The Battle for Ancient Tibet in the Modern Narratives of the People's Republic of China and the Tibetan Exiles with Reference to Indic influences

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In the immediate aftermath of the birth of the People's Republic of China in 1949, there was an urgency to consolidate the Chinese nation that was still in a nascent stage recovering from the civil war between the Kuomintang and the communists. The military victories of the People's Liberation Army had to be translated into a new reality of uniting the Chinese nation and safeguarding it from any dangers. In the borderland regions of China, this meant the incorporation of the different ethnic groups with their varied histories and cultural traditions into a new nation with a socialist vision. In this future direction of a new nation, the idea of progress and universalism was a guiding principle and culture did not have an important place in this discourse (Tam 1988: 79).[1]

In China this problem was complicated by the geographical diversity where more than two-thirds of the new China was the homeland of the ethnic minorities though they were dwarfed by the Han population, who formed the overwhelming majority in China comprising more than 92 per cent of the population but inhabiting only a third of the landmass of China (ibid.: 79). It becomes clear that the ethnic minorities inhabited vastly

different landscapes ranging from the cold deserts just north of Beijing beyond the Great Wall that comprised the traditional homelands of the Mongol peoples, to the uplands of Xinjiang, the forested regions of Yunan to the highlands of Tibet. These locales were characterised throughout history by an adaptation to diverse forms of production mainly nomadism and differentiated sharply from the intensively irrigated regions that formed the core of China.

Further, most of these regions were relatively isolated from the heartland of China, and were also in contact with their neighbours and were part of the different culture areas of the neighbouring regions with whom they shared not only cultural patterns but also long histories. For most of the Mongols, the demarcation of inner and outer Mongolia was a modern phenomenon that did more harm to the Mongol nation than any other act in recent memory, and Bulag argues that this has made the Inner Mongols as the other to the Mongols (Bulag 1998: 171). Similarly, the Uighurs of Xinjiang and the other Muslim minorities like the Kazaks, Uzbeks, Salar, and Tatars were part of a larger Central Asian Turkic imaginary with a different script and a different religion of Islam (Soucek 2000: 314). Another example concerns the tribal groups in Yunan and the borderlands of Burma like the Lisu who did not have a permanent state and practised an economy that relied on hunting and slash and burn cultivation (Zack 2017: 14, 161, 166).

Slash and burn agriculture was the most widespread form of production in highland south-east Asia from the borders of north-eastern India to Vietnam in contrast to the settled agricultural plains of mainland South-east Asia and is now understood as a distinct region (Michaud et al. 2016: 440f.). These societies in the hills successfully resisted the intrusion of the state for more than a thousand years and thus practised shifting culti-vation and other suitable forms of production with a loose political organisation and very little in material surplus. Willem Van Schendel characterised these borderland regions as Zomia that meant a non-state space (ibid.). It was made more famous and received an excellent academic reception with the publication by James C. Scott that introduced highland Asia as a geographical category in addition to the mainland and maritime Southeast Asia (Scott 2009: ix, xiv). Scott included large parts of Tibet in Zomia, and this sparked off another lively discussion (McConnell 2016: 47f.).

China was vast, but its vastness was also full of diversities marked by the main difference of the sharp contrast between the settled agricultural regions of the core of China and its famed wealth and prosperity that attracted the attention of the world through the ages to the impoverished landscapes on its borders (Murowchick 1994: 13f.). Mountains and deserts broke the continuity of the landscape and thus contributed to a discontinuous landscape that could not be wished away as the geographer Spykman contended that 'Geography does not argue, Geography simply is' (Kaplan 2012: 29). There were many other sharp contrasts like the settled agricultural villages of China that contrasted with the mobile settlements of the nomadic communities. Differences thus characterised China and its borders with inner Asia, between the Han and the nomad, and the best marker of this difference was the Great Wall of China (Turnbull 2012: 7). It is a common belief that the Great Wall of China was built to keep the invading nomads at bay and protect China, but this reveals only a part of the picture. The Great Wall of China was also intended to prevent any of the Chinese peasants from leaving (Laird 2007: 32). One of the significant currents in the history of Inner Asia is the rivalry between the Han and the nomad. It is represented in a vigorous debate on the suitability of characterising the nomad as greedy or needy.[2] These fault lines reveal the tensions in China that preoccupied the ruling elites from a very early date.

In this context, the idea of marriage as a political tool and an expression of international relations emerged from the Han period when the border peoples become a threat to China. The Han-nomad binary also expressed in another form, where the nomads were represented as a problematic other (ibid.: 1092). In the historical memory of China, the rule of the Mongols and lastly the Manchus was a historical anomaly that did not go in the pattern of Chinese historical narrative. For the Chinese, both these groups were foreigners and also northern barbarians and thus intruders into Chinese lands. After the collapse of the Qing Empire and the rise of Nationalist China, the premier Sun Yat-Sen went to the tomb of the Yongle Emperor, the first Ming Emperor along with his cabinet (Laird 2007: 240). It was a conscious and symbolic move as the Manchu were seen as foreigners, and Sun Yat-Sen consciously invoked the connection of the regime with the indigenous Chinese dynasty. The end of the Manchu rule evoked many reactions. There was the erasure of symbols connected with them. Mao, in school at that time, cut his and all his

classmates' pigtails, symbolising freedom from Manchu oppression (ibid.). Such symbolic acts were meant to convey that the Manchu hairstyle of the *Que* was a hegemonic symbol and its erasure meant liberation. When such trends form the background of Chinese history, the tensions between the core and the periphery was already centuries old.

