Constructing Modern Tibetans as a Community of Remembrance

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Introduction to the Case of Tibet

Numerous scholars, such as Arjun Appadurai (1996) and Benedict Anderson (1983) have argued that globalization and diaspora result in the increasing accumulation of ideas and imaginations within personal and collective memories and identities. This is certainly the case for Tibet. The policies and international marketing strategies of both the Chinese and Tibetan governments have greatly impacted Tibetan identities and narratives. Central to this influence are the international discourses on human rights and freedom and the politics of self-determination. The Dalai Lama fled China in 1959, setting off a mass movement of refugees to India. Since then nearly 150,000 Tibetans have followed him into exile. Many have poured into India, but small pockets of refugees have founded communities in New York City, Switzerland, Nepal, Canada, and Australia. The breadth of the diaspora and the types of nations that offered Tibetans asylum placed them within reach of many new means of imagining their existence and identities.

The Tibetan social system to this point had been primarily feudal and based in religious tradition. The majority of Tibetans fled in the 1960s, a period of social and political upheaval throughout the world. Globalization has paired the Tibetan resistance with western support and technology, resulting in a proliferation of human rights-oriented aide organizations and pro-Tibet websites. For Tibet, electronic mass media has become a global ‘weapon of the weak,’ or a non-direct and subversive weapon (Scott 1985). This has resulted in the active resistance of Tibetans
and their supporters through well over 212,980 Tibet-focused websites (Bray 2000). Websites such as FreeTibet.org display photos of peacefully resistant Tibetans and post articles on human rights violations by the Chinese. Also, films such as Seven Years in Tibet and Kundun portray the Dalai Lama as an intensely peaceful man, as opposed to the heavy handed and cruel Chinese.

The Tibetan government-in-exile has realized the power of western sympathy for Tibet and has constructed a metanarrative of Tibetan-ness based on religiosity and suffering in order to elicit support for self-determination. This is evident in the marketing of the Dalai Lama as a symbol of peace and wisdom, the amendment of Tibetan history in national narratives, the support of certain films by Tibetan leaders, and through the spread of information on human rights abuses by the Chinese. Tibetans have taken full advantage of modernity in order to maintain their connection with traditional culture, though an elitist and essentialized one (Venturino 1997).

Since 1989, when the Dalai Lama received the Nobel Peace prize for his continued pursuit of a peaceful resolution to the conflict with China, the Dalai Lama has kept a regular travel schedule propagating a peaceful Tibetan Buddhism. He has become a truly international figure and an icon representing Tibet. The discourse found in his travels and teachings work to mold images in the minds of onlookers that will foster support for the Tibetan cause. There has long been a Western idea of Tibet. In the 18th and 19th centuries it was the lost Shangri-La, an unspoiled utopia (Hilton 1933; Lopez 1998). Now it is perceived as a bastion of peace and tranquility, a pure nation of pacifists overrun by oppressors (Bishop 1989; Schell 2000; Adams 1996). These ideals have been incorporated and given preferential status in the formation of a modern Tibetan metanarrative, thus infusing it with a sort of reverse orientalism.
This paper will briefly discuss the impact of this metanarrative of Tibetans in diaspora. Of particular note will be the discussion of the content of Tibetan personal and collective narratives, the importance of the metanarrative in defining and contextualizing individual lives, and finally, the outworking of this metanarrative in the life of Dorje, a 30 year old refugee I interviewed in Dharmasala, India during the summer of 2005. The overall purpose of this paper is to orient the construction of this metanarrative within the struggle for self-determination for Tibetans and the resultant effects in the lives of individuals.

Tibetan Narratives

A metanarrative, or “a totalizing cultural narrative schema which orders and explains knowledge and experience,” places and anchors one’s life in terms that are culturally understood and valued (Stephens 1998). For Tibetans this means that stories about suffering, hardship, religious fervor or dedication, and oppression are highly valued. Such narratives have become the symbolic reality of Tibetan existence, though they are not entirely accurate. This metanarrative is the product of the explicit and implicit actions of the Tibetan government-in-exile, as well as the numerous advocacy groups closely tied to the freedom movement. It has become the truly dominant narrative of Tibet both within and without of Tibetan communities. However, while such a narrative is quite strong in shaping personal narratives and memories, it is not an irresistible force. It is in the dialectic between personal and collective narratives that this paper will discuss the formation of Tibetans into a community of remembrance.

Tibetan personal identities have typically been characterized by regional and religious sectarianism. They were also very focused on local familial and religious relationships, such as to their local monastery and its abbot and to their land and immediate families. Though
important, the Dalai Lama was only peripherally important in most of their lives. Other
monastic and secular leaders were more immediately relevant, for things such as grazing rights
and marriage and religious ceremonies. Personal narratives are filled with unique experiences,
forming distinct and sometimes contestant Tibetan identities. Many of these narratives contain
few or no memories of oppression and religiosity. This is not to say that they did not suffer or
were not devout, but that their life narratives were not infused with the imagery of suffering and
religiosity found in the metanarrative.

One main purpose of this metanarrative is the elevation of a pan-Tibetan identity above
individual and historical regional identities. Therefore, personal narratives and memories have
come under attack from the metanarrative. McGranahan (2005) calls these ‘arrested histories,’
where Tibetans who were part of the violent resistance to China during the 1960s and 1970s are
silenced or censored from voicing their experiences and narratives because of the divisive
influence they might have. Even Tibet’s historical military exploits and inter-tribal feuding have
been covered over. The Tibetan government has adopted a strategy of peaceful and religiously
focused resistance, and anything contrary is not in the best interest of the Tibetan people. For
many Tibetans this has been acceptable because it has afforded the Tibet cause international
notoriety, primarily through the Dalai Lama, and for some it has even brought local and financial
support. But this is not the case for all Tibetans.

