DISCUSSION PAPER SERIES

Centre for New European Research
21st Century COE Programme, Hitotsubashi University

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Somewhere between Success and Neglect: the Social Existence of Tibet in Switzerland

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April 2005

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1. From the “external Other” to the “internal Other”

From the time of Columbus’ “discovery” of the American Continent to the emergence of numerous “newly independent states” in Africa and Asia after the Second World War, many non-European regions throughout the world, either directly or indirectly, felt the influence of European colonial rule. The relationship between the “European” and the “non-European” world during that time rested on the former using the power of knowledge and authority to penetrate beyond the geographical bounds of Europe to the latter, and the former and representing, in a one-sided manner, the latter as the Other.

The Second World War displaced some 30 million people. The problem of how to deal with this vast number of people led to the “Universal Declaration of Human Rights” in 1948, which in turn led to the enactment of the “Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees” in Geneva in 1951. The ideals of “citizenship” born out of the French Revolution certainly gave birth to the notion of “refugees”---as distinct from displaced peoples---that applies to people crossing borders to escape or seek refuge. It can be said that the modern notion of “refugee”, however, came into being after the Geneva Convention. Through the establishment of international institutions after this treaty to grant status to and

protect refugees, [1] Western European countries were to experience population inflows not only from Eastern Europe and Russia, regions connected by land, but also from far away non-European regions such as East Asia, Africa, Oceania, and so on. With the addition of immigrants seeking work, Europe was to take in massive numbers of non-Europeans, but not as "*external* Others" as had been the case till then, but as "*internal* Others". This presented new and various problems for both the Europeans and the immigrants and refugees. Circumstances differed widely for immigrants: countries like Netherlands and Sweden being forerunners in adopting multicultural policies; Germany having strong exclusive tendencies based on *lex sanguinis*; and France valuing cultural assimilation. But coming from different cultures, what kinds of experiences did immigrants have within European civilization? And what did Europe, which in the past was in a position of control through the administration of its colonies, incorporate from these cultures into their national polices, laws or private aid programs?

The 1960's and 1970's, when immigrants and refugees began to increase, were also decades, especially in the U.S. and Europe, that saw a wide-spread reexamination in academia and intellectual trends of the relationship with the Other. Even in the realm of popular culture, along with the loose tide of "anti-modernism", interest in things "non-European" grew, and has continued to grow in varying forms. Just as when one examines Colonial rule and the experiences of the colonized, one must look at the problem of the "internal

[1] The IRO (International Refugee Organisation) was established in 1947, followed by the UNHCR (United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees) in 1950.

Other” in Europe within the broad context of the co-relation of cultures.

2. The importance of “existing”

It was an extension of interest in the above questions that led this author to conduct a two-year study of Tibetans in and around Zurich, Switzerland and Tibetan Buddhism in German-speaking Europe. Roughly 40 years have passed since the Tibetans living in Switzerland first came from Nepal. Tibetans in Switzerland are relatively well-off, and most live stable lives enjoying the security of Swiss society. Being Buddhists, Tibetans are not seen with the same degree of “otherness” as Muslims are. They are not overtly politically[2] active, and their existence is almost never taken up as a problem in Swiss society in general. Aside from some who complain about the claustrophobic size of their own ethic community, I had rarely heard a Tibetan express dissatisfaction or frustration towards Swiss society. I was looking at ways in which Swiss or Europe at large would represent modern Tibet and its culture, including stereotypes, bias, sublimation, and efforts at trying to save the “authentic culture”. In other words, I was trying to observe how excessive and misguided interference corresponded to the “culture” of their community: festivals, the making of films from travels to Tibet, ways of gathering aid for Tibetan refugees in India and Nepal. I had been paying attention to actions and attitudes, direct or indirect, of the host society toward the Tibetans.

One day, I noticed a matter of unease for the Tibetans. In the fall of 2003, the

[2] The Office of Tibet in Geneva is the representative in Switzerland of the government in exile.

