

Tibetan Culture as Battlefield: How the Term ‘Tibetan Culture’ is Utilized as a Political Strategy

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HOW THE TERM 'TIBETAN CULTURE' IS UTILIZED AS A POLITICAL STRATEGY

Tibetan culture, like other cultures, is often represented as if it is a timeless and essential thing, rather than something dynamic and constructed. But as I hope to show, the concept of culture is not unequivocal, but open to a variety of interpretations. Therefore it is a contested field, and we will see in our context how contesting discourses seek to define and represent Tibetan culture in different ways. Again, like any other culture, Tibetan culture is always developing and so are the ways we talk about culture. The Swedish Anthropologist Ulf Hannerz illustrated the dynamic and flowing nature of culture, by comparing it to a river meandering through the landscape (Hannerz 1992: 4). From a distance the river looks like a permanent blue line clearly distinguishable from the surrounding green scenery. But when you approach closer, you will discover that the river is in constant flux and not an unchangeable marking in the landscape.

In the following I will analyse the mechanisms involved in the attempts to define and represent Tibetan culture. This may cause a bit embarrassment by the way that I will discuss Tibetan culture and Buddhism, and at the same time politics and power. In my description I will also employ metaphors like 'weapon' and 'battle'. I hope that in the end such a language of critical and academic interest can make sense to the reader who is interested to learn about discourses on culture. Also, a critical attitude is not the same as being in favour of Chinese occupation of Tibet, and in general, this paper is not meant as a political contribution to the discussion.

In the course of my discussion I will furthermore explain and demonstrate how the term 'Tibetan culture' is utilized as a political strategy. There are two points that I want to convey: 1. There is an ongoing debate—even a battle—over what Tibetan culture is and who its 'authentic' representatives are. 2. The concept 'Tibetan culture' is turned into a powerful weapon by linking Tibetan culture to Buddhism.

In the debate over what Tibetan culture is and who its 'authentic' representatives are, the Dalai Lama and the Tibetan Government-in-Exile¹ are one faction. They argue with a concept of culture, which establishes a uniqueness of the Tibetan culture, and which then calls for a distinguished Tibetan nation—distinct from the Chinese. Used in this way, the concept of

¹ I use the term "Tibetan Government-in-Exile" for the Tibetan equivalent *btsan byol bod gzhung* when I collectively refer to the "Central Tibetan Administration" in exile, including "the Cabinet" (*bka' shag*) and "the Assembly" (*bod mi mang spyi 'thus lhan tshogs*). Tibetan words are italicised and written according to the system described by Wylie (1959).

culture turns into a weapon in the battle for Tibetan self-determination. To exemplify my first point I will present a rough outline of how the West defined 'its Tibet', which is an ongoing discourse, and how Tibetans, Chinese and Tibetans in exile represent 'their' Tibet and Tibetan culture. It is furthermore interesting to note that when the debate becomes more refined and demands transformed strategies, the discourses are changing and adapting to new needs. I will also show that these transformations in the discourse become apparent in the Tibetan language itself, when the Dalai Lama and the Tibetan Government-in-exile speak to a Tibetan audience about culture.

My second point is a further specification of the Dalai Lama's and the Tibetan Government-in-Exile's concept of culture. In order to strongly establish the uniqueness of Tibetan culture and its dissimilarity from the Chinese—at least from the contemporary Chinese culture—the Dalai Lama and the Tibetan Government-in-Exile link, in their argumentation, the Tibetan culture to Buddhism. A definition of culture that is almost exclusively based on Buddhism can be used to include people or exclude others from being members of this culture. One particular group that has been forced out of and away from its original context—Tibet—and into a foreign context—the exile—claims to represent the 'truly authentic Tibetan culture' while other representations are to be dismissed. In my opinion, the linking of Tibetan culture to Buddhism was a crucial move for the political representatives of the exiled Tibetans, through which they positioned themselves as the legitimate representatives of the only 'authentic' Tibetan culture. To exemplify this, I will demonstrate the significance of a distinction that the Dalai Lama has made between 'internal culture' and its 'external manifestations'. By talking about culture in this way, Tibetan culture is transferred to the inner sphere of the individual and defined as based on the mental phenomena of religion. As a result of this process of internalisation of culture, it is stressed that Tibetans can take their culture with them and out of Tibet and do not have to live in Tibet anymore to be 'authentic' Tibetans. There is also a second aspect to this process: By distinguishing the culture itself, namely the internal culture, from the culture's external or material manifestations, other representations of Tibetan culture can now be excluded by dismissing them as being nothing but an external expression of culture and not the culture itself. These external or 'artificial' expressions of culture can be dismissed by pointing to their lack of a true internal cultural base, namely Buddhism.

Preserving Tibetan culture in exile

It is a contested field, then, what Tibetan culture is and who its 'authentic' representatives are. Moreover, the linking of Tibetan culture to Buddhism is a formidable strategy for legitimating

one representation of Tibetan culture as 'authentic'. Further elaborations on these two points, however, require a little more background.

In his book *Dreamworld Tibet: Western Illusions*, Martin Brauen has shown how films, books and the advertising industry portray Tibet and Tibetan culture in specific ways. Tibet is often represented as a peaceful refuge of ancient traditions and wisdom. Peace-loving and spiritual Tibetans—preferably monks, inhabit this idealized Tibet. Brauen points out that because the West has almost exclusively been interested in the "dharma" (the Buddhist teachings)², or what they perceive to be the "dharma", it is primarily Tibetan spirituality that has been stereotyped in advertisements, books, and movies (Brauen 2004: 246).

