to practice and preserve them in exile.” The sentiment is similarly expressed on the back cover of Goodman’s biography of the Dalai Lama (1986), a biography which

... recreates the life of the Dalai Lama to 1959, when he and 100,000 other Tibetans fled into the foothills of Northern India, thus preserving their art, science, history, and religion at a time when their cultural heritage inside their native Tibet was virtually destroyed.

The contrast appears *implicitly*, too, as a difference in emphasis. There is rarely any mention of conditions in exile that might be inimical to traditional Tibetan practices and ways of life. Yet those living in India and Nepal, at least, face significant prejudice against Tibetans and Tibetan practices, and material and environmental conditions are, anywhere that refugees settle, vastly different from those of pre-inva-

sion Tibet. Still, there is little discussion of how Tibetan cultural practices, and the everyday lives of Tibetan people, are changing in response to such conditions.⁸

Conversely, references to Tibetans in Tibet emphasize change, most often very dramatic kinds of change: the total destruction of everything that Tibet was before 1959, using words like “extinction,” “extermination,” and “eradication,” and phrases like “wholesale deforestation” (Avedon 1986:315), “monasteries . . . totally destroyed” (Bernstein 1987), “cultural lobotomy” (Goodman 1986:x), “religious holocaust” (Ackerly 1991:133), and “cultural genocide” (Klein 1990:48). The book *White Lotus: An Introduction to*



Lama observing religious event

PHOTO: JOEL CORREIA

Tibetan Culture is dedicated to “Tibetans in exile who struggle to keep their culture alive and to those still living in Tibet who struggle to stay alive” (Elchert 1990). Snellgrove and Richardson introduce their cultural history of Tibet by saying that they undertook the task because “the civilization of the Tibetan people is disappearing before our very eyes”—in other words, as a kind of salvage or museum operation.⁹

There is undoubtedly some legitimacy in drawing contrasts between the extent of cultural survival inside and outside of



Tibet. I wish neither to underestimate the damage that Chinese occupation has caused in Tibet and the danger it has presented to the lives of Tibetans nor, conversely, to make light of important successes of refugees in preserving aspects and institutions of their culture. But surely conditions in exile are not always conducive to cultural survival; surely, as well, there is some degree of cultural survival within Tibet itself (even if in areas not associated with the formal Buddhist tradition). The contrast is perhaps politically effective, but is paradoxical: on the one hand the Tibetan spirit is indestructible; on the other, it is fragile and easily crushed.

THE DALAI LAMA AND THE MANIPULATION OF IMAGES

This raises a question about the extent to which the Dalai Lama and other Tibetans are constrained by the kinds of representations I have been discussing. Certainly, the Dalai Lama himself, as well as the Tibetan Government in Exile, employ many of the same tropes Westerners do and contribute heavily to the construction of the basic image I outlined above. At the same time, the Dalai Lama often



Kids in Lhasa, photo of His Holiness

PHOTO: NANCY GREEN

seems to test the bounds of that image. My favorite example of this is his comment upon seeing Galen Rowell's incredibly romantic and widely published photograph of a rainbow over the Potala: "That's the hill where my cars broke down. The steep road up to the palace stopped all three—two Austins and a Dodge" (Rowell 1991). Or, in another comment in the same calendar, His Holiness remarks upon a photograph of a Lama of the Kumbum monastery in Amdo: "His eyes are closed and it is hard for me to tell if he is praying or just trying to keep his hat on!" (Rowell 1991).

More substantively, the Dalai Lama, other Tibetans in ex-

ile, and a kind of "inner circle" of Westerners interested in Tibet are adamant on the point that they do not advocate a wholesale return to pre-invasion conditions, particularly to its political and social conditions.

The reproaches from many quarters that we Tibetans—especially those in exile—are reactionary and wish to restore the old social order, are completely absurd. We have recognized that the old social order was unjust. Even if the Western system of values and conception of society need not be the measure of all things, we have so deeply internalized values like democracy, the constitutional state, free speech, and social justice that a return to the old theocratic-feudalistic order is no longer thinkable. Young Tibetans in Tibet will never wish to return to the old forms of society. . . . An important task will be the secularization of political life. (Tenley 1991:45)

These changes in the social structure are apparently not seen as violating a distinctive Tibetan identity by those most centrally involved in the vision of a future Tibet. Yet they obviously represent a departure from the social organization of "traditional" Tibet in an area that directly impinges upon the essential matters of religion and religious institutions.