Society for Swiss-Tibetan Friendship (Die Gesellschaft Schweizerisch-Tibetische Freundschaft) held an event centering on the delivery of a petition called “For the Right of Self-determination of the Tibetan People” (Für das Selbstbestimmungsrecht des tibetischen Volk) to the Federal Assembly Building (Bundeshaus) in Bern. There was a package tour available from Zurich arranged by the Society which included admission to the in-session Assembly, a meeting with a group of Members of Parliament with interest in the plight of Tibet, and participation in a demonstration on the street in front of the Bundeshaus aimed at getting passersby to take notice of the plight of the Tibetans. There was a request that women dress in traditional Tibetan chupa, and bracelets hand-woven from wool in Tibetan motifs were brought to pass out to people. Perhaps aided by the chupa, the group did turn heads, and some people stopped to listen to the demonstrators, but there were also many people who simply walked right past as if the group had not even caught their eye. After the tour was over, I talked with the Tibetans about the events of the day. When the question arose, they confessed that what bothered them the most was the *lack* of attention. During my time in Switzerland my interest in this issue grew, and I was able to bring up the question on various occasions. The answers, however, were in many case, “being ignored” or “being disregarded”. If intervention through power or the imposition of value systems constitutes a danger to existence by *excessive* interest, then this danger could be called one of *disinterest*. I felt that in this vague sense of unease there was a fundamental problem which the people who live in European society as immigrants or refugees must face.

Studies of the colonial experience and post-colonial research, generally speaking, have consisted of ”critical examinations of the historical and political realities in representations of the Other: the ‘colonial gaze’”. [3] As is the case with Said’s pioneering work *Orientalism*, the main focus has been on criticisms of the technology of control, i.e. the way the West has in a one-sided manner and in an asymmetrical relationship represented the Other, the dichotomization of the ruler and the ruled, and the solidification of such categories, in addition to examinations of opposition to, translation and appropriation of control, and heterogeneous cultures born from the process of interaction. Much attention has been paid to such interaction and the “colonial gaze”, but ”being ignored”, or “neglect”, is somewhat startling. Just as “forgetting” is one form of memory, “neglect” may be one aspect of this gaze. And in both cases, it is the West that either looks or looks away, and the gaze and actions of the non-Western side can be read as a form of resistance.

The people of the host society, i.e. the majority, may not look outside of their own society, but if the minority, or the “internal Other” are not a part of the gaze of the majority, then they might as well not exist in the host society. Anxiety directed toward “neglect” felt by people in a “foreign” culture, as immigrants, is an expression of desire for a “social existence”. In contrast to the “community” formed by people living in the host society, this element not only forms bonds between people, but is also dependent on being the object of attention. In this case, rather than being the object of attention and interference *because* they are a minority, the desire for attention as a “social entity” rises up and takes the

[3] *Shokuminchi Keiken* p.19

shape of a minority. Needless to say, this “social existence” does not imply a mere passive entity; rather, as much post-colonial research has shown, the minority in a post colonial society skillfully employs the arguments of the side that once held power, and modifies interpretations of those arguments, appropriating them for their own purposes.

I purposefully use the words “social entity” and “social existence” so that these notions are not rigidly associated with preexisting ideas or issues such as ethnicity, community, or minority political movements. When a minority group rises up in a particular society, in most cases the problem of identity comes into play and politics becomes an issue. In post-colonial research, there are criticisms of essentialism, whereby a minority group, out of fear of assimilation, asserts any characteristic that makes a point of its distinctiveness, and yet there are also arguments that accept such strategic assertions as necessary, i.e. as identity politics. In any case, the assertion of social solidarity by a minority group is subject to criticism on the grounds that it tries to define the common roots of and essentialize the minority, and that it is akin to the nationalism of the majority. In order to avoid this danger, the idea is to thoroughly do away with any sort of dualist point of view. [4] For a minority living in the host society, however, whether it is active political assertions of existence or rights, or the mere anxiety of neglect far removed from any political aims, there is a distinct desire to continue to exist socially, without being assimilated and in a form that is an object of the general gaze. Though it cannot be denied that there are political overtones in

