

Research Article



***Tibet and China's Orientalists: Knowledge, Power, and the Construction of Minority Identity***

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**Abstract:** This article explores the salience of Edward Said's characterization of European Orientalists to contemporary Chinese academics working on Tibetan Buddhism. While Said's work has been criticized for selective citations and for focusing on work that is long out of date, Orientalist tropes are pervasive in current tibetological work published in China, including articles in purportedly scholarly journals. This work is closely connected with government propaganda, and it is often explicitly directed by members of the government to further agendas of suppression. Equally importantly, the article examines the ways in which Tibetans are presented with a version of their religion that bears little or no resemblance to how they traditionally have understood it; but it is also an image that Tibetans are increasingly being coerced to endorse.

**Keywords:** Orientalism; Tibet; Buddhism; propaganda

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### Chinese Orientalism and the Tibetan Other

In 1950 the People's Republic of China (PRC) launched an invasion of Tibet—which official discourses proclaimed was an “inalienable part of Chinese territory” that had temporarily become estranged from the Motherland as a result of the military weakness of the last phase of the Qing dynasty (1644–1912) and intrigues by foreign imperialists. From the beginning of its occupation, China conducted a propaganda offensive intended to win the hearts and minds of Tibetans and to convince the rest of the world that it was engaged in a “peaceful liberation” (和平解放 *heping jiefang*) and not a colonialist annexation of a sovereign neighbor. In addition to the land Tibetans occupied, the PRC propaganda apparatus also took control over how they would be publicly depicted. In common with other minorities that were components of China's ethnic profile (either willingly or unwillingly), essentializing images of the people of the Tibetan Plateau were circulated throughout China.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Gladney (2004) provides a wide-ranging analysis of how the PRC portrays its minorities. Leibold (2007) explores how groups in various regions of China whose ancestors did not view themselves as Han have over the course of centuries shifted their ethnic identification and how the rhetoric of Han racial/cultural superiority has developed.

The creators of these discourses recognize that many foreigners reject China's claims to legitimate sovereignty and that few who have an interest in Tibet regard PRC depictions of its religion and society as reflective of reality. The images Chinese academics and media produce and disseminate share much in common with those of the European Orientalists discussed by Edward Said in his influential book *Orientalism*. Like their European predecessors, China's Orientalists are preoccupied with identifying essences and with teleologies of modernity. In their narratives, the indigenes of the Tibetan Plateau are backward and incapable of representing themselves. PRC scholars seek to identify the core elements of minority cultures and to create a system of knowledge in which each group has a fixed essence and is situated at a particular point along the continuum of modernity and economic development.<sup>2</sup> The Han (China's majority ethnic group, comprising 92% of the population) stand at the forefront, providing role models and guidance to their "little brothers and sisters," and they also study and classify them as a tool for solidifying their control over minority peoples and their lands. The majority ethnicity sets the terms of discourse and decides what should be known about the others.

When European powers conquered and colonized other peoples, they subsequently funded research in a range of disciplines, including linguistics, anthropology, sociology, religious studies, history, and archeology in order to acquire knowledge that would enable them to better understand their subjects and more effectively rule them. The dynamic of power and knowledge has been described by Michel Foucault and Said, and it is at play in current PRC academic circles that focus on Tibet and other minority areas. Like their European counterparts, China's Orientalists have developed "supporting institutions, vocabulary, scholarship, imagery, doctrines, and even colonial bureaucracies and colonial styles."<sup>3</sup> When China militarily occupied Tibet, it acquired the power to dispatch its administrators and scholars throughout the region to study its people and gather information on them. Ethnographers and government functionaries observed their kinship patterns, marriage practices, lifestyles, economic relationships, and religious rituals. These were recorded and used in the colonialist enterprise.<sup>4</sup>

2 An example of this enterprise is a section of the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region Museum (新疆维吾尔自治区博物馆 *Xinjiang zizhiqu bowuguan*) in Ürümqi devoted to information on China's ethnic minorities. Each is depicted in a diorama with life-sized figures, most of whom are singing and/or dancing. Visitors are informed that one group is fond of smoking; its culture and history are reduced to a pile of tobacco leaves and a pipe. The Mongols—whose ancestors created the largest contiguous land empire in history—are represented by two male figures wrestling while a pony looks on. Information placards declare that the most important aspects of Mongol culture and history are wrestling and horse riding.

3 Said (1979): 2.

4 Chen and Wang (2008) provide an interesting survey of this research. They note that "in China, Tibetology is closely related to current socioeconomic development in Tibet" (634) and discuss studies on language, marriage customs, kinship patterns, incomes and lifestyles, and a range of other topics that provide data used by the government in planning policy and development agendas (see in particular pp. 634–639). The PRC's efforts to study and gather information on Tibetans was by no means the first such program: in the early twentieth century, the Republican and Nationalist governments also dispatched teams of researchers to Tibetan areas to gather data. Their resources were, however, far more limited than those of the PRC, as was the territory into which they were able to venture.

In the early phases, Chinese scholars focused on the relative level of development of the region's political economy, and their work was infused by Marxist methodology and assumptions.<sup>5</sup> Linguists recorded aspects of Tibetan dialects, but instead of attempting to develop factual knowledge about their distinctive features, much of this work was devoted to proving that Tibetan is derived from Chinese and that it is part of the "Sino-Tibetan language family."<sup>6</sup> Historians were (and many still are) obsessed with Marxist periodization and with determining when Tibet moved from a slave society into feudalism. They also invented fictitious narratives of Tibetan proto-patriots who viewed themselves as citizens of the Middle Kingdom and worked for the advancement of national unity.<sup>7</sup> In both instances, the Orientalist enterprise is "a distribution of geopolitical awareness into aesthetic, scholarly, economic, sociological, historical, and philological texts... an elaboration not only of a basic geographical distinction... it is, rather than expresses, a certain will or intention to understand, and in some cases to control, manipulate, even to incorporate, what is a manifestly different... world."<sup>8</sup>

In the PRC, the stated intention of publications in academic journals and for general audiences is to convince recalcitrant Tibetans of the validity of Chinese historical claims to their territory and to inspire a patriotic sense of belonging. An example of

5 Since Xi Jinping solidified his grip on power in 2017, he has pushed a return to old-style Marxism, and increasingly academics are being forced to incorporate Marxist themes and class analysis into their publications. See ABC News, May 4, 2018: <http://www.abc.net.au/news/2018-05-04/china-xi-jinping-is-pushing-a-marxist-revival/9724720>; accessed August 12, 2018.

