

The Ethics of Nationalism: A Sino-Tibetan Dialogue

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My parents endlessly watch war movies: pixelated black and white films of the Chinese Communists enduring hunger, fearlessly marching through grenade territory, claiming a land that was theirs. My mother still refers to the Japanese as “Japanese ghosts.” When I was little, she would point to Japanese kanji characters at the Asian supermarket and say, “See? They stole that writing from us.” And I would believe her.

Later, in high school, I begrudged my mother’s grudge: I read John Hersey’s *Hiroshima*, and the Japanese this time were the ones wronged. I hurt for them. The Sino-Japanese War has long since been over, I’d tell her, and yes, I, too, saw the torture chambers the Japanese had concocted in Manchuria, but that’s not the Japanese civilians’ fault. My mother would say, but what about the Japanese history textbooks that say nothing about the Nanjing Massacre? How can their country’s schoolchildren not know of the horrors of that age? I did not know for a long while. My parents are tricky. They are generally liberal, but for a long while, I did not even try to broach the two unmentionable T’s of Taiwan and Tibet.

In college, I traveled for answers, particularly about Tibet. I could not reconcile the two sides: my activist friends espousing the “Free Tibet” cause while my parents scoff from the side. Tibet has always been part of China, they say. To them, everything is a conspiracy concocted by Western nations, jealous of China and wishing to break the country up. But how can I blame my parents when they were only a generation away from the destruction Westerners brought? European soldiers in an invasion of the capital city scraped the gilding off the royal water tanks, and now in Beijing’s Forbidden City sit enormous blackened jugs that were once gold, as a reminder of the atrocity. Would I have felt any less touching them,

these defiled relics, if I weren't Chinese, if the people hurt weren't my people? How would you feel, my parents retort when I talk to them about the possibility of Tibetan independence, if someone tried to cut off a part of your flesh? What if Alaska one day wished to rebel? Would America allow it?

In New York, I met Pelgye, owner of a Tibetan goods shop in Manhattan that I had marked off on a list—I wanted to meet Tibetans, to ask them *their* side of the story. Yet when I first wandered into his brightly lit shop, bells tinkling behind me, I didn't know what to say and stood there, mumbling something about Tibet. Later, after we had talked, Pelgye told me he did not blame the Chinese, and told me to read more, gave me books, yet did not tell me any more himself. To Pelgye, global politics is not as important as connection to the people around him: like you, he said, nodding gently to me, coming into his shop to talk with someone about an issue I wanted to understand. I don't know how much I've learned about the political situation between Tibet and China from Pelgye, but I've learned about his childhood: pretending that rocks were candy while fasting as a monk, his grandmother's mud hut, his clothes that smelled sweet from the fabric alone, his escape to Nepal, and now, his nostalgia for Tibet. It was easy to talk of these disputed lands with him, one-on-one, this man who did not judge.

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Even after meeting Pelgye, after reading accounts of China's occupation of the land from refugees in exile, watching videos with testimonies of torture from Tibetan nuns, then reading the Chinese side—emphasizing the Tibetans' release from serfdom, their new development, better lives—I could not fully connect to the issue. I could feel with my head, but not my heart. I chose to go on a study abroad program my junior year to see things for

myself in the Tibetan exile communities of India and Nepal. “What can you gain there that you can’t get here?” one of my friends, a lover of local communities, asked me. But it was not about gain: it was about loss, losing the distance, the theories, the safety.

I was afraid of my race for the first time, being Chinese. I’ve known plenty of Arabs friends with Jews, Jews with Germans, Americans with natives. Still, I couldn’t help wondering: what would Tibetans think of me? But I wanted to know what it would be like to face people my own race has hurt.

Once I arrived in the exile communities, though, some of these fears turned to be unfounded. Even when I tried, tentatively, to ask my homestay father, who left Tibet 25 years ago for freedom, about thoughts on China, all he would say in response would be, “Ah... China. China, Tibetan, faces the same.” And then, as we are having tea, he pointed to the thermos and said, “From China. Good, good.”

Still, one of the Tibetan host sisters of another program mate, who I met briefly and had said before that she “liked Chinese people, though not the Chinese government,” seemed oddly stiff at our initial meeting. Afterwards, my program mate told me she had said, “Actually, I don’t know if I like Chinese people.” Her host sister’s family had been tremendously hurt by ordinary Chinese living in Tibet, so this was more real and present to her than to other Tibetans, perhaps generations removed.