The Tibetans themselves participate and enjoy these Western dreams of Tibet: "They tolerate it, even encourage it [...]" (Brauen 2004: 242). They have appropriated the orientalist view in the Western dreams to draw attention to their 'Tibetan cause' and win over patrons and supporters. Since it is practised by the Tibetans themselves, it could be called a kind of self-orientalism.³ Advertisements, books, and movies depict Tibetan culture and Buddhism in specific ways—and so do the Tibetans. These specific ways are what we call a discourse. Here, for our purposes, I will focus on the discourse promoted by the Fourteenth Dalai Lama and the Tibetan Government-in-Exile, as it is their discourse that defines the official space for talking about culture in the Tibetan exile.

According to the Tibetans in exile, the Chinese occupation of Tibet in 1950 was an imperialist act that not only deprived the Tibetans of political self-determination, but also deprived them of the freedom to express and take care of their own culture, religious conviction and customs. Since Tibet's foremost religious and political authority, the Fourteenth Dalai Lama, fled Tibet in 1959, 122.000 Tibetans have followed him into exile (Planning Council 2000: 7). The Dalai Lama and the exiled Tibetan administration established their political and cultural headquarters in Dharamsala, North India. Though the Tibetan Government-in-Exile regards itself as the sole legitimate voice of "all Tibetans, whether they are in Tibet or in exile" (*gzhis byes bod mi yongs*), no foreign power has formally accepted the Dharamsala administration as a government, although many of them have shown considerable sympathy for the Dalai Lama's struggle.

² I use the Sanskrit word *dharma* instead of the English word "religion" or "the Buddhist teachings" for translating the Tibetan term *chos*, which itself is a translation of the Sanskrit term *dharma*.

³ I owe the employment of this term in the present context to Dr. Denise Gimpel.

The Dalai Lama has stated that leaving Tibet was crucial for preserving the Tibetan way of life and the Tibetan culture, religion and national identity (Dalai Lama XIV 2000: 24). He and the Tibetan Government-in-Exile fear that the living experience of Tibetan culture is threatened with extinction due to two kinds of cultural displacement: 1) colonisation by a foreign culture, namely the cultural displacement experienced because of the Chinese occupation of Tibet, and 2) physical dislocation, namely the cultural displacement that the Tibetans experience in exile. The Government-in-Exile asserts that the Chinese occupation of Tibet has been very destructive for Tibetan culture: 6.246 monasteries have been demolished, numerous Buddhist artefacts have either been destroyed or been sent away to Beijing, and Tibetan children are denied a Tibetan cultural education. Moreover, they claim that only the superficial and ritualistic aspects of Tibetan religion and culture are allowed in Tibet (DIIR 1990). Therefore they have placed a great responsibility on the shoulders of the exiled Tibetans. They are seen as bearers of a particular cultural heritage, which can only survive free of Chinese influence. As Tsering Shakya (1999: 413) has pointed out, the Dalai Lama and the exiled Tibetans have been promoted as the guardians of an ancient culture, while the Chinese are described as the destroyers of that culture.

The Tibetan Government-in-Exile has declared that they want to protect and promote Tibetan culture in exile, and to make sure that the Tibetan children in exile are socialized as Tibetans. By making "preservation of culture" a long-term goal with high priority in exile, they want to avoid the destiny that culturally displaced people are said to be experiencing, namely the loss of their traditional lifestyle and culture. This preservation should ideally enable the exiled Tibetans to return to a future free Tibet with the knowledge of their culture, religion, language, and traditions fully intact. In future free Tibet the exiles will join the Tibetans that remained in Tibet in "[...] re-establishing the Tibetan way of life after the long years of Chinese oppression." (CTRC 1992: 28)

Culture and its preservation have obviously become a part of exile politics. In its course, certain elements of Tibetan culture have been declared its essential characteristics. To protect these, the Tibetan Government-in-Exile has institutionalised specific aspects of Tibetan culture, established a Department of Religion and Culture⁴, and thereby made culture a sector

⁴ In the first years in exile, the Department of Religion and Culture (*chos rig lhan khang* or *chos rig las khungs*) was named "Council of Religious Affairs" (*chos don las khungs*). It took care of the exiled Tibetans' religious affairs. Cultural affairs of a more "profane" character sorted under the "Department for Education" (*shes rig lhan khang* or *shes rig las khungs*). Even though the "secular" and the "profane" affairs today sort under the same department; the Department of Religion and Culture (*chos rig las khungs*), it is still popularly called "Council of Religious Affairs" (*chos don las khungs*) among the Tibetans in exile.

within their administration. There are several cultural institutions that have been established outside Tibet. These institutions represent exactly those elements that are seen as important and valuable. One example is the Tibetan Institute of Performing Arts (*bod gzhung shes rig zlos gar*) in India.⁵ The institute was established to educate Tibetan youth in traditional Tibetan music, dance and drama. By establishing it, the Tibetan Government-in-Exile has institutionalised Tibetan performing arts, called *zlos gar* in Tibetan, and claimed for it cultural authenticity. Such an institutionalisation serves to protect the "proper" transmission of Tibetan culture as it used to be in the old Tibet before the Chinese occupation, by securing the teacher-student tradition within the institution walls.

Through their specific understandings of what Tibetan culture is, the Tibetan Government-in-Exile has created its own politics of culture, and at the same time it also has created a specific understanding of what Tibetan culture should be. Through their specific way of defining Tibetan culture, Tibetans in exile define Tibet as a distinct nation with a distinct culture. And this distinctiveness is again an essential argument for demanding "self-determination" (*rang dbang*) in Tibet.

