Chapter 1

INTRODUCTION

For centuries, the margins of the Tibetan Plateau have been sites of cultural interaction. The frontier towns on the edge of the plateau have been meeting places between people who were known by a variety of different labels, among them people identified as Tibetans and others identified as Chinese. After the so-called ‘Peaceful Liberation’ of Tibet by the People’s Liberation Army in 1950, the former frontier areas on the margins of Tibet have become fully incorporated into the Chinese state as ‘Tibet Autonomous’ prefectures within four Chinese provinces: Qinghai, Gansu, Sichuan and Yunnan. This book deals with issues of ‘cultural survival’ in these areas.

The founding of the People’s Republic brought significant changes to all the Tibetan areas, but new policies were first carried out in the Tibetan areas outside what eventually became known as the Tibet Autonomous Region (TAR). By the late 1950s the Tibetan monastic clergy and other landowners came under attack as all agricultural land was redistributed, and subsequently turned into communes. The Cultural Revolution (1966-1976) later targeted all expressions of ‘traditional culture’, including religion. In the aftermath of the Reform period, starting in 1979, religious expressions have again been permitted. This has led to what many writers have termed a ‘religious revival’ among Tibetans. However, despite policy changes initiated during the early 1980s the articulation of Tibetan identity is still a contentious issue in China, particularly in view of the fact that the survival of Tibetan culture has become one of the key topics of disagreement between China and the international community.

The issue of ‘cultural survival’ in Tibetan areas has become heavily politicized in recent years, as Tibetans in exile and Tibet support groups have increasingly linked their political agendas to the question of the protection of ‘cultural rights’ in Tibet. When criticizing China’s human rights record in Tibet, they argue that Tibetans in Tibet are denied religious freedoms. They also question the ability of the Chinese authorities to provide proper education facilities for
Tibetans, and many claim that Tibetan language is being overtly suppressed in the Chinese school system. The Tibetan exile government further contends that:

What China terms ‘Tibetan cultural development’ boils down to the production and dissemination of literature, films, songs, etc. in praise of the new socialist Tibet and denouncing traditional Tibet as a dark, barbarous, brutal and backward society.  

Finally, they argue that the question of ‘cultural survival’ should be linked to issues such as sustainable development, environmental degradation on the Tibetan Plateau and ‘ethnic and racial discrimination’, and argue that the large-scale in-migration of Han Chinese to Tibetan areas is a result of Chinese policies to ‘dilute Tibetan culture’ by making Tibetans ‘a minority in their own country’.

On the contrary, the Chinese authorities claim that they have freed the Tibetans from the fetters of ‘feudal exploitation’, by emancipating Tibetan cultural as well as economic life. From their point of view, they have created a modern Tibetan society where religious freedom is protected through the constitution, and where faith has become a ‘personal affair’ rather than a consequence of the theocratic rule of the Tibetan clergy. The Chinese government is also proud of the fact that it has introduced modern secular education in the Tibetan areas, and regards the role of the Chinese state as helping Tibetans ‘develop’ by providing them with technological and scientific knowledge, and teaching them Chinese. Official Chinese statements further argue that Tibetan language and literature has been protected and developed through the introduction of new technology such as broadcasting, modern printing techniques, computer software and fonts in Tibetan. They categorically dismiss the claim that in-migration of Han Chinese to Tibetan areas or other aspects of their development policies have had detrimental effects on Tibetan society or culture. Rather, they argue that the Chinese authorities have improved social and cultural conditions in the Tibetan areas tremendously, especially since the beginning of the Reform era.

Two recently published documents provide a clear illustration of the disagreement: a White Paper from the Chinese government on the ‘development of Tibetan culture’ and a response to this White Paper from the Tibetan exile government. The Chinese White Paper gives the beneficial government policies of the People’s Republic the credit for what it describes as improvements in Tibetan culture during the last four decades, and claims that ‘what the Dalai
clique is aiming at is nothing but hampering the real development of Tibetan culture’. Comparing the ‘development of Tibetan culture’ with the elimination of the ‘dictatorial system of feudal serfdom and theocracy’ in medieval Europe, the paper argues that the past decades of Chinese rule has led to the ‘emancipation’ and ‘development’ of Tibetan society and culture:

The development of Tibetan culture in the last four decades and more has been achieved in the course of the same great social change marked by the elimination of feudal serfdom under theocracy that was even darker than the European system in the Middle Ages. With the elimination of feudal serfdom, the cultural characteristics under the old system, in which Tibetan culture was monopolized by a few serf-owners was bound to become ‘extinct’, and so was the old cultural autocracy marked by theocracy and the domination of the entire spectrum of socio-political life by religion, which was an inevitable outcome of both the historical and cultural development in Tibet. Because without such ‘extinction’, it would be impossible to emancipate and develop Tibetan society and culture, the ordinary Tibetan people would be unable to obtain the right of mastering and sharing the fruits of Tibet’s cultural development, and it would be impossible for them to enjoy real freedom, for their religious beliefs would not be regarded as personal affairs. However, such ‘extinction’ was fatal to the Dalai Lama clique, the chief representatives of feudal serfdom, for it meant the extinction of their cultural rule. Therefore, it is not surprising at all that they clamor about the ‘extinction of traditional Tibetan culture’.4

In the Tibetan exile government’s response, this White Paper is explained as ‘yet another attempt to hide China’s repressive policies of Cultural Genocide in Tibet’:

Tibet - a distinct nation with a rich cultural heritage - has a recorded history of over 2,000 years and, as verified by archaeological findings, a civilization dating back over 6,000 years. From very ancient times, especially since the advent of Buddhism in the seventh century, Tibet developed as an extraordinary treasure house of culture. However, since the destructive Maoist campaigns of Communist China’s ‘democratic reforms’ began in 1958, Tibet has been reduced to a cultural wasteland, where even the survival of the Tibetan language is in question. [...] From the 1980s, Tibetan literacy and arts have enjoyed a minor revival in the hitherto cultural wasteland of
Tibet, thanks to the efforts of the Tenth Panchen Lama and Tibetan patriots. Nevertheless, it must be stated that what survives today is only a fraction and reflection of what once flourished in this rich cultural reservoir on what was once the ‘Altar of the World’. Certainly, the traditional social structure in Tibet did not meet all the expectations and aspirations of the populace. However, this 2.5 million sq. km nation preserved a vast treasure of culture with every spiritually-minded Tibetan serving as its protector. China is the sole destroyer of this heritage. And this destruction continues. Beijing has claimed to be the political representative of Tibetans for 45 years. With the 21st century it now lays an additional claim to be the protector of Tibetan culture.5

Not only do these two important documents present contradictory ‘facts’ about Tibetan culture, but in addition they differ radically in their implications about what ‘Tibetan culture’ is or should be. One of the focal points of disagreement is the role of religion as a marker of Tibetan identity and, from the perspective of the CCP, what role religion should be allowed to play in the shaping of a modern Tibetan society. We will examine the contradictory claims of the Chinese authorities and the Tibetans in exile in the following chapters, to see how they present conflicting views on almost every aspect of Tibetan cultural life, but particularly on issues of religion and language, and how to ‘develop’ or ‘preserve’ Tibetan culture.

