

Imagining Tibet: Between Shangri-la and Feudal Oppression

ATTEMPTING A SYNTHESIS

FINAL CHAPTER OF *IMAGINING TIBET*
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The Myth of Tibet through History

Though already the stuff of legend, Tibet doesn't appear to have received special attention in accounts from classical antiquity.¹ Rather, as was the case for most areas along the borders of what was then the known world, legends and mythology seem to have usurped accuracy. This phenomenon was not exclusive to the classical Western world; early India and China, for example, had similar legendary accounts of the "outside world."²

With the first firsthand reports, however, we immediately enter into *medias res*; from the Middle Ages onward Christian emissaries to Mongol khans occasionally report on Tibet. Even though legendary elements still influence these accounts and make them only conditionally accurate, their focus on Tibetan religion is already remarkable. It is thus evident that from time immemorial Tibetan religion exerted a certain fascination on non-Tibetans. It is therefore no wonder that the realm of the legendary Prester John, a fabled Central Asian Christian diaspora, was said to be located in Tibet.³

One of the most important figures in this context has been the Venetian traveler Marco Polo,⁴ whose travelogue remains the most widely read contemporary account. Though he mentions Tibet, he does so only in passing and without much accuracy, simply repeating the legends he had heard in China.

Religion remained a central issue in the first direct encounters of Westerners with Tibetans, largely because the first Europeans to set foot in Tibet were Christian missionaries like Andrade (1580-1643) and Desideri (1684-1733).⁵ Interestingly and surprisingly, despite their evangelical zeal, these missionaries' image of Tibet was quite sophisticated. As Kaschewsky demonstrates in this volume, their approach toward Tibetan Buddhism was remarkably objective and enlightened for their time.⁶ This encounter resulted in a genuine intercultural dialogue, the intellectual level of which remained unsurpassed well into the twentieth century.

Unfortunately, when the information from these missionary accounts was culled for European encyclopedias and travel compendiums, the selection was biased, narrow, and unflattering. Bigotry, priestcraft, idolatry, and "devil-worship" were the leitmotifs that thus came to dominate the image of Tibet. As several authors in the present volume show, these strongly biased excerpts of the missionaries' narratives laid the foundations for the image many Western intellectuals and literati like Kant, Herder, Rousseau, and Balzac had of Tibet. Thus, the pre-modern "myth of Tibet," as it circulated in the West, was predominantly negative.

The age of European colonialism gave rise to another close encounter between the West and Asian cultures. In this phase extremely divergent views about Tibet and its culture and religion emerged.

The first objective and comprehensive studies on Tibet were published by the Hungarian traveler-scholar Alexander Csoma de Körös (1784-1842), who might rightfully be considered the founder of Tibetology. Csoma took up Tibetan studies by pure accident: He was trekking through Central Asia on a search for the origin of the Hungarian people and got stuck in Zangskar, the southwestern part of Ladakh, where he spent several years studying Tibetan language and religion. The colonial context of his work is noteworthy: His pioneering work, *The Dictionary of the Tibetan Language*,⁷ was commissioned by the

British colonial government in India, which was keen to explore Tibet as the “backyard” of its empire. Later, Csoma’s work was continued by Indian agents of the colonial government. The most famous of these so-called pandits was Sarat Chandra Das, who based his own Tibetan dictionary on Csoma’s labors.⁸ Unlike Csoma, however, whose interests in Tibet were purely scientific, the Indian pandits sought specifically political, military, and economic information to meet the more practical needs of a colonial administration.



Fig 1. The Dalai Lama as Magus Melchior. (From *La Dépêche*, Verneuil, 30.12.1989)

The nineteenth-century colonial context also provided a new opportunity for large-scale missionary endeavors in the wider Tibetan cultural area. But the missionaries of this age had little of the objectivity that characterized the sophisticated approach of their predecessors, and they showed limited interest in the regional culture or religion. Instead, their attitude reflected the European arrogance characteristic of the time: local culture was generally seen as backward and primitive compared to European superiority. Rare and remarkable exceptions to this rule were the Moravian missionaries who settled in Lahul and Ladakh in the westernmost part of the Tibetan cultural area. Their encounter with the Tibetan civilization was relatively constructive, and some Moravians even produced valuable scientific contributions to the study of Tibet.⁹ This tolerant attitude was, however, part of their broader missionary strategy, which envisioned the establishment of local autonomous Christian communities as essential. Moreover, more than other contemporary Christian missionaries, they considered a sound knowledge of the culture and religion of those they sought to convert essential for their endeavors.

During the nineteenth century, Orientalists took up the scientific study of Buddhism and started to accept it as an important part of humanity’s cultural heritage. The focus of their attention, however, was on early Indian schools of Buddhism. Tibetan Buddhism was openly dismissed as a degeneration steeped in magic and superstition since it contradicted in many ways the Western scholarly construction of a “pure” and “original” Buddhism. It is in this context that the term “Lamaism” was coined, epitomizing the scholarly reluctance to accept Tibetan Buddhism as Buddhism at all.

The Western academic interest in Tibet was mainly due to the preservation in Tibetan translation of a large number of Indian texts that had been lost in the original. These Tibetan texts were retranslated into Sanskrit and other Indian languages—a practice that has now come under heavy criticism in the scholarly community.

The first extensive account of the specific Tibetan form of Buddhism was L. A. Waddell’s *The Buddhism of Tibet or Lamaism*, which bolstered the widespread negative images of Tibet with a “scientific” foundation. Waddell found the topic of his research so dubious that he even took to censoring some of its more “shocking” aspects.¹⁰ Nevertheless, his book was used as a standard work in the academic world well into the second half of the twentieth century, with new editions being published as late as in the 1990s.