[4] Criticisms of essentialism are based on the perception of the Other as a stereotyped and homogeneous category, something which Said sharply points out in *Orientalism*, but Said was later to come under criticism for being dualistic. The focus of attention later shifted to a more “middle” ground by Bhabha, Gilroy and others.

this desire, my point here is not simply to examine the subject matter from a narrow framework that argues its merits or demerits. Rather I wish to look more broadly at the form that this desire takes. I consider this perspective to be significant in order to examine how people that were granted status as refugees and suddenly came to Europe continue to socially exist.

3. “Successful” refugees: acceptance into Switzerland

Tibetan refugees are said to be refugees who have “succeeded”. Leaving aside fundamental questions such as how that success is defined, e.g. Tibetans themselves might not necessarily judge it as a success, if it does appear successful in the eyes of the West, that is certainly not unrelated to the fact that many citizens of western nations had more interest in Tibetans than other refugees and provided continuous support. The Tibetan refugees in Switzerland are no exception. Many people involved in the acceptance of Tibetans in Switzerland have pointed out that though they were refugees, they were warmly welcomed as honored guests by their local Swiss host communities. [5] Tibet, for reasons of geographical and political isolation, is one of the few countries that had almost no contact with Europe. The other side of this is that fanciful representations abound so much that the Western conception of Tibet has been called the “colonization of the imaginary”, [6] and with that one-sided image, the idea that Tibet was virgin land untouched by European influence---a pure culture---took firm hold. For that reason, support for refugees who fled from Tibet

[5] Interview with Jacque Kuhn in *Tibet aktuell*.
[6] *On Belief (Thinking in Action) ,* (p.67 in translation).

did not end with food, clothing and shelter for its people, but always had the theme of “saving a culture”. Sentiments such as “though they were refugees, they were warmly welcomed as honored guests” underscore just how important this aspect was.

Tibetan refugees are people who fled the country with or following the Dalai Lama’s exile to India in 1959. Many of the people that had crossed the Himalayas on foot reached Mustang, Nepal and other places considered remote even today. Toni Hagen, a Swiss geologist who was part of a mapping expedition quickly noticed the flow of people. He called on the government of Nepal and international organizations, and began relief efforts. He built not only housing for the refugees, but also facilities for making carpets, an industry which was to become key in Nepal, ensuring the financial base of the Tibetan refugees. At the time there were more than 10 organizations involved in relief work, including the International Red Cross, the Swiss Red Cross, and Helvetas,[7] leading to a relatively quick solution to the most pressing problems. After taking note of the gradual rise in refugees, Hagen began to think about immigration to another country, and made a request to the Swiss government. It was this chain of events that led to the arrival of the first wave of Tibetan refugees in Switzerland in 1961. [8]

There were charity concerts held around Switzerland, Hagen showed footage he took of Tibetan refugees in the Himalayas, and it is said that scholars, elected officials and businesspeople took particular interest in Tibetan culture. A couple

[7] For a more complete list, cf. ”40 Jahre Tibeter in der Schweiz”.
[8] There had been cases prior to this of the acceptance of Tibetan orphans.