There is a selection of certain aspects of Tibetan culture as authentic, intrinsic, and essential that takes place in creating the image of Tibet, and this is particularly clear when we look at those aspects of Tibetan history and culture that are *not* being selected or emphasized. While the Dalai Lama and others explicitly discuss the necessity for reform of traditional Tibetan social structures, even they perform a sleight of hand when they talk generally about preserving Tibetan tradition—a tradition that clearly does not include the old social order. (Popular positions, on the other hand, tend simply to ignore the stratified nature of pre-invasion Tibet or romanticize it.)

The Dalai Lama himself is, I think, quite aware of this issue of the manipulation of images. He seems at once to try to destabilize some of the more outrageous romanticizations, and at the same time, play on them in order to keep support for Tibet and Tibetans-in-exile alive and viable. International support for the Free Tibet movement is linked to the very images that he tries to defuse. If he is too successful in changing the Western images of his people, he risks losing the support and momentum of the "Free Tibet" movement.

NEW AGE SPIRITUALITY AND THE NATIVE AMERICAN CONNECTION

Spiritual interest in Tibet takes a variety of forms and emphases; I concentrate here on a particular version of new age spirituality which explicitly connects Tibet to Native America. The comparison is interesting because there are both striking similarities and interesting differences between popular discourses on Tibet and on Native America. While



the most obvious difference is in the greater degree of political advocacy directed towards Tibet, similarities tend to focus on the areas of spirituality and the connection to nature. In an excerpt from an essay in *White Lotus: An Introduction to Tibetan Culture*, this connection is explicit:

Much like American Indians, Tibetans consciously lived a simple life and avoided any senseless exploitation of their natural resources. They pursued a spiritual life, in harmony with the surrounding element, instead of competing with the outside world in industry and commerce. (Lhalungpa 1990:32)

During KUT's radio program on the Drepung-Loseling monks choir, the host noted that the name of a sacred dance sounded as if it could be Native American. The brochure for the monks' concert evoked a connection, as it described the setting of the American site of Drepung-Loseling Monastery as "mountains once considered sacred by the native Cherokees." Comparisons of Native Americans and Tibetans tend to locate Native American spirituality in the past, portraying much of contemporary Native American society as broken and corrupted. A participant in a computer bulletin board on Tibet, active in the late eighties and early nineties, wrote that it is too late to save Native American spirituality, but not