6 This notion was widely accepted among Western linguists until recently, but a number of publications have cast doubt on the hypothesis and have pointed out that to date no real evidence has been provided by those who hold it. Tibetan and Chinese differ significantly in vocabulary, syntax, and grammar; Tibetan employs an alphabet (derived from Indic models), while Chinese uses a character-based script. At present no one has even laid out a convincing model for how the hypothesis might be proven. In his discussion of the theory, Roy Miller (1988): 518 concludes: "given the nature of both Tibetan and Chinese morphology, one can only be astonished that it has ever been suggested that these two languages—actually and more accurately, these two great language families—are genetically related. Nothing in the morphology of either language points in the direction of such a hypothesis." The hypothesis is entrenched in PRC linguistics studies, and it figures in Chinese claims of cultural hegemony over Tibet. A survey of PRC studies of Tibetan language is provided by Chen and Wang (2008): 659–664.

7 PRC representations of Tibetans conceive them as congenitally patriotic (toward China) and as harboring a deep sense of belonging to their Motherland. Even Tibetans who worked for Tibetan independence from China are commonly depicted as closet Chinese patriots. An example is the thirteenth Dalai Lama, Tupten Gyatso (Thub bstan rgya mtsho, 1876–1933), who declared his country's independence in 1912, expelled Chinese nationals, and built up Tibet's army in order to help defend against Chinese aggression. A number of PRC histories of Tibet report as factual an apocryphal statement he purportedly made to a Chinese delegation that visited Lhasa in 1919: "It is not my true intention to be on intimate terms with the British; I swear to be loyal to our own country and jointly work for the happiness of the five races." He is also quoted as declaring in 1930 that: "My greatest wish is for real peace and unification of China. Since it is all Chinese territory, why distinguish between you and us?" These quotes are from an untitled instructors' manual for China's "patriotic education" (爱国主义教育 *aiguo zhuyi jiaoyu*) campaign that was smuggled out of Tibet and copied for me by the Tibet Research Centre in Dharamsala (pp. 403–404). An even more bizarre imaginative leap concerns the fourteenth Dalai Lama, Tenzin Gyatso (bsTan 'dzin rgya mtsho, 1935–), who has become the PRC's poster monk for "splittism" (分裂主义 *fenlie zhuyi*, i.e., plotting to separate Tibet from China). According to this convoluted narrative, he was, like all Tibetans, a loyal Chinese citizen in his youth, but following an abortive uprising in 1959 he was kidnapped by Tibetan rebels and taken against his will to India, where he came under the influence of foreign imperialists. China's Orientalists portray imperialists as extraordinarily persuasive, and so, this story avers, the Dalai Lama lost his way and became a pawn in their global machinations. As a result, the Dalai Lama subsequently "completely renounced the patriotic stance he once expressed and engaged in numerous activities to split the Motherland" (from the *Patriotic Education Instructors Manual*: 426).

8 Said (1979): 12.

PRC historical revisionism appears in a number of academic publications that discuss the journey of Sakya Pandita Gūnga Gyeltsen (Sa skya Paṇḍita Kun dga' rgyal mtshan, 1182–1251) and his nephew Pakpa Lodrö Gyeltsen ('Phags pa bLo gros rgyal mtshan, 1235–1280) to Liangzhou in 1244, in compliance with a command by the Mongol ruler Godan Khan (1206–1251). They ceded sovereignty of Tibet to Godan in order to prevent him from invading their country, but Chinese historians construe Godan as a *Chinese* ruler and attribute patriotic sentiments to the Tibetans. Ga Zangjia praises Sakya Pandita as a “crucial political person who contributed much to the official incorporation of Tibet into China,”<sup>9</sup> and Zheng Dui asserts that Pakpa’s motivation was to promote “the unification of the whole country.”<sup>10</sup> There is no indication in biographical accounts of Sakya Pandita and Pakpa that they viewed themselves as citizens of China, or that they had any notion of the modern Chinese notion of “national unity” that construes Tibetans as one of the country’s ethnic minorities.

An even more unlikely scenario often appears in PRC publications that discuss the tenth Panchen Lama, Losang Tinlé Lhündrub Chögi Gyeltsen (bLo bzang phrin las lhun grub chos kyi rgyal mtshan, 1938–1989). He is often depicted as holding deeply patriotic sentiments toward the Middle Kingdom and as being personally aggrieved by the Japanese invasion of China from 1937–1945. Chinese sources report that he called on his fellow Tibetans to resist: “We must not let Japan swallow up our country! We have a population of several hundred million, so why do we abjectly allow Japan to invade us?... Japan is just a small place; I am not afraid of it... I will protect the nation and attack Japan!”<sup>11</sup>

Born in 1938 and having spent his early years in modern-day Sichuan at the periphery of the Tibetan cultural world, it is unlikely that the one-year-old future Panchen would have even been aware of Japan’s attacks (or of China’s territorial claims to the Tibetan Plateau). Moreover, when Japanese armies began their invasion, he had not yet been recognized as the Panchen Lama, so he would not have had any status as a political leader. The Panchen Lama did not, in fact, participate in any anti-Japan activities, and the conflict occurred during the period of Tibet’s official independence from China (1912–1950).