Even quite recently the scientific study of Tibet focused on religion, largely neglecting most other aspects of Tibetan culture. Until well into the 1960s there were only a handful of important Tibetological works focusing on nonreligious subjects.¹¹ Many books were little more than descriptions of monasteries and temples, leaving the reader to wonder about the economic basis of these monasteries, or their methods

for recruiting new monks. The first detailed description of the Tibetan political system, Melvyn C. Goldstein's doctoral thesis *An Anthropological Study of the Tibetan Political System*, was published only in 1968, and general ethnographic accounts came even later: Martin Brauen's *Heinrich Harrers Impressionen aus Tibet* came out in 1974, and the edited volume *Der Weg zum Dach der Welt* in 1982 (Müller and Raunig, 1982).

Yet at least up to the 1970s even, the study of Tibetan religion was confined to the Indian-derived "high" Buddhism practiced in Tibet by a religious elite. Popular Tibetan religion was almost entirely neglected until much later, and even then was studied more by anthropologists than Tibetologists. The indigenous Bönpos and the small but socially important Muslim communities in the urban centers of Central and Eastern Tibet as well as in Ladakh were completely neglected as well.

The distanced, even largely disapproving, scholarly discourse on Tibet, particularly its religion, did not remain uncontested. As early as the nineteenth century, shortly after the emergence of Tibetology as a scholarly discipline of its own, the Theosophical movement built up Tibet into a spiritual El Dorado. Ignoring the then dominant critical Western discourse, Theosophical writings sensationalized Tibet as the spiritual center of the world. Isolated from modernity on "the roof of the world," Tibet was suddenly perceived as a repository of secret knowledge and sublime wisdom untarnished by the ages. The reasons the Theosophists chose Tibet as a screen for the projection of their dreams, longings, and fantasies are manifold and not yet fully understood. What seems certain is that other Central Asian people who stood under the influence of Tibetan Buddhism, like the Mongols and the Manchus had already developed similar notions about Tibet.¹²

In addition, the Theosophical image of Tibet echoes the Tibetan eschatological myth of Shambhala.¹³ Based on the texts of the Kalacakra Tantra, this myth refers to a legendary land hidden behind impassable mountains, where wisdom and harmony prevail even as darkness and chaos rule the outside world. Only when time ripens will the sun of Shambhala dawn and give humanity its long-desired "golden age." Even though the Tibetans never thought of their own country as the fabulous Shambhala, the legend was a living, almost tangible, reality for them. Further research might determine whether the founders of Theosophy were aware of this myth and ultimately projected it onto Tibet. In any case, as Frank Korom and Poul Pedersen have shown in this volume, Tibet's politically motivated isolation left a blank though tangible space onto which Europeans could project their fantasies and longings.



Fig 2. Guesthouse signboard in Dharamsala. (photo by Dodin)

The Theosophists were a small group of mostly eccentric Europeans and North Americans. As such, their overall importance for the West, then in the heyday of colonialism, was negligible. Their influence upon the West's image of Tibet, however, was formidable. The Theosophists were fascinated with ancient Egypt. This fascination spurred the first translation of the *Bardo Thödol*, a Tibetan ritual text intended to guide the dead to a higher rebirth. The translation was entitled *The Tibetan Book of the Dead*, awakening slumbering Western fantasies about ancient Egypt. Theosophy influenced many key figures of the ensuing propagation of Tibetan Buddhism in the West, like Anagarika Govinda, Marco Pallis, and Sangharakshita.¹⁴ The same was true of the Russian painter and mystic Nicholas Roerich, who in the 1920s undertook a long expedition to central Asia and Tibet to search for Shambhala.¹⁵ Henry Wallace, then U.S. Secretary of Agriculture and later a presidential candidate, helped finance this expensive undertaking.¹⁶

The emergence of the Theosophical image of Tibet preceded and certainly influenced Tibet's appearance in Western literature, as with Rudyard Kipling's *Kim* (1898), Antonin Artaud's writings of the 1920s, and, most influentially, James Hilton's 1933 popular novel *Lost Horizon*.¹⁷

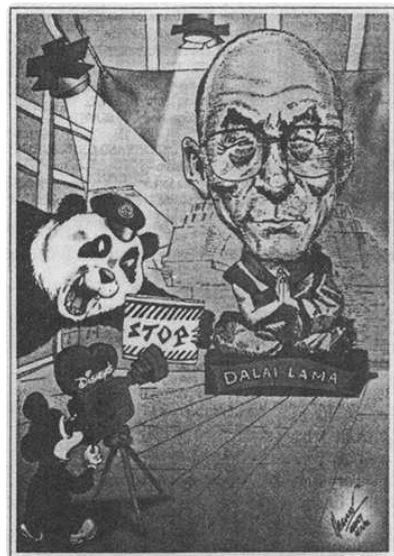


Fig 3. The Dalai Lama as a Hollywood star, (from: *Far Eastern Economic Review*, Hongkong 26.12.1996)

Caption: News Item: Hollywood celebrities oppose Beijing's "attempt to impose worldwide censorship" on films in or about China—including the Disney-distributed *Kundun*. Bun Heang Ung

Even the odd ideas about Tibet prevalent among the German Nazis drew on notions spread by the Theosophists, although the Nazis replaced the generally open-minded (albeit slightly Eurocentric) attitude of the Theosophists toward Asia with a bizarre, racist ideology.¹⁸