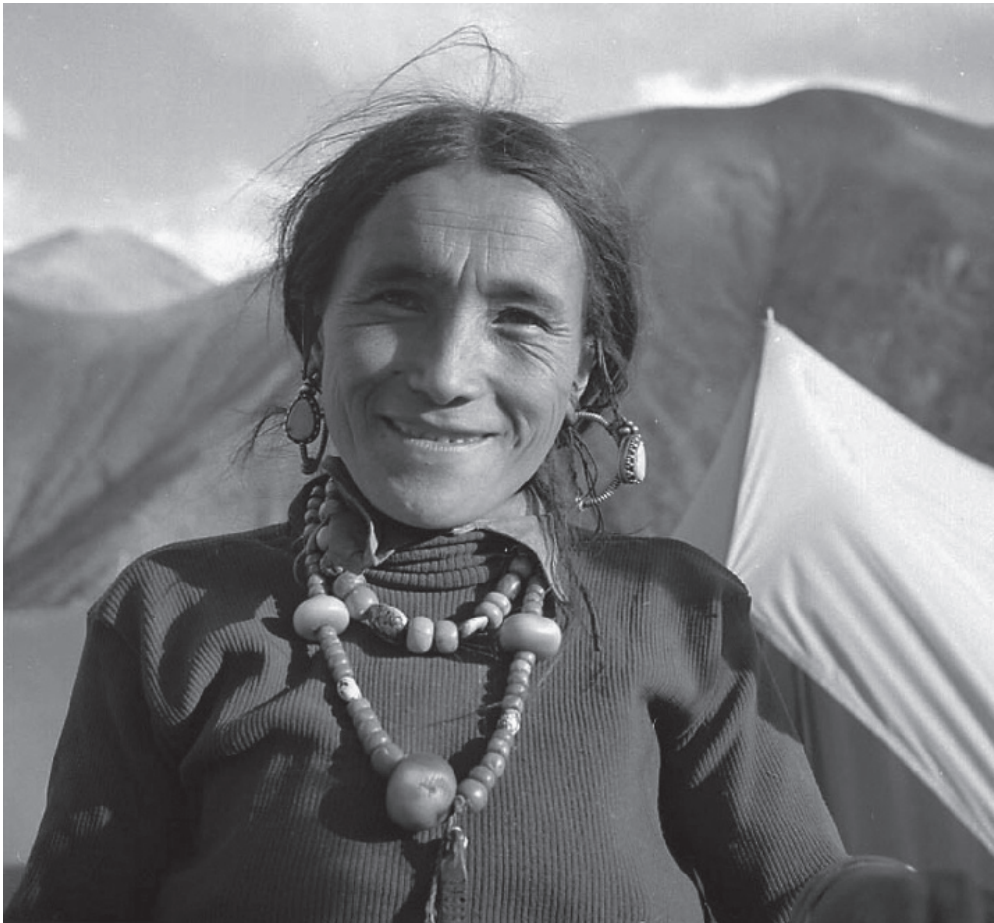
Tibet and Tibetan religion.

People get upset about what was done to the Native American West during the mid to late 18th century. But we can't change that. However, the same is happening in Tibet right now, and we could do something to change that. It's not too late, yet. (Peterson 1991)

It seems possible that the cultural processes—alienation, nostalgia, or utopian urges—that have led to an interest in Tibet and Tibetan culture are similar to the processes that have fueled interest in Native Americans. If a common alienation with modern technological society prompts the interest in both culture areas, then it is not surprising that the qualities highlighted in the two—both of them internally diverse as well as different from each other—are similar. A perceived general cultural identity is illustrated with superficial similarities such as the use of turquoise jewelry or the braided hair of men. The narrative of similarity, or indeed identity, between Tibetans and Native Americans is naturalized in a variety of ways. The following computer "bulletin board" comment incorporates racial, spiritual, and geographic explanations:

Both the Tibetans (at least some of the far out ones) and the

Hopi believe that their races are descended from the same line. If you look at their facial features, this becomes obvious. The European and Middle Eastern "religious" traditions that have been transplanted to the United States are not indigenous to this land. Yet the Hopi and by extension the Tibetan spiritual traditions are more natural. Many people... have, in this land, sought to find their true spiritual path, and felt a heart connection to the American Indians, their shamanism, their mandalas, etc. When the Karmapa (head of one of the Tibetan schools, now deceased) came to this country he spent some time with the Hopis and said something to the effect that the Tibetans and Hopi were the same people. Other lamas met with the Hopi elders and compared prophecies, (I know one of the people who translated at the meeting) which were very similar. Joseph Campbell also



Woman of Dolpo

PHOTO: DEVON NELSON



talked about how spiritual knowledge is connected to the land and cannot be grafted from a foreign culture. (Peterson 1989)

Dhyani Ywahoo, a Cherokee woman, is on a list of Native Americans condemned by the Circle of Elders of the Indigenous Nations of North America, the American Indian Movement, and the National Indian Youth Council for trading in the commercialization of indigenous spirituality. She explicitly connects her traditions with those of Tibetan Buddhism, claiming that her parents were visited by Padmasambhava (the Tibetan Buddhist culture hero) before she was born. Writing about her and her connection with Tibet, Steven McFadden asserts “for both peoples, the purpose of their religion is to help maintain the natural harmony of the universe by living in balance with it” (1991:52). Ywahoo argues “Buddhism gives a language that can make the deeply intuitive wisdom of the native teachings very accessible to the Western mind. So it is a good meeting” (quoted in McFadden 1991:55). This is a description of spirituality made available to an audience of Western consumers.