### Essentializing Tropes

In the PRC, much of what is reported about Tibetan history and people is fabricated or misleading. European Orientalists, by contrast, tried to accurately report historical events and details of their ethnographic research, but in both cases the enterprise is a “corporate institution for dealing with the Orient—dealing with it by making statements about it, authorizing views of it, describing it, teaching it, settling it, ruling over it... a style for dominating, restructuring, and having authority over the Orient.”<sup>12</sup> Tibetans and other minority peoples forcibly annexed to the Motherland since the communist revolution of 1947 play the same role as Europe’s Orient: they are foreign, mysterious,

9 Ga (2003): 113.

10 Zheng (2010): 124.

11 See Zheng Dui (2012): 9.

12 Said (1979): 3.

exotic, and also sensual, uninhibited, fascinating while at the same time repellant. It is relatively easy to understand them, however, because like the Orientals of European imaginings, Tibetans “are almost everywhere nearly the same.”<sup>13</sup> Regional differences, conflicting patterns of religiosity, and ethnic variations are overlooked and subsumed in the narrative of sameness, in which all inhabitants of the Tibetan Plateau can be depicted and known with the help of a few fixed and unalterable categories.<sup>14</sup> Tibetans look, think, and act the same, and so they can easily be understood and represented by experts. Like their European counterparts, China's Orientalists often speak of “lifting up the veil” of Tibet's “mysteries” and revealing them to their audience.

The relation between China and its minorities is one of power and dominance. It began with military takeovers and is maintained by force as well as propaganda. PRC Orientalists, like Europeans in other Asian countries in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, are in Tibet because they can be there, and Tibetans lack the power to resist Chinese efforts to study them. Their culture is displayed in museum exhibits, the Nationalities' Palace (民族文化宫 *Minzu wenhuagong*) and Ethnic Culture Park (中华民族园; *Zhonghua minzu yuan*) in Beijing, in television programs and movies. Tibet's history and significant features are determined and categorized by mainly Han professionals in this knowledge industry—in collaboration with government officials who dictate what messages their publications must encode—and their conclusions are consumed by their mainly Han audience.

This sometimes plays out in bizarre ways. The Ethnic Culture Park is a government-sponsored enterprise that purports to present accurate information about China's ethnic minorities, and most of the officially recognized ethnicities have parts of the complex dedicated to their cultures. The most common presentations involve singing and dancing, but the performers are mostly Han (Figure 1).<sup>15</sup> In China, women are the markers of ethnic difference, so most of the staff in the park are women who conform to Chinese standards of beauty: they are young, thin, and light-skinned. These performers, and the government officials who created the complex and determined what sort of information would be presented to the public regarding the country's minorities, provide essentializing and purportedly definitive information for the (almost exclusively Han) visitors.<sup>16</sup> During my visit there in 2008, the visitors were mainly Han families, and I overheard several remarking on how informative and educational the experience was for children.

13 Said (1979): 38.

14 Ethnic categorization is encoded in multiple ways, including Resident Identity Cards (居民身份证 *jumin shenfenzheng*) that all citizens are required to carry. They display a person's name, gender, ethnicity, date of birth, domicile, and identification number. All Tibetans are lumped together in a single ethnic group. See Immigration and Refugee Board of Canada (2007).

15 See Gladney (2004): 41. It is common throughout China to see Han dressing up in local “ethnic costumes” and pretending to belong to a particular minority group. An example of this was a scene in the opening ceremony of the 2008 Beijing Olympics in which the country's contented minorities were represented by a group of performers in colorful ethnic apparel. It was later reported that all of them belonged to a Han-only performance troupe. See *The Telegraph*, August 15, 2008: “Beijing Olympics: ‘Ethnic’ Children Revealed as Fakes in Opening Ceremony.”

16 When the park first opened, the official (and unintentionally truthful) English translation was “Racist Park.”



As Said notes, “there is nothing mysterious or natural about authority. It is formed, irradiated, disseminated; it is instrumental, it is persuasive; it has status, it establishes canons of taste and value; it is virtually indistinguishable from certain ideas it dignifies as true, and from traditions, perceptions, and judgments it forms, transmits, reproduces.”<sup>17</sup> The PRC’s Orientalist enterprise is lavishly funded by the government and disseminated through academic publications, the Internet, television, and radio; in print and electronic formats; as well as in public productions like the Ethnic Culture Park. While its minority subjects may resent the condescension encoded in these discourses, they lack the power to alter or influence how they are depicted. The popularity and ubiquity of these stereotypes are an indication that they resonate with the Han, who learn that others lag behind them in cultural and economic development and that their forbears rescued minorities from barbarism and uplifted them culturally.

The knowledge produced by PRC Orientalists also serves to deflect criticism and reassure their audience: from birth, Chinese are told that imperialists are the most evil people in the world; the notion that the Motherland might be guilty of imperialism is offensive and emotionally painful to people raised under this ideology. Their experts provide reassuring alternatives to this unwanted conclusion, one that is directed at China by foreigners and deeply resented. Said has been criticized by a number of Western scholars for his selective use of sources and for highlighting tropes that are well out of date and could not be published today.<sup>18</sup> In China, by contrast, racist discourses relating to minority peoples remain part of mainstream academia. Dru Gladney argues: “While every society tends to allow the exoticization and eroticization of the other and the stranger, in China [it] is an active project of the state. It is the internal other that is appropriated for nation-building and reinforcing the prurient moral code of the totalitarian state.”<sup>19</sup>

The PRC’s Orientalist project works to refute claims of Chinese imperialism and creates a satisfying national grand narrative, one in which superior Han civilization was peacefully disseminated to the grateful minorities, who themselves yearned to cast away their cultures, religions, languages, traditions, and histories and move forward by embracing the advanced civilization of the Han. The only thing of any value they had to offer in exchange was their land, and they willingly did so.

These recipients of Han largesse may provide entertainment in the form of song and dance (Figure 2).<sup>20</sup> Their colorful native traditions are frequently featured in television programs and movies; their songs and dances—many of which encode patriotic sentiments and gratitude toward their liberators—are a pervasive feature of popular culture in the PRC. According to James Leibold,

In constructing a myth of Zhonghua cultural antiquity and racial propinquity, Sinic intellectuals transformed the Orientalist discourse of white racial superiority onto China’s own minority nationals—rationalizing a paternalistic

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<sup>17</sup> Said (1979): 19.

