

# ***How Tibet's Religious and Cultural Policies Have Affected Tibetan's Identity Since China's Reform and Opening Up?***

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**Abstract:** The mysterious Tibet is often veiled, and the reason is its complex religions. Since China's economic reform, Tibetan people often feel confused about their identity in the society because of the mysterious Tibetan religions, which include many types - such as Nyingma, Kagyu, Sakya and Gelugpa. And this contributes to the difficulties for Tibetan people in their processes of finding their own identities. Identity refers to one's own perception of and description of oneself in the society. This paper first introduces the religious culture of Tibet after China's reform and opening up, then gives two case studies of Tibetan people's gradual search for their own identity. Finally, this article analyzes how the behavior of these people affects their identity and whether it makes them perceive Sino-Tibetan relations to be closer. This paper finds that through various governmental policies and programs, together with mainland people's voluntary participation in these programs, Tibetan people have gradually found their identity in today's Chinese society. The relationship between mainlanders and Tibetan people has also been strengthened.

**Keywords:** identity, politics, Tibetan politics, religious and cultural policies, ethnic politics, Sino-Tibetan relationship

## **1. Introduction**

Since China's policy of reform and opening up, the religious and cultural landscape of Tibet has undergone significant changes that have affected the identity formation of the Tibetan people. The rich and complex tapestry of Tibetan religion, with its diverse traditions and practices, presents challenges to individuals seeking to understand and define their place in society. This article explores how religious and cultural policies of Tibet have influenced Tibetan identity since China's reform and opening up.

Tibet is known for its mystery and secrecy, thanks in large part to its complex religious heritage. As Chinese society has evolved, Tibetans have been facing the daunting task of navigating this diversity and its impacts on their own identities. In the wake of China's reform and opening, Tibetans have grappled with issues surrounding their cultural and religious heritage and their relationship with the dominant Han Chinese culture.

In order to understand the impact of these policies on Tibetan identity, this paper delves into the religious and cultural landscape of post-reform Tibet. It will examine Tibet's changes in religious practices, the role of monasteries and religious institutions, and the impact of external forces on Tibetan culture. By examining real-life examples, the paper will demonstrate the gradual search for

identity by Tibetan individuals and explore the factors that shaped their self-perceptions in an evolving socio-political context.

In addition, the paper will analyze the impact of Tibetan individuals' behavior on their identity formation and whether the formed identity has created a stronger link between Tibet and the mainland. Understanding the complex interplay between political, religious, and cultural policies and personal identity is crucial to understanding the multifaceted experiences of Tibetans in contemporary China.

Through second-hand literature, documentaries, news reports, and government documents, this paper analyzes two case studies in detail to explore how religious and cultural policies impacted Tibetan's identity formation. The first case study is a little-known local custom named sky burial (Tianzang), which is hard to be understood and known by people in the mainland. To help mainlanders better understand this Tibet's custom, a Han director, after observing the sky burial personally, filmed and described it to audiences through the form of words (though it was not allowed to be broadcasted). The second case study is about a mainlander teacher, Mr. Wang, who went to Tibet to assist in teaching Tibetans mandarin. This experience helped Tibetan to understand more about Han culture, which in turn led to a closer relationship between mainlanders and Tibetan. Thanks to the limited resources put into education in Tibet, the education level in Tibet did not keep up with the level in the mainland. Mandarin competency is especially low among young Tibetans. More and more Han teachers therefore voluntarily traveled to Tibet to teach Tibetan children mandarin, and what they had learned in their lives as well. These cultural programs gradually narrow the distance between Tibet and the mainland. Through these religious and cultural policies, the paper finds that the Tibetan gradually formed their identities and better integrated into the mainland society, largely through the development of cultural exchanges and mutual understandings between Tibetan and the mainlanders.

By delving into the nuanced relationship between Tibetan religious and cultural policies and Tibetan identity, this paper aims to reveal the complexities of a society undergoing profound change. By fully exploring these dynamics, the paper hopes to provide valuable insights into the challenges Tibetans face in defining their identity and the potential implications for broader Sino-Tibetan relations.