By the time the People's Liberation Army had exercised its control over mainland China and was moving into the peripheral areas the tension between the Han and the nomad was already centuries old and the expansion of the People's Liberation Army was also understood in this vein as an elder brother trying to make the younger brother fall in line.[3] Therefore, the expansion into Tibet was accompanied by a legitimising narrative of modernisation and emancipation from imperialism was advanced to the wider world audience in the aftermath of 1959 and the fall of Old Tibet (Chen 2003: 128). This diatribe against centuries-old feudal serfdom strengthened the Chinese position and gave it a rhetorical strength that ran along with the popular mood throughout the world in favour of the currents of modernity and emancipation. The invasion was portrayed by the occupying forces of the People's Liberation Army as a moment of liberation from centuries-old tradition and the associated suffering of the working people of Tibet under a feudal theocracy legitimised by Buddhism (Zhang 2004: 52).

The global audience well-received this narrative. The world was on the brink of a new historical moment. The past was largely blamed for the horrors of the present, and the future seemed promising. Thus, demonising the past also charted a new path to the future. Therefore, the narrative of linear progress in the future blurred the regional particularities. These were viewed only as aberrations. Whatever the route, the final destination was socialism, and many Chinese cadres sincerely believed in this universalist position and showed iron discipline (Norbu 1987: 110). Eyewitness accounts also recount the fervour of the communists in advancing their cause (ibid: 211). We see that the greatest casualty of this exercise was the forced path to modernity. The rule of the Fourteenth Dalai Lama was understood as the rule of a feudal theocracy and the culmination of a centuries-old tradition of oppression (Siren 1997: 48). It became a natural target to be erased to further the cause of socialism. History became the essential tool to legitimise the Communist rule over Tibet, and the battle for Tibet also became a battle for history.

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On the Tibetan side, we see not only the Central Tibetan administration but also several exiled Tibetan writers and academicians and their supporters who include non-Tibetans also. The Central Tibetan administration is the official name of the Tibetan Government in exile located in Dharamsala in India, which is also the seat of the Fourteenth Dalai Lama (McConnell 2016: 15). Such a case was also seen in Russia after the collapse of the Soviet Union with the ethnic minorities' overwhelmingly favouring particularism over universalism. In the case of the nomadic regions, the idea of a linear progression could be advanced as the movement to settled agriculture from nomadism and swidden agriculture was seen as a step forward (Scott 2009: 28). In the case of Tibet, a region with a strong historical tradition such a discourse met with strong resistance and culminated in revolts (Shakabpa 1967: 316).

Matters reached the climax in 1959 with the fall of Old Tibet and the flight of the Fourteenth Dalai Lama to India and the riots in Lhasa.[4] Now the battle for Tibet also became a battle for legitimacy as the most important symbol of Tibet had fled, and history was at the centre stage of this battle. The essential questions framed by China were the modernising potential of Old Tibet, and the emancipation of the Tibetan masses from a feudal theocracy and this process of conquest of Tibet was called as the peaceful liberation of Tibet. One of the forceful exponents of this change is Israel Epstein a naturalised Chinese citizen whose book on the transformation of Tibet extols the benefits of Chinese rule. He claims that it is an eye-witness, and ear witness accounts of the author's travels in Tibet in 1955, 1965 and 1976 (Epstein 1983: 7).

Today, the battle between the People's Republic of China and the Central Tibetan Administration and the Free Tibet movement has spread to another new terrain—the ancient period of Tibet (Powers 2004: 3). Themes such as the imperial period of Tibet, the first Emperor Songtsen Gampo and his Chinese wife, Princess Wen Cheng Kong Jo, the place of Buddhism and more importantly the ethnogenesis of the Tibetan people, the Tibetan language and the decline of Buddhism along with the fall of the Tibetan Empire have all become essential landmarks in these polarised narratives.

This article seeks to analyse these themes that have been a bone of contention trying to understand the sources and the methods employed along with the rhetorical positions of both these parties to see how

historical events have become sites of concerns informed mainly by modernist exigencies of nationalism. The oft-visited themes are the early Ramayana, the Tibetan script and the connection between the Indic myths and the ethnogenesis of the Tibetans and the spread of Buddhism along with some associated themes like the Tibetan script and medicine and Indic deities. The paper argues that most of the eighteenth and nineteenth-century modernist ideas of race, religion and progress that characterised these debates and are discarded globally continue to hold sway even now in a modified form. Further, the construction of these two opposing narratives also robs both the regions, especially the borderlands of their agency. A survey of the treatment of these themes shows that they have affected the Tibetan borderlands as a choice born out of strategic essentialism to present Tibet as a whole. This has become another subsumed narrative, and the recent rise of such regional narratives reveals the multivocality of the debate.

Tibetans enter the scene of recorded history with the rise of the Yarlung dynasty in the seventh century CE, and the enormous expansion of the military power takes place under this dynasty along with the introduction of the Tibetan state, Tibetan script and the introduction of Buddhist religion to Tibet. In short, the transition from a pre-state to a durable state structure and that too as an effective martial power is accomplished under the kings of the Yarlung dynasty of central Tibet (Smith 1996: 52). Traditional Tibetan history begins by tracing the contributions of a list of forty-one rulers with an emphasis on the three eminent empire builders, Songtsen Gampo, Trisong Detsen and Ralpachen (Shakabpa 1967: 25, 49). All these rulers belonged to the Yarlung dynasty so named after the Yarlung valley in central Tibet. It is surprising to note that even the Chinese narratives are also focused on the Yarlung rulers and the first Emperor Songtsen Gampo and devote considerable space to him (Wang and Suo 1984: 15, 17, 33).