<sup>18</sup> See, for example, Bernard Lewis’ (19982) attack on Said’s methodology and conclusions.

<sup>19</sup> Gladney (2004): 258

<sup>20</sup> See Gladney (2004): 57–59.

nationality policy and a Darwinian narrative of Chinese historical development with a single, dominant Han majority at its center.<sup>21</sup>



Figure 1: Performers at the Ethnic Culture Park enacting a “traditional Tibetan dance.” Photo: John Powers.

PRC Orientalism, like that of Europe, “is premised on superiority... on the fact that the Orientalist, poet, or scholar makes the Orient speak, describes the Orient, renders its mysteries plain.”<sup>22</sup> Moreover, Orientalism, both in China and the West, is more a reflection of the societies that produce these discourses than of the cultures they purport to depict. It is a creation of categories of analysis and representation that are foreign to their subjects and that configure them in terms they do not recognize. In Tibet this domination—which is made possible by the armed conquest that began in the 1950s and continues today through a pervasive military presence, extensive surveillance, economic control, and population transfer—enables further dominations, which include ideological productions that settle the natures and histories of subject peoples and give the Han authority (moral, cultural, and civilizational) over them.<sup>23</sup>

21 Leibold (2007): 174.

22 Said (1979): 20.

23 With the completion of the Qinghai-Tibet Railway in 2006, the pace of Han migration to Tibet has increased markedly, but PRC officials claim that Tibetans are still the overwhelming majority in the Tibet Autonomous Region and neighboring autonomous prefectures. The Central Tibetan Administration (the Tibetan government-in-exile) asserts that there are now several million more Chinese than Tibetans on the Tibetan Plateau, but the figures of both sides are exaggerated. During my visits to Tibet in 2001, 2011, and 2013, it was clear that there are many more Chinese (mainly Han and Hui) in the cities, but the countryside remains mostly Tibetan. There are far more Chinese in the region than is admitted by the PRC government, but it is impossible to obtain accurate figures because of the political sensitivity of this issue. A nuanced study based on extensive field research can be found in Fischer (2008). Population transfer as a means of subduing conquered populations is a traditional tactic of Chinese governments, and it has been employed liberally by the PRC. In Xinjiang province, for example, Han comprised 6% of the population in 1949. This increased to an estimated 38% in 2015, and following recent unrest the PRC government has initiated policies to significantly increase Han migration to the region. See *South China Morning Post*, “China’s drive to settle new wave of migrants in restive Xinjiang,” May 8th, 2015.

The subjects are denied autonomy, and their cultures become objects of re-creation; this information becomes a means of greater control: “knowledge of subject races or Orientals makes their management easy and profitable; knowledge gives power, more power requires more knowledge, and so on in an increasingly profitable dialectic of information and control.”<sup>24</sup>



*Figure 2: Statue at a government-run hotel in Kashgar that informs visitors that Xinjiang is “a land of singing and dancing.” Photo: John Powers.*

### **Academic Depictions of Tibetan Religion and Culture**

Although their interpretations were commonly colored by racist assumptions regarding the subjects of their research, European Orientalists often acquired high levels of expertise in the languages and literatures of the countries they studied, and many spent years in a particular region engaged in ethnographic research. One recurring problem in PRC studies of Tibetan Buddhism, by contrast, is a lack of linguistic expertise on the part of the authors, coupled with a sinocentric bias. Many work exclusively from Chinese materials and assume that Chinese translations accurately reflect the Tibetan (or sometimes Sanskrit) originals of technical terms. An example is the frequently-seen

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<sup>24</sup> Said (1979): 36.



translation of Hevajra (Tib. Kye rdo rje) as “Happy Thunderbolt.”<sup>25</sup> It treats the Chinese translation *Huanxi Jingang* 欢喜金刚 as an accurate rendering of the Tibetan and Sanskrit. *He* (and its Tibetan equivalent *kye*) is a vocative, meaning “O,” “hey,” etc. The Chinese term *huanxi* (which means “happy” or “joyous”) may be an attempt to approximate a phonetic equivalent, but it does not reflect the way in which it is understood in Sanskrit or Tibetan. The translation of *vajra* (Tib. *rdo rje*) as “thunderbolt” is also problematic. In Indian Vedic materials, the *vajra* is a weapon of Indra, the king of the gods (*deva*), which he uses to defeat their enemies, but in Buddhist tantric literature it refers to a five-pronged scepter that has connotations of medieval Indian kingship imagery.<sup>26</sup> During tantric initiations, students commonly don attire that encodes associations with Indian royalty such as crowns, and the *vajra* is part of this ritual paraphernalia. In Tibetan tantric literature, the *vajra* symbolizes the adamant state of indissoluble union of wisdom and compassion characteristic of the mind of a buddha.

Chinese scholars often find tantric Buddhism particularly difficult to comprehend, and many of their pronouncements on it are incoherent in Chinese or English.<sup>27</sup> Vajrayāna is commonly characterized as “idealistic,” a term that is important in Marxist theory, and in PRC studies of Tibetan Buddhism it is conflated with currents in Buddhist epistemology. Marx critiqued Hegel’s idealism on the grounds that it reduced practice to theory and thus failed to take full account of material reality. Hegelian idealism is concerned with the teleology of history and posits a dialectical process that proceeds in a linear fashion to a preordained conclusion. This bears no apparent relation to Buddhist thought. Nonetheless, having labeled tantra idealism, Chinese commentators mistakenly conflate it with the Yogācāra school of Indian Buddhism, which developed centuries before tantra appeared in India and is labeled “idealism” by some scholars. In *Marvelous Spectacle of Tibetan Tantra*, for example, Dondrup Tsering informs readers that “Tantric Mahāyāna Buddhist thought is the same as the ideas of the idealist school [i.e., Yogācāra]. Its ideology is entirely developed on the basis of Mahāyāna Buddhism and its emphasis on the same ultimate truth of the identity of [mental] reality and the world.”<sup>28</sup>

This is a common notion in modern Chinese discussions of tantra, but it is a simplistic way of presenting Yogācāra thought. Yogācāra philosophers claim that we have no direct access to external objects and that our impressions of things are mediated through the mind. Our sensory apparatus conveys stimuli to the mind, which then interprets them and uses them as the basis for constructing our understanding

25 See, for example, Li (1994): 26.

26 Kingship imagery a central focus of Davidson’s (2002) study of the origins and development of Indian Buddhist tantra.

27 For example, Li (1994): 65 summarizes the basic viewpoint of tantra: “Good fellows, basically whatever it is. Suchness, including yourself, is not intrinsically entangled, why should you try to disentangle yourself. It is not intrinsically deluded, why should you seek truth apart from it?” He provides no clues regarding what this might mean.