## 2. Background

Tibet's charm comes from its unique snowy plateau scenery. The average altitude of 4,000 meters makes Tibet the closest place for human beings to the sun. Its humanistic landscape that is integrated with nature is the unique attraction that Tibet has in the heart of every traveler who yearns for it. At the same time, there are still many Tibetans whose living habits are very different from the city residents outside the plateau, and it is because of this difference that everything in Tibet has an ornamental value, and there is nothing that travelers are more curious about than the Buddhism in Tibet.

Tibetan Buddhism is a product of the Chineseization of Buddhism, which was formed during the long-term exchange between the original benzene religion in Tibet and Buddhism in the Central Plains and India. Tibetan Buddhism concentrates on the historical characteristics of Tibetan regional culture, which contains a body of knowledge no less than the number of majors in a university and exceeds the scope of knowledge accumulation of any other religion, and has a wide penetration and influence on social life [1]. Therefore, it is inseparable from the history and reality of the Tibetan region to create international Tibetan studies, and Tibet, China, is rightly the homeland of Tibetan studies. The overall situation in the field of Tibetan Buddhism at present is good, and the vast majority of monasteries, monks and nuns from Tibet are sincere in supporting the Communist Party of China, upholding the socialist system, and consciously observing discipline.

## 2.1. Overview of the Symposium on Tibetan Work

Since the reform and opening up, the Chinese Communist Party has upheld the principles of Marxism, proposed a more ethnic and religious policy with Chinese characteristics, and carried out initial practices. As the Communist Party has gained a deeper understanding of the Tibetan people and other ethnic minority regions, the government has become more in-depth about the religious situation in Tibet. In response to the specific situation in Tibet, the government has also launched symposiums to discuss Tibetan work. Since China's reform and opening up, there have been seven symposiums conducted. The gradual development and enrichment of the guidelines delineated from the symposium on Tibetan work is a successful practice of the theoretical system of socialism with Chinese characteristics on ethnic issues, especially Tibetan issues. In these seven symposiums, it is seen that the government has been helping Tibet break new grounds in the early stage and speed up the pace of constituting a moderately prosperous society in all aspects. At the same time, in view of the uniqueness of the Tibetan religion, the government started to propose from the fourth symposium to do a good job in ethnic and religious work and cast a firm sense of Chinese national community [2]. The Symposium on Tibetan Work has set different goals and tasks at different stages of history, and has also continued to steadily promote the Chineseization of Tibetan Buddhism. It was clearly pointed out at the conference that three points are needed to continuously promote the Chineseization of Tibetan Buddhism: First, to build consensus inward; Second, to strengthen positive guidance; Third, to deepen the interpretation of doctrines and teachings [3].

## 2.2. Sino-Tibet Relationship

Stalin once pointed out that a nation is a stable community of people formed in history with a common language, a common territory, a common economic life and common psychological qualities expressed in a common culture. The division and definition of ethnicity is complicated by the combination of various factors such as ethnic origin, history, culture, and ethnic identity, and has always been an issue of keen interest and controversy among ethnographers [4]. For a long time, Tibetan Buddhism has penetrated the spiritual world of Tibetans as a belief system and a potential spiritual power, and has been deeply burned into their minds, thus influencing Tibetan values and outlook on life, and then becoming a guideline for people's thoughts and behaviors. Therefore, it is said that Tibetans are a plateau nation with Tibetan Buddhism as the basic cultural feature. The Sino-Tibetan exchange and integration between Tibetans and Han Chinese for thousands of years is a microcosm of the formation of the pattern of "Chinese national pluralism", in which the Chinese and Tibetan people were not only united and cooperated with their compatriots of other nationalities, but also wrote the picture of the magnificent history of the Chinese nation, as well as the course of mutual learning and common development and progress [5]. The process of interaction, exchange and intermingling of the Han and Tibetan people in history is not only the process of deepening the central regime's governance of the frontier, the process of radiation of the culture of the Central Plains to the frontier areas, but also the process of increasing the centripetal force of the people toward the central regime and deepening their identity with the Chinese nation, and the process of moving the cultures of the Tibetan people toward the Chinese culture.