The dynamic discourses

It is not only for the Tibetan Government-in-Exile that culture plays an important political role—the Chinese too use Tibetan culture as a political strategy. There is an ongoing cultural debate between a "Chinese discourse" on culture and the discourse on culture promoted by the Dalai Lama and the Tibetan Government-in-Exile. The debate is over what Tibetan culture really is, and who its "true" representatives are. It is a struggle over the legitimate right to represent Tibetan culture and for being recognised as such in the rest of the world.

How this debate plays out also reflects in the Dalai Lama's and the Tibetan Government-in-Exile's discourses on Tibetan culture when they speak to a Tibetan audience. A closer examination of the Tibetan equivalents of the term 'culture' and how the Dalai Lama and the Tibetan Government-in-Exile define culture proves to be very fruitful.

⁵ Other institutions in India: The Library of Tibetan Works and Archives is a research-, translation-, and educational centre for Tibetan Studies and arts. Norbulingka Institute trains students in literary and craft skills. The Tibet House is a cultural centre that does research and arranges seminars on Tibetan culture and history. The Central Institute for Higher Tibetan Studies in Sarnath is a deemed university for higher education in Tibetology, Buddhism and Himalayan Studies. In addition, many monasteries, nunneries, and temples have been established in exile as religious and cultural education-centres.

In the Tibetan language discourses in the Tibetan Diaspora there are four words used to denote 'culture': *shes rig*, *rig gnas*, *legs byang*, and *rig gzhung*.⁶ Here, for our purposes, I will only refer to the most common Tibetan word for culture today, namely *rig gzhung*. What I have learned from my research is that throughout time the Tibetan discourse on culture proves to be a dynamic one. The notion of culture indeed undergoes transformations that can and must be related to the transformations in the surrounding discourses, for example the Chinese. This will become evident through the following chart:

Tibetan culture is (<i>bod kyi rig gzhung</i>):			
in 1980	in 1985	in 1994	in 2002
- one of many symbols of a Tibetan national character that distinguishes Tibetans from Chinese;	- one of many symbols of a Tibetan national character, but furthermore - unites the Tibetans and - is related to Buddhism;	- related to Buddhism, - benefits the world and - is threatened by the cultural genocide in Tibet;	- not only related to, but founded on Buddhism; - benefits the world, - belongs to the mind, - is internal culture, but has material manifestations, and - is threatened by a new kind of Cultural Revolution in Tibet.

The table summarizes the most characteristic ways in which the Dalai Lama and the Tibetan Government-in-Exile have talked about 'Tibetan culture' since 1980. I have identified the years 1980, 1985, 1994, and 2002 as years when the regularity of the Dalai Lama's and the Tibetan Government-in-Exile's discourses on culture changed pronouncedly and new tendencies became apparent.⁷

⁶ The following is based on the results of the research that I carried out for my MA-thesis in Tibetology (Brox 2003). I investigated the Dalai Lama's and the Tibetan Government-in-Exile's statements relating to the idea of "culture" from 1979 until 2002. Their statements were collected from various written sources such as official documents, parliament proceedings, and speeches to the Tibetan speaking public. Not only does the ways in which they talk about culture undergo changes, but also the words denoting "culture" have changed: In 1979-80 the notion of "culture" was expressed with *shes rig* and *rig gzhung*. Over the years *rig gzhung* became the most common word, while *shes rig* no longer was used for denoting "culture", but instead was used as "education". Today, two additional terms appear as "culture": *rig gnas* is used to translate the Chinese word "wénhuà" ("culture"), and on a few occasions the word *legs byang* ("culture" or "good civilisation") appears. Neither *rig gnas* or *legs byang* are threatening the hegemonic position occupied by *rig gzhung* to signify "culture" today.

⁷ I identified these years based on a two-fold methodological approach: I carefully mapped the discourse and its regularity over time (diachronic analysis). Where I found that the regularity of the discourse pronouncedly changed, I analysed the discourse as specified in its context (synchronous analysis). I then compared the synchronous analysis in order to demonstrate and explain discursive transformations and stability. For the discourse analytical approach I drew on the insights of Michel Foucault (1972) and the strategy for analysing the material was inspired by Niels Åkerstrøm Andersen (1994).

In the following I will provide you with a few more details of this dynamic discourse. I will also try to relate it to similar transformations within English language discourses on Tibetan culture. By doing so, I hope to be able to show you how this debate is fought like a battle, where arguments are sharpened like weapons and are strategically adapted to the changes that occur. Hopefully the reader will thereby understand why I call it a "battlefield" and be lenient with me for this rather drastic use of a metaphor.

In the early eighties the Dalai Lama and the Tibetan Government-in-Exile operated with a relatively vague notion of culture. They chiefly pointed to a Tibetan particularity distinguishing the Tibetans from the Chinese. It is this particularity that the Tibetans are trying to protect in exile. Over the years, Tibetan culture becomes an independent semantic universe and object of discourse. It is also more directly related to Buddhism within the discourse. For example Tibetan Buddhism is now identified as the most important source within Tibetan culture, providing a common Tibetan identity. Furthermore, Tibetan culture is from now on additionally portrayed as the uniting factor for the Tibetans in exile. The ability to manifest this national community outwardly was fundamental for legitimising claims to self-determination in Tibet.