Both the narratives are poles apart, and a deeper reading of the two versions of Songtsen Gampo would reveal the fault lines. As a historical personality, Songtsen   Gampo ascended the throne at the age of 13 in the year 614 CE and ruled till 648 CE and based on textual study Shakabpa says he lived till the age of 82 (Shakabpa 1967: 29). Some aspects of his personality were affected by myth-making, and there are layers of myth shrouding Songtsen Gampo. In the modern Tibetan narratives, Songtsen Gampo occupies a prominent place for many reasons

including his patronage and introduction of Buddhism to Tibet and his wide-ranging conquests that marked the birth of the Tibetan empire and his matrimonial alliances (ibid.: 25f.).

When we talk of marriages and the ruling families of China, we notice that marriage was used as a political and diplomatic tool since the Chin period.[5] Marriage alliances or *ho-Ch'in* translated literally as harmonious kinship was new in the Han period and continued well into the Tang period when the Tibetans enter the scene (ibid.: 113). Songtsen Gampo's marriages with the princess of Nepal and the princess of Tang China are examples of such unions. Nepal under the Malla dynasty had connections with neighbouring Tibet, and Songtsen Gampo wanted to marry Bhrikuti Devi, the Nepalese princess who was the daughter of Anshuvarman, the Nepalese king of the Malla dynasty (Shakabpa 1967: 25). At first, Anshuvarman did not accept the proposal and later after pressure from the Yarlung ruler soon acquiesced, and Brihikuti Devi became Songtsen Gampo's bride and went to Lhasa (ibid.). However, there are no significant narratives of the military engagement between Songtsen Gampo and the Nepalese ruler, but in the case of China, the contacts have become a matter of contestation (Powers 2004: 3-5).

According to Chinese narratives, Songtsen Gampo married Wen Chen Kong Jo, the daughter of Tang Tai Zong the ruler of the Tang dynasty in the Chinese city of Xian and this is an event that is hailed as the union of the Tibetans and the Chinese and has entered popular books and textbooks also (Quick Access 2010: 102). Opposed to this narrative is the Tibetan narrative where this story is narrated not in the sense of cooperation between the Tibetans and Chinese but as a show of power relations when Tibet was a military power. The horsemen are interpreted not as the retinue of Songtsen Gampo on a friendly mission but part of his army out to serve an ultimatum to the Tang emperor Tai Zong. After the marriage, interpreted as a victory by the Tibetans or in the Chinese narratives as a symbol of Tang-Tubo alliance, and in a ceremonial escort, Princess Wen Chen Kong Jo to Lhasa and both the representations are vastly different (Powers 2004: 31-3).

The Chinese sources do not make much mention of the Nepalese princess but dwell on the Tang princess and her contributions to 'civilising' Tibet including the introduction of Buddhism to Tibet obscuring the fact that the Nepalese princess was also a Buddhist. Incidentally for the

devout Tibetans, both the Nepalese and the Chinese princess are more than historical personalities and are deified and worshipped as the Green Tara (*Belsa*) and the White Tara (*Gyasa*) respectively. Their images are enshrined in the Jokhang temple in Lhasa, one of the oldest Buddhist temples in Tibet (Shakabpa 1967: 25). For the average Tibetan, these deities were not representative of a power struggle though modern historians have mainly invested these categories in reading them.

The Chinese ruling families used marriage as a diplomatic tool, and this is evident in their matrimonial alliances with several nomadic societies, but not with agricultural societies. This raises many questions.[6] According to current understanding, the Chinese princess who married into the nomadic ruling families acted as a power element and helped to further Chinese interests is one of the roles. During the Tang period, there were a total of 16 marriages between the Chinese princess and the Turks, Khitan, Khotan, Tibetans and other nomadic peoples. In two cases, Tang China was forced into accepting marriages; one was with the Tibetan King Songtsen Gampo and Princess Wen Cheng Kong Jo (ibid.: 123). The princess carried a large retinue and costly gifts indicating the importance of the marriage for the Tang dynasty, a fact that is much publicised. Like other Chinese princess married to nomadic rulers, Wen-Cheng also served as a cultural ambassador.[7]

It is one of the points of departure in the modern narratives produced by the Chinese government, and there is also a drama produced and enacted almost 180 times a year.[8] History is being falsified round the year with an elaborate state apparatus and a marriage of technology and extravaganza.[9] There is a lengthy description given by Wang Furen and Suo Wenquing about the arrival of Wen Cheng to Tibet (Wang & Suo 1984: 18-20). They describe in detail the large retinue loaded with costly gifts as a spectacle to behold (ibid.: 18). They further write that all the commoners welcomed this retinue and laud it as a symbol of the Tibetan-Tang alliance. This alliance is associated with the civilising mission by these authors, and the entry of the Chinese princess overwhelmed the Tibetan masses. Instead, the fact that Tang China was forced into marriage by the superior military strength of the Tibetans is completely absent and thus becomes an important site of contestation.[10]