The political image of Tibet proved mutable as well. Peter Hansen and Alex McKay have shown in this volume that British colonialists thought of Tibetans as either backward and barbaric or noble and charming. Interestingly, the partisans of the former category tended to perceive Tibet as a part of China's sphere of influence—even though they rarely specified exactly how—while those of the latter emphasized the obvious autonomy of Tibet in both the cultural and political spheres. It is also this latter group who demanded a greater involvement of Britain in Tibet. When British civil servants actually acquired a foothold in Tibet after the British military expedition of 1904, they promoted this view and painted a positive portrait of Tibet by carefully selecting and censoring their representations. Only a few explorers traveling in eastern Tibet or otherwise escaping British control, like William McGovern, Alexandra David-Néel, and—later on—Heinrich Harrer, could present an alternative image.¹⁹ British administrators, who McKay terms the "Tibet cadre," tried to fit Tibet into Western political concepts and portrayed it as a unified political entity willing to enter the global community then dominated by the colonial powers. The

seriousness and sobriety required in politics, however, prevented them from using any mystical, romantic Shangri-la-type images. The image of Tibet they promoted might have been one-sided, but it was not mere propaganda. Reflecting as it did the converging political concepts of the highest Tibetan political elite, including the Thirteenth Dalai Lama, and the British "Tibet cadre," it simply projected their anticipated vision of Tibet's future as present reality. This vision, however, was never realized since—as Goldstein has masterfully demonstrated²⁰—the reforms of the Thirteenth Dalai Lama were sacrificed to the selfish interests of ultraconservative monasteries in and around Lhasa. British civil servants also failed to persuade their government to support their plans. Even then the main thrust of the British political agenda in this region was the preservation of good relations with China. Despite their Tibet cadre's sympathy and influence, Great Britain never had more than scant interest in Tibet. Both the national government in London and the colonial government in Delhi consistently refused to recognize Tibet as an independent state. The same kind of concern for *realpolitik* moved other Western powers to adopt this position as well.

Tibet did not make the international headlines again until 1950-51, when China invaded the country. The invasion raised much compassion in the West for a defenseless people devoured by an imperialist power, but this feeling never generated any substantial political support. Few countries supported resolutions in the United Nations that dealt with Tibet's plight, and those that did were minor political powers like Costa Rica and Ireland.

The flight of the Dalai Lama and many other Tibetans into exile in 1959 resulted in the first relatively large-scale encounters between Westerners and Tibetans, especially high-ranking Buddhist clerics. For the first time Tibetan Buddhism had to be acknowledged as a living tradition, not just a petrified and

distorted relic of vanished Indian and Chinese traditions. The danger that Tibetan Buddhism might be lost forever impelled scholars, especially younger ones, to study it with greater vigor than ever before. In the present volume, Per Kvaerne, Heather Stoddard, and Jeffrey Hopkins—as well as Donald Lopez in his “Foreigner at the Lama’s Feet”²¹—clearly articulate the feelings of urgency and concern among young scholars of the time. Still, it would take another decade for this new view of Tibetan Buddhism as a living religion to reach the “established” scholarly community.

Soon Tibetan Buddhism started attracting many people outside the academic world. Most of these were youth searching for new forms of spirituality, who had come to know about the Tibetan tradition of Buddhism through reports of the first “backpack tourists” in Asia, documentary films, conferences, and books like Arnaud Desjardin’s *Le message des Tibétains*. Now they had the chance to acquire firsthand experience. In the United States, the one-time Harvard professor Timothy Leary and a group of young intellectuals gathered around him rewrote the *Tibetan Book of the Dead* as an allegory about mind expansion, thereby bringing Tibet to the attention of the LSD generation.²²

In the 1970s Tibetan lamas, invited by their new American and European disciples, started traveling to the West and laying the foundation for what Stoddard calls in this volume the “globalization of Tibetan Buddhism.” Far from becoming a mere continuation of what it had been in pre-1959 Tibet, Tibetan Buddhism in the West developed specific forms, the diversity of which need not be described in detail here. For our concern, it seems worth noticing though that the notions of Tibetan culture that prevailed (and to some extent still prevail) among Western converts have been thoroughly positive but largely uncritical. Very often a mixture of half-understood Buddhist doctrine and naive belief in magic and miracles obstructed the serious study of Tibetan Buddhism,²³ impeding the necessary adaptation of its culturally neutral doctrinal positions to Western needs and understanding. This might be the reason for an experienced teacher of Tibetan Buddhism in Europe, like Loden Sherab Dagyab, to establish in this volume:



Fig 4. Encounter with the myth of Tibet in daily life. A shoepolisher in Dharamsala, July 1991. (photo by Dodin)

After thirty years of dynamic propagation of Tibetan Buddhism in the West, we can see that the romantic image of Tibet still persists and only hesitantly is giving way to more realistic considerations. The persistence with which Europeans cling to the myth of Tibet only shows how urgently they need it to compensate for the inner necessities they lack. Such clinging says more about the condition of Western society than about Buddhism itself.

Coming back to the field of politics, two opposing views emerged after Tibet lost its independence: Conservatives and other rightists who until then had tended to regard Tibet from a rather critical, Euro-centric perspective, echoing images coined in previous centuries, suddenly started criticizing the brutal oppression of a seemingly peace-loving people together with the large-scale destruction of its ancient and noble culture—a destruction that had actually started long before the onset of the cultural revolution. Tibet provided them with an opportunity to denounce the evils and destructive power of communism and decry the “red” and the “yellow” perils at the same time. This, however, proved little more than verbal support, and that, too, soon died. Although the CIA supported the guerrilla war of the Khampas with military training and a steady supply of weapons, these measures were intended more to irritate China than to liberate Tibet. The CIA doctrine of “low-level conflict” caused the Khampas’ campaign to drag. Support for the Khampas’ cause eventually ended with the diplomatic agreements between China

and the United States under President Nixon. Now Tibet was completely erased from the political agenda, and the “orphans of the Cold War” were abandoned.²⁴ Clearly, little more lay behind the support for Tibetan liberation than thinly veiled anticommunism. This was but one more sad episode in the Cold War, with no real sympathy exhibited for the Tibetans and their fate.

