

Tibetan studies in Australia: politics

James Leibold

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

Christine Mathieu

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

Tibetan studies in Australia: language and education

Gerald Roche

As recently as 2011, John Powers could claim that “there are no Tibetan language courses taught at universities in Australia,”¹ and, unfortunately, the situation has changed little since then. The only formal Tibetan language course offered in Australia is at the Australian National University (ANU), and it is currently suspended.² Nonetheless, competence in some form of Tibetan is an important foundation for Tibetan studies in Australia.

David Templeman (Monash), Yanfang Liou and Tenzin Ringpapontsang (ANU); Geoffrey Samuels, Jim Rheingans, Catherine Scheutze, and Elizabeth McDougal (University of Sydney); Sonam Thakchoe (University of Tasmania); John Powers and Gillian Tan (Deakin); Ruth Gamble (La Trobe University); and myself all work, to varying extents, with varieties of spoken and written Tibetan. With the lack of Tibetan language training in Australia, all of these scholars have learnt their Tibetan overseas, in a variety of formal and informal programs. In addition to Tibetan, scholars working on the sacred textual traditions of Tibet also work with Sanskrit (John Powers, Sonam Thakchoe and Jim Rheingans).

Chinese, English, and Hindi are also used as research languages in Tibetan studies in Australia. Political scientists such as Ben Hillman (ANU) and James Leibold (LTU) work in Chinese, as does anthropologist Christine Mathieu (Monash), who conducts research on the Naxi and Mosuo people on the southeastern edge of the Tibetan Plateau. In terms of language teaching in Australia, Chinese is now widely taught in Australian universities, as well as some primary and high schools. Meanwhile, scholars examining issues to do with the diaspora community, such as Julie Fletcher (Victoria University), Jennifer Rowe (University of Queensland), and Julie Blythe (LTU), use English in conducting research. Georgina Drew (University of Adelaide), who works on a variety of issues related to religion and resource management in the Himalayas, uses Hindi as a research language, as does Ruth Gamble in her work in India. Jane Dyson (University of Melbourne), who works in the Indian Himalayan state of Uttarakhand with communities that once had

trading relations with Tibetans north of the Himalayas, works in both Hindi and Garhwali.

Other lines of research in Australia that intersect with Tibetan studies have opened up new linguistic horizons beyond Tibetan, Chinese, English, and Hindi. As a country with a large number of endangered and ‘sleeping’ languages, Australia has internationally been at the forefront of language description, documentation and revitalization research, and this expertise contributes to Tibetan studies. Two PhD studies describing languages spoken by Tibetans in the People’s Republic of China have been completed in recent years. One, on the Ersu language spoken by Tibetans in Sichuan Province, was written by Zhang Sihong at James Cook University.³ Another, completed by Henriëtte Daudey at LTU in 2014, provided a grammatical description of the Pumi language spoken in Yunnan Province;⁴ although its speakers are classified as belonging to the Pumi ethnic group, just across the border in Sichuan Province, speakers of the same language are classified as Tibetans.

Two other PhD projects are currently nearing completion at LTU, both being undertaken by Tibetans from the PRC, both native speakers of the languages they are describing. One project, by Sonam Lhundrop, will produce a description of the rTta’u language, spoken by about 4,500 Tibetans in Sichuan Province. Another, by Libu Lakhi, will describe the Namuyi language, spoken by about 10,000 Tibetans, also in Sichuan Province. Both of the projects, as well as Henriëtte Daudey’s, are testimony to the heritage of Tibeto-Burman linguistics at LTU and the work of Emeritus Professor David Bradley and Randy LaPolla (now at Nanyang Technological University, Singapore), and now continued by Lauren Gawne, a David Myers Research Fellow and author of *A Sketch Grammar of Lamjung Yolmo*.⁵ Lauren’s work, in particular, intersects with that of other linguists in Australia who work on Tibeto-Burman languages outside of Tibet, in Nepal and Bhutan—Gwen Hyslop (University of Sydney), Mark Donohue (ANU), and Barbara Ward (University of Melbourne). It is also worth noting the important linguistics work being done in the surrounding Himalayan regions in northeast India, bordering the Tibetan world, by Stephen Morey (LTU) and Mark Post (University of Sydney).