In the mid and late eighties the Dalai Lama altered the focus in his English statements from claiming self-determination to issues like human rights, environmental awareness, pacifism and preservation of culture. These were highly professed values on the international agenda. This move can be interpreted as a strategy of the Tibetan Government-in-Exile to mobilise sympathy and international support (Barnett 2001: 270; Tsering Shakya 1999: 413).⁸ Accordingly, the Dalai Lama propounded a five-point plan for transforming Tibet into a zone of peace (Dalai Lama XIV 1995). At the same time, Tibetan culture was promoted internationally as one of the world's cultural heritages and thus received a globally important status. For example, the Tibetan Institute of Performing Arts became an important global ambassador that promoted Tibetan culture on an international stage. Tibetan culture was well received abroad and it was recognised as unique and worthy of protection. In December 1989, the Dalai Lama was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize. This was a clear sign that the Dalai Lama

⁸ According to Barnett, this new, international discourse was the result of a series of strategy-meetings held by Tibetan leaders in 1985-87 (Barnett 2001: 273). It is evident that the Dalai Lama recognised the importance of culture. In the autumn session of the Tibetan Parliament-in-Exile in 1994, the Dalai Lama said that promoting Tibetan culture and "dharma" is a strategy that will benefit the Tibetans' fight for a free Tibet. He said that it is possible to generate solidarity with the Tibetans via culture and "dharma" as those who are sympathetic towards the Tibetans gradually will develop sympathy for the Tibetan freedom fight as well. (Parliament Proceedings 1994: 1-2)

was successfully speaking a language that the world understood: Pacifism and preservation of the Tibetan cultural heritage were issues that the global community listened to.

In the early nineties, the Dalai Lama and the Tibetan Government-in-Exile began to describe the situation in Tibet as a "cultural genocide".⁹ At that time it also became more common in the Tibetan language discourse to voice Tibetan culture within a global perspective. Repeatedly, Tibetan culture was defined as a culture from which the whole world could "benefit" (*phan thogs*). The Dalai Lama stated that Tibetan culture had "great benefit" (*phan thogs chen po*) because of its positive effect on the global mind: Tibetan culture and dharma (*chos*) generate "pure conduct" (*kun spyod gtsang ma*), "mental peace and happiness" (*sems kyi zhi bde*) and raise one's "spirits" (*snying stobs*).¹⁰ When Tibetan culture is referred to as a global value, cultural genocide assumes a whole new significance because an annihilation of Tibetan culture would also constitute a loss for the whole world. Cultural genocide in Tibet thus turns into an issue that should rightly concern the international community. Since Tibetan self-determination is regarded as a pre-condition for preserving Tibetan culture, the fight for self-determination in Tibet is also of consequence for the well being of humanity.

The Chinese discourse on Tibet and Tibetan culture since the nineties can be seen as a direct response to accusations from the Dalai Lama, the Tibetan Government-in-Exile and the international community of an ongoing cultural genocide in Tibet. The Chinese have repudiated the accusations, point by point, using rhetoric similar to the one that they themselves have been attacked with. These Chinese writings have also adopted a global perspective, where Tibetan culture is described as a "dazzling pearl in the treasure-house of Chinese culture as well as that of the world as a whole" (IOSC 2000: 1).¹¹ This Chinese discourse emphasises the importance of preserving China's minority cultures. On the whole it

⁹ "Cultural genocide" is a term that the Dalai Lama used in his English "10. March Declaration" for the first time in 1993 (Dalai Lama XIV 1998 [1993]: 439). In the Tibetan version of the speech (*gsum bcu'i dus dran gsung 'phrin*) this was called "[...] *bod kyi thun mong ma yin pa'i ngo bo dang/ chos/ rig gzhung bcas pa rtsa med giong ba* [...]" ("annihilation of Tibet's unique identity, dharma and culture") (Dalai Lama XIV 1997 [1992]: 115). The English term "cultural genocide" was included in the two first drafts of the United Nations' Genocide Convention of 1947, but was removed from the final draft and is therefore not enforced in international law. In the first draft, cultural genocide is defined as when the specific characteristics of a group is destroyed by e.g. forcible transfer of people, systematic exile of individuals representing the culture of a group, prohibition of the use of national language, and systematic destruction of historical or religious monuments, books and objects (UN Secretariat 2002 [1947]). The second draft also included deliberate acts committed with the "intent to destroy the language, religion, or culture of a national, racial or religious group on grounds of the national or racial origin or the religious belief of its members" (UN Secretariat 2002 [1947]).

¹⁰ The Dalai Lama also commented that similar effects are not produced by Chinese culture (Dalai Lama XIV 1997 [1992]: 103-104).

¹¹ The same source also claims that in the modernisation process of Tibet, finer aspects of Tibetan culture have been preserved, while the decadent and backward elements that didn't adjust have been discarded or gradually disappeared as a natural way of cultural development (IOSC 2000: 27-29).

appears that cultural preservation is utilizing as a political strategy just like the Dalai Lama and the Tibetan Government-in-Exile.¹² Since the sixties, the Chinese communist party has used the performing arts as a means to convince minorities to subject to the united "motherland", and from the nineties onwards they also sent Tibetan ensembles abroad to perform Tibetan songs and dances for an international audience. These performances spread the message that Tibetan culture was being developed and promoted within Tibet and under Chinese protection.

Since the Chinese Government today claims that Tibetan culture is flourishing in Tibet under Chinese protection, the Dalai Lama and the Tibetan Government-in-Exile find themselves confronted with a discourse on Tibetan culture that utilizes a rhetoric parallel to their own. Statements about Tibetan culture put forward by the Dalai Lama and the Tibetan Government-in-Exile have to respond to the changing Chinese discourse and the increased focus on Tibetan culture abroad. This is visible in the ways that the Dalai Lama and the Tibetan Government-in-Exile have referred to Tibetan culture from the late eighties and early nineties until today, to a Tibetan speaking audience: They were responding to the need to more closely specify what Tibetan culture is and to define it in relation to the Chinese representation of Tibetan culture.