of industrial entrepreneurs offered their company housing facilities to the refugees, and later set up a fund that led to the construction of a Tibetan monastery outside of Zurich in 1967. The fund's stated purpose was to found the Tibet-Institut to support, religiously and spiritually, the Tibetan people living in Switzerland. It also stated its aim to aid in the continuation of the traditions of religious history, literature, music, art, linguistics, medicine, etc, in order to maintain and preserve the religious and cultural values of Tibet. The Tibet-Institut was also to provide a meeting place for Tibetan and Western culture.[9] Behind such deep interest in Tibetan culture was the idea that Tibet itself had already been polluted with the culture of China and Tibetan society in exile would have to preserve "pure" Tibetan culture outside of Tibet, in a kind of "ark". Particularly since there was a lack of things that could go into a museum, intense efforts were made in the name of protection of intellectual property. Tibetan monks were greeted with tremendous respect everywhere they went, and monks were regularly dispatched from India to the monastery. Support for Tibet began with relief for refugees, and from that grew such endeavors. In any case, the Tibetan people were welcomed with great interest when they first arrived.

4. Tibet as a vessel

The Swiss acceptance of Tibetan refugees was called a model case. In India and Nepal as well, where roughly 80% of all Tibetans still reside, educational facilities are of a high standard, the carpet industry is successful, temples and

[9] "Warum ein tibetisches Kloster in Rikon?" P.20

monasteries have been rebuilt, and in many cases Tibetan society as a whole (not to mention the lifestyles of individuals) is more prosperous than that of the host countries. One cannot ignore the internal contributions of the government in exile and the leadership with the Dalai Lama at the center, but there was also a tremendous amount of interest from the U.S. and Europe from the time the first refugees began to appear. In particular, interest in Tibetan Buddhism or traditional medicine was an impetus for people, things, and money to flow in, and the excitement gave the impression of success. In Switzerland even today there are quite a few people who became interested in Tibetan culture through aid to the refugees, which subsequently led to a lifetime connection to Tibet. The question of how this “genuine culture” or “bridge between East and West” tailored by European reasoning is being consumed must be dealt with elsewhere, but in the eyes of the Western world, the cultural contribution made is laudable, and Tibetan society continues without problem, is affluent and stable. However, when one backs away from the excitement for a moment and looks carefully at the details of everyday Tibetan life, one can see the fear, however mild or diffuse it may be, of being neglected as a minority in the blind-spot of their European host society. Neglect may be one form of gaze. And in this case, as in relations between the West and non-West in the colonial era, who gazes and who is gazed upon is not subject to change. It is fixed and guarantees the absolute superiority of the former. In that sense, neglect may just be the equivalent of the film negatives of the colonial gaze, representation and discourse. Is it truly just the reverse, though? According to Jean-Luc Nancy, people are not capable of self-completion in death. People cannot die alone.

Nancy holds that death is made complete by others who see it through and tend to it; death is not something that one person is capable of. Nancy calls this passiveness “partage” (sharing), and asserts that it is a fundamental condition of community. There is an activity in gazing and being gazed upon. Even if that relationship is fixed, the Other exists by being gazed upon. However, neglect necessarily implies the impossibility of sharing. There is no room for community to exist there, not even in its most negative sense.

If, like Islam, there is discourse within that interprets that thought as a threat, the Other already potentially exists. And if that discourse contains many misunderstandings, then a very real and tangible conflict will arise. A threat is not something that disappears easily. If the relationship is such that there is no benefit, loss, manifest problem or threat, then there is no Other to gaze upon, and no social existence of the minority. Interest and curiosity are matters of indulgence, and do not have the same power as a threat. One only has to think of the recent trends in refugee problems to realize the significance of this difference. People flooding in from countries all over the world are treated as a burden, and if they are granted refugee status, countries are forced to let them in. As a result, there have been some recent cases where the word “refugee” is not applied and people are overlooked completely.[10]

In Tibetan society in Switzerland, there are multiple layers of Gemeinschaft. Each has relationships with organizations in the U.S., India and Nepal, making it far from a closed space. People who have been adopted into Swiss families

[10] “Kesarete Yuku Nanmin-tachi“, in *Gendai Shiso*, vol. 30, p.13.

before receiving refugee status and who do not speak Tibetan, people who have married with Swiss nationals and people who do not belong to any formal Gemeinschaft work in cooperation with friendship societies run by Swiss and aid societies supporting refugees in India, Nepal and those still in Tibet. In addition, there are administrators of cultural centers like the Rikon Institut that are Swiss yet are important members of Tibetan society. Monks are dispatched every few years from India to the Tibet Institut, and they also carry out prominent functions.