My own current research, for my three year Discovery Early Career Research Award from the Australian Research Council, focuses on how the linguistic diversity of the Tibetan world is recognized and managed within the PRC. I am conducting ethnographic research with a specific community—speakers of the Manegacha language on the northeast Tibetan Plateau—to understand why they are shifting away from Manegacha and increasingly teaching Tibetan to their children. Meanwhile, I am also endeavoring to understand the broad political context within which this shift is happening, and how other Tibetan communities in the PRC are responding.⁶

In addition to this research on language, education is now emerging as a field of research by Tibetan graduate research students in Australia. PhD candidate Rigdrol Jikar at the Victoria University is undertaking a project examining the internationalization of higher education in the PRC, and how Tibetan students access and interact with this emerging educational field. Jia Yingzhong, another Tibetan student at Victoria University, graduated with a Masters in Education in 2015, with a thesis examining how culturally-responsive pedagogy for Tibetan students in the PRC improved their English-learning outcomes.⁷ Finally, Lhamotso, a Tibetan from the culturally and linguistically distinct Tibetan region of Rgyalrong, is currently undertaking a PhD in Education at Deakin University. Her research focuses on professional development amongst Tibetan English language teachers in Rgyalrong.

In summary then, except for scholars working in English, Chinese, or Hindi, Australia’s Tibetan studies community has flourished despite the lack of language training opportunities in Australia. Australia’s strengths in language documentation and description have given the country an important role in describing the region’s undocumented languages. Additionally, Australia, as a huge recipient of international students, especially from the PRC, has the potential to be an important site for training future Tibetan educators.

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Notes

- 1 Mackerras, C. 2011. ‘Tibetan Studies in Australia, Hong Kong, and Singapore’, *Asian Ethnicity* 12(3):265–283, p.267.
- 2 <https://tinyurl.com/studytibetanANU>
- 3 <https://researchonline.jcu.edu.au/31252>
- 4 <https://tinyurl.com/wadupumi>
- 5 <https://eprints.soas.ac.uk/23711>
- 6 See Roche, G. 2017. ‘The Transformation of Tibet’s Language Ecology in the Twenty-first Century’, *The International Journal for the Sociology of Language* 245:1–35; <https://doi.org/10.1515/ijsl-2017-0001>
- 7 See Jia Yingzhong. 2015. ‘Exploring the elements of a quality English language program for Tibetan students: A case study of Gang Jong Normal University’, *Global Childhood Studies* 5(4):437–451; <https://tinyurl.com/yinzong>

Tibetan region of Kham,¹ examining how pastoralists perceived the rapid changes taking place in their traditional pastures under the influence of government policy, international development, and religion. In this work, Tan focused on change as processes of adaptation and transformation. Adaptation implicates variables that may shift and alter human-non-human relationships but where these relationships are still relatively intact. Transformation, on the other hand, signals a rupture that may or may not be reversible. With a focus on territorial deities, Tan’s current work builds on these insights to explore the interplay between ecology and religion on the Tibetan plateau. Drawing from Gregory Bateson’s *Steps to an Ecology of Mind*, she proposes that in the Tibetan pastoralist context, the terms ‘ecology’ and ‘religion’ inform each other, and may be regarded as inherently connected. At the heart of this analogy are the relationships that people have with the entities constituting both their ecological systems and their religious systems.

Yan Fang Liou’s ethno-musicological research focuses on the outer and inner performances involved in Tibetan Buddhist rituals. Her work is based on a case

study of the Two-Arm Mahakala ritual of the Karma-Kagyü order, in which she considers the connections between outer performance, which includes musical behaviours (chanting and the playing instruments) and physical behaviours (displaying mudra), and inner performance (spiritual visualisation). Ritual performance and music connect and work together: the outer performance initiates the ritual, while the inner performance fulfils

the ritual’s religious function. Liou works with emic concepts of music and notation to explore how ritual instruments are played. She draws from linguistics, musical semantics, and American folklore studies to develop the methodology and concepts to show how music produces both meaning and function for the community.

As for my part, following conversations at the IUAES-CASCA conference in Ottawa

this year, I am now planning to revisit my doctoral work in the ethno-history of the South-western Sino-Tibetan borderland (Naxi and Mosuo people) in order to 1) make some of my findings more accessible to anthropologists working in the region, and 2) develop some of the implications of this research for anthropological theory. The structural and historical exploration of mythology, ritual and kinship revealed a web of inter-connections between traditional beliefs, folk behaviours, and politics, and allowed a reconstruction of the shaping of ‘Naxi’ and ‘Mosuo’ polities under Ming indirect rule. I have thus argued that the deliberate adjustment of mythology and ritual by local elites who were well-versed in local lore as well as Chinese and Tibetan civilizational modes, spurred and legitimated the transformation of the societies in this region from tribal to feudal. My analytical method made extensive use of the structuralist theories of Edmund Leach and Claude Lévi-Strauss, confirming these scholars’ enduring genius as well as calling for theoretical fine-tuning.

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Notes

- 1 See her book *In the Circle of White Stones: Moving Through Seasons with the Nomads of Eastern Tibet*, <https://tinyurl.com/giltanstones>