Much later, I had dinner at the host sister’s family’s restaurant; they owned a small place selling Tibetan soup and dumplings. Despite my protests, the parents wouldn’t let me pay.

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“You think I like India?”

Gonpo is sitting cross-legged on the tiled floor of his apartment, a quiet space with a balcony that overlooks the beautiful Kangra Valley surrounding Dharamsala, India, which has served as the center of the Tibetan government-in-exile for 50 years. I am having dinner with a group of young Tibetans. Chopsticks are clicking. I had asked the group a simple question, or so I thought: what did they think of India? I did not think it would elicit such emotional responses. Gonpo’s thin frame—lean from years of doing massage in the room just next door, with its raised white bed—agitates towards his bowl of rice as he continues.

“It’s unfair,” he says. “We stay here in India because we have to. Because we have no land of our own. No freedom. No protection.” He pauses and shrugs. “If today an Indian police punched me in the face, I would take it. I have to. It’s not my country.”

For Tibetans like Gonpo, though, who choose a life in exile, the desire for a country of his own—a home—must be reconciled with the real flourishing of religion, community, and free expression that can be found in places like Dharamsala. Most Tibetans are here to study modern subjects or religion or to see the Dalai Lama, rights they can only pursue in exile. And it is in exile that the Tibetan community is closer than ever before.

The older generations say that before, in Tibet, people answered the question “where are you from?” with their geographic separations within Tibet: Kham, Amdo, Uzhan. But in Dharamsala, that difference becomes less important as Tibetans are placed under a larger umbrella of national identity. Nowadays, when you ask a young Tibetan where he is from, he will say simply: Tibet.

John Powers confirms that these changes occurred for Tibetans fairly recently: while he says Chinese nationalism (or at least culturalism—the glorification of Chinese culture,

believed by the Chinese to be higher than all other civilizations around them) has been around for a while, “For Tibetans, however, nationalism is a much more recent phenomenon, whose primary impetus is the incursion of China into Tibet and the subsequent uprising that led to Chinese military suppression and the flight of large numbers of Tibetans into exile.”¹ For Chinese, too, it is the common humiliations they faced against the West combined with a growing power in the world and the pride therein that contributes to present-day Chinese nationalism.²

On the other hand, because this union of Tibetanness is precisely what the Chinese government does not want, Tibetan culture and religion often come under attack in China, especially in education of Tibetan children. “Some Tibetans respond to these assaults by losing their sense of Tibetan identity,” Powers writes, “But many others become intensely aware of the cultural differences separating them from the Chinese. In the exile communities, the land of Tibet functions as an important symbol for nationalist consciousness.”³

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In Dharamsala, I am teaching English and, surprisingly, Chinese. Many Tibetans wish to learn Chinese nowadays, because the Dalai Lama has said it is good to know about China, especially since the Chinese aren't really even allowed to know about Tibet; because in the refugee quarters, different dialects of Tibetan run rampant but only one dialect of Chinese—Mandarin—is needed; because Chinese is useful. Others of my students want to

¹ Powers, John. *History as Propaganda: Tibetans in Exile vs. the People's Republic of China*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2004, 146.

² Zhao, Suiseheng. “Chinese Nationalism and Its International Orientations.” *Political Science Quarterly*, Vol. 115 (2000).

³ Powers, John. *History as Propaganda: Tibetans in Exile vs. the People's Republic of China*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2004, 148.

go back to China someday, sneak back in and become teachers there to improve the Tibetan level of education in general.

One of my students, a monk, Sonam Pentsuok, became a monk at age sixteen in Sichuan, and is now growing close to thirty; he came to India to receive a better monastic education in one of the three great monasteries in southern India.

When Sonam was back in Sichuan, he used to watch many Chinese films about the Japanese invasion and hated the Japanese because he thought he was Chinese. “But now I don’t hate the Japanese,” he says. “They haven’t hurt Tibetans, after all...” When he first arrived at the Tibetan Reception Center in Nepal, on his way to receive a better monastic education in India, he thought, before returning to China, he was told that China invaded Tibet, but he didn’t believe them. “You can’t say this about Chinese people,” he told them. It was all he believed, all that he had grown up believing—so to him, it was true. Now he believes in another truth.