In a further example, Lynn V. Andrews is a white woman who has written a number of bestselling “autobiographical” books detailing her journey towards enlightenment, a journey undertaken with the help of Native American spiritual guides. In *Windhorse Woman: A Marriage of Spirit*, she takes her spiritual quest to a Tibetan area of Nepal where she meets with the “international shamanic sisterhood of the shield” and loses her “psychic virginity” to a Tibetan spirit man. When she encounters *local* traditional practices (e.g. Tamang rooster sacrifice), however, she denounces them as “ignorant and superstitious,” actively negating cultural and religious specificity. Moreover, Andrews shows no interest in the harsh realities of life for Tibetans. Although she and her companions illegally cross over the border into Tibet, their brush with Chinese soldiers is benign: the soldiers do not challenge her disguise and are readily charmed and distracted by an exchange of herbal medicines. (Nor does Andrews address material conditions of Native Americans, although she claims longstanding relationships with at least two Native American women. Everything, in her vision, is a purely *spiritual* struggle, taking place on a plane that transcends material conditions in the same way that it transcends cultural difference.¹⁰

CONCLUSION

Most Westerners interested in Tibet’s spiritual riches, however, tend also to be concerned also with the welfare of actual Tibetans, both in Tibet and in exile. Images of Tibet that have a strong political component, moreover, are more likely to emphasize Tibet’s spiritual and cultural uniqueness than to suggest an essential equivalence to other indigenous

peoples. Tibet’s perceived uniqueness, in fact, is often explicitly given as a reason why the political support of Tibet is so important. In a 1987 *New Yorker* article whose title, “Journey to Lhasa,” deliberately echoes the extensive travel literature of the past, we can see the idealization of Tibet, the reasons why we should protect it, and the analogical connection to the natural environment.

There is something profoundly moving about the Tibetan way of life—about its religious essence. One feels instinctively that if this civilization were crushed and replaced by something that was yet another imitation of ourselves the world would be poorer for it. Like a fragile ecological niche, once gone it can never be restored. (Bernstein 1987:48)

While this emphasis on Tibetans’ uniqueness (in essential contrast to all other peoples) seems on the surface quite different from equating Tibetans with other indigenous peoples (in essential contrast to “the modern West”), it is similarly problematic, leaving me with the following troubled questions: If Tibet is to be honored, preserved, and fought for because of its uniqueness, its spirituality, and its connection to the environment, what happens when Tibet or Tibetans change in response to shifting national or global conditions, new environments and contexts, or their own changing desires and needs? What happens when Westerners begin to see Tibetans as fully human with full human capacities and a range of human foibles and flaws? Is it perhaps politically risky to predicate political support for Tibet on one-dimensional visions of Tibetan people, culture, history, and society?

In writing this paper, I do not mean to challenge the sincerity of those who have a spiritual interest in Tibet, or to detract from Tibetan religious traditions, or to undermine the political agenda of those, both Westerners and Tibetans, who work for Tibetan independence and self-determination. I suggest that we should oppose the Chinese presence in Tibet not on the basis of fantasies we ourselves have created about Tibetan culture as uniquely representing our hope of redemption from modern society, but on the basis of its brutality and oppressiveness. I suggest, further, that a better understanding of the way such images are constructed can provide the basis for a greater appreciation of the lives and situations of actual Tibetans, one that recognizes both their common humanity and their cultural distinctiveness. Finally, I suggest the importance of recognizing the difficult positions occupied by Tibetans today as they attempt to forge their own destinies at home and in exile in conditions that may be inimical both to positive processes of culture change and to positive processes of cultural preservation.