The aim of this book is to investigate the present conditions of Tibetan cultural life and cultural expression in the ‘Tibet Autonomous’ prefectures outside what is known in the PRC as the ‘Tibet Autonomous Region’ (TAR). The study is based on fieldwork and interviews conducted during the years 1998-2000, and covering all these prefectures. The geographical delimitation was chosen not only for pragmatic reasons, but also because firstly, these areas are little studied, secondly, they are of particular interest as Tibetan areas that have become part of Chinese majority provinces, and thirdly, they comprise the margins of the Tibetan cultural area. As such they are currently subject to a heavy influx of settlers, traders and transient labourers, making cultural issues particularly salient in these areas.

Although we try to provide a comprehensive discussion of Tibetan cultural life, the focus is particularly on the revival of monastic life in Tibetan monasteries, the teaching of Tibetan language in schools, the use of Tibetan in the media and publishing, as well as other expressions of Tibetan culture, primarily those that are endorsed by the government. In
addition, socio-economic issues are addressed as an important factor contributing to ethnic tension as well as an aspect of cultural survival in its own right.

The heavy influx of forced labourers, settlers, traders and transient workers has been identified as an important problem for the survival of Tibetan culture. Ever since the 1950s the Chinese authorities have been resettling Han Chinese on ‘reclaimed’ land previously used by nomadic herders. The authorities have also carried out programs to fence in the grasslands and settle nomadic families, build roads, extract minerals and timber, and construct hydro-electric power plants throughout the plateau, claiming that they have been helping Tibetans ‘develop’. New policies to ‘Open up the Western Regions’ (Chinese: xibu da kaifa) aim to increase the pace of this ‘development’ by improving infrastructure and bringing in foreign capital to further the extraction of natural resources from the Tibetan Plateau and neighbouring regions in western China. The results of these policies are as yet difficult to predict, but if they fail to benefit Tibetans they will undoubtedly contribute to ethnic tension in all the Tibetan-inhabited areas.

Some theoretical issues

The purpose of this project was initially defined in terms of providing information on ‘Tibetan culture’. However, the concept of ‘culture’ itself is not as evident today as it used to be, and therefore deserves some clarification. In addition to the various ways that the term ‘culture’ has been used by Western social scientists, Tibetan and Chinese meanings of the term should also be considered. The different meanings of the term ‘culture’ have implications that will be investigated further in the following chapters.

Basically, two established ways of understanding culture can be identified in Western social science and popular discourses. One perspective ties ‘culture’ directly to the way of life, and sometimes even the way of thinking, of a group of people. The other perspective understands ‘culture’ as the expressions of a group of people, e.g. language and literature, architectural styles and decorations, religious ceremonies, arts and crafts, folk-songs and dances, cuisine and costumes, games and festivals; particularly those expressions that serve to define and promote the identity of the group.
Within contemporary social science, particularly within the field of anthropology, ideas of a simple relationship between ‘society’ and ‘culture’ have long since been questioned, and the concept of ethnicity has been differentiated from the concept of culture. Culture is no longer a zone of shared meanings, but a zone of disagreement and contest, and the study of culture has in many cases become the study of the politics of culture and the ‘invention of tradition’. To sum up a long and complex process of debate, the concept of culture in anthropology and related disciplines has evolved from a term for something shared or ‘public’, to something contested or ‘unequally distributed’, and constructed or ‘invented’. The very notions of ‘culture’ and ‘identity’ have been questioned, and a number of writers have criticized the use of the ‘culture’ concept. The criticism includes the role of the anthropologist or ethnologist in the construction of culture and in defining the ‘other’ ethnic group, the way the anthropologist helps construct, produce, and maintain ‘otherness’, and make it seem self-evident.

It has also been pointed out that many Third World elites have adopted a cultural nationalist discourse which reiterates early anthropological talk about ‘culture’ as something which coincides with a particular ‘people’. In Chinese social science there is a similar assumption that ethnicity is based on shared culture, or the sharing of objective cultural traits, along with shared origin. The boundaries of a culture are basically assumed to be coterminous with the boundaries of an ethnic group, and ethnography thus describes the ‘culture’ of a particular group. One talks about the Tibetan culture as the culture of the Tibetan people, where both culture and people refers to bounded, clearly definable entities.

Contemporary Chinese discourses on ‘culture’ have certainly been influenced by ideas that can be traced back to what is now considered ‘outdated’ Western social science discourse. These ideas have also found their way into Tibetan language use. However, both languages have left their own marks on the terminology, and added further meaning to the concepts we translate as ‘culture’. In the Chinese term for ‘culture’, ‘wenhua’, ‘wen’ refers to writing, and ‘hua’ is a verbalizer. The term literally means ‘to culture’, ‘to civilize’ or ‘to literize’. ‘Wenhua’ can also mean ‘educated’. One often speaks of someone who is ‘educated’ by saying that he or she has ‘wenhua’ or ‘culture’. The most commonly used Tibetan term for ‘culture’, ‘rig gnas’, can similarly be used to describe someone as ‘knowledgeable’, much in the same sense as the English ‘cultivated’. The kinds of knowledge indicated by the term ‘rig gnas’ are the ‘five great fields of knowledge’, ‘rig gnas chenmo nga’, studied in the
monasteries: language, logic, arts and crafts, medicine and spiritual realization. However, Tibetans sometimes use another term for ‘culture’, ‘rig gzhung’, which is more comprehensive and more abstract than ‘rig gnas’. While ‘gnas’ means area, place or field, ‘gzhung’ means way or path.

We have found that the term ‘culture’ is widely used among Chinese social scientists, including Tibetans, and it is also recognized by the general public, although the sense in which it is used often differs from that of the European or American social scientist. However, what is interesting in this context is not so much how their views differ from our own, but rather how these views give rise to different ways of understanding ‘culture’, and ‘Tibetan culture’ in particular. It should be clear that we do not set out here to decide which characteristics or cultural markers differentiate Tibetans from other ethnic groups. Rather, our study takes as its point of departure how the label ‘Tibetan’ is defined in practice by those who use the term in local contexts. This local usage includes a wide range of implicit and explicit definitions of Tibetan-ness by the staff of research institutions, officials in various government departments, education professionals and other people that we talked to during our fieldwork. The focus is thus on the ascription and use of various signifiers or markers of Tibetan identity, such as language, literature and oral traditions; elements of lifestyle (among other clothes and diet); typical forms of economic organisation; and spirituality and religious rituals.

Within the PRC stereotypes of what it means to be a Tibetan are created in the popular media, school textbooks, and in research publications. These publicly transmitted stereotypes provide a frame of reference as people relate them to their own experiences and use them as building-blocks in their own life-worlds. Our study is descriptive rather than definitive, in that it is based on these different ways of understanding Tibetan-ness, and does not provide an in-depth investigation of how stereotypes of Tibetan-ness are recreated and how they are sometimes also challenged. Whereas we do not specifically address the issue of what it means to be a Tibetan, we do reflect on the consequences of categorizing something as ‘Tibetan’. In this sense we are concerned with the different ways that the terms ‘Tibetan’ and ‘culture’ are understood, and what the label ‘Tibetan’ implies. This means that we understand ‘culture’ as symbolically constructed and reinvented, and therefore subject to constantly changing interpretations and inherently contested.
No matter how we define ‘culture’ it has become increasingly obvious that we live in a world where it is virtually impossible for any ‘culture’ to survive in isolation, unaffected by economic globalization, tourism and television broadcasting. As observed by Madsen (1999), even when indigenous peoples in relatively isolated villages practice rituals and customs that have been ‘preserved from the past’, these can never be practised with the matter-of-factness with which they were practised in the era before roads and telephones and the Internet, not to mention modern methods of political control. However, while we question the notion of ‘unchanging cultural traditions’, it is also important to interrogate ‘change’ and examine how, at different times and under different circumstances, change takes place in different ways.