Displacement, however, fosters a sense of unity by emphasizing similarity above uniqueness.
Tibetans in diaspora are uprooted and marginalized, thus they find it necessary to actively work
to reaffirm their membership in the Tibetan community. Personal memory and experience is
often overridden by collective memory becoming a surrogate memory (Kidron 2004). The
metanarrative comes to stand in for personal narratives, providing social and religious
connections for the individual, while also providing a unified front for the Tibetan government-in-exile to use in international political discourse.

As a result, Tibetans with unique personal memories are represented by a monolithic collective narrative focused on religiosity and suffering, which is politically oriented toward international audiences. Tibetans, therefore, moderate their personal narratives between personal and collective memories.

Narratives as Guiding Metaphors for Tibetan Memories

The goal of the metanarrative is to create a collective identity, to foster unity and to eliminate dissent, thus creating a community of remembrance (James 1997). A community of remembrance is simply a group who comes to remember a set of events in a more or less codified manner. It is in the dialectic between personal and collective memories where most Tibetans negotiate their identities. In fact, Adams (1998) discusses the inability of a human rights discourse to articulate the experiences of women in Lhasa, and Barnett (2006) reveals the varied memories and narratives surrounding the city of Lhasa. Nevertheless, the metanarrative infuses these individuals with symbols and metaphors for articulating their experiences.

Due to the nature of Tibetan experiences in diaspora, many individuals migrate to the metanarrative as a way of maintaining connections to their past and to their homeland, as well as to feel a part of Tibetan culture. Bartlett (1995) refers to collective memories as ‘schemas,’ while Bruner (1986) calls them ‘guiding metaphors,’ which shape the ways that people think about and retell their own stories. For Tibetans, schemas and guiding metaphors are made up of the officially supported metanarrative, which fosters unity and undercuts division. Individuals hear the metanarrative and borrow from it to define and narrate their own lives. Thus, the
metanarrative comes to replace or reorder their own memories and narratives with generic ones, reinforcing and exaggerating their membership in the Tibetan diasporic community.

When asked about his life, Dorje, like many Tibetans, initially recounted only tales of harrowing escapes and his time in a Chinese prison. He assumed that was all that was important to someone like myself. He had indeed experienced many hardships at the hands of the Chinese, however, only when prodded did he recount the many wonderful years of life in Tibet, farming on productive land, herding sheep in the mountains, and having been educated by his family. Dorje serves as an example of how deeply the metanarrative can influence the ways in which Tibetans narrate their lives. For Dorje it was less about the content and more about the way he told or didn’t tell his story. He had been conditioned, from living in exile for years, from the many westerners he met before me, and from the narratives he heard from Tibetan leaders in exile to discount his joyous and productive years and to emphasize his moments of suffering. He came to believe this was the most effective way for him to gain support and to be validated, in everyone’s eyes, as a Tibetan. This discussion does not intend to discount his tragic experiences; it merely wishes to point out that he was more willing to tell me the same stories of loss and harassment again and again than those of his family and their time in Tibet.

This paper is also about how the metanarrative is entextualized, or inscribed on Tibetan subjects. In other words, the process of making and molding modern Tibetans is at question. For Dorje, the symbols of suffering from the metanarrative had thoroughly reinforced his experiences of loss and discounted or hidden his unique experiences of family, friends, and normalcy in Tibet. He had been formed over time in diaspora to fit the mold of a proper Tibetan, as deemed by those trying to elicit support for the freedom movement. In Dharmasala, stories of suffering and religious zealotry are everywhere. One can enter any one of several dozen cafes...
and shops and see posters advertising weekly speeches by former political prisoners. There are also regular teachings by the Dalai Lama emphasizing suffering and peacefulness in the Norbulingka, the main monastery in Dharmasala. It takes real digging to hear about any other experience in the lives of most Tibetans. Dharmasala Tibetans, perhaps more so than other Tibetan refugees, due to their proximity to the Tibetan government-in-exile, have been inscribed with the proper Tibetan narratives, making them good citizens.

For Tibet, the control of history and the remembrance of the past are most important. This can take place in the control of texts, rituals, communal organization, and education. Smith (1991) has argued that national identity is reliant upon the solidarity established through shared memories. As these memories are socialized in the hearts and minds of Tibetans, a community of remembrance is constructed. For Tibetan leaders this means that they can use the people of Tibet as billboards, reinforcing and validating their cries for support in resisting Chinese oppression. In the end, the Tibetans only hope is unity, and unity means suppression or relegation of unique narratives to secondary status. This does not mean that their personal narratives and memories are erased, but that they are covered over, co-opted, and reshaped to support the official Tibetan metanarrative.

In Conclusion

Tibetan identities, memories, and narratives have come to be informed by an increasingly robust metanarrative focused on religiosity and suffering. This metanarrative is constructed both intentionally and organically by the Tibetan government-in-exile and by numerous individuals and organizations close to the Tibetan freedom movement. Ironically, as the intent of the metanarrative is to support Tibetans and to preserve their traditions and culture, in the end it
forces out or at the least suppresses the individuality of personal experience, producing homogenized narratives. It does, however, present a unified front in resisting the Chinese. But this has done them little good over the last three decades, with little changing in reality. Instead there continues to be grave cultural loss at the hands of the Chinese, as well as in the wake of the metanarrative. Finally, there is a growing discontent with this metanarrative and its ineffectiveness, not to mention the erasure of Tibetan history. It will be interesting to see over the coming years how well this metanarrative will stand up and whether the freedom movement will become increasingly violent, especially as the Dalai Lama ages and eventually dies. Over time, an entirely new metanarrative will emerge, taking any number of shapes.

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