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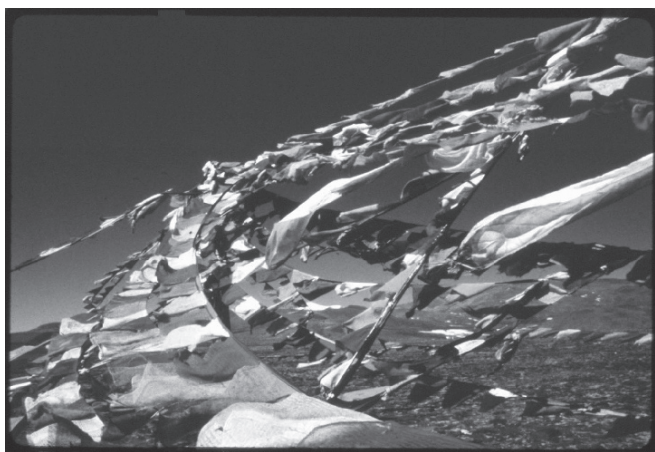


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Prayer Flags

Photo: Abi Devon

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ENDNOTES

1 When I say "Westerners" or refer to "Western images" in this paper, I am speaking primarily about Westerners with an interest in Tibet, with a focus on such individuals in the United States, and not necessarily about Westerners generally.

2 Peter Bishop's book, *The Myth of Shangri-La: Tibet, Travel Writing and the Western Creation of Sacred Landscape* (1989), traces Western images of Tibet from the eighteenth to the mid-twentieth century.

3 This paper was originally written in 1992 and has been minimally revised for publication at this time; most of the material analyzed is therefore at least thirteen years old. There have been a number of works since then that have forged new ground in Tibetan studies. Examples of these include Keila Diehl's ethnography of Tibetans, youth, and rock-and-roll in Dharamsala, *Echoes From Dharamsala: Music in the Life of a Tibetan Refugee Community* (2002); P. Christiaan Klieger's work, particularly his 2002 ethnographic memoir, *Tibet-o-Rama*; Orville Schell's *Virtual Tibet: Searching for Shangri-La from the Himalayas to Hollywood* (2000); and Donald S. Lopez, Jr.'s *Prisoners of Shangri-La: Tibetan Buddhism and the West* (1998). On the whole, though, the representations and images that I describe persist.

4 See also Klieger (1992) for a discussion of the history of patron-client relationships between the Chinese government and Tibetan religio-political figures and differing interpretations of that relationship.

5 Calling Bonpo "pre-Buddhist" makes it seem as if it disappeared with the advent of Buddhism in Tibet, which, of course, it did not. See Samuel (1993) for a nuanced discussion of the uses and misuses of the term "Bon."

6 Barbara Brower has challenged Western environmental movements' unreflective appropriations of certain Tibetan Buddhist ideas and rhetoric. Her 1992 presentation to the Center for Asian Studies at the University of Texas was unique in its attempt to examine specific Tibetan Buddhist religious practices (in highland Nepal) in terms of their actual impacts on the environment.

7 Inhabitants of Nepal, on the other hand, even high altitude Tibetan Buddhists just across the border from Tibet itself, are as often seen as environmental destroyers as naturally fit environmental managers.

8 Anthropologist Melvyn Goldstein, for example, has written a number of articles based on ethnographic work within refugee communities in India. He has done so, however, less to illuminate the conditions of those refugees, than to reconstruct "traditional" Tibet—albeit with details that differ significantly from the dominant narrative I outlined above. Goldstein's work (e.g. Goldstein 1971a, 1971b) emphasizes a traditional Tibet of serfs and lords, a society both highly stratified and occasionally flexible.

9 Travel brochures constitute a notable exception to this rhetoric; rather than emphasizing complete destruction, they tend to underemphasize or ignore the Chinese presence and present Tibet as culturally intact. For example, the travel website lonelyplanet.com states on their introduction page for travel in Tibet: "Tibetans are used to hardship, and despite the disastrous Chinese occupation, they have managed to keep their culture and humour alive." Additionally, Goldstein and Beall's *Nomads of Western Tibet: The Survival of a Way of Life* (1990), focuses both on destruction and on cultural survival within Tibet.

10 There is of course a material level to new age spirituality—whether it focuses on Native America or on Tibet. From catalogs of "Dharmaware" or the "finest in shrine and practice materials" to treasure vases empowered by a Rimpoche to "act as magnets of spiritual & material wealth"; from Shambhala king and queen dolls and "how-to" enlightenment audio and video tapes to a proliferation of seminars and literature; and from dharma pins to offering bowls it is clear that the world of new age Tibetan Buddhism in this country is at least at one level a world of commodities. Objects, tradition, and spiritual knowledge—all can be bought and sold.