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“Do you think any good has come of development in Tibet?” I ask Gonpo during the first of our group dinners with Kirti, Besang, and Tashi, four Tibetan youth in Dharamsala whom I have befriended. “No,” he says, resoundingly. Kirti chimes in, too. “Why do you even have to ask that?”

Kirti, who is entering Class 12 at Upper Tibetan Children’s Village (TCV), one of the series of free Tibetan boarding schools in India started by the Dalai Lama’s sister, and is the youngest of the group of four friends, one day wishes to be an international lawyer. He appreciates my search for truth, he says, but tells me that when I look at history, I can’t just weigh fact against fact either. I have to look at who is suffering.

Maybe this is my own nationalism kicking in: of course Tibetans are suffering, I tell him. I'm sorry. But in many ways, so are ordinary Chinese folks. Maybe all of China needs to change first.

"We can't worry about all of China right now," my student monk, Sonam, has said. "We have to be able to stand up on our own feet before we can help Xinjiang or Taiwan or inner Mongolia; if you're wobbly yourself, how can you help others?" But he only talks about other regions with ethnic conflict.

Wang Lixiong, a Chinese intellectual with a particular interest in Tibetan rights (he is also married to a Tibetan woman), writes, "In today's Tibet, almost every major project relies on Beijing's support. Without supplies and support from Beijing, progress, at least in Tibet's cities, would grind to a halt. Beijing's treatment of Tibet has often made other regions envious."⁴ He cites government statistics that say that in the almost forty years since the Tibetan Autonomous Region was founded, the central government provided subsidies for almost ninety-five percent of its 87.6 RMB of financial expenses. Furthermore, Tibetan people also have preferential interest rates at banks and Tibetan businesses have preferential tax rates. Tibetan farmers and herdsman don't have to pay taxes or administrative charges at all (taxes are something the Dalai Lama said he would levy if he came back to Tibet⁵).

At the same time, development across Tibet, as in mainland China, is definitely not all good and often unequal. But Kirti, Besang, Gonpo, and Tashi don't believe me when I say it's the same in China. "Tell me something," Tashi says. "Do most Chinese villages have electricity?" I don't really know, and I say, well nowadays, probably, I guess so. "But not all!" I am quick to point out. "Exactly!" he says, latching on to my first words. "Most Tibetan

⁴ Wang, Lixiong. "A True 'Middle-Way' Solution to Tibetan Unrest." *China Security*, Vol. 4 (Spring 2008): 29.

⁵ Wang, Lixiong. "A True 'Middle-Way' Solution to Tibetan Unrest." *China Security*, Vol. 4 (Spring 2008): 29.

villages don't. I had to walk two hours to watch TV. My cousin died from little pimples"—chicken pox, perhaps?—"because they couldn't get him to a hospital!"

Name a Chinese village that is as worse off, they tell me. Go ahead. What have you seen? And flustered, I can't name any, can only say something vague about the droughts and floods in Anhui. Their faces are smug snow. "Go to Tibet and see for yourself," Kirti says. "Go to a Tibetan village." He is implying: that is the only way for me to know. But I want him to know that I believe him: I believe that conditions are bad. I don't need to see them firsthand to believe it. I just believe that conditions elsewhere are bad, too.

Back at my guesthouse, I check Google on Chinese village education. I read about how hard it is to get to school in the winters in Chongqing, remember my mom's tales of teaching village children in Jiangxi: how they would use a pencil until it was a mere stub, then attach a piece of plastic onto the stub so they could continue to write until the lead ran out entirely. I read about how thousands of high school seniors get into college, but can't afford it. I read about farmers' protests against pollution, villagers' dissatisfaction with corruption, all put down by the government, and I think: yes, this is happening everywhere in China. Who are these Tibetans to think they are unique?

But then I think: at least the Han Chinese villagers get to learn in their own language, are not discouraged from being proud of their culture. And I know in so many ways that Kirti, Tashi, Besang, and Gonpo are right. I just wish they would believe me, too, that they have more in common with ordinary Chinese people than they may think. What good does it do for me to acknowledge their suffering if they think it's unique only to their people?