## 3. Literature Review

It is well known that China is a multi-ethnic country, and a harmonious social system is the foundation for a country to become a great nation. Both Han and Tibetan people are important members of the Chinese family, and since the reform and opening up, the relationship between Han and Tibetan has been inseparable. According to Prof. Yu Min and Zhang Haiguo, researchers in genetics at Shanghai Jiaotong University School of Medicine, both Chinese and Tibetan belong to the Khan-Tibetan

language family and that the skin pattern of Tibetans shows the institutional characteristics of northern Chinese communities [5]. At the same time, the exchange and intermingling of Tibetan Buddhism and Confucianism were also related from a very early stage, starting from the entry of Princess Wencheng into Tibet during the Tang Dynasty, when Chinese Buddhist culture began to spread into Tibet, leading to the acceptance of Confucius' Analects and Zhongyong by future generations and their translation into Tibetan. Therefore, it is known that the relationship between Chinese Han and Tibetans has started since ancient times.

Since China's economic reform, the government has also discovered the mystery of Tibet, namely, the stable development and order of Tibetan society. In 1994, Jiang Zemin pointed out that stability in Tibet is a prerequisite to ensure the continuous development of all undertakings in Tibet and the gradual improvement of people's living standards. Without stability, nothing can be talked about. The stability of Tibet is also of great significance to the reform, development and stability of the whole country. Working together and put our foothold on the basis of doing a good job for ourselves is necessary, on the basis of accelerating the economic development of Tibet and strengthening our national strength. Only socialism can save China and develop China, and only socialism can save Tibet and develop Tibet [6]. Secondly, in 2014, General Secretary Xi Jinping also stressed at the Central Political and Legal Work Conference that "without a stable socio-political environment, all reforms and development cannot be discussed, the best plans and programs can hardly be realized, and the achievements already made will be lost." It can be seen that the stability and development of Tibetan society has taken on national strategic significance for China [4].

In recent decades, dramatic changes have taken place in Tibet. Tibetan people started to search for their own identity after the reform and opening up of the country from a low, incomplete, and unevenly developed society to a well-off one. As shown in Table 1 [3], China first started to focus on Tibet in 1980, and developed a developmental approach to its situation, assisting it to integrate into China and find its identity.

Table 1: Seven Tibetan Symposiums.

	Time	Policy	Purpose
The First Tibetan Symposium	March 1980	The government formulated the "eight guidelines" to enhance the policy for Tibet.	Shifting the focus of work and establishing a new mechanism to systematically study Tibetan work.
The Second Tibet Symposium	February to March 1984	Develop the economy, improve people's livelihood, and start small and medium-sized projects with aid.	Marking the start of a nationwide aid project for Tibet.
The Third Tibet Symposium	July 1994	"Counterpart aid to Tibet, piecemeal responsibility, regular rotation", aid projects increased.	Creating a new situation of national support for Tibet.

Table 1: (continued).

The Fourth Tibet Symposium [5]	June 2001	Increase the investment of funds and policy preferences for Tibetan aid.	Comprehensive promotion of the New Century Tibet Project.[6]
The Fifth Tibet Symposium [7]	January 2010	Putting Tibet-related work in four provinces on the agenda, exposing and criticizing Dalai separatist activities, and increasing aid to Tibet.	Ensure that the four provinces “Tibetan areas” by 2020 to build a well-off society in all aspects.
The Sixth Tibet Symposium [8]	August 2015	Put forward specific measures in policy, economy, culture, society, ecology, ethnicity, religion, party building, assistance, etc.	Opening up a new horizon in the strategy of governing Tibet.
The Seventh Tibet Symposium	August 2020	Make deployments in ethnic identity, livelihood development, ecological civilization, party construction, and Tibet-related aid to Tibet.	Pointing out the direction of Tibet’s development in the new era.

