

Wang Hui 汪晖,

Dongxi zhijian de Xizang wenti

东西之间的西藏问题

(The "Tibetan Question" between East and West),

Beijing, Sanlian shudian, 2011.



The "Tibetan question" between East and West is a collection of three essays. They are now translated into English, with the first and namesake essay and the third essay on Okinawa published in *The Politics of Imagining Asia* (2011a), and the second essay on what Wang Hui terms *trans-systemic society* published in *Boundary* (2011b). This review concerns the original Chinese version.

The Tibet essay was first published in 2008 in the magazine *Tianya* 天涯, as a topical essay in response to the 2008 events that can be arguably considered a watershed in the history of contemporary China. It is a telling fact that before 2008, no Chinese intellectual of some weight had really written about Tibet, whether or not from a Chinese nationalist perspective. As Wang Hui himself criticizes, modern China shows an "ignorance and ignoring" towards Tibet, while "scholars of a minority background who know a variety of minority languages" are "confined in regional and ethnic studies" (p. 138). The Chinese educated readership turned its attention to Tibet only because of the demonstrations and riots in which "business held by Han Chinese and Muslims are attacked," and especially because of the subsequent Western reactions, in which something more fundamental was attacked.

The Reform period of contemporary Chinese history, or in its original Chinese, Reform (*gaige* 改革) and Opening-up (*kaifang* 开放), is powered by a narrative that posits a fundamental compatibility between the Chinese nation, in its historically contingent but transcendentally reified borders and in its specific forms shaped by the Communist history, and the liberal and neo-liberal global order led by the Western world. When "the passing of the Olympic torch [...] was seriously obstructed by Tibetan exile groups and Western movements for Tibetan independence," the sacred body of the Chinese nation was directly contradicted by normal, left-leaning Westerners not particularly ill-disposed towards China, epitomized by the Youtube videos where Chinese and Tibetan (!) flags were shown together, with proclamations of "I love China! I love Tibet!"

It is in order to address this widespread bewilderment that Wang Hui's Tibet essay puzzlingly begins not with anything having to do with Tibet itself, but with a history of the western perception and conceptualization of Tibet. Wang Hui inevitably refers to *orientalism*, but with the Saidian critical stance softened. His readership, already convinced of Western malice, was curious about something else, namely the incomprehensible element that cannot be reduced to Western malice. He draws on the Western critical literature of Western perception of Tibet, of which the best-known example is Lopez (1998), mostly from a pro-Independence, hard *rangtzenpa* stance, and adapts them to explain why ordinary Westerners are so obsessed with a free Tibet. The perplexed Chinese reader in 2008 is presented with helpful facts, for

example, that the imagination of Tibet as a “peaceful country” dates to Ippolito Desideri (b. 1684), or that the spiritual crisis in the 60’s West made young people search for meaning in Chinese communists or Tibetan gurus.

The other topical element, i.e., the protests and riots in 2008, was attributed by Wang Hui to economic marginalization in a capitalist economy. This seemed plausible in 2008, as the Lhasa riots did present some family resemblance to classical race riots, but does not date well since. Wang Hui’s perception of Tibet is primarily shaped by his friendship and intellectual engagement with the anthropologist Xiao Wangzhi, a half-Tibetan Yunnanese working on the multicultural Southern fringe of Tibetan areas. This led him to underestimate the potential energy of nationalist mobilization in areas characterized by a dominant Tibetanness.

Amdo, in particular, is already recognized by Wang Hui as the focal region of Tibetan demonstrations (“Ngawa (Sichuan) and the Tibetan areas of Qinghai and Gansu,” p. 3). The Amdo writer Zhogs Dung, better known as an anti-clerical partisan of modern rationality, wrote an exuberant pamphlet *Gnam-sa go’byeḍ* (2010) after the 2008 events, in which he praised the “maroon revolution” after the color of the robe of ordained monk, and predicted that the spirit of the Tibetan nation was going to be awakened by its echoes. Amdo society after 2008 was indeed marked by heightened political, religious and cultural activity of the ethnic-linguistic-religious complex commonly subsumed under nationalism. This manifested in ways both officially tolerated (*dge-bcu* “Ten Virtues,” the movement for a pure Tibetan language) and repressed (self-immolation), which has attracted some recent academic attention.¹

Reading this 2008 essay in 2018, I am struck by its historical treatment, which typifies a recent trend, both inside and outside China, which Uradyn E. Bulag (2011, 2017) terms the “Imperial turn of Chinese anthropology.” According to Bulag, himself sympathizing with this trend, the self-conception of Chinese nationalism turns further and further away from the identification with the Han Chinese core and assimilation to (Han-)Chinese culture as an ideal, but more and more with the Inner Asian dynasties that created the complex empire which, like modern PRC, comprises both China proper and a large chunk of Inner Asia. In the traditional *hua-yi* dichotomy, the intellectual elite of modern China increasingly consider themselves no more as inheriting a China which asserts itself as culturally Han Chinese (*hua* 华) against its barbarian invaders, but inheriting the cosmopolitan empires of the Inner Asian (*yi* 夷) dynasties. In a historical irony, the Inner Asia centered historiography of Okada Hidehiro, Sugiyama Masaaki, and the body of American historiography on Qing recently polemicized under the title of New Qing History, hitherto attacked as denying the culturally Han-Chinese nature of Chinese empires, is more and more adopted in a quest that Bulag refers to as a quest to “seize the inheritance of the Mongol Empire” (2011: 92).