The finer details of the power struggles become clear when we examine the process of marriage in detail against the larger background. Songtsen

Gampo had initially proposed a matrimonial alliance with the Tang in 634 CE and the Tang emperor Tai Zong was almost ready and planned to use the Tibetans as a counterweight against another nomadic group. This nomadic group was the Tuyuhun who was an emergent threat, and in 635 CE, their king No-ho-so objected to this marriage. This was because the Tuyuhun were now actively in alliance with the Tang and therefore interested in promoting a pro-Tang policy (ibid: 114). As Songtsen Gampo was rebuffed, he attacked both the Tuyuhun and the Tang, and it is after the military encounters that the power of the Tibetans became clear. It is under these circumstances that Tang China had to accept the matrimonial alliance where Tibetan troops were in a strong or equal position but not in an inferior position (ibid.: 115). The associated aspects describing the marriage are to be read against this larger background of the relationship between the Hans and the nomadic societies.

In addition to Nepalese and Chinese wives, Songtsen Gampo also had Tibetan wives who rarely make it to the historical narratives. We also have borderland narratives of the story of Wen Cheng Kong Jo in Tibet that do not conform to the standard monolithic narratives of the Tibetan exiles and also do not correspond to the Chinese narratives.[11] One narrative from eastern Tibet says that Wen-Cheng had an affair with Gar Tongtsen, a minister of Songtsen Gampo and also had a child from this relationship that was stillborn.[12] What this all reveals is that there are multiple narratives of the same event within Tibet itself. They reveal many layers of understanding and also many diverse receptions of the events like the localised receptions.

In most cases, we may read these actions of the individual actors like Songtsen Gampo as representative of a larger entity like the Tibetan nation as the union of two individuals is taken to represent the union of two peoples (Fen & Qiang 2019: 364). The term race is still employed by Fen and Qiang to understand peoples as representative of racial categories (ibid.: xxii, 4, 363). Such categories are no longer employed though the Tibetan writers also used them earlier when the understanding of such categories was accepted (Shakabpa 1967: 5). Further, these individuals also could influence decisions on a large scale like the introduction of Buddhism what it ultimately reveals is that there is a tension between the two parties and most of these transactions are a part of the ancient Sino-Tibetan relations that have become the main bone of contention. Marriage was not just between China and the nomadic powers

but also between the different nomadic powers and Songtsen Gampo's marriage to Bhrikuti Devi can also be understood in this vein.[13] It also reveals the conventional explanation of marriages with Chinese princess as a means for the nomadic powers to get material benefits do not exhaust the potential of such actions (ibid.).

There are many dimensions, and the rise of different nomadic powers on the borders of China reveals the levels of interactions as there are no matrimonial alliances with certain nomadic powers when they are weak. When they posed no threat to China, such powers are ignored, and the classic example is of Tibet where we do not find any example of *ho-ch'in* after the collapse of the Yarlung dynasty. The two marriages between the Tibetans, i.e. between Songtsen Gampo and Wen-Cheng and later between princess Chin Cheng and a Tibetan king happen when Tibetan kings are in ascendance (ibid.: 130). Like the first marriage between Songtsen Gampo that bore fruition only years after he made the initial proposal, the same is the case with the second marriage of a Tibetan king and a Chinese princess.

This has to be seen in the context of Tibet's expansion from the middle of the seventh century CE. Tibet sent marriage proposals to China in 658 CE which were refused and later in 679 CE through princess Wen-Cheng which was again refused (ibid.: 114). The reason advanced for the second refusal was that princess T'ai-p'ing whose hand the Tibetans had asked for marriage had already become a Taoist nun. However, the tide turned in 703 CE with mounting Tibetan attacks on the Tang, and Empress Wu agreed to give princess Chin Cheng's hand in marriage. The actual marriage between Chin Cheng and the Tibetan king took place in 710 CE (ibid.: 130). All these facts demonstrate that there are many important variables to be considered when we take marriage into account as it meant much more than the union of two people. It is easy to read that marriage alliances were also a political tool and the princess functioned as ambassadors as in the case of Wen-Cheng and Chin Cheng.

Further, marriage with one nomadic group also led to their loyalty and alliance in the complex rivalries as many examples would show. For instance, the Tang alliance with the Tuyuhun led to the refusal of a princess in marriage to Songtsen Gampo. Thus reading the marriage of Songtsen Gampo as a straightforward event would obscure many parts of

the narratives, including the regional narratives with the local versions of this event.[14]

History has become an influential tool for China to legitimise its rule over Tibet. In this process, the Chinese repeatedly stress the unity of the Tibetans and the Chinese as belonging to one family. However, China and Tibet have diverse histories, landscapes and cultures, and one necessarily has to invoke the idea of the difference. That is because the environment has been of the most important factors for the differential evolution of identities in China and Tibet (Smith 1996: xix). For the Chinese narratives, this idea of difference is also because of certain divergences and a search for common origins; unity is fixated and surfaces in their narratives on Tibet. Therefore, in addition to the Sino-Tibetan relations, the ethnogenesis of the different peoples is also another important domain of contestation (Powers 2004: 30, 109). It is also an area where myth and history collide. Unlike the story of the Yarlung dynasty where there are historical personalities whose presence is not disputed by both the parties, in the case of the origins of the Tibetan people, the story becomes more complicated, drawing mainly from a much-celebrate myth.