As mentioned, discourses about ‘cultural preservation’ are being actively used in political arguments by both Tibetans in exile and Chinese authorities. In these discourses, the dilemmas of modernization and cultural change are carefully hidden. Obviously, modernization in any form entails cultural change, and however ‘culture’ is understood, ‘cultural survival’ involves a series of dilemmas, including the problem of balancing the need for modernization with the need to preserve cultural traditions. The reports on Tibetan culture issued by the Tibetan exile government as well as the Chinese authorities both fail to acknowledge these contradictions and dilemmas. Statements from the Tibetan government-in-exile tend simply to attack the Chinese authorities for the negative consequences of modernization for Tibetan culture, while statements from the Chinese authorities just as uncritically emphasize the positive aspects of modernization. Reports from Chinese government sources typically advertise economic progress, improved healthcare facilities, industrialisation, city construction and housing development, the construction of dams and hydroelectric plants, and at the same time allege that Tibetan culture is thriving and has been ‘developed’ since the establishment of the People’s Republic. They argue that there has been a flourishing of both traditional and modern art-forms and media, and give examples of art troupes giving folk-dance and opera performances, modern art exhibits, museums, modern Tibetan literature, publishing, radio and television transmission, and scientific research on Tibetan medicine. In fact, when Chinese authorities describe how Tibetan culture is being ‘developed’, one of the most pronounced features of the alleged ‘development’ is precisely the use of new technology and ‘scientific methods’, which is considered wholly positive and entirely unproblematic in terms of cultural preservation. These views are elucidated in the Chinese White Paper on Tibetan Culture referred to above:
The [Tibetan] people’s modes of thinking and concepts are bound to change with the changes of the modes of production and life in Tibet. During this process, some new aspects of culture which are not contained in the traditional Tibetan culture but are essential in modern civilization have been developed, such as modern scientific and technological education and news dissemination. The fine cultural traditions with Tibetan features are being carried forward and promoted in the new age, and the decayed and backward things in the traditional culture that are not adapted to social development and people’s life are being gradually sifted out. It is a natural phenomenon in conformity with the law of cultural development, and a manifestation of the unceasing prosperity and development of Tibetan culture in the new situation. To prattle about the ‘extinction of Tibetan culture’ due to its acquisition of the new contents of the new age and to its progress and development is in essence to demand that modern Tibetan people keep the lifestyles and cultural values of old Tibet’s feudal serfdom wholly intact. This is completely ridiculous, for it goes against the tide of progress of the times and the fundamental interests of the Tibetan people.

Chinese media propagate the idea that traditional Tibetan culture is essentially backward and in need of modernization. However, the Western world is not without its own essentialist images and stereotypes of Tibet and Tibetans, commonly known as the image of ‘Shangri-La’. The tendency to recreate Tibet and Tibetan lifestyles as a utopian ideal has been explained by some as a reflection of Western attitudes about our own societies and the need to find alternatives to consumerism.\textsuperscript{14} Tibetans have thus been recast as a spiritual people living in harmony with nature. Such stereotypes should be countered, not only because they are romantic and in many ways unrealistic, but because they obscure the difficult challenges Tibetans face when trying to strike a balance between preserving and developing their ways of life. This problem has also been recognized by several Tibetan exile critics, such as the writer Jamyang Norbu. For instance, in an article published in the exile magazine \textit{Tibetan Review} he criticizes the Western media for creating ‘Shangri-La’ stereotypes of Tibet, as well as Tibetans for recreating those stereotypes for commercial aims, and argues that we should avoid ‘calling on people in underdeveloped societies to live passive, traditional and ecologically correct lifestyles - and not emulate the wasteful lifestyles of people in Western consumer societies’.\textsuperscript{15}
So-called ‘traditional’ Tibetan arts and artefacts have become both politicized and commoditized, and in this sense many Westerners would say ‘inauthentic’. One of the authors of this book had a personal experience of this Western quest for ‘authenticity’ at the Qinghai Lake 'Bird Island Tourist Resort’ in the late 1980s. The Tibetan manager of the resort, while showing us visitors around, proudly presented some newly-built grey concrete tourist bungalows as ‘traditional Tibetan’. One of the tourists in the group remarked sarcastically: ‘Oh yes,- traditional Tibetan concrete!’.

It may be fruitful to examine the changing economic and social roles of cultural expressions, and how they are related to particular ways of life, integrated by distinct natural and social conditions. However, we should also be aware that evaluations of what is ‘traditional’ and what is ‘modern’ are not value-neutral but essentially political statements. This is the case whether ‘modernization’ is defined as something positive or negative, and whether ‘tradition’ is seen as an obstacle to development or as something valuable that needs to be saved or protected.

In addition to issues of modernization and cultural survival, the ‘politics of culture’ itself should also be considered. In speeches and news reports ‘Tibetan culture’ has been consciously and systematically put to ideological use by Chinese authorities. For instance, in 1996 ‘Tibetan culture’ was declared ‘non-Buddhist’ by the then Communist Party leader in Tibet, Chen Kuiyuan. The Party Secretary made a speech where Buddhism was described as a foreign culture, and the song ‘Emancipated Serfs are Singing’ was praised as an example of healthy and useful national culture. One of the most interesting points made by the Tibetan exile government in their answer to the PRC White Paper cited above, is that the Chinese government is promoting a ‘new socialist Tibetan culture’ that portrays ‘traditional Tibetan society as dark, barbarous, and backward’. According to the Tibetan government-in-exile this has resulted in the development of two cultures: ‘the traditional spiritual culture of Tibet and the communist-nurtured "campus culture", which is neither Tibetan nor Chinese’. Furthermore, the ‘knowledge of this shallow "campus culture" may help one make a living as a poet, writer, translator or journalist or administrative clerk under the Chinese government’, but ‘it does not empower him or her to further the development of Tibetan culture’. Whether this is true is a difficult question that may become clearer in the following chapters.
In the course of developing and refining the project methodology it has been necessary to take a critical look at the complexities of ‘cultural survival’, and of ‘culture’ as a contested concept, and find operational ways of dealing with our topic. When it comes to the quantifiable data we have thus narrowed down the research focus and delimited the investigation to some relatively easily definable aspects of what might be termed ‘cultural production’, rather than trying to study ‘culture’ as such. This selection in itself assumes a particular understanding of ‘culture’. Specifically, it gives prominence to the importance of language and religion to ‘culture’. However, we base much of our analysis on a more inclusive understanding of ‘culture’, emphasising the strong connections between cultural expressions and culture as a way of life. In this view, culture includes livelihoods and means of subsistence. Cultural survival depends on the sustainability of these means of subsistence, including the natural and social conditions that are essential for its survival. This does not mean that livelihoods remain unchanged, only that the necessary conditions are there for them to be continued.