#### 4. Data and Method

This paper employs a case study approach to provide an in-depth, multifaceted examination of how Tibetan policies and religious culture in reform-opening dependent China have influenced the self-identity of the Tibetan people. Specifically, this paper uses documentaries, news reports, government documents, and related sources to find specific examples that provide a more comprehensive explanation of the relationship between China and Tibet and what government assistance the Tibetan people have received since the reform and opening up.

#### 5. Results

##### 5.1. Religion in Tibet

Identity is a relatively abstract concept, mainly through a person’s perception and description of themselves in society, but also the perception of that person by others, or the expression of a common concept among a group of people. Identity can constitute the psychological characteristics, beliefs, personality, appearance and expression of a person or a group [7]. In Tibet, a place full of mystery, everyone is searching for their own identity in the society. Here, this paper will take the documentary film “A Year in Tibet” as an example [8]. Director Shuyun was given the privilege to film in Tibet in 2006, and after she entered Tibet for an in-depth study, he said, “It’s not like that. We are just reacting to the life of Tibetans today, so why must we add the word happiness?” Shuyun was helpless. A Year in Tibet is a documentary with a multi-line cross-narrative, because at that time, director Shu Yun thought that a single-line narrative was outdated.

In this documentary, director Shu Yun saw a lot of real life of Tibetan people, such as the process of the Panchen Lama's inspection of Baiju Monastery and the custom of monogamy, which do not match the understanding of customs of people in other cities in China. The most special is the process of sky burial, in this work which will be shot in the days, a monk in a monastery in Tibet suddenly died, and the director also obtained the help and permission of the local neighborhood secretary and the temple lama, to follow the monk from death to the whole process of sky burial.

In the eyes of many people, death means the end, indicating that everything will be scattered with the clouds and reach the end of life. However, in the concept of Buddhism, death is also a very important station in life. Buddhists believe that death is also the beginning of a new journey, which is for people to go to the next life. Tibetan sky burial is a traditional way of burial, mainly in the hope that the soul of the deceased will not dissipate and hope that it will reincarnate and return to the earth. In Tibetan's eyes, using the "skin" to feed the beast is the most honorable charity people could get when they are dead. At the same time, director Shuyun believes that this is a humane and compassionate way to express the Tibetan people's optimistic attitude towards death. Three days later, at 8:00 am, a sky burial master along with five distant relatives and friends of the deceased went to the sky burial ground, and with their assistance, they were about to start this great ceremony. Starting with the scapulae, they cut the long-dried body and crack the bones into pieces, singing a light-hearted labor call during the process - it is an honor for the Tibetans to assist the sky burial master because they are helping a monk's soul to rise to the sky and express their blessing for his reincarnation. But helping their bodies and souls reach the heavens is not so easy. The sky burial master lit a pile of cypress branches and tsampa on the edge of the platform where the body was smashed so that the smoke would drift away into the distance, and then he would wait in place for a while, holding the dismembered body and shouting for the vultures circling in the sky to come and snatch the flesh and bones of the body.

In this way, the body and soul of the dead will follow them to heaven. But in the end these filmed clips did not make it into the documentary "A Year in Tibet" because not all people can understand the way of sky burial and not all Tibetans want this ritual to be known to the world. Because of this, the barrier between Tibet and the world lies in the fact that these rituals are difficult for the world to understand, and it will take a long time for them to integrate into the world. Director Shuyun also said, "After all, we have to live in the same big family, to have long-lasting peace, communication is the most important; but at present, we and Tibet are now not even able to reach the most basic 'understanding', not to mention understanding and communication."

The propaganda of Tibet is a long-term task, not an issue one documentary film can address. Everyone has their own understanding of things, and as long as there are different ideologies, the divide will persist. Because of this problem, the Tibetan people need to find their identity in society from all different places, and the Han Chinese people are doing their best to help the Tibetan people from different aspects.