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According to the Tibetans, the Tibetan race originated from the union of a red-faced monkey and a mountain ogress and the monkey is identified as an incarnation of Avalokitesvara (Shakabpa 1967: 5). Another myth traces the origins of the Tibetans in India and recounts the days during the epic period of Mahabharata when there were warfare and considerable unsettlement in India that led to the migration of Tibetans to the land of snows to escape the conflicts (ibid.: 5). We see that the ideas of race are no longer employed as a category of analysis in social sciences and the ideas of race which is employed here actually draws from what we can call as a common sense understanding of race.[15] In the commonsensical understanding of race, the phenotype is considered as the most important physical marker and is to employed only cautiously and not read as race and Warren Smith does this without reading phenotype as race (Smith 1996: 11). Further, in such an understanding, groups belonging to the same race are supposed to be essentialist categories. Therefore, it would be wrong to use the idea of a race to signify unity between the Tibetans and the Chinese. It only serves the purpose of showing that the Tibetans are at a distance from the Chinese. One can also notice a perceptible shift in the employment of the term race and the shift to the more acceptable term phenotype.

Interestingly, there was only one anthropometric survey done in Tibet and by Gordon Bowles in eastern Kham which is a borderland of Tibet and China. He dwells on the trait of the epicanthic fold of the eye that is considered an essential trait of the Mongoloid phenotype, and according to this premise, about 90 per cent of the Chinese have some degree of an inner fold (Smith 1996: 10). For the complete eye folds the figures for Chinese along with the Chiang average around 44 per cent, while in eastern Tibet it is only eight per cent. It reaches a further low of 2.65 per cent in parts of eastern Tibet (ibid.) What we get from this survey is that while the data needed to make such conjectures needs to be vast and robust, we cannot rely on such data as it is neither voluminous nor is it robust. A single survey may have laid to rest some of the longstanding assumptions of racial unity between the Chinese and the Tibetans, but it is not sufficient.

Notwithstanding this fact, there may be other reasons to attribute India as the origin of the Tibetan people as we also encounter similar narratives. In the case of the origin of the Korean dynasty, the Koreans again trace Ayodhya in India as one of the sources of their origin as there was a Korean princess who supposedly hailed from India and this event is celebrated a very year (Kishore 2016: 26). Therefore, the reason for the Tibetans to trace India as one of the sources may be deeper and go beyond religion as Buddhism was introduced only later into Tibet in the seventh century CE.

Tibetans and Chinese were supposed to belong to one family, and they thus represent the five races of China according to the Kuomintang's idea, and the flag of the Kuomintang also represented this feature.[16] The communist party narrative also has the five stars representing the five ethnic groups of Han, Manchu, Mongol, Uighur and the Tibetan ethnic groups. In the Chinese language the term for ethnicity is *minzu*. Such a reading is wrong and based on false ideas (ibid.). In a recent article on the Formation the Chinese nation and its multi-ethnic groups in the inaugural issue of the *Journal of Anthropology and Ethnology*, published by a one of the reputed publishers Springer, the focus is to explain the diversities and integration (Fei 2017: 1). The avowed aim of the journal is also a corrective to the traditional bias of non-Chinese scholars writing on China.

About the explanation of diversity and the origins of the Tibetans, the Chinese position is articulated here clearly. The origin of the Tibetan people is traced to the Qiang people though not forcefully but in a roundabout way (Fei 2017: 22). According to the Han language dictionaries composed during the Han period, ethnic origins of the Tibetans are from the Fa Qiang group, as the Fa Qiang was also one of the ethnic groups in the Tibetan plateau and had relations with the Gansu Qiang tribe (ibid.). A series of conjectures are drawn based on the views of some linguistics. These linguistics include the Qiang, Pumi and Lhoba languages as part of the Tibetan language family. However, as the linkages are not clear, the article concedes that even if the Qiang were not the source of the Tibetan peoples, their role in the ethnogenesis of the Tibetans is substantial (ibid.).

Further, there is also another assertion about a group of peoples called the Baima Tibetans who do not speak a Tibetan language and also do not believe in Lamaism in the Aba county (ibid.). Along with language, there is a close relationship between the Han and Tibetan languages. The spread of Tibetan culture and language also meant the Tibetanisation of culture, and in this process, many societies like the Mongols became Tibetanised as they adopted Tibetan Buddhism and many other aspects of Tibetan culture. The Fourth Dalai Lama, Yonten Gyatso hailed from Mongolia (Mullin 2001: 181). In the case of the Lhoba and the Moinba people also we notice a similar process of Tibetanisation. The Monpa and the Lhoba people are also found in the Indian state of Arunachal Pradesh that borders Tibet, and is considered by China as a part of their country (Klieger 2015: 58). During the pre-modern period, Mon Yul or the land of Monpas was also part of the Tibetan cultural area and was so acknowledged. Here the language spoken is the Monpa language, but there is no doubt about the Tibetanness of these people.[17] The best proof of this is that the Sixth Dalai Lama, Tsangyang Gyatso hailed from this region (Mullin 2001: 245, 274). In the Tibetan understanding, there is room for accommodating difference between the Tibetan Great tradition and the various little traditions of the peripheries and the Tibetanised groups.