Young Tibetans in India and Nepal tend to want to go to urban areas to find high paying jobs, while entry into jobs involving “traditional” crafts---religious thangka painting, temple carpentry, medicine, astrology---are sought after by a considerable number of Westerners and Japanese. There are also many cases where non-Tibetans also play a central role in cultural activities such as publishing, editing and education. Such people are incorporated flexibly to comprise Tibetan society. Upon building of the monastery in Tibet, the Dalai Lama was asked by Toni Hagen what would happen if a monk who came to Switzerland were to convert to Christianity, to which the Dalai Lama reportedly replied that it might not surprise him, as Buddhism is but one of the many holy things.[11] It seems to me that this dialogue accurately reflects the situation of Tibetan refugee society. There is a “vessel” called Tibet. Its contents change, and it’s not filled with everything pure. Its contents may be Western, or it may be filled with a Tibet designed by the West. The central issue is that it does have a shape.

Tibetan society in Switzerland is in many ways similar. It must always include

[11] “40 Jahre Tibeter in der Schweiz”P.27

the interest and curiosity of the West. If it were to become a closed society, that underlying anxiety would certainly heighten or come to the surface, and to continue to exist as a social entity, Tibetans would have to turn the issue into a political one. In this vessel, there is also a close-knit Gemeinschaft made up of only Tibetans, and there are feelings of rejection toward “Western” Buddhism. But that alone cannot sustain Tibetan society. The interest and curiosity that the West holds is one layer that supports the shape, from within and from without, of the Tibetan world.

Precisely what sort of existence is this vessel? Heidegger proposed a kind of “uncanny” (unheimlich) fearfulness, anxiety, or unease at the heart of existential examination. He asserted that “being-there” (Dasein) would not cause one to feel unease were we alone. The reason we feel unease is that “being-there” is “being-with” (Mit-sein). Feeling lonely is proof that we are not alone. However, what occurs to me is that an assumption is being made that anxiety is equally shared by all Dasein. The majority of a society would never feel unease derived from neglect, despite the existence of the minority. Loneliness is not necessarily felt because of “being-with”. To return to Nancy’s argument, if a person or persons feel concern about losing their social existence, it is because they cannot bring that existence to completion by themselves. Nothing can exist on its own. A vessel is an extension of such form of existence. For that reason, it is not something essential and is not a purpose in and of itself. However, as in the cases of both Heidegger’s Mit-sein and Nancy, the equality of the members of a society is a condition. There is no condition by which there may be a death that is not seen. In “Our common frailty”, written for the Japanese addition of *La*

communauté désoeuvrée, the author makes a claim to the effect that “if ‘Japan’ did not exist, ‘my’ community, (let’s say France…) would certainly not exist in its present form.” But for the “internal Other”, a (host) society that does not feel the influence of the non-existence of something is certainly possible. In this case, what element of community exists between the two?

At present, as the numbers of non-European refugees and immigrants increase, it is not only a problem for the immigrants themselves, but also a problem for Europe. Modern European philosophy, which has celebrated the disintegration of the “community” and sung the praises of the freedom of the “individual”, has as a prerequisite the equality of “individuals”. It is necessary for Europe, however, to accept as its own the problem of absolute (structural) inequality that is inherent in modern society, and then begin a dialogue that treats the problem. It is not a problem where both can be placed in the same framework by finding a common set of values, and it is certainly not a problem that can be solved by finding a new “community” by which anxiety can by relieved. For this author at least, interpreting the mode of being of Tibetan society as a vessel seems to be useful for further examinations communal element of the “internal Other”.

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