In Western countries, a popular contemporary image of ‘Tibetan culture’ is that of the ‘vanishing civilization’. According to the exiled Tibetan researcher Tsering Shakya:

The politics of Tibet have been reduced to the question of the survival of a civilisation, which is on Death Row. It is no longer a question of whether it can be revived or saved. The implicit assumption is that it cannot be saved; commentators are busily writing a "Requiem for Tibet" and predictions of "The Last Dalai Lama". Therefore, the politics of Tibet are seen as how to preserve a dying civilisation, whether it is better to preserve it in jam jars or museums.

When culture needs to be preserved in a museum, is it still ‘authentic’ culture? Who is to be the judge of what is ‘authentic’, real Tibetan culture? Does it make a difference for this ‘authenticity’ whether a Tibetan is doing the documenting, collecting the samples and setting up the exhibits, or a Han Chinese, or a Western academic? What about the different opinions among Tibetans about what it means to be a Tibetan today: whose opinions are most valid? And if we define Tibetan culture as a way of life, who has the right to tell Tibetans that they should preserve that way of life? These are some of the unsettling questions that need to be posed, although the answers may be difficult, if not impossible, to find.
**Issues at stake**

The revival of Tibetan monasteries and the use of Tibetan language have been the focus of much of the contention about Tibetan culture, within the PRC as well as internationally. Language and religion are widely acknowledged by Tibetans, both within and outside the PRC, as essential aspects of Tibetan culture. Tibetan Buddhist literary heritage, traditions, and institutions are commonly regarded as the core of Tibetan civilization. The rush to rebuild monasteries and revive religious traditions since the early 1980s is thus not only a question of personal conviction, but of asserting and strengthening group identity. While Tibetan language is seen as an important medium for the transmission of Buddhist teachings, the preservation and development of Tibetan language is also regarded as important in its own right, as a vital aspect of cultural survival. The suppression of Tibetan religion and language in Tibetan areas during the ‘leftist campaigns’ of the 1950s and the Cultural Revolution (1966 – 1976), and the new understanding of ethnic identity as introduced through the ideology and practice of PRC minority policies have contributed to the understanding of Tibetan Buddhism and Tibetan language as principal markers of Tibetan identity.

**Monastic reconstruction**

In the present study we have investigated the issue of monastic reconstruction to find out how many monasteries and nunneries have been restored since the period before the first CCP campaigns were enforced, and how many monks and nuns have joined these monasteries and nunneries. We have also examined whether there have been restrictions on the restoration of monasteries and the admittance of monks and nuns. Government funding for the restoration of monasteries has been widely publicized, but who has actually provided the funds for rebuilding monasteries and supporting monks and nuns, and under which circumstances does the state contribute to monastic reconstruction or provide financial support to clerics?

tulkus (reincarnated lamas) are highly revered by Tibetan Buddhists and thus play a key role in all Tibetan areas. They are in many ways the keepers of Tibetan cultural traditions. For the authorities, tulkus are important as respected informal leaders of Tibetan communities and potential mediators between the authorities and the Tibetan people at large. For these reasons tulkus are often appointed as members of the People’s Congress or People’s Consultative Committee (CPPCC) at all administrative levels, as leading members of the Buddhist
Association or even as government officials. The process of recognition and approval of new tulkus has consequently been subject to detailed regulations from the authorities in charge of religious affairs. A key issue thus concerns the authorities’ mechanisms of controlling the tulkus and co-opting them into state institutions. We also wanted to know if there are restrictions on the restoration of tulkus lineages, and have tried to find out how many tulkus there are today as compared to the 1950s.

One of the critical questions regarding the practice of religion is the contemporary limitation of religious freedom. What are the limits to religious freedom for lay Tibetans and how are monasteries controlled? We have already mentioned the question of restrictions on rebuilding monasteries and admitting monks and nuns. However, the revival of monastic life is not just a question of reconstructing monastery buildings and admitting new monks. It also includes the revival of religious ceremonies, crafts such as butter-sculpture and the making of mandalas, religious music and performing arts, painting, astrology and divination, medical practice, woodblock printing, as well as various branches of Buddhist studies and practices. Have government regulations influenced the revival of monastic life and what have been the general conditions for the revival of religious traditions after twenty years of disruption?

For some Tibetans, monastic education represents a compelling alternative to the state education system. While schools implicitly transmit ideas of the cultural inferiority of ethnic minorities, monastic education represents a source of pride for Tibetans who value what they understand as their own cultural heritage. On the other hand, many educated clerics promote secular as well as religious education. Monastic leaders and tulkus have set up foundations to provide financial support to local schools, and even to build private schools combining religious and secular education. Whereas the Chinese media often emphasize the contradictions between religious practice and economic progress in Tibetan areas, and in extension the opposition between monasteries and schooling, there are important links between monastic and secular education.

**Education**

Regarding public education, our focus has been on the teaching of Tibetan and Tibetan medium teaching in schools for Tibetan children. The issue of availability of such teaching is in itself complex, and includes not only the question of whether schools teaching Tibetan exist in a particular area, but also questions such as the cost of schooling, school admittance
procedures and examination requirements, access to boarding, and living conditions in dormitories, as well as the quality of teachers. We have investigated not only the number of schools teaching Tibetan or teaching in Tibetan, but also the extent to which these schools are actually ‘within reach’ of Tibetan children. Interrelated issues involve the perceived use of education by parents, career opportunities available after graduation, and problems faced by students from Tibetan medium schools when they reach higher levels of the education system.

A core problem concerns the balance between Tibetan and Chinese in bilingual schools, and the question of which language to use as the medium of teaching. Although many educators have argued that Tibetan students who receive their education in Tibetan achieve far better results than those who are taught in Chinese, others have emphasized the problems these students face when continuing their studies in Chinese. The extent of failure among Tibetan students in exams where they compete with native speakers of Mandarin Chinese is an important factor to consider. There has been an ongoing discussion among educators in China as to whether Tibetan children are better off learning Chinese from the beginning of their schooling, or whether Tibetan medium teaching is the best alternative. Among those who favor Tibetan medium teaching, some have argued for extending Tibetan medium teaching to higher levels of education and expanding the use of Tibetan to a greater variety of subjects and fields of study.

Another important issue regards the quality of education that is offered, as well as the cultural and ideological contents of the curriculum. These factors are also related to the importance attributed to schooling by the parents. The explicit role of education in China is to promote the idea of a unified ‘Motherland’ and foster patriotic citizens. Through the infusion of such ideals as patriotism and ‘love for the Motherland’ and a heavy focus on Chinese values and traditions, schools may be contributing to the assimilation of ethnic minorities. At the same time it is difficult to imagine how Tibetan language could survive, as a viable written language at least, without being taught in these same schools. In the face of these realities, the education system plays a highly ambiguous role in terms of its influence on Tibetan culture.
Research design

Fieldwork for this study included making systematic observations on-site, photographing sites, gathering information through informal communication and developing contacts with local research institutions engaged in Tibetan studies. Primary source materials that were collected include lists of religious sites, county history publications, statistical information on education, and samples of teaching materials, collected directly from schools, from bookstores or publishing houses. Key interviews were semi-structured, open, and were conducted with county, prefecture and province level government officials, school-teachers, religious and educational specialists, school and university staff, researchers and staff of cultural institutions, monastic leaders and ordinary monks and nuns. Other interviews were unstructured. Research was conducted in 25 counties covering all the ‘Tibetan Autonomous’ prefectures. We conducted approximately 90 interviews with government officials in various departments and units, and at least as many other key interviews.