No one in my time in Dharamsala has been openly hostile to me; instead, they take pains to point out, here, look, we are eating Chinese cabbage tonight, or even: teach me

Chinese, your language; I wish to learn it. Besang, Tashi, Gonpo, and Kirti all say they trust Chinese police more than Indian police. When I tell him of my fears of being a Chinese person in Dharamsala, Sanjay Kep, who works at the China Desk in the Tibetan government in exile, tells me the story of a student from Beijing who raised his hand during a press conference in Dharamsala after the March 2008 riots in Tibet and told the audience he was Chinese. "If he wasn't afraid, why should you be?" Sanjay says. "Besides, you're American."

Yet when it comes to politics, we still argue, and I am still not finding answers to my questions: what will happen if Tibet really is free? After all, Lixiong Wang writes, "Revolution is a grand holiday for the people: during the revolution, people might exultantly celebrate, but problems usually occur the day after the revolution succeeds."⁶ For example, if Tibet were free, what would happen to the Chinese currently residing within Tibet, of which there are a great many? Once self-governance is achieved, the Dalai Lama suggests that people of other minorities not born inside Tibet should leave while those born inside Tibet could stay. Yet there are many complexities involved with this simple statement. For one, how many people would that encompass who could stay? Would families also be torn apart? Many Chinese mothers living in Tibet think it is unhealthy to give birth in high altitudes, so they actually leave Tibet to give birth, then go back.

Kirti seems to think all the Chinese in Tibet were placed by the Chinese government anyway, so it shouldn't matter. I protest: it's true that the government has sent and encouraged many Chinese to live in Tibet, but many came of their own accord, whether through economic incentives or personal reasons. Both he and Gonpo don't believe me, and I wonder if I am being too stubborn, too, defending China. I am tired of arguing with them.

⁶ Wang, Lixiong. "A True 'Middle-Way' Solution to Tibetan Unrest." *China Security*, Vol. 4 (Spring 2008): 29.

In the end, though, under whichever policy, isn't it always the civilian who loses? The Tibetan whose home is tainted with "foreigners" and the Chinese family who has found their way to Tibet only to be told they never belonged there.

Gonpo and Kirti believe that ordinary Chinese people may think that the Chinese brought happiness to Tibetans but think the government definitely knows the reality of the situation. "They just want Tibet for its resources," Kirti says. "If not for international pressure, they'd want to kick all Tibetans out of Tibet." And when I say I don't know if you can say that is the only thing keeping Chinese at bay, Gonpo says, "You don't believe us, because you are Chinese." I feel accused. "How do you know these stories are truths?" I ask him. "I know, because I'm Tibetan," he replies. "It's my history." To him, history is black and white. No question. "Go to Tibet," he says, as he always does. "Or better yet," Kirti adds, "be reborn in Tibet as a Tibetan girl. Then you'll understand."

I want them to know that I believe them; I just wish their views weren't so extreme, that they would leave some room for forgiveness. I keep wondering also: if my Chinese parents came to Dharamsala, would they understand? Or will they just say what the Chinese usually say: that Western countries want Tibet to seek independence so that they can make China weaker? What they have heard for decades has become history for them, unquestionable, black and white.

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This is the narrative of my family:

My parents were born in 1953 and 1954, survived China's famine as children from 1958 - 1961 (they were better off in the cities where they were born than rural areas elsewhere), worked for years in the fields during the Cultural Revolution under Mao's

educating-the-city-youth initiative. Their families were both hurt tremendously by the time the Cultural Revolution was over; my father's father, my grandpa, who was head of Xinhua News Agency—which made up the whole of Chinese press at the time—became a political prisoner and died in jail when my father was nineteen.

Now my parents are in America, their past behind them, the only remnants of their field work some bouts of arthritis every now and then, but when they speak of China nowadays, despite all injustices they may have faced, it is with a sense of pride. My parents still believe that though China has made mistakes, it has been good to them; it was their home for close to four decades of their lives.

Academics call this “Han chauvinism,” but there is a courage and forgiveness in this attitude, too, no? Deng Xiaoping, who stepped up as chairman after Mao died in 1976, said that Mao was 70 percent good and 30 percent back, despite the fact that he himself was a victim of the Cultural Revolution and his son was crippled because of the violence.⁷ The information about Deng was stated in a publication by the Tibetan exile government's Department of Information and International Relations (DIIR), in which the DIIR questioned the Chinese way of thinking.

Will the Tibetans ever be able to understand Chinese loyalty to their country, as similar as it is to their own?

My parents still do not understand why I am interested in Tibet, in journalism—all “dangerous things,” my mother says. She tells me to shut my mouth before I go to China. Even though you are US citizen now, she tells me, you still have to be careful about politics.