Nowadays the Dalai Lama and the Tibetan Government-in-Exile repeatedly state that the Chinese are not truly attempting to preserve Tibetan culture in Tibet. On the contrary, Tibet is said to be going through a new wave of "Cultural Revolution" (*rig gnas gsar brje*). For the Tibetans, the Cultural Revolution represents a time when the Chinese government put all its efforts into prosecuting Tibetan culture and religion. The Dalai Lama and the Tibetan Government-in-Exile is of the opinion that in contrast to the Cultural Revolution in the late sixties, when material manifestations of Tibetan culture (for example the monasteries) were destroyed, the Cultural Revolution that is going on today, is aimed at the Tibetan mind—as the last bastion of Tibetan culture the Chinese can attack. The Tibetan mind is exposed to massive Chinese influence through Chinese "colonialism" (*mi ser spel ba'i ring lugs*) and "Chinese mass migration" (*rgya'i mi 'bor gnas spo shugs che byed pa*). The Tibetan Prime Minister (*bka' blon khri pa*) in exile, Samdhong Rinpoche, has explained that the Chinese Government has increased its efforts to colonize Tibet because it did not succeed in destroying the Tibetan "dharma" (*chos*) and "cultural identity" (*rig gzhung gi ngo bo*) during the Cultural Revolution (Samdhong Rinpoche 2001: *ka*). The Government-in-Exile's Department of Information and International Relations has pointed out that since 1994 the Chinese Government has launched

¹² In Beijing June 2000 Zhao Qizheng, the leader of "The Information Office of the State Council" in China, commented that: "By means of cultural exchange, we should enhance our influence on Western community and its opinion. By means of culture, we should promote effective struggle for favorable public opinion regarding our work in Tibet" (Qizheng 2000: 13).

campaigns that aim to undermine Tibetan religion, culture and language in what the Government-in-Exile calls a "battle for hearts and minds" (DIIR 2001: 33).¹³ For the Dalai Lama and the Tibetan Government-in-Exile, this battle is an attempt to assimilate the Tibetans into Chinese society by transforming the Tibetans' minds into Chinese minds.¹⁴

Tibetan culture is intimately linked to Buddhism.

In the following I will try to show how the Dalai Lama and the Tibetan Government-in-Exile link Buddhism to Tibetan culture within the present day's discourse. This can, again, be seen as a response to Chinese and international discourses. The Dalai Lama and the Tibetan Government-in-Exile have moved Tibetan culture to the inner sphere of the individual. I will emphasise two characteristic examples of how this was done. Tibetan culture is moved to the inner sphere of the individual by defining Tibetan culture as intimately connected to "Dharma" (*chos*), and by distinguishing between internal culture and its external manifestations.

Today, Tibetan culture is defined by the political representatives as a quality of the mind that is deeply rooted in and founded on Buddhism. This foundation can be cultivated through a Tibetan education in monasteries and schools, where a Tibetan socialization is possible. Moreover, the Dalai Lama differentiates between the culture itself, namely in the inner sphere of the individual, and manifestations of culture in the outer world. This strategy of definition has a great significance in connection with the cultural battle and, not least, for the exiled Tibetans' fight for self-determination in Tibet today.

Just like the examples from films, books and the advertising industry in Brauen's *Dreamworld Tibet* (Brauen 2004), the Dalai Lama and the Tibetan Government-in-Exile remember Tibet chiefly as a place that for hundreds of years had been a peaceful Buddhist sanctuary. In statements put forward by them, Tibetan culture is explained as deriving from, founded upon, or connected to the Tibetan "dharma" (*chos*). When they define "dharma" (*chos*) more precisely, it is usually denoted as "Buddha-Dharma" (*sangs rgyas kyi chos*), "the Buddha's teaching" (*sangs rgyas kyi bstan pa*) or "Buddhism" (*nang pa'i chos*). There are incidences when "dharma" (*chos*), which is intimately connected to Tibetan culture, is denoted as "the

¹³ According to the Department of Information and International Relations, the party-secretary of the Tibet Autonomous Region, Chen Kuiyuan, during a meeting in 1999, recommended the Chinese Government to "[...] eradicate Tibetan Buddhism and culture from the face of the earth so that no memory of them will be left in the minds of coming generations of Tibetans – except as museum pieces" (DIIR nd: 5-6). It was this 'museumification' of Tibetan culture and the Chinese indoctrination of the Tibetans that the Tibetan Government-in-Exile regarded as a new Cultural Revolution.

¹⁴ But, as Dr. Denise Gimpel has pointed out to me, it was not a new strategy that the Chinese Government applied in Tibet. It is an old Chinese policy called "teaching and changing", meaning that through education the people should reform into the Chinese way of seeing the world.

impartial Dharma-traditions" (*ris su ma mchis pa'i chos rgyud khag, ris su ma mchis pa, or ris med*). This designation points out that the notion "dharma" (*chos*) covers four different traditions: *mying ma, bka' brgyud, sa skya, and dge lugs*. Alternatively the "dharma" (*chos*) is defined as the four Tibetan Buddhist traditions and the so-called Tibetan 'indigenous faith' *bon*, for example by saying "the four great Dharma-traditions and *bon*" (*chos lugs chen po bzhi g.yung drung bon*) or by defining "dharma" (*chos*) as "the five great Dharma-traditions within Tibetan Dharma" (*bod kyi chos kyi nang la chos lugs chen po lnga*).