## 5.2. Culture in Tibet

There are fifty-five minority groups in China, each of them has their own language, and so does Tibet, whose Tibetan language is their culture. However, this specific language also has a great impact on their education. Today, with the general rise in education standards, the pressure on Tibetan students to learn Chinese and also to be trained in English has gradually climbed, which is undoubtedly a huge pressure for them. At the same time, the education level in Tibet is not as high as in other cities, so Lhasa city bears the brunt of the "15-year free education" to help Tibetan children go to school without any worries.

When Mr. Wang first arrived in Tibet, it was difficult for him to adapt to the lack of oxygen and cold, dry weather in Tibet. He also felt the backwardness of Tibetan students' foundation and the



different pace of classes [8]. Therefore, he created a new teaching method suitable for local students to improve the efficiency of their lessons. “In their eyes, Mr. Wang puts the students at the center of the class and does not make them learn like machines, but gives them the ability to learn on their own,” reported in the news [8]. “We not only teach students, but also pass on our teaching experience to local teachers.” Wang Qiming said. In the process of aid to Tibet, the “blood transfusion” way of education group aid to Tibet changed to “blood-making” aid to Tibet, to bring out the local teaching team has become an important purpose of this aid project.

In the Lhasa Jiangsu Experimental School, there is a student who is an orphan. His special family background did not make him give up learning. There is “no need to pay for school, the school also has a poverty fund,” reported in the news [8]. Compared to his peers, he can’t enjoy the care of his parents, but the guarantee from the national policy inspires him to be self-sufficient and self-improvement. “I want to go to university in the future and be an English presenter,” the student said. With a special fondness for English, he set his mind to work hard. The state’s help for such students allows them to find their role under the whole national social system, giving them more confidence to study as well as a vision for the future, and contribute to as many children as possible from other regions.

Since 1985, the state has been allocating funds to implement the “three-package” policy of “covering food, housing and study expenses” for the children of farmers and herdsmen at the compulsory education stage in Tibet. At the same time, the same standard of scholarship system and financial subsidies have been implemented for the children of urban families in need. The policy provides a solid foundation for students to go to school, afford to go to school, and stay in school.

Over the past 30 years since its implementation in Tibet, the “three-package” policy has gradually expanded its coverage from public primary and secondary schools in 1985 to students in pre-school to high school (including secondary vocational) education. At the same time, the “three packages” policy has also increased the protection of the targeted population, from 1985’s primary and secondary school students of farmers and herdsmen, to the current children of farmers and herdsmen and children of urban families in need of schooling. From 2012, the state also included the region’s road maintenance section children of families in need and road maintenance road shift (work area) staff children into the policy coverage.

The state’s financial investment has provided financial support for the development of education and talent cultivation in Lhasa, and at the same time, the right to get access to education of Tibetan people of all ethnic groups has been fully guaranteed. “All these mineral pigments used for coloring are purchased by the government uniformly, at no cost to the students,” said the director of the culture and art teaching department at the Second Secondary Vocational and Technical School in Lhasa. In the geography classroom of Jiangsu Experimental Middle School in Lhasa, the teacher manipulated the digital planetarium to demonstrate geography knowledge to students through the dome screen, such as the “Big Bang”. In the chemistry lab, the electronic whiteboard allows students to see more intuitively, but also allows the teacher to play video while prompting the focus of the experiment. “These devices have made my learning a lot more efficient,” said a student. These modern teaching equipment has paved a solid foundation for children to receive a full range of education.

In the canteen of Lhasa Jiangsu Experimental Middle School, the management is carefully checking the inspection and quarantine reports of raw materials and the qualification of suppliers. “Thanks to the good policy of the country, the children eat here for free,” he introduced. In order to let the children eat well, the school also set up a special accompanying table on the side of the canteen. How are the children eating? What else do they want to eat? The accompanying teachers are the first to know.

During the old days of Tibet, the majority of those who received education were the children of nobles. In the past 60 years of democratic reform, Tibetan education has made a historical

transformation from “having a school” to “having a good school”. In Lhasa, a modern education system including early childhood education, primary education, secondary education, secondary professional and technical education, higher education, as well as adult education and Internet education has been established, and people of all ethnic groups can enjoy the right to education.