28 Dondrup Tsering (1999): 3. The author’s name is Tibetan, but the book is typical of studies of Tibet published throughout China. In order to be able to publish in PRC presses and journals, Tibetans must study in government-run universities, and generally in departments specializing in minority studies that follow the Party line and teach their students the officially endorsed narratives created by the country’s Orientalists.

of what we perceive.<sup>29</sup> In this regard, Yogācāra works on epistemology and meditation practice do emphasize the subjective aspect of experience and highlight the fact that sense impressions and interpretations of them are mental events, but Yogācāra does not subsume the world to mental reality. Rather, it claims that mental patternings influence how the world is perceived and predispose beings to certain types of volitional actions. Dondrup Tsering construes Yogācāra as identical with tantric theory, but he does not cite any Vajrayāna sources. He assumes that because Yogācāra is “idealistic” it shares the aspects of Hegel’s philosophy that were critiqued by Marx.

Marx rejected Hegel’s notion of Spirit (Geist) as the hidden motivating force behind history; for Marx, political economy is what moves events forward and is the factor that leads to changes in social superstructure. He claimed that his approach was “scientific” (*wissenschaftlich*) and based on empirical evidence, contrary to Hegel’s speculative and theoretical system. Marx countered Hegel’s dialectical idealism with dialectical materialism; for Hegel, human thought drives history and determines the development of political, philosophical, and material culture. Marx argued that this is backwards: material culture—specifically the development of the means and forces of production—determines the development of ideology and politics.

None of this is pertinent to the philosophical systems of Yogācāra or tantra. Neither takes any position on politics or economics, and they do not share the Hegelian or Marxian conceptions of a linear human history that proceeds through dialectical processes toward a final stage. Yogācāra and tantra posit that the mind is the source of the experiences of living beings and that the worlds they inhabit are determined by their minds; in this sense there is some resonance with the Marxian critique. Both Yogācāra and tantra would probably agree with Hegel’s idea that historical events are moved forward by thought, but they would deny that there is any hidden factor like Geist that underlies this process. Nor would they accept the Hegelian and Marxist conceptions of historical teleology. Rather, Buddhism teaches that the minds of sentient beings are influenced by past karma and volitional decisions, which create predispositions for concordant future actions and decisions. These are not fully determined, however, and Buddhist practice is premised on the notion that it is possible to begin making choices different from those one made in the past and thus change the course of one’s psychophysical continuum.

Many Yogācāra works are concerned with issues of epistemology as they relate to Buddhist practice, along with a range of philosophical subjects and examinations of scholastic topics. Like other Indian Buddhist systems of meditation, Yogācāra soteriology is based on repeated familiarization of the mind with objects of observation that lead to improved mental functioning.

As the common name for the tradition (which means “Yogic Practice”) implies, meditation theory and training are a focus of many works by Yogācāra authors, and their analyses of epistemology and psychology are linked with their presentations of Buddhist soteriology. In a number of PRC discussions of tantra, it appears that the authors have mistaken similar-sounding terms. Two of the tantra sets delineated

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<sup>29</sup> See Powers (2011).

by Tibetan doxographers are “yoga tantra” (Tib. *rnal 'byor rgyud*; Skt. *yoga-tantra*) and “highest yoga tantra” (Tib. *rnal 'byor bla na med kyi rgyud*; Skt. *anuttara-yoga-tantra*); this may be one reason why PRC scholars with little background knowledge assume that Yogācāra (which probably originated in the third and fourth centuries) is related to tantra (which probably originated in the eighth century). Various permutations of terminology such as “Highest Yogachara”<sup>30</sup> appear in PRC studies of Tibetan religion.

Tantric systems are complex, and a detailed description of their assumptions and practices exceeds the parameters of this study, but in brief, tantra is premised on the notion that living beings are psychophysical continuums and that both mind and body are influenced by the operations of energies that circulate throughout the subtle body (Tib. *sgyu lus*; Skt. *māyā-deha*). Tantric training aims to manipulate and control these energies; this process produces blissful minds that are conducive to progress toward buddhahood. Tantric theory is unconcerned with political economy. Such matters are regarded as at best irrelevant to the Buddhist path and at worst an impediment to it.<sup>31</sup>

### **Tibetan Tantra and Hinduism**

PRC-produced discussions of Tibetan Buddhism commonly contain an assertion that it is an amalgamation of Indian systems (Buddhism and Hinduism) and Bon (an indigenous Tibetan religion that borrowed elements from Buddhism but views itself as non-Buddhist). Kezhu Qunpei, for example, explains that Tibetan Buddhism’s distinctive features include “a living buddha system of reincarnation, theocracy, tantric yoga, and the complex blending of Buddhism with the spirits of Bon.”<sup>32</sup> In this scenario, Bon is presented as a pre-Buddhist tradition of shamanism that propitiated autochthonous supernatural forces. These were incorporated into the Buddhism Tibet imported from India and China and merged to form a distinctive system based on worship of natural forces and invented gods and demons.