The Dalai Lama and the Tibetan Government-in-Exile repeatedly point out that it is necessary to study and understand "dharma" (*chos*) or Buddhism in order to cultivate a foundation for Tibetan culture. The Tibetan Institute of Performing Arts is a good example of an institution that, in accordance with their definition of Tibetan culture, is rooted in Buddhism. The Tibetan Institute of Performing Arts seeks to reveal Buddhism as an essential part of Tibetan "performing arts" (*zlos gar*) by incorporating Tibetan Buddhism with the myths of *zlos gar*.

When the connection of Tibetan culture and Buddhism is expressed in Tibetan language, Tibetan Government-in-Exile often states for example: "the culture that is connected with the Buddha-Dharma" (*sangs rgyas kyi chos dang 'brel ba'i rig gzhung*), "Buddhism is most essential within Tibetan culture" (*bod kyi rig gzhung nang la gts'o che shos shig nang pa'i chos 'di yin*), and "the culture, for which Buddha-Dharma is most essential" (*nang pa sangs rgyas pa'i chos gts'o bor gyur pa'i rig gzhung*). Tibetan culture and Buddhism are so closely connected that sometimes it seems like Tibetan culture is synonymous with Tibetan Buddhism. This is especially clear in the many cases where they are mentioned as a yoked pair, as in the widespread expression *chos rig* "Dharma and culture", where *chos* means "dharma" or "religion", and *rig* is short for *rig gzhung*, namely "culture". Samdhong Rinpoche once explained to me that culture and religion are different and separate: Religion is something absolute, but culture belongs to time and space and is therefore something processual.¹⁵ Culture can express a connection to the absolute religion, but is cultivated in time and space and is therefore subject to changes and development. One may describe Tibetan Buddhism as stabilising and restricting Tibetan culture so that the culture won't develop in unwanted directions. Often when the Dalai Lama and the Tibetan Government-in-Exile point out this unbreakable relation between Tibetan culture and *dharmā*, they emphasise that cultural changes, which oppose or lack a *dharmā* fundament, cannot be considered a "true" expression of Tibetan culture. Thus the Buddhist foundation of Tibetan culture determines whether something is authentic Tibetan culture. By pointing out its close relationship to Tibetan

¹⁵ Personal communication with Samdhong Rinpoche, 20. February 2002, Dharamsala.

Buddhism and thus by moving culture into the inner sphere of the individual, Tibetan culture is taken out of its context, or decontextualised. This means, in this case, that culture is freed from the bonds to specific places, namely Tibet, and specific 'things' other than its relation to *dharma*.¹⁶

Distinction between internal culture and its external manifestations

The Dalai Lama has defined Tibetan culture as something within the mind, but that does not mean that he denies the fact that the culture also has material imprints. The Dalai Lama elaborated on this in a speech in 2001, when he explained the differences between culture itself and its external manifestations (Dalai Lama XIV 2002: 6):

What we call Tibetan Dharma and culture, which is precious, is not [something] to line up on an altar or to keep in a pocket. This activity of maintaining good customs individually is the principal meaning of Dharma and culture. It is not singing and dancing alone. Even the Chinese know Tibetan singing and dancing. Even though [the Chinese] shouldn't alter [song and dance] on their surface, they perform the Tibetan songs and dances dressed in Tibetan clothing. Because of that, what we call Tibetan culture has to be [something] that primarily exists in the mind. Simply dressing up in Tibetan clothing and verbally expressing Tibetan songs is not appropriate. Those are only the branches and ordinary aspects [of culture]. The principal culture is beneficial thoughts and genuinely good habits. It is good if song and dance represents that. Since these are interwoven with the Buddha-Dharma it is necessary to know the Buddha-Dharma.¹⁷

¹⁶ There are also many examples of Tibetan culture being described as something that resides within people by connecting culture with "mental qualities" (*sems kyi yon tan*), "personality" (*gshis ka* or *gshis rgyud*) and "moral propriety" (*ya rabs spyod bzang* or *ya rabs bzang spyod*). The Dalai Lama have pointed out that Tibetan culture is "preserved" (*rgyun 'dzin* or *nyams med rgyun 'dzin*) when our "individual personality" (*so so'i gshis rgyud*) have "a good attitude of moral propriety" (*ya rabs bzang po'i lta spyod*) that is cultivated through studying the "Buddha-Dharma" (*sang rgyas kyi chos*) (Parliament Proceedings 2001: 8). Moral integrity is closely connected to the understanding of what Tibetan culture is. Dalai Lama has explained that even though you express a relation to Tibetan culture outwardly, you are not capable to "preserve" (*rgyun 'dzin*) Tibetan culture as long as your mind, speech, and body is "extremely unprincipled" (*ma rabs miha' shal*) (Parliament Proceedings 2001: 8). According to Sally Falk Moore, political ideas can be sacralized and removed from the category of the debatable by attributing moral significance to them (Moore 1993: 1). Is the politics of preserving Tibetan culture sacralized when Tibetan culture is closely connected with Buddhism within the discourse propounded by the Dalai Lama and the Tibetan Government-in-Exile?

