Globalization and Resistance

The Tibetan Case

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Introduction

When discussing the question of globalization and its effect on minority populations, as well as the effect in turn of minorities on the future of the world, the Tibetan case presents multiple facets and raises numerous questions related to this issue. The Tibetan minority finds itself having to negotiate between an imposed globalization and one which is voluntarily embraced. Indeed Tibetans are caught between two aspects of this phenomenon: on the one hand, they are coping with and resisting Chinese occupation and colonialism which is itself reinforced by certain effects of globalization (i.e. the need to secure strategic positions and especially resources; the constraints linked to entering the stage of international powers, the adoption of consumerism and materialism) and on the other hand, they are learning to skilfully employ features of globalization as tools and strategies of resistance (in terms of communication, economic mobility, financial and legal assistance, education, etc.). As we shall see, they are becoming citizens of the world while upholding their primary identity as Tibetans.

The Tibetans: A Global Minority Community?

Tibetans are a minority in China, in what they consider as Tibet in China, and in exile, but not yet within the Tibet Autonomous Region (TAR).1 As an ethnic minority group, Tibetans come 9th in terms of numbers (5.8 million) in the list of 56 national minorities (shaoshu minzu) recognized in China. As opposed to the Tibet Autonomous Region defined by China, the territory they themselves consider as historically representing an independent Tibet covers about ¼th of China.2 Tibetans have been escaping their country over the past six decades,

1 <www.tibet.org/Activism/Rights/poptransfer.html>, visited on 31 July 2013.
2 The Tibet Autonomous Region covers 1.2 million square kilometers. The surface of the area considered as Tibet by Tibetans covers 3.8 million square kilometers (approximately the equivalent of Western Europe) and includes TAR, Qinghai, parts of Gansu, Sichuan and Yunnan.
ever since the “peaceful liberation” of the country by the Chinese Communists. In exile and in the West, to describe the experience of Tibetans within China and the fact that many of them live in exile now, terms previously used in the case of Jewish populations such as genocide and diaspora are now also commonly applied in the case of Tibetans as in that of other minorities, although the first term is usually qualified and used in the expression “cultural genocide.” Within the current international context of a rapidly changing world, the Tibetan case could perhaps serve as a paradigm for other repressed or exiled minorities due to certain specificities of their particular group: the choice of non-violence, their adaptation in exile while retaining a very strong sense of primary identity, and their dream of independence or of returning to their homeland one day, and this after sixty years of what they consider as a state of occupation of their country. This paper will deal with both the Tibetans still living within Chinese-occupied Tibet and those living in exile, with the view that they constitute a whole as a global minority community and that their sense of belonging to one people transcends national boundaries imposed by colonialism and exile.

Indeed, colonialism does not only pertain to European history: there have been numerous examples of colonialism as well in countries of the Middle East and Asia (such as in Japan, China, former Siam, India, etc.). Chinese colonization (as seen from the Tibetan viewpoint) since the 1950s has had a major impact on Tibetan society and has led to the emergence of a Tibetan diaspora in several phases, starting with the flight of 80,000 Tibetans into exile in India in 1959 (in fact many wealthier families had already established themselves there in the preceding decade, foreseeing the difficulties to come). Of course, Tibet had already been coveted in the past by the Chinese, British and Russians, but the Liberation Army’s offensive at the end of the 1950s ended in a decisive take-over and in the permanent flight into exile of the Dalai Lama who represents a focal point for the identity make-up of the majority of Tibetans.3

Until 2008, between 2,000 and 3,000 Tibetans had continued to escape over the border into Nepal and India every year (usually after a two or three-week trek over the mountains). This escape is motivated by unbearable living conditions experienced inside Tibet by Tibetans due to economic, cultural, religious, and educational discrimination, to constant surveillance and police control,

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3 The Dalai Lama is usually qualified as being the “sun” for Tibetans, his counterpart or the “moon” being another religious leader, the Panchen Lama. These qualifications illustrate the Tibetan propensity to use natural symbols in their depiction of daily reality and also point to the vital and life-sustaining role these two figureheads play in the identity make-up of the Tibetan community.