Wang Hui’s affinity to this trend can be seen in his justification of the Chinese incorporation of Tibet, which follows Shi Shuo 石硕 (1994)’s highly creative historiography. Shi Shuo writes about the Imperial (7th-9th century A.D.) and post-Imperial Tibetan history as one of eastwards expansion. Faced with a

¹ See Buffetrille & Robin, 2012; Gaerrang, 2012; Buffetrille, 2016.

westward expanding China, eastwards expanding Tibet naturally merged into a new political entity that was simultaneously China and Tibet. In a recent article by Chen Bo 陈波 (2016), in which the vision of Chengdu Tibetologists is most clearly articulated, the Chinese term of China (*zhongguo* 中国, the central land) is superimposed on the Tibetan notion of Central Tibet, *yul-dbuw* (the central land). There is no need for Tibet to assert its independence, as the whole Chinese state and territory is the Tibetan national state and territory, the notion of “the central land” being capable of sustaining multiple, conflicting historical constructions.

Wang Hui's approval of the historiography of Chengdu Tibetologists typifies his view of China, from its earliest beginning down to the modern PRC, as a *trans-systemic society*, the subject of the second essay in the collection. China is neither a nation-state nor a civilization masquerading as a state, but a state-society that lies across mutually influencing but heterogeneous civilizations. He draws on the work of historian Hamashita Takeshi on the tributary system (1990) for a new imagination on China and East Asia. Pre-modern East Asia, with a Chinese cultural and imperial core and a complex network of tributary relationships of *chaogong* 朝贡, *fanshu* 藩属 and *fandi* 藩地, is considered a naturally superior system both to the economic exploitation of colonialism and neo-colonialism, and to the straitjacket of Westphalian sovereignty and Wilsonian nation-states.

The recent history of Tibet, to Wang Hui, is one of brutal colonialism and constraining nationalism imposed by the ascendant West to the benign tributary network of the Qing. A “politics of translation” decontextualized the benign and ambiguous tributary system to the word *sozerainty*, an ambiguous notion, which offered Western powers the elbow room to “recognize the Chinese *sozerainty* in Tibet, while at the same time supporting Tibetan separatism under the name of autonomy” (p. 66; emphasis mine). Wilsonian national self-determination brutally imposes a system born on Western soil as the “normal” state of affairs, which makes China, a trans-systemic society, an “artificial and coercive” (p.53) anomaly. More concretely, the Younghusband invasion of Tibet showed Tibetans the Chinese inability to protect Tibet from foreign interference, thus “caused centrifugal tendencies in Tibet” (p.56). His third essay, analyzing the history of the Ryūkyū islands, similarly contrasted the peaceful old world of tributary relations to the modern brutality of Japanese colonialism and American global hegemony.

Wang Hui defends a “dynamic” historiography against nationalist historiographies, which he deems “centralizing” and “exclusive” of both the Chinese (“unifying”) and Tibetan (“separating”) kinds. The Chinese state is seen as the institutional expression of his ideal trans-systemic society. Much as early-20th century Japanese ideology of “*kindai no chōkoku* 近代の超克,” Wang Hui attempts simultaneously to defend and shape the Chinese state by appealing to an ideal image of his own making. The tension between the ideal anchored in an idealized past and the reality of the post-Cultural Revolution China, which behaves more and more like a regular, assimilationist nation-state of the Central European kind, is most evident in his treatment of the marginalization and the gradual disappearance of the Tibetan language.

Wang Hui treats marketization and globalization as a kind of impersonal *force majeure*, which inevitably leads to a natural imposition of the Chinese language and culture over the minority ones. The demise of the Tibetan language is considered to be essentially a neo-liberal ill which can be tempered by governmental “support for minority languages” (p.129) – if an ill at all indeed, as he declares, in a rather offhanded way, that it is counterproductive “to impose linguistic difference with modern ideas about ethno-national identity, given that Chinese and Tibetan are kindred languages” (p.128).

That the government plays only a neutral, if not actively benevolent, role in the assault of capitalist homogenisation of minority culture is not necessarily borne out by facts. For example, the most important political and commercial centre of the Northern part of Amdo is Xining, an officially ethnic Han city. For one sixth of Tibetans living under the Chinese state, career advancement brings one and one’s children to Xining. Educated Tibetans who work in Xining have petitioned the government for years in order to create a Tibetan-language school for their children, a demand stubbornly refused. It is debatable whether the equation between career advancement and big-city commodities with linguistic assimilation is inevitable. Imagining the state to be eager to protect linguistic diversity, but for neo-liberal obstacles to its capacity of action, is probably rose-tinted.

To this day, the casual tourist can stroll around Beijing and stumble on survivals of a different attitude to cultural diversity. The staple tourist attraction of Yonghe Temple, a Gelug monastery patronized by the Qing emperors, still houses dozens of Mongolian-born monks who can speak with visitors in an excellent Amdo Tibetan. The imperial imagination, in the ideal case, might bring a measure of magnanimity and flexibility to the decision-making of the Chinese state. Little suggests that this is the case, as even Mongolian-language education, hitherto considered politically neutral, is increasingly being banned in an increasingly fervent drive of assimilation to solve the national question once and for all². In this aspect, the imperial turn in Chinese anthropology occupies a position similar to other ideological movements in China: it justifies the Chinese state as a successor to the magnificent, multicultural world of the Qing empire, but has little power to move it to act in a way that befits this position.

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² In the Mongolian autonomous prefecture of Bayangool, Xinjiang, the last Mongolian-medium school, was converted to a Chinese-medium school. The official news article covering the event (online) is couched in a rhetoric that associates Mandarin Chinese both with “the splendid traditional Chinese culture” and “being a civilized person.”

URL: http://www.xjbz.gov.cn/html/news/bm/2017-9/10/17_06_55_540.html

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