On the rebuilding of religious sites and practice of religion, the researchers visited about 40 monasteries and nunneries, and numerous other religious sites, and interviewed local experts from within the community on the history of religious sites in the area. These interviews included information on the historical background and current situation at each particular site. Observation of religious practice was conducted systematically to verify claims. Standardized questions were prepared to assure that comparable data was gathered. We interviewed officials in the local Religious Affairs departments and others involved in the implementation of religious policies. County and prefecture ‘local histories’ (Chinese: difangzhi) also give basic information about the number of monks and geographical distribution of monasteries and religious sites in each county. The data from these and other written sources have been compared with the corresponding data gathered on site, in interviews with officials in the Religious Affairs departments and from documents acquired from these departments.

On Tibetan language education, we visited a total of 45 schools and colleges, interviewed teachers, administrators and education specialists, and made observations of educational practice where possible. We further collected samples of teaching materials, school curricula, circulated materials for teachers and other relevant written materials. Assessments include official educational programs as well as locally managed grass-roots educational facilities designed and run by local Tibetans. Schools at all levels were visited (primary, middle,
vocational, college and university level), including boarding schools in herding areas and village primary schools in agricultural areas, most of them visited without prior notice. Statistical information was collected in interviews with leaders of the prefecture education departments in all ‘Tibetan Autonomous’ prefectures. This includes detailed information on total numbers of schools and students, and numbers of bilingual schools and students at all levels, according to county. Interviews with local school staff supplemented the statistical figures provided by government officials and gave us more detailed information about the actual situation.

Two basic types of literary sources are used: works within the field of minority studies and works drawing on statistical materials. Some remarks must firstly be made about minority studies (Chinese: minzuxue) or ethnology in the People’s Republic. Ethnology is institutionally and intellectually tied closely to the practice of ‘nationalities work’ and minority policy. The discipline still leans heavily towards Marxist evolutionist theory, rooted in the works of Friedrich Engels and Lewis Henry Morgan. Issues such as the negotiation of identity, cultural commoditization and globalization, the social construction of culture and ethnicity, and the politics of historical and ethnographic writing have so far been more or less ignored. This means that the theoretical approach of PRC scholars differs markedly from contemporary Western approaches.

Even more can be said about the use of official Chinese statistics. During fieldwork we were told that government officials in the PRC commonly have three or four documents on each topic, for various different uses, giving widely disparate figures. The credibility of these documents is rarely checked by outside agencies. In some cases it is questionable whether officials are even aware which of their documents gives the correct information. By all accounts, Chinese statistical materials are notoriously unreliable. As pointed out by Clarke (1992), China has a system of administration that depends on local interpretation and implementation of central commands and initiatives. In the case of most areas of China outside the eastern seaboard, this includes survey work. Furthermore, direct lateral linkages between counties or provinces are weak, there is no independent cross-checking on accuracy, and the primary allegiance of officials who carry out data collection is within the local administration.
As a result of these and other inadequacies in surveying and data collection, statistics are generally riddled with errors. Politically motivated distortions could make data on production and income levels particularly unreliable. Common survey errors include discrepancies in the use of terminology and interpretation of categories, actual reclassification of categories over time, obvious errors of data entry, inaccuracies and inconsistencies in recording, aggregation and simple calculation mistakes, and sampling biases.

To counteract some of these problems, we have tried to link wider statistics to case studies for accuracy. One strategy during interviews has been to repeat the same questions at all administrative levels, in order to compare the figures supplied by different levels of administration. Prefecture level figures can then be compared to county level figures, and county level figures to figures collected at a particular site. This strategy can at least demonstrate when figures are clearly unreliable. The question remains which of the different figures are more accurate. When figures are exactly the same for two levels this may indicate either that they are accurate or simply that they have been drawn from the same source.

Unfortunately, we have not by any means had the resources necessary to collect all of our own statistical data. Despite this warning against the uncritical use of statistical data, we still use them. However, no such data are given without complete references. One might ask, if Chinese official statistics are so unreliable, why refer to them at all? Firstly, there are no independent statistics available. Secondly, in order to verify or disclaim ‘facts’, these ‘facts’ must first be available. Further research on these areas would thus benefit from any available baseline reference data, if only for the sake of replication. The data presented here have so far not been easily available outside of China, at least for researchers who do not read Chinese. It is therefore an additional aim to make basic data on these under-researched areas of ‘ethnographic Tibet’ more widely available. Finally, even unreliable statistics can be useful, if read with an understanding of which distortions to expect. For instance, since China has introduced compulsory nine-year education, we know that the goal for any government education bureau is to have 100% of school-age children attending school. If an education bureau reports a rate of 85% school attendance, we should expect the accurate figure to be no more than 85%, but anywhere below that figure. The data presented here should thus not be understood as factual, but should be read with these considerations in mind.
Two main methods were used on site: observation and interviews. Observation is not always as simple as it seems. Efficient observation depends on the experience and background knowledge of the researcher. This background knowledge can also create blind spots. We expect to see something, and as a result, we see just that. If we draw this to the extreme, we cannot in fact claim to know something just because we have observed it. Conducting interviews also presents a range of difficulties. Although one of the authors is fluent in Chinese and the other has studied Central Tibetan, the great majority of interviews we conducted required some degree of interpretation. This was especially important when interviews were conducted in a Tibetan dialect (Khamba or Amdo-ke) or in a local dialect of Chinese.

Interpretation is always a potential source of misrepresentation, but with or without good interpretation, language presents its own problems. Even seemingly easy questions, such as ‘how many monks are there in this monastery?’ or ‘how many rooms are there in this school?’ can be susceptible to misunderstandings. On one occasion, we spent more than two hours interviewing a monk in a monastery. One of the first questions presented to the monk was on the number of monks in the monastery, and we were given what seemed to be a straightforward answer: five monks. After a long list of other questions, we spent some time on the ritual calendar of the monastery. At that point it became clear that we were in the middle of the summer holidays when most of the monks had returned home to their families. On returning to the first question about the number of monks, we finally managed to find out the actual number of monks ordinarily staying at the monastery, which was about eighty. In addition to interpretation problems, there is the obvious problem of accuracy in responses. Most people are never compelled to be accurate and precise, and cannot be expected to provide accurate information, especially on figures.

The sensitivity of asking even simple questions about religious and minority issues should not be underestimated. This is why we never asked people their names or other personal information. We never conducted interviews with monks or nuns when accompanied by officials. Unwanted company to religious sites was very rare, and most school visits were also unaccompanied. Visits to monasteries and many schools were conducted without prior notice. We travelled with an introduction letter from our host institute the Institute of Nationalities Studies (INS), a department of the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences (CASS), and were accompanied throughout the fieldtrips by a researcher from the INS who
acted as our guide and translator. Despite this, since most sites had never received foreign researchers before, many of those interviewed were obviously ambiguous about the situation, and some may have felt uncomfortable with disclosing information to foreigners. In dealing with the Chinese bureaucracy, it is difficult even for a Chinese citizen to obtain information, since officials usually do not see it as a responsibility to provide information to the general public. There is simply no precedence for openness.