Zhang Xiaoming elaborates on these notions. After informing readers that his presentation is authoritative, accurate, and stimulating, Zhang explains that Bon is “a kind of animistic religion. It worships spirits of the earth, the sun, the moon, the stars, snow, landscape, rocks, trees, animals and everything in the universe, and prays them for blessings and expelling mischance.”<sup>33</sup> He adds that the ancient Tibetans “pay tribute to ghosts” and “worship wizards.” This fails to recognize the complexity of Bon and assumes the validity of characterizations by nineteenth-century Western Orientalists who present Bon as primitive shamanism and as the indigenous religion of early Tibet, and who characterize Bonpo priests as the functionaries of the royal cult of the Tibetan Imperium of the seventh to ninth centuries.

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30 Ga (2003): 49

31 For a fuller description of tantric theory and practice, as well as the history of its development, see Powers (2007): 249–324.

32 Kezhu Qunpei (2009): 1. He later adds: “For 300 years [Tibetan Buddhism] battled Bon, the indigenous religion. Each religion absorbed elements from the other. Their resulting forms developed the profound philosophy of Tibetan Buddhism, which also established the local color of Tibetan Buddhism.”

33 Zhang Xiaoming (2004): 11. He goes on to describe in detail the distinctive features of Bon cosmology, philosophy, and practice, none of which have any apparent relation with what is described in Bon texts, what Bonpos actually do, or with the self-representations of the system.

Non-Chinese scholars of Tibetan religion and history have pointed out a number of problems with these notions.<sup>34</sup> There are no records from the Imperial period that support the idea that Bon priests officiated in the royal cult. Documents describing religious rites indicate that they were performed by Buddhist clerics, and Bon histories written after the fall of the Imperium do not demonstrate the sort of detailed knowledge of ritual and court etiquette that would be expected if they really were intimately involved in these affairs. In documents discovered at Dunhuang, “Bon” is not found as a designator of a religious sect, and the term “*bon po*” appears to refer to ritual functionaries in general and not any specific religious group.<sup>35</sup> The earliest surviving documents that refer to Bon as a religion date from the ninth or tenth centuries, i.e., after the fall of the Imperium. In Buddhist histories written after the twelfth century, Bon is the main opposing factor in the spread of the Dharma, and Bonpos are described as ritualists who served a pantheon of gods and spirits. These notions have been uncritically adopted in PRC accounts of Tibetan religion, and their authors appear to be unaware of recent textual studies that have raised doubts about the simplistic characterizations of Buddhism and Bon found in medieval writings by Buddhist clerics and later repeated by European Orientalists.<sup>36</sup>

PRC scholars commonly assert that the deities visualized in Tibetan tantric practices derive in part from Bon antecedents; the other main source they identify is “Hindu tantra.” This notion is encoded in many PRC sources that discuss Tibetan tantric Buddhism, which appear to repeat notions that were posited by early European Orientalists but that have been overturned by subsequent scholarship. According to Dondrup Tsering, “tantric Buddhism originally derived from popular Hindu (brahman) teachings strongly influenced by medieval beliefs. Its characteristics derived from Indian folk beliefs and are rooted in the soil of Indian culture.”<sup>37</sup>

These notions reflect assumptions by eighteenth- and nineteenth-century European scholars who regarded Hinduism as the first religion of India and Buddhism as an outgrowth of it that incorporated many of its features. Buddhism was commonly interpreted as a reform movement that rejected certain elements of Hinduism such as caste. Tantric traditions existed in both Hindu and Buddhist circles during the medieval period, so it was assumed that Buddhist tantra must have derived from Hindu roots due to the purported historical precedence of Hinduism.

Few if any contemporary scholars of either tradition would entertain these notions. The term “Hinduism” as used by European Orientalists was an anachronism that assumed brahmanical traditions dating back to Vedic times (ca. 1700–500 BCE) can legitimately be labeled in this way. Modern scholarship has shown that the notion of “Hinduism” as a designator of the religion of people on the Indian subcontinent who

34 See, for example, Walter (2009): 191–197.

35 Stein (2010): 231–272 provides a thorough and detailed survey of the terms Bon and *bon po* in early Tibetan sources.

36 Samuel (1990) discusses the usage of the term “shamanism” in relation to Bon and problems relating to it. Kvaerne (1995): 10–12 also critiques the appropriateness of referring to Bon as “shamanism” or “animism.”

37 Dondrup Tsering (1993): 3.



identified with mainstream brahmanical practices probably has its origins in the early eighteenth century.<sup>38</sup> The Orientalists' belief that "Hindu tantra" was the basis for Buddhist tantra is impossible to establish on the basis of available evidence.<sup>39</sup> Records from medieval India indicate that various groups of tantric practitioners existed: some appear to have identified themselves with Buddhism, while others appropriated some of the deities worshipped in medieval Brahmanism. but there is no evidence to support a definitive conclusion that one group's doctrines and practices formed the basis for the other. Many of these cults were eclectic in their imagery and doctrines and appear to have been unconcerned with doxographical classifications.<sup>40</sup>

### **European and Chinese Orientalism: Differences in Styles**

The PRC's Orientalists often have little real knowledge of Tibet, and some of the publications produced in China admit that their authors have never visited the region or talked with its inhabitants.<sup>41</sup> This is no barrier to expert status in China, however, because Tibetans are already well-known and their culture, religion, habits, and essence have been settled and widely disseminated. Said noted that in the works of European Orientalists "assertions of the most bizarre sort dot his or her pages."<sup>42</sup> The same is true in PRC productions on Tibet, but there are significant differences in the styles of Chinese and European Orientalists.

The Western academic enterprise rewards researchers who identify flaws in previous scholarship and persuasively argue against outmoded notions. Said's work established his reputation and brought academic honors, royalties, and recognition precisely because he highlighted failings in Western research on Middle Eastern and Asian peoples. There is no possibility of a Chinese application of Said's work to tibetology being published in the PRC and debated by intellectuals. Government censorship ensures that all information on Tibet follows strictly defined guidelines and repeats the Party line. There are, however, spaces for authors to develop individual features in their works. All publications on Tibet are required to contain certain established "facts," but as long as these are present authors may invent elements that contribute to the preordained conclusions, and many productions on Tibet demonstrate some creativity in this regard. A number of these publications have a particular invented element not found in other ones, such as details of a "peasant rebellion" not attested

38 Adrian Burton (2000) discovered correspondences between Indian kings dating from the early eighteenth century that appear to be the earliest extant examples of this usage.