After China uncovered the situation of local education levels in Tibet, the political and economic integration, trade development, and population movement among China’s regions are continuously pushing Tibetan education out of its traditional semi-closed, self-sufficient state for ethnic minorities on the border. In the past, parents of Tibetan people hardly realized the difficulties caused by their children’s lack of Chinese language ability in their future development. When the government was faced with the huge social pressure that these students were unable to find employment for a long time, the method of strengthening Chinese language teaching, mainly using Chinese to teach modern knowledge systems and allowing students to better strengthen Chinese language while learning knowledge became a common tendency of government departments in choosing teaching language.

However, in reality, there is a distance between the objective requirements of social development and the local people’s feelings towards their native language, which makes it difficult to get a consensus. And some parents will not look at the long term and therefore do not see the long-term development trend of local employment, and some intellectuals have certain obsessive emotions about their Tibetan language, so that Tibetan people in some places may have certain worries and concerns about the policy of strengthening Chinese language education. At the same time, some Tibetan people hope that the main curriculum in schools will still be taught in Tibetan for the convenience of students’ learning and for the sake of preserving the national language and culture. According to the constitutional protection and the views of domestic and foreign cultural scholars based on the “protection of cultural diversity” and “protection of traditional culture of minority groups”, it is gradually becoming more difficult to implement bilingual education.

With the dramatic increase of student enrollment numbers among all levels of education in Tibet, We can imagine how much pressure this has put on the employment market of Tibetan college students. If the government does not have clear and strong measures to promote proper employment of college graduates, the non-engagement of college students will soon become another destabilizing factor for Tibetan society. A similar phenomenon began to appear in Xinjiang in the late 1990s and remains a pressing social problem to this day. Therefore, bilingual education is an important supplement for Tibet.

## 6. Conclusion and Discussion

As discussed above, as a city in the peripheral area of China, Tibet still has a certain gap compared to other prosperous cities. Tibet’s religion and history have cast a veil of mystery over Tibet, making it difficult for the Tibetan people to find their own identity. And as the Tibetan people have limited access to education, it is hard for Tibetan young people to compare with the students in other big cities of China.

The Tibetan people have always been a mystery to the rest of China, this paper therefore attempts to study the relationship between Tibet and the rest of China. This paper aims to provide information that may help the readers understand the situation of Tibet more effectively. By looking at the education prevalence rate of Tibetan elementary school students and the undergraduate rate of local Tibetan university students, it can be preliminarily observed that even though Tibet has been gradually catching up with other regions compared to decades ago in terms of education, their socioeconomic development is still relatively slow due to the unique culture and regional characteristics.

With two case studies, this paper presents that Tibet has gained a wide range of support from teachers of the rest of China, to teach mandarin and other knowledge, which played an important role



in the process of connecting with Tibet. For local students in Tibet, the government and the Tibetan aid workers are just as important in helping them to have better foreign language instruction and government subsidies as what they had before. This certainly takes a lot of worries away from them, and also helps them better define what they are passionate about to find their own identity in society.

The government's policy on Tibet did help the Tibetan people to better integrate into the society. Through strengthening the publicity of the importance of Tibet and the popularity of the Chinese language, the Tibetan people can find their own identity in Chinese society. The Chinese mainlanders are also happy to go to Tibet to help Tibetan students to study better, and the Sino-Tibetan relationship has been enhanced as a result.

However, what has been examined in this paper is far from comprehensive, as the importance of Tibetan religion to Tibetan people and the importance of Tibetan language to Tibetan people cannot be fully reflected by the literature search alone. Therefore, in future studies, it will be helpful to visit Tibet directly to conduct surveys and interviews locally, or even enter the local schools to teach and bring a longer term positive impacts, so to observe first-hand the identity of Tibetan people through our own teaching, and at the same time to better help the Sino-Tibetan relationship to become closer.

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