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TIBETANS IN NEPAL: THE DYNAMICS OF INTERNATIONAL ASSISTANCE AMONG A COMMUNITY IN EXILE

ANN FRECHETTE

REVIEWED BY KIMBER HADDIX MCKAY

In *Tibetans in Nepal*, Ann Frechette gives us an excellent analysis of the construction of personal identity in the Tibetan exile community and the integral links between that identity and the flow of international resources. This is essential reading for any scholar of Tibetan modernity or contemporary life in those thriving pockets of Tibetan-exile culture existing in the Kathmandu Valley and beyond. Among many other things, this book analyzes the complexities of the Tibetan exile situation vis-à-vis Nepal's sovereignty and the substantial resources flowing into the country to assist these Tibetans. As Frechette describes, assistance to Tibetans in Nepal comes from bilateral and multilateral lending or grant-making organizations, in combination with private sources. Each of these sources has a specific agenda associated with its funding, and those agendas are often explicitly or implicitly at odds with either the goals of the Nepalese government, specific provisions of the Nepalese Constitution, or legislation enacted separately from the Constitution but dealing with the rights of individuals or communities within Nepal. All of these factors intertwine in the contemporary construction of Tibetan-ness, especially for those Tibetans residing in Nepal.

Dealing with the Tibetan exile community and the cultural, economic, religious, historical and humanitarian issues associated with it has been complicated for the Nepalese government and Frechette's book helps us understand why. Particularly informative to this issue is her analysis of US and Swiss support to the Tibetan exile community. US support to

the Tibetans has taken a variety of forms since the 1950s, with varying consequences for the Nepalese government. US military and financial support to the Khampa guerillas, for instance, was motivated largely by geopolitical interests pertaining to the Sino-US relationship of the 1950s and early 1960s, while US-funded resettlement camps and more recent symbolic and material support to Tibetans are differently motivated, more humanitarian in nature, perhaps, and certainly more driven by economic concerns relating to the US trade relationship with China. From Nepal's side, playing host to a community that was actively involved in a guerilla movement against the People's Republic of China was not a comfortable position. In fact, Frechette argues that this was not an arrangement to which the Nepalese government agreed, or, arguably, of which it was even aware.

Frechette details the various ways in which US support to the Tibetan exile community has indirectly undermined or prevented the integration of Tibetans into Nepalese society, by supporting a social and cultural identity whose most fundamental precept is attachment to someplace else. National allegiance and cultural loyalty is thus to the Tibetan government in exile. US support to the Tibetan exile community within Nepal also directly challenges Nepalese sovereignty, in that it has provided privileges to the Tibetan exile community within Nepal with a seeming disregard for the need of the Nepalese government to assert control in its own manner over its populace, both citizens and residents.

*Tibetans in Nepal:
The Dynamics
of International
Assistance among
a Community in
Exile*

Ann Frechette

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Books, 2002. xxiv,
220 p.



Frechette's analysis of the Swiss government's involvement in the Tibetan exile community is also illuminating, though her analysis of the political and/or other reasons for the Swiss involvement with Tibetans is less revealing than her analysis of the US involvement. She does, however, nicely demonstrate how struggles over control of the Swiss-Tibetan carpet industry, including incentives to maintain residence in the Swiss-supported resettlement camps, have in fact reinforced loyalty to the Tibetan government in exile, and have created a physical hub within Nepal for the Tibetan independence movement. The US and the Swiss examples demonstrate some of the ways in which governments around the world have involved themselves in the Tibetan cause. To students of Tibetan affairs most of this will not be new material; but Frechette adds a variety of interesting analytical angles based on her ethnographic research with Tibetans in exile that are both poignant and relevant to contemporary issues.

Particularly apropos at this point in history is Frechette's discussion of the integration, or lack thereof, of the ideology of democracy into the hearts and minds of Tibetans. The two words with which Tibetans refer to democracy are spelled "dmangs-gtso" and "mang-gtso." While these are pronounced basically the same, they have different origins. Derived from Tibetan religious texts, the former spelling refers to the lowest caste in the caste system, connoting that the lowest caste should rule. The latter spelling was brought into play when the Assembly of Tibetan People's Deputies decided that the first connotation was too close to communism. By changing the word's spelling, they shifted the meaning to indicate that the masses, rather than just the lower caste, should rule. Both spellings are still in usage, and the debate continues. Frechette's analysis of the various interpretations, reinterpretations and flat-out misunderstandings of the concept of democracy is excellent. It brings into relief the many complexities associated with the appropriation (or imposition) of the notion of democracy in a population that does not have a history with this form of socio-political organization. In this section of the book, Frechette's informants offer a fascinating discussion of the importance of widespread literacy, social equality, equal opportunity to resources and other critical supports to democracy. They variously describe democracy as a ritual, as an historical event, and as a signifier of equal rights to command respect or access

to a government and its resources. Central to this discussion is the notion of "enlightenment." This fundamental concept in the Tibetan Buddhist worldview is elegantly juxtaposed by Frechette and her monastic and lay informants to equally fundamental concepts within democratic thought.

The Tibetan exile community in Nepal faces many challenges, not the least of which is the evolution of their cultural and individual identities. Frechette shows that this evolution will be influenced by the ways in which Tibetans in Nepal are involved with sources of international assistance and, increasingly by the Nepali government's attempts to regulate the dynamics of assistance to organizations within their borders. Additionally, as implied in Frechette's wonderful chapter on transnational identity, "Friends of Tibet," the duration of the Western love affair with Tibetan Buddhism will also continue to strongly affect the exile community. Based on extensive ethnographic research, Frechette adds a fresh, balanced, and nuanced perspective to our understanding of how living in Nepal has shaped this part of the Tibetan exile community's identity and involvement in globalization. In a song performed by an organization sponsored by the exile administration for both Tibetan and Western consumption, Tibetans of one flesh and blood are encouraged to unite and return to Tibet. The ability and desire of all Tibetans, including those residing in Nepal, to "unite as one" is challenged in this book, and thanks to Frechette's work, her readers will better understand this challenge in its many complexities.

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Tibetan weavers, Jawalakel, 1976

PHOTO: DAVID BROWER