In contrast to this, for the political left—especially the “New Left”—historic Tibet was a prime example of “Oriental despotism.” The influential position of religion in a political entity under the leadership of an absolutist god-king, the monasteries’ liberal share of national resources, and the people’s alleged obedience and submission to the lamas in “pre-liberation” Tibet starkly confirmed the leftists’ belief that religion was the “opiate of the masses.” Official Chinese reports of “liberated” Tibet confirmed the leftists’ position. Propaganda pictures of selfless barefoot doctors, liberated “serfs,” and laughing farmers hand in hand with Chinese comrades in the middle of lush fields of grain promoted a Utopian image and made the self-appointed Western “Red Guards” believe that at last the new era of mankind had arrived.²⁵ At the same time, centuries-old cultural artifacts of immeasurable worth were senselessly destroyed or sold to Western art dealers via Hong Kong. Those Tibetan intellectuals who did not make it into exile were exterminated, and a totally irrational rearrangement of grain production patterns caused the first severe famine in the recorded history of Tibet. We still do not know how many Tibetans perished as a result of starvation during this period. Leftists dismissed these by now incontrovertible facts (which were available even then) as reactionary propaganda to discredit the “New China” that had supposedly liberated itself from colonial servitude and that they perceived as marching toward a gleaming, socialist future. They naively and pathetically celebrated “China’s red sun over Lhasa,”²⁶ and listened to bizarre propaganda about human sacrifices in the name of religion and other crimes said to be committed by the “Dalai-regime.” Like their political opponents, the leftists were not interested in Tibet itself—they were only attracted by images that supported their own preconceived notions and ideological positions.

Finally, around 1980, Chinese communism lost its threat potential for the rightists, just as the leftists’ cultural hero Mao lost much of his magic. This led to another drastic change in the political images of Tibet. Conservatives recognized the economic potential of the human masses of the “sleeping giant” China (another face of the once perceived “yellow peril”) and immediately stopped toying with Tibet. Afraid of hurting Chinese feelings and thereby obstructing profitable trade relations, they decided to accept Tibet as part of the “Chinese political family.” At the same time leftists shed their Marxist ideology and acknowledged the Tibetan people’s right of self-determination, which made many of them support far-reaching autonomy or even total independence for Tibet.

Between Shangri-la and Feudal Oppression

Looking at past and present images of Tibet, it seems obvious that a balanced approach has been the exception rather than the rule. This fact seems particularly obvious in consideration of the overwhelming attention paid to Tibetan religion and the almost total disregard of other aspects of Tibetan culture. This is not altogether unexpected, as the Tibetan concern for religion has been matched by few other people in the world. Moreover, after the collapse of their empire in the ninth century, it was through religion that the Tibetans themselves managed to maintain influence over vast sections of Central Asia and of China under the Mongol (Yuan) and Manchu (Qing) dynasties.²⁷ This, however, does not imply that Tibetan Buddhism and Tibetan culture are identical, or that the average Tibetans have known no other concern than religion, though such assumptions remain—at least tacitly—frequent. This overemphasis on religion, which more often than not was strengthened by foreign perceptions, came to supersede all other aspects of Tibetan culture, thus distorting the overall image of Tibet. Such unbalanced intercultural perceptions are frequent: patterns of norms and behavior, as well as the horizons of the experience of the observer, often lead to a selective emphasis on specific aspects of an alien culture under consideration—sometimes to the total neglect of other equally important aspects. Thus, certain traits of a culture are stressed in a way that cannot stand up to sober analysis.

A further peculiarity of the perception of Tibet by outsiders is the ambivalence between two extreme and mutually exclusive views. On the one hand, the land on the “roof of the world” evokes ideas of sublime wisdom and simple cheerfulness. On the other hand, it is associated with superstition and cruelty, as well as with a deeply reactionary and oppressive political regime. In both views, the resonance of religion remains remarkably ubiquitous. At times considered a bastion of wisdom, at times a dungeon of despair,

a realm of light or one of darkness, Tibet appears to inspire both attraction and revulsion, giving rise to the diametrically opposed visions of a Shangri-la and a feudal hell, dividing those concerned with Tibet into Tibetophiles and Tibetophobes.

Indeed, traditional Tibet was a land of extremes and, considering the small size of its population, extraordinary diversity. Alongside highly centralized institutions, one could find stateless regions in which a strong individualism was subjected to nothing but local territorial or “tribal” loyalties.²⁸ Within the religious institutions, clear-cut rivalries existed between the various religious schools, between monasteries of the same school, and even between individual colleges of the same monastery.²⁹ In Tibet the normative ideals of peacefulness, harmony, and compassion can be found alongside a self-assertiveness that verges on violence, and intense religiosity can be found side by side with crass materialism. Creative Tibetan intellectuals time and again questioned an all-too-common intellectual rigidity, especially that of religious scholasticism, and were able to make a significant impact. Beyond these social and intellectual contrasts, even the natural environment of Tibet³⁰ is one of the most extreme ever inhabited by human beings. Bleak highlands and thick subtropical forests are found only a few kilometers apart, giving rise to an extraordinary socioeconomic diversity.

Given such diversity, the unambiguous nature of most images of Tibet, whether positive or negative, appears all the more astonishing and raises suspicion as to whether those who coined the images in question did not—consciously or unconsciously—suppress that part of the picture that did not match their global perceptions.