Some of the most basic questions we wanted to answer in this study include how many monasteries have been rebuilt, and how many monks, nuns and tulkus there are today as compared to the early 1950s. Although we have consulted a number of Chinese sources to find answers to these questions, our most important sources are our own interviews. We interviewed officials in the Religious Affairs departments in most of the prefecture governments, and we also interviewed officials in many counties. In addition we visited a number of monasteries, and interviewed monks in most of these monasteries. We interviewed officials at the province government level in Sichuan and Qinghai, to obtain overall figures. We further cross-checked this information with written sources and with our own findings from the same areas. On Gansu and Qinghai provinces our main written source has been *Gansu and Qinghai Tibetan Buddhist Monasteries* by Pu Wencheng (1990), where more than 800 Tibetan monasteries are listed and given short presentations. This book also lists the Tibetan name of every monastery. Ran Guangrong (1994) has published another book, *Tibetan Buddhist Monasteries in China*, which gives an overview of Tibetan autonomous areas of the four provinces on a more general level, and also includes chapters on Tibetan Buddhist monasteries located in Tibet Autonomous Region and Inner Mongolia. We have also used other available monographs and compilations about specific areas, such as Dechen (Diqing), Golok (Guoluo) and Kandze (Ganzi). Finally, we have looked for relevant information in a large number of prefecture and county histories published during the 1990s.

Our main English-language source has been Marshall and Cooke’s study ‘Tibet Outside the TAR’, published on CD-ROM (1997). This extensive survey is a very good source of detailed background information on most of the counties we researched, although it has some significant geographical gaps in the data and lacks substantial information on religious or educational institutions. In addition, since the authors of ‘Tibet Outside the TAR’ worked ‘undercover’, the type of data they had access to is very different from our own material.
Hopefully, our study will provide an update and complement to the work of Marshall and Cooke.

**Methodological problems**

Our research design presents a number of challenges. For instance, it has been extremely difficult to estimate how many monasteries there were in the areas under study before the destruction of religious sites started. The names of monasteries in Tibetan and Chinese are most often completely different, which would make it difficult to use old Tibetan sources that might have been available from the Tibetan government-in-exile. Published sources in Chinese tend to use the Chinese names of monasteries, and these are the sources that can provide information on the current situation. However, among the different Chinese sources, several of them give substantially different figures, both on the former and the current numbers of monasteries and nunneries, monks, nuns and tulkus.

The authorities in charge of religious affairs keep a detailed account of different categories of monks, but the categories that are used may not be defined identically from one place to the next. Historical records often describe different categories of monks or ‘religious professionals’, such as tulkus, ‘geshes’, ‘khenpos’, ‘lamas’, and ‘drabas’ (ordinary monks). When different sources list past and present figures, the way different categories are defined may differ, and categories may therefore be confused. In addition it is often unclear which of the categories are included in the total figures.

One problem has been to establish which definitions of ‘monks’ and ‘nuns’ have been used by various sources. Written sources often provide quite detailed information on the numbers of monks, ‘ordained monks’, ‘lamas’, geses’, ‘khenpos’, tulkus, etc., without noting which of these are included as ‘monks’. This makes it difficult to know whether the numbers should be added together or not. Some sources use the term ‘religious professionals’, not noting how many of these are actually counted as monks. In some Tibetan Buddhist traditions, such as Nyingmapa, monks are in fact allowed to marry, which creates doubts as to whether those who are married should be defined as monks. Practitioners of magic (ngagpa) may or may not be counted as ‘monks’, whether they are married or not, since they usually dress in monk-like robes. In addition, if a monastery is defined as a ‘place where monks live’ then the question of whether these ‘religious professionals’ are monks extends to whether the place
They live is a monastery. We have noted particularly contradictory information on the numbers of Nyingmapa monks and monasteries.

It is worth noting that prior to the establishment of the PRC, 10-50% of all monks were known to live outside monasteries. Some travelled the countryside telling stories, and some monks and, more commonly, nuns lived permanently at home as dependants of the household head. It is unclear whether the figure cited above includes ‘ngagpas’, who even today roam the countryside telling fortunes. In several of our interviews we were given information on ‘private monks and nuns’, ‘monks and nuns living at home’ or ‘travelling monks and nuns’. Sometimes these were included in the statistics on monks and nuns, sometimes not. We suspect that some of these are actually monks and nuns who have been expelled from their monasteries or nunneries, or have failed to be accepted at a monastery. However, some of them may be living outside monasteries and nunneries for the same reasons as they would have in former times. It is difficult in general to know how the registration of monks and nuns is implemented and statistics are gathered, and how this differs from one area to the next, and particularly unclear how many monks and nuns today live outside of monasteries permanently or temporarily.

The current system of registering monks gives rise to several other ambiguities. Since the authorities are trying to keep strict control over the numbers of monks, detailed accounts are kept, using a number of different categories. Whereas traditionally, monks never retired, today monks above a certain age limit ‘retire’, whether they continue to live in the monastery or not. If ‘retired’ monks continue to live in the monastery it is unclear what their ‘retirement’ actually implies, other than that they may no longer be counted as monks in official statistics. Similarly, there is currently an age limit of 18 years to become a monk or nun. Those under the age limit are sometimes not reported, and various excuses are given when they are reported. As one county government official explained: ‘those under the age limit are there to help elderly monks or to learn a craft’. It is sometimes unclear whether monks under 18 are even included in the statistics. Another problem was brought to our attention by local government officials in charge of keeping records of monks and nuns. These officials complained that their job was made more difficult when monks were registered in a monastery in their county, but actually went to live in another monastery in a different county. Those at the receiving end would of course have similar problems in deciding how these monks should be accounted for.
At present, authorities in charge of religious affairs give quotas for the number of monks or nuns that can be accepted in a monastery or nunnery. These quotas are very often exceeded, and when officials are asked how many monks and nuns there are in a monastery or nunnery, they are sometimes reluctant to admit that they know the quota has been exceeded. Therefore, they sometimes give the quota figure rather than the actual number of monks and nuns. The figures collected by the prefectures and provinces are further based on reports given from each county, and in local interviews we learned that the Religious Affairs departments keep at least two accounts of the number of monks. One figure resembles the number of monks living permanently in each monastery, and an alternative figure indicates the quota, the officially accepted number of monks allowed to reside permanently in the monasteries. These two figures often vary a great deal, and it is sometimes unclear which of these figures is being presented. Visits to local monasteries revealed further complications in the relationships between the figures. We visited monasteries with up to 100% more religious personnel living there than what was reported by the local authorities.

All that has been said about statistics on monks above also applies to nuns. In addition, we regret the shortage of exact information on nuns available from any sources, written or oral, from many of the areas visited. Little was known about the number of nuns in the 1950s, and the limited impression we can gain from interviews with county governments is that there may be more nuns than the prefecture governments report. This is probably due to the large number of nuns living outside the nunneries. For instance, in Derge (Dege) County the authorities in charge of religious affairs informed us that the county currently had only one nunnery with 23 nuns. In addition, we were told, approximately 300 were practising as nuns, but living at home. These were not included in the statistics. If the situation is similar in other counties, this of course makes statistical figures about nuns even more problematic than those referring to monks.