¹⁷ My translation from: "*nga rang tsho bod pa'i chos dang rig gzhung rtsa che red ces mchod gshoms nang bsgrig rgyu dang/ yang na am phrag sbug tu nyar rgyu zhid ma red/ so so la goms gshis bzang po zhid 'jags pa bya rgyu 'di chos dang rig gzhung gi snying po gtso bo yin/ gzhas dang zhabs bro rgyag pa de tsho gcig pu min/ bod pa'i gzas dang zhabs bro rgya mis kyang rgyag shes kyi yod/ rgya mi' gdong la bzo bcas rgyag rgyu med kyang khong tshos bod chas gyon nas bod pa'i gzhas zhabs bro rgyag gi*

As I understand his comments, the Dalai Lama regards Tibetan culture as something you cannot have outside yourself: You cannot place it on an altar, keep it in your pocket, exhibit it in a museum or wear it as attire. The essence of Tibetan culture is Buddhism, and it is not something you wear on the outside, but have within. The Dalai Lama differentiates between culture itself, primarily existing in the mind, and what he calls the culture's "branches" (*yan lag*), the culture's "ordinary aspects" (*cha shas phal pa*), and the "representations" or "symbols" (*mtshon byed*) of culture. The culture itself exists within the individual, but it is the culture's material imprints that are expressed outwards through body, speech and mind. Samdhong Rinpoche has pointed out that Tibetan culture is connected to the mind, but that material objects, which can be exhibited in museums and be collected in archives, are only expressions and symbols of culture: "They express culture. They are not culture."¹⁸ The same point applies to the images from the films, books and advertisements presented in Brauen's book (2004). These are not Tibetan culture, but they re-present culture.

I think I have made my point that the Dalai Lama's and the Tibetan Government-in-Exile's definition of Tibetan culture places culture inside the individual with Buddhism as its core, and give less significance to the external and visible manifestations of culture. But one important point remains for me to clarify: How can this definition of Tibetan culture be an important political strategy in a battle about culture?

As we have seen, the most influential exiled Tibetans regard culture as a mental process within the individual. According to the Dalai Lama, Tibetan culture should arise from and rest in Buddhism so that the material and external manifestations of culture have a foundation. By distinguishing between the internal culture itself and its external or material manifestations one creates the possibility to exclude certain cultural expressions, which claim the status of being Tibetan. The motivation is to protect Tibetan culture from being reduced to merely material aspects. But exactly this, the Dalai Lama and the Tibetan Government-in-Exile say, is what happens under the Chinese in Tibet.

yod/ der brten nga rang tsho bod pa'i rig gzhung zhes pa 'di gtso bo sems nang yod pa zhig dgos/ bod pa'i gyon gos gyon pa dang/ kha nas bod pa'i gzhaz btang ba gcig pus mi 'grigs/ de dag ni bod kyi rig gzhung gi yan lag dang/ cha shas phal pa tsam yin/ gtso bo'i rig gzhung ni phan pa'i bsam blo dang/ ya rabs gzhung bzang gi goms gshis de tsho yin/ de mtshon byed gzhaz dang zhabs bro de rigs yong gi yod/ 'di dag sangs rgyas kyi chos dang 'brel ba yod par brten sangs rgyas chos shes pa byed dgos!" (Dalai Lama XIV 2002: 6).

¹⁸ Personal communication with Samdhong Rinpoche, 20. February 2002, Dharamsala.

Such a definition of Tibetan culture makes it possible to exclude those, who under the influence of the Chinese merely perform songs and dances dressed in Tibetan clothing and so forth without the proper foundation of Buddhism, as not being authentic. A true culture, as the Dalai Lama and the Tibetan Government-in-Exile see it, cannot be copied or forged. The Dalai Lama has pointed out that the Chinese have copied Tibetan songs and dances, but according to him, this is not a Tibetan culture anymore (Dalai Lama XIV 2002: 6). Thus with this definition it is possible to evaluate the authenticity of people, acts or objects that claim a Tibetan cultural identity, and exclude and call them Chinese by defining them as expressions of only ordinary aspects and external branches of Tibetan culture and thus not the culture itself.

At the same time, this definition of Tibetan culture makes it possible to include those Tibetans who have rejected the mere material expressions of culture. For example those who do not dress in traditional Tibetan clothes, and do not sing and dance the Tibetan way, but have been educated and socialized as Tibetans and therefore cultivated a Buddhist foundation for "true" Tibetan culture. At a time when material expressions of culture, as belonging to time and space, are constantly changing under "foreign" and "modern" influences, such a definition of culture provides the exiled Tibetans with a formidable tool: It gives less significance to the outer signs of cultural belonging and thus allows for those who do not live in Tibet itself, who do not wear Tibetan clothing anymore etc., still to be culturally Tibetans.

Tibetan performing arts (*zlos gar rig pa*) are an excellent example of how the Tibetans in exile have to compete for cultural authority and how the definition of Tibetan culture can be used to exclude some forms of Tibetan performing arts as being Chinese and not Tibetan. The Tibetan Institute of Performing Arts have performed abroad many times. But they meet competition from other Tibetan ensembles that are educated in Tibet under Chinese influence. They compete and take part in a battle about who are the "true" representatives of an authentic Tibetan culture. As Topden Tsering (1999: 12) has commented:

"Faced with Tibet's sinicisation and exile hardships, the Tibetan opera evolves from being a traditional medium of entertainment to a weapon with which to challenge Chinese propaganda."

Through their definition of Tibetan culture, the Dalai Lama and the Tibetan Government-in-Exile can argue that the Tibetan Institute of Performing Arts is the true representative of authentic Tibetan culture because they live up to the rules set by the definition: They have

cultivated the Buddhist fundament and have been socialized as Tibetans within the Tibetan Government-in-Exile's own institution.

Conclusion

The French philosopher Michel Foucault (1972) has pointed out that even though there are so many words that can be combined in so many ways and express so many different statements, the way we use language and what we actually say is in reality quite limited—we speak in discourses (Foucault 1972). The way we speak about something is always a construct—a construct that is (often involuntarily or unconsciously) determined by many factors. Look for example at the representations of Tibet and Tibetan culture in Brauen's book (2004): The advertisements that use Tibetan culture are directly appealing to the way we construct a mythical Tibet in our minds. This is perhaps even a good example of a very conscious way of manipulation through discourse, because I don't believe that the advertisement industry is that innocent.