It is obvious that the different images of Tibet presented in detail in the papers collected in this volume and summarized in this essay generally reflect observers’ longings, expectations, and moral or political discourses more than they depict Tibetan realities. Heberer’s essay, for example, demonstrates this with exceptional clarity. Heberer describes how for centuries Chinese (Han) perceptions of Tibet reflect a xenophobic and ethnocentric attitude toward the “other” and yet illustrate a longing for an unencumbered *joie de vivre* and supposed (particularly sexual) freedom, sorely lacking in the observer’s own cultural environment. By comparison, with a few notable exceptions, Western images of Tibet remained relatively vague until the nineteenth century, owing mainly to the geographical distance between Tibet and Europe. With the increase of direct, firsthand contacts in the colonial period, however, those bland, half-legendary stereotypes gave way to more clarity and precision. Objectivity, though, was still a long way off, since physical proximity also generated emotions that distorted perceptions, filtering data through the lens of the observer’s personal background, agenda, and the *zeitgeist* of his lifetime.



Fig 5. Advertising the “Tibet-Winter collection 1994,” C&A Fashion House, Bonn. (photo by Dodin)

Thus, in the late eighteenth century, when Tibet was still relatively accessible to foreigners, British officers such as Bogle, who had been sent to foster trade relationships, painted a very favorable image of Tibet. Certainly Bogle’s personal curiosity and open-mindedness reflected the spirit of European enlightenment then still at its height. By contrast, during the period of more assertive colonialism in the nineteenth century, some British officers developed fantasies of filling the imperial treasury with the immense riches and huge natural resources that their poor knowledge and greedy imaginations made them expect on the “roof of the world.” Frustrated by the conservative monasteries’ collusion with the

hegemonial power of the Manchus to keep Tibet inaccessible, they consequently perceived the Tibetans as wildly barbaric xenophobes who obstinately refused to partake of the blessings of modernity. These civil servants' perceptions of Tibet were not unlike contemporary British ideas about Afghanistan, which also had obstinately turned its back on the empire.

Christian missionaries were not so concerned with such macropolitical issues. Instead, their attention focused on the local conditions directly affecting their missionary work and how to deal with those while spreading the Gospel. But despite their great efforts, they never met with much success in their endeavor to convert the Tibetans. Accordingly, in resignation, most of them depicted Tibet as a land caught in the spell of dark superstitions. Its religion was perceived as based on the unconditional submission of its devotees to a tyrannical caste of priests consciously subjugating the people and on the mindless repetition of shallow cult practices. During the Victorian period the sexual customs of the Tibetans seemed especially lamentable: horrifying narratives of polyandry—an even more offensive vice than polygamy—and of alleged secret sexual rituals exemplified the Tibetans' apparent sexual depravity.³¹



Fig 6. Advertising the "Tibet-Winter collection 1994," C&A Fashion House, Bonn. (photo by Dodin)

Toward the end of the nineteenth century, as has been mentioned, the Theosophists in their "revolt against positivism" challenged such views by "discovering" Tibet as a sublime spiritual treasure house. This "discovery," however, was in fact little more than a forgery. Their highly fanciful depiction of Tibetan religion provides ample evidence of the Theosophists' indulgence in projecting their own longings and fantasies. It is immediately conspicuous that their "Tibetan sages," bearing the Indian title of mahatma and Indian-sounding names, as well as their reminiscences of Old Egypt cannot have anything to do with an actual Tibet. What they labeled as "Tibetan wisdom" rather exposes their almost complete ignorance of Tibet. Historically, the Theosophists were thus the first Westerners to deliberately use Tibet as a glamorous vessel for contents defined by alien scopes and concerns.³²

In the same vein, as Bishop and Norbu have shown in this volume, Tibetan-themed fictional literature produced since the late nineteenth century has rarely made use of genuine Tibetan material. Instead, Tibet found itself being used as an exotic backdrop for Western heroes—a backdrop painted with both the well-established positive and negative stereotypes. Set in Shangri-la, Hilton's *Lost Horizon*, the archetypal novel about Tibet, depicts a society consisting of two distinct strata: monks who, strangely enough, have white skin and local (obviously Tibetan) "coolies" who work the fields and engage in other menial tasks. Here the archetypal positive (wisdom and sophistication) and negative (roughness, simplemindedness, and superstition) images of Tibet find themselves juxtaposed on one and the same place, but while the negative connotations apply to the locals, the positive ones happen to be reserved for the white elite. Compared to the Theosophists, some Western novelists thus went a step further in the process of appropriation by taking up positive symbols and leitmotifs associated with Tibet while depriving them of their Tibetanness. This, however, turned out to be only a momentary episode in the depiction of Tibet, since later the Shangri-la archetype was again applied to the Tibetans themselves.

Blending Bogle's favorable view with the heavy sense of duty of their predecessors during the golden age of colonialism, the British civil servants who gained a foothold in Tibet at the beginning of the twentieth century interpreted the Tibetan history and political system according to notions they were familiar with,

such as “nation-state,” “parliament,” and “cabinet.” When they found essential items such as a flag or a national anthem lacking, they did their best to create them. This episode, which McKay has dealt with at length in this volume, not only underlines once more that sympathy for Tibet depends on compatibility with the concerns of the observers, it is also the first historic attempt to actively gain sympathy for the tangible Tibet by deliberately staging such compatibility. At least in this case, the motivation was real concern for Tibet, and as has been mentioned, the idea of Tibet thus propagated won the basic consent and even active participation of parts of the Tibetan elite.

Compared to this, the naked anticommunism and anti-imperialism that marked the positions of the political Right and Left after the Chinese invasion of Tibet was of a completely different nature. Both sides avoided any proper analysis of Tibetan culture and history, and neither showed much concern for the actual fate of the Tibetans. Instead, they were satisfied with linking Tibet with the stereotypes they associated with their respective political opponents, as the keywords and phrases they used in their discourses demonstrate: “feudalism,” “world communism,” “liberation of the serfs from the yoke of religion,” “reactionary propaganda,” “imperialistic ambitions,” and so forth. In such an ideological discourse, Tibet itself played, if any, only a minor role. The subject of debate could just as well have been somewhere in Africa.