⁷ DIIR Publications. “Central Tibetan Administration's Response to Chinese Government's Allegations.” Department of Information and International Relations, Central Tibetan Administration, (Dharamsala, 2009).

More than force, the Chinese government uses psychological means—the fear it inculcates, which may be larger than its actual power—to keep people in line. While the Tibetan exile government by no means uses such force deliberately, the integration of religion and state is sometimes such that fervent followers of the Dalai Lama—especially those who think he is a living Buddha—will believe that any criticism of his policies is wrong. As such, Tibetan dissidents, especially in Dharamsala, are often looked down upon and even sometimes threatened with their lives⁸. The Dalai Lama himself stepped in to publicly protect prominent Tibetan historian Dawa Norbu from such censure when Norbu critiqued the government. This is the ugly side of nationalism anywhere: when one person’s love for country prevents another’s freedom.

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In 2007, Tenzin Wangchuk started an on-line outreach center in Dharamsala called Drelwa (*brel ba*), which in Tibetan means “relationship.”

Inside, Tenzin has “hired”—on a screened volunteer basis—Tibetans who come from China (often housewives with time on their hands) with open mindsets to tell Chinese friends or strangers on-line using Chinese what Tibetans are doing and what the Tibetan situation is currently like. Using QQ or Rainbow, two popular instant messaging programs in China, a user can easily search for strangers to talk to based on their self-declared location within China. “But how do you even begin this sort of dialogue?” I ask Tenzin. “Isn’t it too sensitive?”

Well, at the beginning, Tenzin says, you talk to people like you would talk to anybody else. Sure, you can say you’re Tibetan, but mostly people everywhere just need a place to

⁸ Powers, John. *History as Propaganda: Tibetans in Exile vs. the People’s Republic of China*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2004.

vent. “Especially the Chinese,” Tenzin says, “whose hurts aren’t recognized or presented in the media.” So Tenzin and his other outreach workers, who are familiar with Chinese social problems, will commiserate with them. When he was in college in Beijing, Tenzin says, all his fellow students were Han, and he’d try to talk to them. This is the same: they start by talking about ordinary things—the rain, their dinner, their latest day—then, after a while, after a relationship has been built, they might begin telling their own stories.

Many Chinese people, he says, will ask us, incredulously, “Aren’t you already free?”

No, they would reply. And then, in human-to-human terms devoid as much as possible of political jargon, they start explaining why.

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Once, in my Indigenous Religions seminar, a classmate spoke of her moment of unawareness over fall break: how, in all well-meaning non-knowledge, she had asked a Native American friend how his Thanksgiving was. “I’m native. I don’t celebrate Thanksgiving,” the friend said, and left it at that. And left her wondering, wondering what she should have done, if she and all of us—if it’s possible that we, as a country—could be more watchful of our language and ourselves.

And my professor, a white man who works and writes and lives with Native Americans, smiled and thanked her for her insight, and then told us all, “Don’t be afraid not to ask about—especially celebratory—things for fear of political incorrectness. I’d rather offend someone in my gesture, and have that person correct me, so we’ll come to a middle ground, somewhere where we can enter into who we are.”

So a conversation will start perhaps, or at least some thinking. So that then college can be a place for cultivation not just of analytical mind but a sensing, feeling, minding mind,

where academic discussion is inextricably mixed with personal connections instead of abstractions. True intellectuality, just as true ethics, recognizes our roots. An ethical being is not necessarily pure or unbiased, but acknowledges who he or she is, race, gender, prejudices, privileges. He or she says, this is who I am, and I look at the world through my particular perspective, but I will try to be as aware as I can of what my place means, even if it hurts to acknowledge it, and I will choose to act accordingly.

This is who I am: a Chinese-American girl in the twenty-first century who hopes that one day, both China and Tibet will be free. I hope also that being unashamedly Chinese, I will be able to do some good in both places. China and Tibet are far away right now, but I know I will go back; they will always be close to me.

I still visit Pelgye in his shop in New York. I tell him about my time in South Asia as we drink tea. "In your past life, you were a Tibetan," he says, chuckling. But what does it matter if in my present life I am Chinese, so long as I can choose who I want to be?

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* Some names have been changed at the request of the interviewees. All quotes in this essay are from notes that can be traced back to sources in Dharamsala, India, in April 2010.