

Tibetan studies in Australia: politics

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Researchers in Australia have long made an important contribution to our understanding of the politics of contemporary Tibet. This contribution continues today, with a new generation of scholars shining light on Tibetan society and its complicated relationship with the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) and the People's Republic of China (PRC). Writing over five years ago, Colin Mackerras noted Australia's surprising strength when it comes to the study of Tibet, highlighting the diverse work of a range of Australia-based scholars.¹ In this brief review, I focus on new research related to the politics of Tibet since the publication of Mackerras' 2011 report.

He Baogang, Alfred Deakin Professor and Personal Chair in International Relations at Deakin University, has a longstanding interest in the 'Tibet problem' in both Chinese politics and international relations. His new book draws together a number of previously published articles and new material to explore how democratic governance can offer a viable solution to the place and status of Tibet within China.² He argues that new forms of democratic governance, chiefly a deliberative referendum, could help solve contentious national issues, such as the status of Tibet and Taiwan.

Ben Hillman at the Australian National University has spent nearly two decades studying the Tibetan communities of Southwest China, exploring ethnic policy and governance issues, as well as the important role that patronage and power plays in sustaining CCP rule in rural frontier areas.³ He is currently working on a new project that seeks to document the agency and diversity of Tibetan lives in a rapidly changing China. Using a series of life stories, the project seeks to move beyond stereotypes to reveal the complex ways Tibetans pursue their life chances and the implications for Tibetan identity and culture. Hillman is one of Australia's leading experts on the politics of ethnicity in China, and has recently teamed up with Gerald Roche and myself to explore how urbanization functions not only as a tool of ethnic governance for the Party-state but



also as dynamic sites for Tibetan counter-mobilization across the Tibetan plateau.⁴

In my own work on ethnic policy in China, I've sought to highlight the unique challenges Tibet and Xinjiang present for Party leaders in Beijing. These two remote yet highly strategic territories possess demographic majorities that share neither the same culture nor belief system as the one billion strong Han ethnic community. While the Party-state claims 'Chinese' links with these regions going back centuries, there is a strong memory of recent colonialism that is exasperated by a heavy-handed, top-down security strategy. While some advocate a second generation of ethnic policies, aimed at weakening minority rights and identities, stability maintenance (*weiwen*) remains the abiding priority, meaning the current approach of more intrusive governance and state-led developmentalism continues to drive Beijing's approach to the two regions.

The Melbourne-based independent scholar Gabriel Lafitte has spent most of his life documenting the colonial nature of Chinese rule over Tibet. His 2013 book, *Spoiling Tibet*, highlights the resource nationalism behind the extraction of mineral resources (copper, gold, silver, uranium, etc.) from the Tibetan plateau, and more recently, he has been exploring the appropriation of the plateau's water resources for bottled water, hydro-electric power and now its diversion to other parts of China as a part of the South-North Water Transfer Project. Much of Lafitte's research can be found through his blog, Rukor.

In his new book *The Buddha Party*, Professor John Powers analyses how the Chinese Communist Party is co-opting and re-defining Tibetan religious practices, arguing religion has emerged as a new tool of control in the Party-state's ongoing colonial mission on the Plateau. Now at Deakin University, Powers is one of Australia's leading experts on the history of Tibetan Buddhism, but in recent years he has turned his attention to the contemporary politics of Tibet and how the Party-state uses history and now religion to reshape the public narrative on Tibet both domestically and overseas.

There is also renewed scholarly interest in the Tibetan community in Australia. Around one hundred Tibetans arrive in Australia each year under the government's Special Humanitarian Programme. Julie Blythe, a PhD student at La Trobe University, is exploring the community's views on conflict and conflict transformation, asking how the Tibetan community in Australia negotiates conflict in their daily lives. While Ms Blythe's focus is on the Tibetan community in Sydney and Melbourne, Jennifer Rowe, a PhD student at the University of Queensland, is studying the Tibetan community in Brisbane and how they negotiate their identity and culture in exile.