Upon closer inspection, contemporary images of Tibet too seem closely related to ideologies, worldviews, and agendas that are not necessarily linked with Tibet itself. This can be illustrated by the discussion in this volume between Norberg-Hodge and Clarke of whether Tibetan culture has an “ecological consciousness.”³³ While both authors emphasize the successful adaptation of traditional culture to the extreme environmental conditions of Tibet, Norberg-Hodge links this to the altruistic attitude promoted by Tibetan Buddhism. Clarke, however, detects here little more than environmental determinism now superseded by modern lifestyles. From what both of them write, it appears that the views expressed reflect their positions within a broader Western political controversy in which Tibet plays a mere illustrative role. While Norberg-Hodge demands a worldwide roll-back of industrialization and strictly opposes the current trend toward deregulation of the world economy, Clarke objects to the primacy of ecology over broader political concerns that he clearly associates with the presumed vain romanticism of an affluent society. Clarke particularly questions the moral right of the West to claim such a primacy on the global stage, since the West itself initialized the very technology and economic systems that now endanger the biosphere. Norberg-Hodge sees traditional Tibetan (or, as the case may be, Ladakhi) society as a viable model for global change,³⁴ a position far from being unanimously held by Ladakhis and Tibetans themselves.³⁵ By contrast, Clarke thinks Tibetans past and present destroyed the environment just as much as Chinese or Westerners have.

Thus, whatever perspective has been adopted throughout history, alien concerns clearly dominated the perceptions of Tibet and accordingly inspired the images propagated. Accuracy was, when of concern at all, generally given secondary importance. While in the distant past distortions might have been generated by filling in gaps of knowledge in a highly imaginative manner, in more recent times increasingly available accurate information has been heavily interpreted to fit with the concerns of the observers.

Today’s images of Tibet in the West are generally positive. Though this owes in part to the persistence of earlier spiritual images—especially those influenced by the Theosophists, which found themselves echoed here even in small details³⁶—it is rather the emerging presence of Tibet in the mass media that has predominantly initiated this new development. Whereas fifteen or twenty years ago demonstrations in Tibet or campaigns of the Tibetan government-in-exile would have reached the public only rarely, they are now regularly seen on TV as well as in newspapers, magazines, and on the internet,³⁷ inspiring sympathy with Tibetans and solidarity with their struggle toward autonomy among a broad Western public.

Above all, in the person of the Fourteenth Dalai Lama, Tibet has a highly charismatic leader who gained popularity in the West even before receiving the Nobel Peace Prize in 1989. Hardly any other political or religious leader of our time has such a positive image, and this image is almost automatically transferred to Tibet as a whole—as are his liberal and pacifist political ideas.

What is most remarkable about this current positive Western image of Tibet is that it builds up the land itself into a metaphor of good, as the last refuge of spirituality amidst a materialistic and radically

demythologized world that seems to have been deprived of all its magic. The influence of the pro-Tibet movement on public opinion in the West has been so formidable that it has almost completely eclipsed the previously widespread negative views of Tibet as a “feudal hell” that are also analyzed in detail in this volume.³⁸ A closer analysis of the images of Tibet thus generated will, however, reveal its often romantic and clearly glamorized nature, which, as was the case in the past with most other images of Tibet, rarely reflects a balanced picture of both past and present Tibet, its history and culture. As has been repeatedly established in this volume, Tibet support groups as well as members of the Tibetan exile community have made extensive use of such uncritical and undifferentiated images of Tibet.

It certainly goes without saying that the small Tibetan population can garner the attention and support of the global community only if it depicts itself as worthy of sympathy on a grand scale. Here, however, the question must be raised whether the use of such unbalanced and uncritical images of Tibet ultimately benefits the unquestionably justified struggle of the Dalai Lama and his people to regain agency over their country and culture. In other words, must one adopt such an idealized image of Tibet in order to support Tibet’s right to self-determination?

Summarizing the current leitmotifs of the still-timid—though in the last couple of years progressing—discussion among exiled Tibetans, Tibet supporters, and scholars of Tibetan studies on this question,³⁹ Barnett demonstrated in this volume that the current discourse on Tibet remains problematic, since it is intrinsically apolitical, tending to (partly contradictory) overstatements and more involved in rhetorical proclamations than practical commitments. In a controversial work, Donald Lopez declared this current image of Tibet a mere product of the historical reception of Tibet in the West, which according to him reduced the Tibetans to hapless “prisoners of Shangri-la.”⁴⁰ This view, however, seems to ignore the very active participation of the Tibetans in the emergence and continuing reiteration of the current image of their country and culture, as well as their remarkable skills in promoting it. As such, it has been refuted by Tsering Shakya⁴¹ and by Germano, who points out Lopez’s latent conservative interpretation of Tibetan culture and history and instead points to the dialectic of autochthonous creativity and inculturation of exogenous ideas so typical of Tibet’s cultural history.⁴² Like other scholars before,⁴³ Barnett also, although without referring to Lopez, points out the Tibetan agency in the current discourse on Tibet.