About the use of the term Qiang as an ethnic group we notice that sometimes it is used to signify the Tibetans in the ancient period and at times the Qiang are also represented as outsiders. In the opinion of Warren Smith, this contradictory position can be understood as the Qiang were absorbed by the Tibetans and the Qiang people prevailed on the

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Tibetans in the early period before the rise of the Yarlung dynasty (Smith 1996: 5-8). In the article by Xiaotong Fei that traces the origin of the Chinese nation to the core of the Han ethnicity it argues that on one side the Han ethnicity went on assimilating other nationalities, and the exact opposite is the Qiang, who went on decreasing in size as it was the supply base of the people for most of the ethnicities and mostly the Han (Fei 2017: 22). The article also gives an example of the Qiang in modern China, pointing to their dwindling numbers (ibid.). One may examine this in detail by dwelling on another article from Taiwan by Wang Ming Ke which points at the disconnection between the present-day Qiang and the ancient Qiang.[18]

In the ancient period, the Qiang was a generic term for many of the peoples of the borderlands in the West of China. The present-day identification of a group of people as Qiang and reading their history backwards as the history of Qiang is erroneous as the present day Qiang started using this ethnonym for self-identification only from this century (ibid.). Many of the present days Qiang mentioned by Xiaotong Fei did not hear the term Qiang or consider themselves to be Qiang before 1950 as Wang Ming Ke has demonstrated based on fieldwork and also the study of texts (ibid.). The problem as pointed out by him is that modern Han Chinese historians do not have a new take on the Qiang but only a reworked idea of the Qiang as the western frontier people of China (ibid.: 145). This statement seems to read the present in the past explanations about the various nationalities that are historically problematic.

The explanation of the similarities between the Han and the Tibetan languages also hide more than they reveal as the Tibetan script is undoubtedly Indian in origin and is phonetic in contrast to the ideographic Chinese script and was derived from the monasteries of eastern India during the seventh century CE.[19] As devout Buddhists, the Tibetans venerated Indian influences as it was the birthplace of the Buddha. Therefore, some element was glossed over and is apparent. Beyond these binaries also exists a new Tibetan narrative of indigeneity that acknowledges Indic influences.[20] Many of the Indic relations are understood but from a different set of power relations that is missing in this whole Sino-Tibetan binary narrative (Huber 2008: 3). The relations between India and Tibet were historically asymmetrical, and India was referred to as the parent and Tibet the child, and there are many speculations about this adoration for India. However, as Toni Huber has pointed out, there is also

a dark side to this relationship, but we do not get references to any loathing of India (ibid.: 3-5). In the relations between the nomadic armies of the early Tibetan rulers and China, there is an evident tension between the two that is absent when we examine the Indo-Tibetan relations.

After the death of Mao, there was a relative relaxation of autocracy in Tibet, and during this period of the late 1970s and the early 1980s many new works came up in the Tibetan language, and they sought to understand the history of Tibet afresh. One of the important voices of these new writings is Dhondup Gyal whose works are canonised on both sides of the border (in Tibet and India) and posit a new path.[21] An important issue with much at stake is the role of Indic influences that is important for us. One of the important projects that Dhondup Gyal had taken up was the translation of the Ramayana (Lin in Hartley & Schiaffini-Vedani 2008: 93). For him, the translation of the Ramayana was not a passive reception of Indian influence in Tibet without any Tibetan agency as many devout Buddhists or the Chinese would have constructed. Examining the context of the transmission of the Ramayana into Tibet, Dhondup Gyal posited that it was during a period when Tibet was at the height of its military power and was therefore in a position to choose its historical course (ibid.: 93-6).

Further, the region of Dunhuang through which this translation of Ramayana entered Tibet was also a region that was not in the direct line of Buddhist transmission but a region open to many influences including various Inner Asian influences. Dhondup Gyal, therefore, viewed the Ramayana, not just an example of Indian literature but world literature (ibid.: 94). It is also pertinent to point out here that Ramayana studies have blossomed since the last two decades in India and there are many Ramayanas voicing the narratives of many ethnic groups in South and Southeast Asia. They also include Ramayanas in many non-Hindu traditions (Richman 1991: 3). Most of these Ramayanas deviate from the Ramayana of Valmiki replacing local characters and concerns. Among the other projects that Dhondup Gyal had taken up was a re-reading of Sakya Pandita's *Kavyadarsa* which was a Sanskrit text on aesthetics translated by Sakya Pandita (Schiaffini-Vedani 2008: 96).

As one of the luminaires of Tibetan literature and an eminent historical personality, Sakya Pandita was the regent of the Ngawang Lobsang Gyatso, the Fifth Dalai Lama and was held in high esteem and continues

to be in the Tibetan communities. However, after the fall of old Tibet some new voices also sprung up and one of the examples if of Dhondup Gyal who is important to us for reasons that he takes a different position from that of the Indian and the Chinese influences as if ancient Tibet was a *tabula rasa*. It also reveals that there is more to Indian influences than Buddhism, and this exercise would reveal that conscious choice of the Tibetans in charting their historical course.

In this whole discourse on the Tibetan royalty and the Tibetan language, the Chinese never dwelt at length about the Bon religion, the pre-Buddhist religion (*Bon*) of Tibet though there is some introductory reference in many places (Wang & Suo 1984: 51). Here, it is important to note that most of the kings mentioned in the list of the forty-one traditional kings of Tibet were *Bonpos* or followers of the Bon religion (Kværne & Thargyal 1993: 13). It is not a prominent issue in the Sino-Tibetan relations as Tibet was a warrior nation then and military power in its own right. The Bon literature has also become so much Buddhicised in the last thousand years that the warrior element is glossed over in favour of the dharma kings or chos-rgyal (Norbu 2001: 408).