39 Jacob Dalton (2004) has advanced the interesting hypothesis that extant records relating to the formative period of Indian tantra actually suggest that Hindu tantra may have derived from Buddhist practices and cults. See also Dalton (2011).

40 Davidson (2002) presents the most detailed discussion to date of available Indic and Tibetan sources relating to the formative period of Indian tantra.

41 Chen and Wang (2008): 640–644 provide a useful survey of PRC publications on Tibetan Buddhist thought and practice. Of the works listed by them as examples of current PRC scholarship that I have been able to obtain and study, none of the authors appear to be aware of current scholarship in the field outside the PRC. In fairness, the same could be said of Western academics with regard to PRC productions: editions of Tibetan works and reference materials are increasingly finding their way into the libraries of tibetologists and used for research, but few have devoted any attention to thematic studies produced in China. The best survey to date by someone who has is Kapstein (2008).

42 Said (1979): 310.

in any Tibetan historical records, a thought or statement attributed to a Tibetan proto-patriot whose biographical sources fail to mention such sentiments, or a belief common to all Tibetans.<sup>43</sup> Corroborating sources are not provided, and PRC censors do not appear to be concerned with such idiosyncrasies. They also have no apparent concern that most publications on Tibet in Western languages are replete with grammatical errors, tortured syntax, and overblown rhetoric.<sup>44</sup> They are clearly not edited by native English speakers, but as long as they conform to the core elements of the government's regime of truth they are deemed suitable for publication.

History is the primary concern of most PRC publications on Tibet. Historical studies present a narrative in which China has exercised sovereignty over the Tibetan Plateau from ancient times; most contain statements that the PRC's case has been successfully proven and that Western condemnations of the Chinese "invasion" or subsequent human rights abuses are unjustified. Much of the research on Tibet published in the PRC is out of touch with contemporary international scholarship, and the authors frequently repeat ideas that were debunked decades ago by tibetologists in other countries.<sup>45</sup> Academic productions and materials created for popular consumption contain the same information and repeat the same tropes; the quality of information on Tibet is uniformly poor. This has been recognized by two Chinese tibetologists, Chen Qingying and Wang Xiangyun, who "admit that many Chinese publications in this field are politically oriented with little substance, lack originality, or repeat others' research."<sup>46</sup> They also admit that tibetology is highly politicized and that independent research in many areas is impossible in the PRC. They conclude their article by conceding that many PRC tibetologists "lack rigorous training in this field" and that "there is still too much redundant research leading to the frequent publication of identical results."<sup>47</sup>

For all their failings, European Orientalists produced much of continuing value. Many of their translations were models of accuracy. A number of prominent translators were missionaries who found it necessary that their renderings accurately reflected the original texts in order to aid conversion efforts. Orientalists who worked in leading universities were appointed on the basis of proficiency in Asian languages and the apparatus of Western scholarship, and in many cases they spent years engaged in fieldwork in their regions of expertise. Some of the ethnographers who traveled to Tibet

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43 Powers (2017) points out and analyzes a number of these inventions of historical events that only appear in modern Chinese works on Tibet and are not attested in any historical sources, either Tibetan or Chinese.

44 The language of PRC productions on Tibet has been analyzed in Powers (2004).

45 See Powers (2017): 130–170.

46 Chen and Wang (2008): 611. Ironically, an example of the sort of work they denounce is Chen (2008). Kapstein (2008): 804 is more positive in his overall assessment of PRC tibetology, but he asserts that "Tibetan religious studies remain problematic... with apparently deep uncertainties regarding just how these may be pursued in a relatively detached, secular manner."

47 Chen and Wang (2008): 678. They add that most academics in the field are unaware of published research produced elsewhere in the world, nor do they even attempt to publish in international journals or presses. They conclude, however, with the hope that "we can expect great progress in the near future." PRC tibetology is closely intertwined with the government's propaganda apparatus, which controls what can be studied and published, so it is unlikely that their hope will be realized any time soon.

recorded details of practices in publications that are of enduring value, despite often condescending attitudes.

An example is L. Austine Waddell (1854–1938), an explorer and amateur archeologist who accompanied the Younghusband Expedition that invaded Tibet in 1903–1904. Like his present-day Chinese counterparts, he promised to “penetrate” this “dark land,” “lifting higher than before the veil which still hides its mysteries from European eyes,”<sup>48</sup> but he was repulsed by much of what he saw. In common with PRC tibetologists, he referred to Tibetan Buddhism as “Lamaism,” and he informed his readers that “the bulk of the Lamaist cults comprise much deep-rooted devil-worship and sorcery... for Lamaism is only thinly and imperfectly varnished over with Buddhist symbolism, beneath which the sinister growth of poly-demonist superstition darkly appears.”<sup>49</sup> He asserted that Tibet had done away with all normative elements of the Buddha’s teaching and only retained a superficial veneer of terminology and symbols beneath which native demon-worship and superstition lurked.

In some places Waddell grudgingly admitted that not all the Tibetans he met were savages; the 13th Dalai Lama, for example, was a relatively competent leader, “according to his limited oriental lights and Lamaist superstitions.”<sup>50</sup> In common with Chinese Orientalists, Waddell thought that religion is the most significant factor that holds Tibetans back and renders them incapable of progressing toward modernity: “They have fallen under the double ban of menacing demons and despotic priests. So it will be a happy day, indeed, for Tibet when its sturdy over-credulous people are freed from the intolerable tyranny of the Lamas, and delivered from the devils whose ferocity and exacting worship weigh like a nightmare upon all.”<sup>51</sup>

Waddell’s conclusions can be found with little variation in the works of PRC scholars who specialize on Tibet; the latter agree with Waddell’s assertions that Tibetan Buddhism is essentially “superstition” (迷信 *mixin*) and demonolatry and that in old Tibet Buddhist clerics were greedy despots and charlatans who enslaved the people and sapped their productive potential. The major differences in their conclusions lie in their respective ideologies and in their predictions regarding the means by which Tibetans will be dragged into the modern world. PRC Orientalists assume that the Han will be the instruments of their upliftment. Waddell believed that British culture would be the vehicle of transformation, and this would be guided by the educational efforts of Christian missionaries. Both he and contemporary PRC tibetologists envisage a civilizing process in which their respective cultures will eradicate superstition and bring modernity to the recalcitrant and oppressed natives of the Plateau. Waddell’s biases reflect the Orientalist assumptions of his time, but his first-person observations of religious practices and festivals continue to provide valuable information for researchers. He attempted to produce an accurate record of what he saw, and while his editorial comments may make contemporary readers cringe, his works are still read as useful sources by some scholars.