It is certainly important to notice that the current instrumentalization of an uncritical “myth of Tibet” has been extremely successful in gaining global sympathy for the Tibetan cause by making the Tibetans the “baby seals of the international human rights movement” as Robert Thurman has put it. The visibility that the Tibetans thus could gain for their cause is particularly obvious if one compares them with the Muslims of Xinjiang who suffer a fate similar to the Tibetans’ but, though as worthy as them, never benefited from much international attention. Nevertheless, as far as the *realization* of the Tibetans’ aspirations for autonomy is concerned, the scorecard of the movement, as all of us know, has remained rather poor. After more than forty years of exile and about twenty years of intensive mobilization of the world’s public opinion along these lines, the Tibet question has remained noticeably absent from the agendas of world politics. It was only when a sober and matter-of-fact approach—instead of declamatory rhetoric and glamorizing strategies of representation—was at work that noticeable, though admittedly still modest, successes could be achieved. For example, accurate and dispassionate arguments of the Tibet Information Network (TIN) greatly helped stop the World Bank funding of the settlement of non-Tibetans in the Amdo region as planned by the People’s Republic of China government in 2000. This seems to illustrate the primacy of critical and differentiated approaches over idealizing and emotional representations in the arena of world politics, where the treatment of the Tibet question without any doubt belongs.

Apart from matters of sustainability, the question must be raised as to the effects of idealized images of Tibet on Tibetan society itself, which, after all, is the intended beneficiary of a resolution of the Tibetan question. For if support for Tibet comes from uncritical followers who only extol its perceived past, Tibetan society runs the risk of getting trapped once more in a rigid conservatism, not to say cultural sedimentation. In order to develop and realize its goals, any society must critically evaluate itself and its history instead of capitalizing on an often misunderstood past, for, as Joseph Beuys has rightly said, “creativity is our real capital.”

Indeed, the willingness among Tibetans and quite a few of their declared supporters to produce self-indulgent pictures of Tibet both past and present all too often prevents a sound analysis of Tibetan history and society. This is particularly true with regard to crucial questions, such as why in the first half of

the twentieth century all attempts to modernize Tibet failed, or which internal conditions contributed to the loss of Tibet's hard-won independence and which changes are still necessary for Tibetan society to continue developing in the new millennium. As recent history has shown, by projecting expectations onto the past instead of the future, such idealizing approaches seriously interfere with the creative efforts of open-minded Tibetan personalities like the president of the Tibetan parliament-in-exile, Samdhong Rinpoche, the political scientist Dawa Norbu, the writer and political activist Jamyang Norbu, and many other less-known Tibetans, in particular gifted intellectuals and artists who often do not find the attention they deserve in Tibetan society and finally choose to live outside of it, many of them even settling abroad.⁴⁴ It also prevented progressive institutions, like the *Amnye Machen Institute* in Dharamsala, from developing a satisfying operation level, since their goals do not match the preservation of an idealized cultural heritage and hence appear neither worthy of attention for the Tibetan society itself nor worthy of funding for foreign sponsors. Last but not least, such approaches have often obstructed or even prevented the realization of goals pursued by the Dalai Lama himself.

Since time immemorial, a broad scope of attitudes and approaches between charismatic creativity and institutional ultraconservatism has been characteristic of Tibetan society and culture. Unfortunately, both Westerners and Tibetans frequently ignore this and by glorifying the former in effect promote the latter. Thanks to its multipolarity, old Tibet benefited from a kind of de facto liberalism that without any doubt was fundamentally different from the deliberate liberalism of modern societies, implemented and administered by political structures under the rule of law and the guaranteed autonomy of individuals and institutions. Still, it seems to be the deep sense of local-rootedness and the plurality of political structures, patrons, and religious institutions that provided a social space within which a remarkable creativity as well as locally inseminated external influences could germinate and give rise to new forms. It seems those very worldly circumstances, rather than astral Shangri-la-type fantasies, gave Tibet its attractiveness and allowed such different and rich personalities like Thantong Gyalpo, Milarepa, the Sixth Dalai Lama, Gendun Chopel, and Khunu Rinpoche to rise to prominence in Tibetan society, their traces still remaining for posterity to follow. Tradition, though, is passing on a fire, not worshipping its ashes.⁴⁵

A legitimate sympathy for the plight of Tibetans aside, we must again ask if myth-making is ultimately helpful. If one wishes to accept Tibet as a real part of the global community instead of a dreamland on the "roof of the world," maybe allowing for some *disillusionment* would be a more sensible approach and would help us appreciate the human face of Tibet in all its richness and vitality, rather than dreaming of a lost wonderland.⁴⁶ As stated earlier, the Tibetans' precarious situation forces them to turn to the outside world for as much support as possible in order to deflect the imminent threat of cultural extinction. And the modern world's need for a utopia does provide a potential balance to the dictates of "realpolitik" and "economic rationale." Visions, however, need not necessarily be based on glamorized images and indeed they should better be oriented toward the future, not the past. Every country and culture has brought forth its own myths and idealizations, and we certainly do not wish to promote any kind of cynical deconstructionism like those that have become fashionable in many academic ivory towers. With this in mind, Tibet has everything to win from a constructive and critical engagement with its past, present, and future. We believe it is this that the Dalai Lama means when he says, "In our fight for freedom, truth is the only weapon we have."

The essays presented in this volume have examined both truths and untruths about Tibet. Some of their claims may strike the reader as unjustified or excessive, some provided contradictory statements, but if this volume provides even a small contribution to the promotion of a constructive discussion about Tibet—and thus, as we believe, helps Tibetans realize their just goals—we will have fulfilled our own goals in examining the endeavor of "imagining Tibet." ■

Notes

¹ See Lindegger, 1979-93.

² Compare Heberer in this volume.

³ See Schmidt and Lammers, 1960.

⁴ See Polo, 1978.

⁵ See Kaschewsky in this volume.

⁶ See Kaschewsky in this volume.

⁷ Csoma de Körös, 1980-82; See also Csoma de Körös, 1834.

⁸ Das, 1902 has remained a standard tool in Tibetan studies ever since his. His dictionary also relied upon Jäschke's work.