In his 2011 article, Colin Mackerras noted that "public opinion in Australia tends strongly to side with the Dalai Lama against the Chinese over the Tibet issue." Yet the tide might be turning due to concerted efforts by Chinese officials and their allies in Australia

to reshape public opinion on the Tibet issue. John Howard was the last Australian prime minister to meet with the Dalai Lama, in 2007, with the Nobel laureate being snubbed by top politicians during five subsequent visits to Australia. Pro-Tibet community groups, like the Australia-Tibet Council and Students for a Free Tibet, now struggle for new members and must compete with a range of pro-CCP delegations and united front organs like the Australia-Tibet Compatriots Friendship Association and the Australian Council for the Promotion of Peaceful Reunification of China. It is hoped, however, that Australian scholars will continue to probe the political sensitivities associated with Tibet's status and the lives and life chances of Tibetan people both inside China and in exile.

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Notes

- 1 Mackerras, C. 2011. 'Tibet studies in Australia, Hong Kong and Singapore', *Asian Ethnicity* 12(3):265-83.
- 2 He Baogang. 2015. *Governing Taiwan and Tibet: Democratic Approaches*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press.
- 3 Hillman, B. 2014. *Patronage and power: Local state networks and party-state resilience in rural China*. Palo Alto: Stanford University Press; Hillman, B. & Tuttle, G. 2016. *Ethnic Conflict & Protest in Tibet and Xinjiang*. New York: Columbia University Press.
- 4 <https://tinyurl.com/tibetcit>
- 5 Leibold, J. 2013. *Ethnic Policy in China: Is Reform Inevitable?* Honolulu: East-West Center; Leibold, J. 2016. 'Interethnic Conflict in the PRC: Xinjiang and Tibet as Exceptions?', in Hillman, B. & Tuttle, G. (eds) 2016. *Ethnic Conflict and Protest in Tibet and Xinjiang*. New York: Columbia University Press.
- 6 Lafitte, G. 2013. *Spoiling Tibet: China and Resource Nationalism on the Roof of the World*. London: Zed Books.
- 7 <http://rukor.org>
- 8 Powers, J. 2016. *The Buddha Party: How the People's Republic of China Works to Define and Control Tibetan Buddhism*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- 9 Mackerras, op. cit., p.267

Tibetan studies in Australia: anthropology

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At a recent gathering of Australia's Tibetan studies researchers, held at La Trobe University on 13 June 2017, Geoffrey Samuel opened the discussion with an overview of the trajectory of Australian Tibetan studies since the mid-1960s and the days of Jan Willem De Jong and Joseph Kolmas at the Australian National University (ANU). The first official gathering of Tibetan studies in Australia took place at an anthropology conference in Newcastle in 1988, and was attended by David Templeman, Gabriel Lafitte and Geoffrey Samuel. Since then, interest in Tibetan studies has grown exponentially, both domestically and abroad, and has expanded to include other Himalayan regions: Nepal, Bhutan, Sikkim, and Ladakh.

Early interest in Tibetan studies originated with what Samuel called the "theosophical fascination with ancient Himalayan sages", and a perception of Tibet as a sort of "exotic spiritual museum", insulated from the world. This 'view up to the plateau' has now evolved in to a 'view from the plateau' – not only has interest in Tibet broadened far beyond

Buddhism, but Tibetan studies are no longer Western-directed, and are now also inclusive of Tibetan and other scholars. Samuel concluded by asking: "Are we a community at all, and do we have common interests to pursue?" To which he answered in the positive: "Australian scholars of Tibet and the Himalayas, although scattered across many disciplines, depend on each other to maintain the critical mass of expertise that is vital to the production of world-class scholarship".

Exemplary of the broader, more interdisciplinary nature of 'new' Tibetan studies in Australia is the work of Catherine Schuetze. She has been a practicing veterinarian in the Himalayan region for fifteen years and turned to social sciences to develop a better understanding of human-animal relations in the Tibetan context.



Schuetze is currently researching several facets of human-animal relations, and developing methods and concepts in veterinary anthropology. Her approach looks at animals through several lenses and narratives: the place of animals in Tibetan medicine; their place in the perspective of Tibetan herdsmen; the Buddhist commitment to kindness to all sentient beings; and the current state of veterinary practice in Tibet, which, though predominantly concerned with livestock, also has an emerging focus on companion animals. Schuetze is currently

training Tibetan veterinarians in companion animal veterinary medicine, as well as training herdsmen in administering their own treatments to animals. Her work also involves recording rituals dedicated to the pacification of local deities and to keeping herds healthy, and other rituals involving animals. Finally, her work involves the compilation of a glossary and bibliography of Tibetan veterinary medicine.

Gillian Tan's current research builds on her former work in socio-environmental change among nomadic pastoralists of the eastern