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The friendship between the Tang and the Tubo (as the Tibetans were called) kingdoms is the frame of reference through which the Sino-Tibetan relations are understood. The rise of Tibet as a military power cannot also be understood if we read the three dharma kings as Buddhist rulers only since these rulers do not conform to idealised Buddhist prototypes. As a *btsan po* (emperor), the Emperor Srong-btsan Ga-mpo was a ruthless military warrior, and the warrior nation that he led, was feared by many of the nomadic powers of Inner Asia (Norbu 1998: 365). China had to encounter these nomadic powers from the time of the Chin dynasty, reflecting one of the main currents of Chinese history, the conflict between the Han and the nomad.[22] The use of blood sacrifices during important events was common among the Bonpo rulers (Cantwell & Mayer 2008: 20). One of the sites of enacting such blood sacrifices was during the treaty between the Tang dynasty and the Tibetan rulers (ibid.: 28). Pan Yihong has painstakingly researched the six Treaties between the Tibetans and the Tang dynasty with translations and has come up with meaningful findings that are at a considerable distance from the official Chinese statist narratives. Two of the significant facts not publicised are the revision of the wordings in the Treaty of 783 CE

between Tang and Tibet and the official letter from Tang to Tibet in 781 CE (Pan 1992: 152).[23]

In the long history of dealings with the neighbours, the Chinese usually had the upper hand but with considerable difficulties as the nomads had a strong martial tradition and therefore the Chinese considered the foreigners as barbarians. In this context, the treaties were a reflection of the Sino-centric view. They were always presented as either treaty of Chinese dominance or friendship; not as Treaties between equals. Under the Tang dynasty, China was forced to accept the terms of the Tibet, and this comes into full display in the double practice of Chinese and Tibetan rituals in the Treaties of 762, 783 and 821/822 (cit. in Yihong 1992: 152).[24]

During the height of Imperial Tibet's success, the armies of the Bonpo warriors were the fighting force who created the Tibetan Empire and their orientation was far from being Buddhist (Norbu 2012: 133). One of the well-known episodes in Tibetan history is the end of the Tibetan Empire that collapsed as a result of the Buddhist-Bonpo conflict in the aftermath of Raplachen's death. According to traditional Tibetan explanations, Lang Darma, the apostate who killed Ralpachen was a demon with two horns on his head (Laird 2007: 67). His death led to unsettled conditions that have been interpreted differently. A Marxist explanation given by the Chinese writers considers it a class conflict between the landlords and the landowners that led to the ruin of both classes in a civil war (Wang and Suo 1984: 29). Both these readings are ideologically polarised and tend to view events only through specific ideological frames, viz. Buddhist and Marxist. We are on the stronger historical ground when we see that the Lang Darma's predecessor king Muni Tsenpo initiated a kind of land reforms, and this led to a reaction amongst certain sections (Shakabpa 1967: 46).

Dawa Norbu's interpretation reveals the inadequacies of both explanations, and he starts by pointing out that during the early period, Buddhism was a Lhasa based court religion and not spread all over Tibet and therefore investing Tibet with a Buddhist religious frame is anachronistic. Lang Darma's actions were also a Bonpo reaction to the pacifist policy of Buddhism (Norbu 1998: 368f.). As such the end of the Tibetan Empire unintentionally released the pent up energies of Buddhism and laid the basis for a new Buddhist revival that is known as *phyi-dar* or

the second diffusion of Buddhism (ibid.: 369). It was due to the efforts of the Buddhist missionaries during the second diffusion that Buddhism became the dominant religion and the credit for setting it off should go to Lang Darma unintentionally (ibid.). We also cannot negate social tensions prevalent in early Tibet as there are not many details. According to Dawa Norbu, the lama historians of Tibet obscured all aspects of feudalism in their narratives of Old Tibet by what he calls an act of 'masterly evasion'. Lamas were the literary elite in Tibet, and therefore, they wrote with a bias in favour of Buddhism that is understood (Norbu 1987: 9). However, these factors in no way establish the Chinese claims of civilising early Tibet.

The idea of civilising Tibet was narrative the Chinese extended to all the nomadic powers on the borderlands and also continues in the modern period as the ideas of development and modernisation.[25] However, the difference was that the Tibetans already had a Great Tradition based on Buddhism. This great tradition and the prevalence of a script indicate a pre-existing knowledge base that is not easy to dismiss. The script then becomes another aspect of intense debate, along with medicine and religion. The early Tibetans were influenced in these aspects from India and created the Tibetan script based on Indian models.

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Similarly, the Tibetan system of medicine also followed the three humoral systems of the Ayurveda of India and not the two humoral systems of the Chinese, e.g. the yin and the yang. While ascribing to the origin of Ayurveda, the Tibetan system of medicine called the *rgyud-bzhi* gives a mythical explanation of its origin based on ancient Indian under-standings (Donden 2003: 34). The difference is that while Brahma is the originator of the ancient system, giving the knowledge to Bhaisayajguru and the Asvins, the Tibetans substitute Buddha for Brahma (Rajesh 2001:37). One must understand that in Tibet, there is not direct repli-cation of all aspects of Indian influence. Local realities mediate such influences, which could not be erased and were powerful. One of the oft-repeated examples is the introduction of Buddhism, and when the Tibetan Emperor Trisong Detsen invited the Indian monk Santaraksita, the first mission failed. Santaraksita attempted to build a temple at Samye on the outskirts of Lhasa, but the local spirits thwarted his efforts. Whatever he built in the day was undone at night and so his efforts to subjugate the local spirits came to a nought and thus Santaraksita gave up (Shakabpa 1967: 36).