When it comes to statistics on tulkus, the situation becomes even more complicated. One problem is that tulkus often live outside their original monastery, particularly if they have been offered work outside the monastery. In addition, tulkus may or may not be monks, and some sources include tulkus as ‘monks’ while others do not. When counting tulkus, some count lineages, i.e. both living and deceased tulkus whereas some count only the living. Some count those tulkus actually living in their monasteries whereas others count all tulkus,
whether they are living in the monastery or outside, sometimes even those tulkus who have left the country. On the other hand, sometimes only officially accepted tulkus are counted, which may be only a fraction of the tulkus that are actually recognized within the monasteries and local communities. Our information indicates that there may be a substantial number of these ‘self-appointed tulkus’\(^\text{35}\), as they were referred to in one of our interviews.

As simple as it may seem, counting monasteries is a difficult matter. In some interviews the problem of inconsistent definitions of a ‘monastery’ was identified by the authorities in charge of religious affairs to explain why there appeared to be fewer monasteries at present than before 1958. The authorities explained that some of the old records of monasteries may have included household shrines and small temples for the mountain gods, offering sites where buildings of any kind had been constructed, tulu residence and so forth. We were further told that nowadays a much narrower definition is used, and a ‘monastery’ is defined as a ‘place where monks reside’, whereas other places of worship are described as ‘religious sites’\(^\text{36}\). Despite these claims, in some areas the authorities reported that there were more monasteries at present than in the 1950s. In these cases there was no mention of varying definitions at all. It is obviously very difficult to judge if the supposed redefinition of the term ‘monastery’ over time really is a problem for record-keeping or just a convenient excuse for the authorities.

We do of course realize that old records might be inaccurate in a number of ways. For instance, the three great Lhasa monasteries, Ganden, Sera and Drepung had ideal numbers of monks, where Ganden was supposed to have 3,300 monks, Sera 5,500 monks and Drepung 7,700 monks. The actual number of monks at a certain time may have resembled these figures more or less, but would of course have fluctuated. Other monasteries may also have had such ideal figures, which may very well have found their way into historical records. Another source of confusion might be the identification of some monasteries as ‘branch’ monasteries\(^\text{37}\) and some as ‘mother’ monasteries. It is not inconceivable that occasionally, records of monasteries may have counted only the ‘mother’ monastery. The monks in such monasteries may also have been considered to belong to the ‘mother’ monastery rather than the ‘branch’. Today however, monasteries are officially regarded as ‘equal’ in rank, and in theory no such distinctions are supposed to be made, although in practice these distinctions are still very much alive in the minds of local people.
Government permission is required for a monastery to be rebuilt and to accept monks. In a number of cases monasteries have been rebuilt without permission because people get tired of waiting. These ‘illegal’ monasteries are sometimes not counted in official statistics simply because officials are reluctant to admit they exist. Ironically, this may result in statistical figures on ‘restored monasteries’ that are too low. Finally, there are great variations in the way people define ‘restored’ or ‘reconstructed’. This might refer to a monastery that has been completely rebuilt, or one where only a few minor repairs have been started, or anything in between.

When it comes to figures on education, we were interested in knowing how many Tibetan children have the opportunity to learn Tibetan, as well as how many are taught in Tibetan medium. We were also interested in how many Tibetan children actually attend school. The question of school attendance is politically sensitive, since the Central Government has decided that nine years of education should be compulsory throughout China. In some of the areas under study, even a three-year education was unavailable to a majority of school-aged children and in counties where herding is the predominant livelihood, we found that official enrolment rates were as low as 28%. Despite this, in other counties with very similar conditions, government officials reported that the enrolment rate in their county was as high as 90%.

Sometimes local governments are provided funding from higher-level governments on the basis of how many students are enrolled in school, and local governments may also provide incentives to parents to enrol their children or sanction them if they fail to enrol their children. In addition, whereas enrolment and actual attendance are two different matters, local officials may use the terms ‘enrolment’ or ‘entrance rate’ (Chinese: ruxuelü) in different ways, such as to refer to how many children are registered as ‘enrolled’ in school as compared to the school-aged children in the area, how many school-aged children actually attend school regularly, or how many school-aged children complete primary school, which may be defined as either four or six years of schooling. Due to these and other problems, accurate information on school attendance is very difficult to find.

The question of medium of instruction is less politically sensitive but may be difficult to answer for other reasons. One of the officials interviewed, a former teacher himself, provided the following illuminating description:
The teachers are bilingual and the pupils sometimes even have two sets of books, one in Chinese and one in Tibetan. Sometimes the teachers write on the blackboard in Chinese and explain in Tibetan, in other situations they might teach in Tibetan and explain in Chinese. Homework might be given in Tibetan, but exams can be taken in either language.

This seems to be how teaching is conducted in many of the areas we have visited. It is obviously difficult, even for us as researchers, to decide exactly what the medium of instruction as described here actually is. Teachers, school staff and officials will of course also define this differently from case to case. In addition we visited schools classified as ‘Tibetan medium’ which actually had parallel classes in each grade taught in Tibetan and Chinese medium. In some of these cases only one third of the pupils were in reality taught in Tibetan.

As with monasteries, defining a ‘school’ is not as easy as one might expect. In several cases we were told that the number of schools in a county was ‘unclear’, since the officials did not know whether to include ‘teaching stations’ or ‘point schools’. These schools may not have a permanent school building at all, and in one case we were told that ‘school’ was taught in the dry riverbed, where pupils used rocks to sit on. In another case we were told that teaching was conducted in the ‘mani khang’ or ‘prayer house’. School hours and days may also be irregular, and officials do not go out to inspect very often and may simply not know how many of these schools are functioning on a regular basis. Many of these ‘point schools’ are bilingual, which of course also makes the number of bilingual schools uncertain. As with the definition of a ‘school’, our sources were often also unclear about what should be counted as a ‘student’ or a ‘teacher’. For instance, during interviews we sometimes realized that preschool pupils might be included in the total number of ‘students’, and that administrative staff was sometimes included in the number of ‘teachers’ in a school.

Since all schools in China should (and the great majority actually do) teach Chinese, we have defined ‘bilingual’ as a school where two languages are taught, in our case Tibetan and Chinese. This is also how the term is commonly used among educators and officials in charge of education. However, some officials tend to be imprecise and take ‘nationalities education’ to imply the same as ‘bilingual education’. In minority areas, ‘nationalities schools’ (Chinese:
minzu xuexiao) are intended to provide education opportunities especially for ‘minority nationality’ students, though in practice, this does not mean that all students in such schools are necessarily ‘minority nationality’ students. In one case we were informed that the definition of a ‘nationalities school’ was that at least 65% of the students should belong to a ‘minority’. In other cases we have been told that even fewer of the students in such schools actually are ‘minority’ students. In addition, it is very common that ‘nationality’ schools do not teach any other language than Chinese, and we found a number of cases where ‘nationalities’ schools in Tibetan areas did not teach Tibetan at all.

As mentioned above, enrolment rates tend to be exaggerated by government officials, which means that the figures provided on the number of students attending school also tend to be too high. This includes those attending bilingual schools. However, when we calculate how many percent of students in a county attend a bilingual school, other problems are more serious, such as a possible tendency to over-report the numbers of bilingual schools as such. In addition, even when a school is counted as ‘bilingual’, this gives no indication of how many of the students are being taught Tibetan, and how many hours per week they study Tibetan. During fieldwork we came across cases where Tibetan was taught only above the fourth grade, or else only to an experimental class. In these schools the pupils were studying Tibetan two to four hours a week, while Chinese was taught up to eleven hours a week.