48 Waddell (1884): 2–3.

49 Waddell (1884): xi.

50 Waddell (1884): xxxiii.

51 Waddell (1884): 573.

The same is unlikely to be true of most contemporary PRC scholarship on Tibet, which is mainly propaganda with no redeeming informational value. Some technical sources—such as editions of Tibetan historical texts, archeological reports, ethnographic studies of Tibetan populations, or linguistic research on dialects—are of good quality, but the overwhelming bulk of work on Tibet is devoid of academic merit and is only produced as an ideological exercise.<sup>52</sup>

The publications of PRC tibetologists are required to adhere to the Communist Party's ideological line and are reviewed by government censors. University administrators have regular meetings with officials of the propaganda apparatus and are given instructions on what can and cannot be studied. An example of the close linkage between academia and government in the PRC is a June 2000 address by Zhao Qizheng 赵启正 (b. 1940), then director of the State Council's Information Office. He informed an audience of academics that their work is part of the Party's propaganda campaigns directed at internal and external audiences and that they are expected to produce publications that contribute to this effort:

The Dalai Clique and hostile western forces have a history of several decades of anti-China activities and propaganda. As well as having complete experience and expertise, they command an army of specialists in this field....In the struggle for public opinion on the issue of Tibet, our adversary is an organized international anti-China force. To counter this united force, we have to build an effective organization and network. The external propaganda struggle for public opinion should be treated as an important work, requiring relentless attention....In this overall struggle for public opinion on the Tibet issue, Tibetology institutes should become an effective army....Effective use of Tibetologists and specialists is the core of our external propaganda struggle for public opinion on Tibet....the very act of writing and publishing books by specialists of our Tibetology institutes is for external propaganda and public opinion. We should not underestimate the contribution of scholarly works to our external propaganda for public opinion; westerners have a lot of respect for this kind of works....Generally speaking, the majority of western Tibetology institutes and Tibet-related organizations have connections with western government and the Dalai clique....Their research on Tibet is politically biased and fraught with many mistaken views....If we publish books and articles that are geared to meet the confrontational needs of our struggle against the Dalai clique and hostile western forces, they will serve as material for our external propaganda and as weapons for external struggle. Particularly, succinct and well-written works are as effective as missiles in the battlefield.<sup>53</sup>

52 An example of a useful resource produced in the PRC is the *dPe bsdur ma bKa' 'gyur* and *bsTan 'gyur*, published in Beijing by *Krung go bod rig pa'i dpe skrun khang* (*bKa' 'gyur*: 1994–2008; *bsTan 'gyur*: 2006–2009), which is based on the *sDe dge* canon and details textual variations in several other versions. It allows scholars to easily compare editions and make textual emendations.

53 The gathering was named "Conference on National Research in Tibetology and External Propaganda on Tibet." The English translation of his speech is carried on the website of Students for a Free Tibet: <http://www.studentsforafreetibet.org/article.php?id=423>; accessed September 21, 2011. His speech is quoted on the *China News* website: [www.chinanews.com/2000-08.../41316.html](http://www.chinanews.com/2000-08.../41316.html). See China: "Zhao Qizheng Accuses



In his closing remarks, Zhao stated, without any apparent recognition of irony, that tibetological publications must contain “clear and credible” arguments and that they should be “reliable.” Zhao also advised the assembled academics to include footnotes and references to sources so that their works will appear to be authoritative.<sup>54</sup> His remarks do not indicate that Zhao was aware of the contradiction inherent in producing propaganda as opposed to rigorously researched academic publications.

Similar problems in scholarship or analysis abound in the works of Chinese tibetologists. The generally poor quality of their publications and their factual errors, combined with the propaganda goals of Tibet-related knowledge production in the PRC, result in articles and books that are replete with misinformation and often outright fabrications (as is the case in other countries under totalitarian regimes where historiography is a tool of control by the state). Much of this can easily be dissected and refuted by scholars familiar with Tibetan language sources who apply the techniques of fact- and source-based contemporary scholarship as practiced outside the PRC.<sup>55</sup> Like the Orientalists of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, the work of PRC academics is financially supported by the state and serves its interests, but in China there is a far greater level of control. Colonial powers like Britain permitted debate and discussion, and from an early period academics who cogently identified flaws in previous work could generally find venues for publication. Their conclusions could be openly debated by their peers. The result was an imperfect system in which racist and essentializing notions sometimes persisted over time, but eventually were subject to critique and correction. China's propaganda apparatus, which exercises control over all publicly disseminated information regarding sensitive areas like Tibet, ensures that only officially preordained conclusions will be repeated by state-sponsored researchers, who are essentially agents of the Communist Party's regime of truth.

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54 Footnotes are increasingly appearing in PRC studies of Tibet, but their authors often fail to understand why references are cited: to allow others to verify sources and understand the context of statements. In many PRC academic works, if footnotes appear at all they refer to an entire source (which might be a multivolume collection), and no page numbers are cited. Thus they are of no value to other researchers because the authors provide no sense of what portion of a text is the focus of their reference, nor of why they regard this work as corroboration of their views.

55 A good example is Blondeau and Buffetrille (2008), which provides a point-by-point refutation of some of the most often repeated propaganda points put forward by PRC academics.

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