⁹ Most notable among them were H. A. Jäschke, who published, among other works, a Tibetan-English Dictionary (Jäschke, 1881), and A. H. Francke (see the extensive bibliography of Walravens and Taube, 1992).

¹⁰ See Stoddard's essay in this volume.

¹¹ Among the most notable exceptions we find R. A. Stein's *La civilisation tibétaine* (1981 [1962]) and parts of Giuseppe Tucci's *Tibetan Painted Scrolls* (1949).

¹² Already Marco Polo mentions the great esteem existing at Khubilai Khan's court for the Tibetan "magicians." The construction of the Potala replica at Jehol shows that awe and fascination for Tibet as a visual myth is not a child of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries only (Chayet, 1985).

¹³ See Grünwedel, 1915 and Bernbaum, 1980. It should be mentioned that the myth of Sambhala was also well-spread among the Mongols and Manchus. Among others the Japanese instrumentalized it in order to gain influence over the Mongols who came under their domination in the course of the Sino-Japanese war (Unkrig, 1926; Narangoa, 1926).

¹⁴ See Govinda, 1968, Pallis, 1939, Sangharakshita, 1971, etc.

¹⁵ For Nicholas Roerich, see Decter, 1989; for his expedition, see N. Roerich, 1929 and G. Roerich, 1933.

¹⁶ Wallace's political career was brought to an abrupt end during the 1948 presidential campaign when *Newsweek* published his correspondence with Roerich under the title "Guru Letters"; see Decter, 1989: 136.

¹⁷ See Bishop's and Norbu's essays in this volume, as well as Brauen, 2000.

¹⁸ For a discussion of the Nazis' image of Tibet, see Greve, 1995, as well as his article in *Mythos Tibet*, the original German edition of this volume (Greve, 1997). Later, Martin Brauen dealt in detail with the precursors of the Nazis' image of Tibet (Brauen, 2000.)

¹⁹ See McGovern, 1924; David-Néel, 1927; Harrer, 1952, 1984.

²⁰ See Goldstein, 1989.

²¹ See Lopez, 1995b.

²² See Leary et al., 1964.

²³ It seems we find here an updated version of the Theosophical Society's images of Tibet with a good dose of the superficial eclecticism typical of the "New Age" movement, which appropriated many of the Theosophists' ideas.

²⁴ See Avedon, 1984; Knaus, 1999.

²⁵ For a somewhat less extreme version of this view, see Grunfeld, 1987.

²⁶ See Han Suyin, 1977 and Weggel, 1997.

²⁷ See Sagaster, 1960, 1976 and Kämpfe, 1974.

²⁸ For the enormous diversity of political structures in Tibet, see Samuel, 1993.

²⁹ See for example Hopkins' essay in this volume.

³⁰ For the perceived influence of nature on Tibet and its culture, compare Kvaerne's comments on the "nature-romantic school" in this volume.

³¹ See Bray in this volume.

³² A similar appropriation occurred in the past, when the Mongol (Yuan) and Manchu (Qing) dynasties used Tibetan Buddhism to stabilize their rule over the Central Asian dependencies of their empires. However, this utilization was of a different nature, as Tibetans actively participated in it, thus serving their own interests. Also, being followers of Tibetan Buddhism themselves, the Mongols and Manchus made use of Tibetan Buddhist institutions but did not alter their original teachings.

³³ Compare Räter, 1994.

³⁴ Compare the title of her book: *Ancient Futures: Learning from Ladakh* (Norberg-Hodge, 1991).

³⁵ It is, however, Helena Norberg-Hodge's incontestable merit to have raised consciousness on ecological questions in Ladakh, and she therefore remains in high esteem among many locals.

³⁶ See for instance our remarks above in note 22.

³⁷ See Bray, 2000.

³⁸ There are, however, a few dissenting voices who contest the dominance of the positive image of Tibet and, instead, continue to spread the old clichés of the "feudal-hell syndrome" via the internet and some scattered publications. But the heavily dogmatic character of these circles, their marginality and the poor quality of their arguments make them negligible (see for instance: Ditfurth and Goldner, 1996, Ditfurth, 1997, Goldner, 1999, and Trimondi, 1999).

³⁹ See, among many others, the contributions of Toni Huber and Jamyang Norbu in this volume, as well as the very important recent book published by Tseten Norbu, *La reconquête du Tibet* (Norbu, 1999).

⁴⁰ Lopez, 1998.

⁴¹ Shakya writes: "The Tibetan invocation of the language of popular political rhetoric is a strategic calculation rather than a transformation of the Tibetan value system." Shakya, 2001: 189.

⁴² See Germano, 2001. Beyond Tibet itself, it should be noted that people of Tibetan culture living within the borders of India and Nepal have recently undergone strikingly similar processes of creative adaptation of exogenous forms while developing strategies for the survival of their own culture, though with mixed success. See Dodin, 1997, 2000, and Dodin (in press).

⁴³ See among others Räter, 1994, and Toni Huber's essay in this volume.

⁴⁴ Clare Harris provides some interesting insights into the difficulties faced by modern Tibetan painters both in Tibet itself and in exile (Harris, 1999).

⁴⁵ This sentence is taken from the title of a movie by Austrian film director Gustav Deutsch ("Tradition ist die Weitergabe des Feuers und nicht die Anbetung der Asche").

⁴⁶ How powerful the "human face of Tibet" can be is admirably demonstrated by Khyentse Norbu's movie *The Cup*, which abstains from the usual idealized images of Tibet and instead depicts the daily life of "normal" Tibetans in realistic environments. With its touching poetry and its sense of humanity, the film provides a direct and holistic insight into Tibetan culture while transmitting a clear political message.

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