Another problem is that we do not know details on how many of the total students in the county or prefecture are Tibetans, nor do we know how many of the students in ‘bilingual’ schools are Tibetans. As noted above, Han Chinese students sometimes attend ‘nationalities’ schools in quite large numbers, and there are also strong indications that Han Chinese children have a general tendency to attend school more frequently than Tibetan children, particularly above the primary school level. On the other hand, Han Chinese are more severely restricted by the ‘Planned Reproduction Policy’ (Chinese: jihua shengyu, commonly known as the ‘one-child policy’) than Tibetans and other minorities, who are normally allowed more than one child. In the case of government-employed, the limit is usually two children, whereas farmers and herders are usually subject to a limit of three children. When we extrapolate from demographic figures alone, unfortunately we have not been able to take any of this into account.
The demographic figures cited in this book are primarily drawn from the national census data, since these are considered to be the most accurate sources. The most recent national census was conducted in November 2000, but the source material for this book is based on the latest census data that was available at the time of writing, which is the material from the 1990 national census. Although ten years have passed since then and the population has obviously increased, what we mainly need to know is the percentage of Tibetans living in an area, not the actual number. However, as many critics have pointed out, this is exactly where the official statistics may be the most unreliable. The reasons for this can be found in the way statistics are collected: who are counted as ‘residing’ in a particular area and who are not counted when the census is taken. Among the groups not counted, Han Chinese are believed to constitute the great majority. The most important groups not counted in the national census are members of the armed forces and temporary migrants, defined as those living in a locality for less than a year and continuously absent from their legal place of residence registration.

We have also included demographic information from the 1990 census for the sake of comparing different areas on the basis of ethnic composition, to see how conditions vary for the reconstruction of monasteries and the teaching of Tibetan in schools. We have thus tried to substantiate the effects of Han Chinese versus Tibetan majorities in the population.³⁹

Use of terminology

As already mentioned, we use the term ‘bilingual school’ to refer to schools where both Chinese and a ‘minority’ language are taught. Both the terms ‘nationalities’ school (Chinese: minzu zhongxue) and ‘Tibetan’ school (Chinese: zangwen zhongxue) were used by some of our sources to refer to bilingual middle schools, as opposed to regular middle schools (Chinese: putong zhongxue). The difference between the terms appears to be that ‘nationalities’ schools are for ‘minority students’, in this case Tibetans, although they are often taught in Chinese medium with Tibetan language as an additional subject, while ‘Tibetan’ schools are schools where Tibetan is used as the medium of instruction. We use the terms ‘nationalities’ school and ‘Tibetan’ school as they are used by our sources, but note that different criteria for what may be called a ‘nationalities’ or ‘Tibetan’ school are applied from place to place.
The term ‘nationality’ (Chinese: minzu) is a term which in Chinese generally refers to the ‘minority nationalities’ (Chinese: shaoshu minzu). This is explained in more detail in the next chapter. When we use the term ‘nationality’ in the present study, it is drawn directly from a particular source and follows the usage of that source. When we refer to these ‘minority nationalities’ in our own discussions, we prefer to use the term ‘ethnic minority’ or just ‘minority’. The use of the term ‘minority’ about Tibetans has been protested by some who see it as inappropriate for political reasons. As used in this study the word ‘minority’ is not politically motivated but merely implies that Tibetans as a particular ethnic group are in minority in a county, prefecture, province, or in some cases the PRC as a whole. However, in other cases Tibetans are the majority group within an area, and are then similarly referred to as the Tibetan majority.

We have chosen to refer to the Chinese majority population as ‘Han Chinese’, although this is also a politically charged term. By using the word ‘Han’ some might accuse us of transmitting the view that the ‘Han’ are only one of many ‘Chinese’ peoples, while all the ‘nationalities’ are equally ‘Chinese’. The term ‘Han’ also creates the impression that there is such a thing as a homogenous Chinese ‘nation’, effectively disguising large variations within the majority Chinese population in terms of language, way of life, customs and religious traditions. Several scholars have in fact noted that the term ‘Han minzu’ is a recent invention, although it emphasizes the connections between the present inhabitants of China and their ‘ancestors’ in the ancient Han Dynasty (BC 206 – 220 AD). Despite these problems, we use the term ‘Han’ as it is used in the PRC today, to categorize the majority of Chinese who are not recognized as members of a ‘minority nationality’.

Notes and references

Pu Wencheng is a Buddhist who is responsible for keeping records on Tibetan Buddhism in Sichuan Province.

In Sichuan we paid a visit to ‘office number three’ of the Sichuan Province Religious Affairs Department. The exceptions are Tsonub (Haixi) and Ngaba (Aba) prefectures.

Figures that are almost but not completely the same may in fact be considered more accurate.

Since 1950, administrative divisions have been redrawn and existing place names changed on a massive scale in minority areas. This makes the study of Tibetan place names especially challenging.

During fieldwork we also collected maps and place name indexes to provide relevant source material for a future systematic study of place names. The material includes extensive lists of place names in Chinese, Tibetan and Roman characters, and large-scale county maps. Since 1950, administrative divisions have been redrawn and existing place names changed on a massive scale in minority areas. This makes the study of Tibetan place names especially challenging.


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Pu, Wencheng (1990), Gaqing zangchuan fojiao siyuan [Tibetan Buddhist Monasteries in Gansu and Qinghai]. Xining: Qinghai renmin chubanshe [Qinghai People’s Publishing House]. Pu Wencheng is a
researcher at the Qinghai Academy of Social Science, Department of Tibetology. During our visit to the Qinghai Academy of Social Sciences in Xining, July 1999, Pu Wencheng was introduced as ‘Qinghai’s most famous Tibetologist’.

27 Ran, Guangrong (1994), Zhongguo zangchuan fojiao siyuan [Tibetan Buddhist Monasteries in China], Beijing: Zhongguo zangxue chubanshe [China’s Tibetology Publishing House].


29 Xie, Haining (1994), Guoluo zangzu shehui [Golok Tibetan Society].


32 Chinese: zongjiao zhiye renyuan.

33 Chinese: zongjiao huodongdian or zongjiao huodongchang.

34 Tibetan: dgon lag. The relationship between ‘mother’ and ‘son’ monasteries is referred to as ‘ma bu’.

35 Chinese: dianxiao.

36 Chinese: zongjiao huodongdian or zongjiao huodongchang.

37 Tibetan: dgon lag. The relationship between ‘mother’ and ‘son’ monasteries is referred to as ‘ma bu’.

38 Chinese: dianxiao.


41 See for example Gladney, Dru (1994) ‘Representing Nationality in China: Refiguring Majority/Minority Identities, in The Journal of Asian Studies, vol. 53, no. 1, February 1994 , pp. 92-123. Gladney notes that the notion of ‘Han ren’, or ‘Han person’, has existed for many centuries as referring to descendants of the Han Dynasty. However, he submits that the notion of ‘Han minzu’ or ‘Han min’ (‘Han nationality’) is an entirely modern phenomenon which arose with the shift from empire to nation and gained its greatest popularity under Sun Yatsen’s Republican revolution in 1911.

42 Chinese historians connect the Han Dynasty with the beginning of trade along the Silk Route and the formation of the Chinese state. Important aspects of this state formation were the standardisation of written language, weights, measures and currency, the founding of a banking system, and the creation of a system of official exams to recruit civil servants.