EMBODYING THE NATION: CHILDBIRTH IN CONTEMPORARY TIBET

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INTRODUCTION

The phone in my room in the foreign residence hall for international students at Tibet University rang twice before I picked it up. At the other end of the receiver, I could hear Kalsang Choedron, a labour and delivery nurse, describe in short detail how a woman who had been in labour for two days was about to give birth. She urged me to come to the Mother and Child Hospital in south central Lhasa to observe. As part of a larger project on gender, space and power in Tibet, maternal and child health comprise one of several avenues of

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2 All names have been changed to protect the identity of research participants.

3 There is a growing body of literature on childbirth both in and outside Tibet, although at present most scholarship deals with the exile community of Tibetans. See Rozario and Samuel (2002), Maiden and Farwell (1997) and Monro (1999). Other sources include Crook and Osmaston (1994), Pinto (1999) and Rozario (1998).

4 For most aspects of research both official and unofficial, directors had to be notified and government permissions obtained. Travel to many areas of Tibet was restricted and unofficial routes were often not open. Long-term relationships with friends who had semi-official and official positions became the most frequent means for understanding the current context of reform. When not in hospital or health bureau settings, long-term friendships still comprised the primary foundation of trust that opened doors to many avenues of incidental research.
my research into the localisation of medical practices and discourses of modernity.

Lisa Rofel’s emphasis on ‘gendered yearnings’ in post-socialist China has relevance to Tibet after 1980 (Rofel 1999). Yearnings for modernity, access to wealth, education and healthcare are forms of compelling desire among young women since the post-Mao liberal reforms of the 1980s. Rofel points out how modernity after the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) took power in 1949 had been expressed through class identities (Rofel 1999: 29–32), and that this modernity shifted in the 1980s when liberal market reforms opened China up to the world, with modernity thus becoming associated with wealth and economic liberalisation. Similar expressions of modernity can be found in Tibet following the post-Mao reforms. Here, too, forms of desire within an increasingly consumer-oriented society occur in particularly gendered and ‘ethnic’ ways.5

The distinction between Western and Chinese modernity might broadly be described as between a Maoist vision of class difference applied to the peasant population versus a liberal market. Western modernity remains tied to capitalist modes of production, globalisation, democratisation, and neo-liberal forms of governance and economy. The underlying question in Tibet is economic, such that Tibetan modernity emerges as a processual and shifting admixture of economic and social forms specific to Tibet—for example, nomadic and farming communities, polyandrous marriage systems and seasonal shifts in agriculture according to weather. Tibetan modernity is marked by changes introduced through commodities, technologies, movement between sites and other shifts connected to the infusion of new forms of capital into the economy. These are typically combined with state-regulated industries such as pharmaceutical production from the Tibetan Medical College in Lhasa, road construction, transportation, health care delivery, education, communications, banking, insurance, and certain modes of agricultural production servicing military forces stationed in the area.