And note also the ways that the Dalai Lama and the Tibetan Government-in-Exile speak about Tibetan culture. Their discourse constructs and applies specific understandings to Tibetan culture. They specifically seek to constitute culture as something that exists primordially and within the inner sphere of people. Thus, their representations are not neutral descriptions of Tibetan culture, but are selected constructions and interpretations.

"Tibetan culture is utilized as a political strategy"

Tibetan culture is a field for struggle, where contesting discourses seek to define and represent the culture in different ways—it is a battlefield. According to Michel Foucault (1972), discourses are controlled, selected, organised and distributed, and they are resources or benefits that can be fought for in political battles. Tibetan culture has been instrumentalised and made into a central pillar of discourse in the Dalai Lama's and the Tibetan Government-in-Exile's main aim: namely self-determination in Tibet. In their battle, they have incorporated the concept of Tibetan culture to serve political purposes.

As I see it, the Dalai Lama and the Tibetan Government-in-Exile put forward statements that are partly a response to the Western discourses and dreams about Tibet described by Brauen (2004). And not least, they are also a response to the Chinese discourse on Tibet and Tibetan culture. The Chinese and Western discourses constitute a discursive formation that both limit and enable the ways that the Dalai Lama and the Tibetan Government-in-Exile can talk about Tibetan culture. Their definition of Tibetan culture has to work as a principle for excluding the

culture that the Chinese Government claim to protect and promote and, at the same time, include their own representation as "authentic" Tibetan culture. Thus the ways that Tibetan culture is defined are important strategies in an ongoing battle.

The strongest weapons of the Dalai Lama and the Tibetan Government-in-Exile are, as I hope to have shown, the linking of Tibetan culture to Buddhism and distinguishing between internal culture and its external manifestations. Tibetan culture has been moved to the inner sphere of the individual and thereby culture has been decontextualised. This means that Tibetans, who have left Tibet but kept up an authentic practice of Buddhism, can be and actually are, true upholders of Tibetan culture. By distinguishing between the culture itself, which is internal, connected to the mind and founded upon Buddhism, and the culture's external or material manifestations, Tibetan culture functions as a principle through which one can include people as being producers and bearers of authentic Tibetan culture. Moreover, the exile community can distinguish itself from "the other", namely the Chinese and the Tibetans living under Chinese influence, and define themselves as the true Tibetans. Hence, the definitions of Tibetan culture lay down rules for what it means to be a "true" or "authentic" Tibetan.

At the same time other representations of Tibetan culture can be excluded by dismissing them as just being external expressions of culture and not the culture it self, and by pointing to its lack of a true internal cultural base—namely Buddhism. It is essential that the definition can be used to exclude alternative understandings of Tibetan culture, individuals, objects, or actions that make claim of a Tibetan status. This is fundamental in order to protect the Tibetan nation, and therefore the "Tibetan cause". It has great political significance, and as such the recognition of being the legitimate, rightful representative of Tibetan culture is the same as having power.

"Discourse can be violence"

I also hope to have shown how the discourse changes in accordance or in response to an ongoing battle about Tibetan culture. What is authentic Tibetan culture, and who are its true representatives? I have also given examples of how a discourse on culture that includes Buddhism within its delineation can be an important political strategy. Now, what has this to do with violence? To answer this question, let me briefly state what the sociologist Pierre Bourdieu (1977, 1990, 1991) called "symbolic violence". Symbolic violence means to exercise the power to constitute, maintain or transform selected meanings and perceptions of the world, and to authorise these as legitimate and universally applicable within a given "nation". It is the power of constructing reality, of including or excluding the objects and classifications, and of

accepting or rejecting the words that can be used to designate or to describe the world (Bourdieu *et.al.* 1977).

The immense authority attributed to the discourse advocated by the Dalai Lama and the Tibetan Government-in-Exile, especially in the case of the Dalai Lama, means that controlling such a discourse is symbolic power. Their institutionalised authority is anchoring the discourse as legitimate. With this kind of power the Tibetans in exile can be forced to follow the rules that are laid down by the discourse: This is symbolic violence. The independent cultural research-institute Amnye Machen Institute (*a myes rma chen bod kyi rig gzhung zhib 'jug khang*) in Dharamsala, India, for example, suffered from such symbolic violence. The alternative discourse promoted by the Amnye Machen Institute focused on "secular" Tibetan culture and thus did not follow the rules laid down by the dominant discourse in the Tibetan Diaspora. As a result, they experienced a lot of opposition, up to the point that two of its founding members left India—exiled from the exile.

In any way, the discourse promoted by the Dalai Lama and the Tibetan Government-in-Exile is repeated and reproduced, institutionalised, and the Tibetan exiles are socialised within the frames for understanding and speaking about culture, which such discourse produces. Implicit in the authoritarian status that the Dalai Lama's and the Tibetan Government-in-Exile's definition of Tibetan culture has, lies a demand on the Tibetans to manifest a "Tibetan-ness" according to those rules. The symbolic power is almost magical because it is the power to tell the Tibetans who they are. The Tibetans have to express and live by the rules that the discourse lays down—at least outwardly. They need a distinguishable culture in order to define themselves as a nation and thus can put forward claims of self-determination vis-à-vis China and the global community. That Tibetan culture "survives" is dependent upon the Tibetans in exile, who are free of Chinese influence and who have the possibilities to be socialised and educated as Tibetans. Thus the Dalai Lama's and the Tibetan Government-in-Exile's discourse on culture is also an important political strategy that is closely related to their main objective: namely "self-determination" (*rang dbang*) in Tibet.

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