While returning to India, he suggested the name of Acharya Padma-sambhava. He was, subsequently, invited. Acharya Padmasambhava succeeded and is known in Tibet as Guru Rinpoche and is one of the most famous Indian personalities to be venerated. Unlike Santaraksita, who wanted to eliminate the spirits, Padmasambhava made them a part of guardian deities of Tibet, and thus he succeeded. Thus the Tibetan Buddhist pantheon includes not only the Indian tantric divinities but also the indigenous Bon deities whom Padmasambhava assimilated into Buddhism. This process of syncretism explains the hybrid nature of Tibetan Buddhism, and this explains other aspects of Indian influence.

In the contemporary period, the Chinese idea of a nation and it border policies that were a result of the centuries of dealing with the nomadic neighbours have conditioned the writing of history. Two important dissimilarities surface while dealing with the aspect of China and Tibet over the border and the geo-bodies of the nation. Ancient China's problems with her neighbours are also a result of her border policies as the nomadic neighbours were labelled as barbarians and were the other of the settled Hans. Sino-barbarian differentiation ensured that the barbarians needed to be domesticated and brought into a sedentary agricultural system (Smith 1996: 21). The modern narratives of China about the various ethnic groups stress their belongings to the motherland, but there is a problem of applying this concept to Tibet. Tibetans regard their country as *pha-yul* (*pha* meaning father and *yul* translated as land) signifying the vast differences in their perceptions of relationship with the land (*Tibetan Bulletin* 1986: 18). Tibetan culture areas in Russia also met with a similar treatment though not so harsh as that of many other nationalities (Saunders & Strukov 2010: 292).

One encounters the problem of tracing influences from neighbouring regions that is a part of the culture Area. As pointed out earlier, the Dalai Lamas or any reincarnate can hail from any part of the Tibetan Culture areas; they do not conform to the stereotype of a Tibetan within Tibetan borders. In the early part of the twentieth century a Buryat Mongol Lama, Agvan Dorjieff, who was a subject of the Russian Czar was an influential figure in Lhasa and also an assistant tutor of the Thirteenth Dalai Lama (Snelling 1993: 35). Most of his actions were suspect as he was a political subject of the Czar of Russia whom he had also met in person in 1898 through Rasputin and was an important religious figure in Tibet (Fleming 2012: 25). British India's incursions into Tibet produced a narrative of

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Dorjieff as a Russian spy (ibid.: 26). After the Bolshevik revolution, Dorjieff returned to Russia and his loyalties were suspect and imprisoned and later died as a heartbroken man (Snelling 1993: vi, 247). To assert that his death was in part due to the suffering inflicted on him based on the Stalinist ideas of a homogenous nation would not be an under-statement.

A similar narrative of tracing a homogenous Chinese nation from the past exists, and by extending this project of homogeneity to the study of ancient Tibet, we only witness some coercion. Therefore, the constant invocation of Bodhgaya as a sacred centre in the ancient Tibetan narratives though it lies far beyond the confines of physical Tibet exem-plifies this situation (Huber 2008: 291). With the rise of the Tibetan Buddhist state in the tenth century CE Bodhgaya, the place where the Buddha attained liberation becomes the centre of the sacred geography for the Tibetans. In the previous period before the seventh century CE, when the Bonpos held power, the sacred geography of the Bon religion was Olmo Lungring (Rinpoche et al. 2016: 2).

Unlike Bodhgaya, Olmo Lungring the birthplace of Tonpa Shenrab Miwo, the founder of the Bon religion cannot be located, though there are sophisticated cartographic descriptions of the same. Possibly Olmo Lungring is at a centre with four rivers flowing in the four cardinal direc-tions towards Khotan to the north, Orgyen to the west, India to the south and China to the east (Coleman 2016: 13). It is clear that like Bodhgaya, Olmo Lungring lies outside Tibet, to the west of Tibet (Dakpa and Rinpoche 2006: 6). This does not preclude both these sacred sites from being a part of the Tibetan imaginary. Similar examples are found around the world. Modern-day anxieties of seeking congruence between physical geography and sacred geography do not fit into the earlier narratives and would only amount to reading history backwards.

The battle for ancient Tibet, therefore, is a battle that is primarily informed by modern concerns of which the need to incorporate Tibet into China is the main project. Extending this argument, we see that the need to give strong legitimacy to a shared past leads to distortion of facts and thus emerges a contestation about the interpretation of facts. Both the parties, the People's Republic of China and the Free Tibet movement have taken clear positions, and there is no dispute among them regarding some of the main events and actors in ancient Tibetan history. Issues of

contestation immediately arise regarding the interpretation of events and one may say that a limiting factor in the Tibetan narrative is the paucity of sources. Unlike other nomadic societies on the borderlands of China whose history has to be entirely constructed based on Chinese sources as they were a pre-literate people, Tibetans have written records. However, they could not produce massive amounts of literature in the early period as compared to China, where the annals composed in the court meticulously recorded a large number of events. Ultimately, we can get a clearer understanding of ancient Tibet only through archaeological studies that are very meagre.

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