

Les réfugiés tibétains en Inde. Nationalisme et exil

by Anne-Sophie Bentz

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Les réfugiés tibétains en Inde. Nationalisme et exil is—as indicated by its title—about the relationship between exile and nationalism among the Tibetan refugees in India. The author proposes that Tibetan nationalism is a construction of this exile, and studies how this nationalism was constructed and negotiated by the Tibetans and their leaders in working towards two main goals: regaining their lost country, and safeguarding their culture in exile. Although the subject has previously been studied by various researchers working within the fields of Tibetology and anthropology,¹ *Les réfugiés tibétains en Inde* offers a broad analysis of the development of Tibetan nationalism since the exile of the Dalai Lama in 1959. The book comprises four parts: the first is a history of the Tibetan nation; the second depicts the construction of the nation by Tenzin Gyatso, the 14th Dalai Lama; the third is on the refugees' relationship with their nation; and the fourth is about the relationship between India and Tibetan nationalism.

In the first part of the book, Bentz depicts the history of the Tibetan nation—which she differentiates from the history of Tibet—as it was written by historians or journalists. She places these secondary historical sources in two categories: Tibetan and Chinese. This classification does not relate to the nationality of their authors, but rather to the historian's agenda concerning the contentious issue of the Tibetan nation and its independence. Indeed, there are some Western historians who also fall into these categories, just as there are Tibetans living in Tibet who support the Chinese agenda. Thereafter, from the perspective of these two categories, the author describes the Tibetan myths of origin, the emergence of the Tibetan Empire, the 'patron-priest' relationship between the Tibetans

1 The author lists the works of Anand, Dreyfus, Kolas and Korom, but others could be added, including Calkowski (1993; 1997), Cantwell (1994), De Voe (1983), Frechette (2002), Klieger (1991; 2002), Smith (1996), Ström (1994; 1997) and Yeh (2002), all of whom deal directly or indirectly with the issue.

and foreign powers, the emergence of the Dalai Lamas, and finally the emergence of the nation.

Bentz concludes this section by suggesting that, contrary to the claims of Tibetan historians, the Tibetan nation—that is, the theoretical existence of the nation consubstantial with an independent state—is not taken for granted, and was not so even before the Chinese invasion. For the author, it was only with exile and the reality of ‘Chinese Tibet’ that nationalism materialised. At this point in the book, the reader may get the impression that the debate about nationalism—as analysed in the introduction—remains unanswered. If nationalism is to be understood as a modern and Western concept, it is indeed very difficult to apply it to foreign contexts, and the view posited in this book may be disputed.

The second part of the book centres on the 14th Dalai Lama as the embodiment of the Tibetan nation in exile. Bentz rightly recognises that the institution of the Dalai Lama was constructed *a posteriori* as a symbol of the Tibetan nation, and that Tenzin Gyatso was the creator and builder of nationalism in exile. The 14th Dalai Lama indeed created and developed most of the symbols of the modern nation in exile. These symbols address the two challenges of exile: maintaining identity, and, on the political side, regaining independence.

Thus, the author describes not only the preservation of Tibetan arts and culture in exile, but also the preservation of religion, the introduction of democracy into the exile Tibetan political system, the creation of a modern education system and of a more or less independent media, and the establishment of the Tibetan language as a national symbol. The author rightly remarks that all of these processes are constrained by the need to please Westerners, the refugees’ principal patrons, who guarantee the survival of the Tibetan community in exile and who sometimes have contradictory aspirations, such as respect for both tradition *and* modernity. While analysing the different images that Tenzin Gyatso is able to maintain in the West and in China, Bentz shows the tensions between his religious and political status. This is an argument that could have been further developed in the book: the popularity of Tenzin Gyatso in the West is mostly explained by his religious charisma, and it is the transformation of this religion—commodified in exile for the global market (see Prost 2006 or McLagan 1996)—that has given international status to the Tibetans and their nation.

The third part of the book offers the opposite approach to the previous one: a ‘bottom-up’ perspective, based on Tibetan refugees themselves. The author describes how the refugees’ geographical exile was successfully overcome. Having been deterritorialised, they reterritorialised in different settlements in India. From there, they created a successful economic and cultural life, which is described by the author. Bentz then analyses the way in which the refugees used religion to overcome psychological exile, a fact that is unanimously recognised by authors writing on this topic. Here again, as written above, religion is central to understanding the context of Tibetan exile.

For the author, the successful re-settlement explains the emergence of nationalism amongst Tibetan refugees. She studies the negative consequences of exile: many highly educated youngsters in the settlements are jobless and are slowly losing their nationalist engagement with the Tibetan cause. In parallel, the political engagement of the entire community is beginning to crumble, a fact recognised by a number of Tibetan intellectuals. To conclude this section of the book, Bentz describes the political disengagement of Tenzin Gyatso in preparing for his future absence, along with the difficulties of the process. Once again, the author could have gone further in her analysis of the true nature of Tenzin Gyatso’s powers—namely an interdependence of religion and politics (according to the Tibetan traditional mode of governance called *chos srid zung ‘brel* or ‘politics and religion combined’).

In the last part of the book, the author analyses the history of the relationship between India and the Tibetan refugees. The emergence of vast support for the refugees from both the Indian government and the Indian population is described. If such an analysis is important for understanding how Tibetan nationalism was built in exile, the book would benefit from an extension of this analysis to Western influences—recognised by the author but not analysed as deeply—and also Chinese influences. The impression given by this last part is that the issue of foreign influence on Tibetan nationalism in exile is not addressed in sufficient depth.

In her conclusion, the author remarks that during the last 50 years of exile, the ‘flame’ of exile has become weaker and could now even be dying. For her, this is due to the actions of India to limit the political claims of Tibetans so as to prevent trouble with China. It is also due to China itself, which threatens the refugees so as to make them cease any attempts at

negotiation, even tentative ones, on the issue of Tibetan sovereignty or independence. It should be added that the weakness of contemporary Tibetan nationalism is also due to the refugees themselves, who are nowadays leaving their Asian settlements for better lives in the West, thus causing a disintegration of exile society. Moreover, the social composition of the community itself—which is now seeing greater tensions between the youngsters born in exile, their parents, newcomers from Tibet, and the non-refugee ethnically Tibetan populations who today represent the majority in exile monasteries and are increasingly present in Tibetan schools—is certainly the biggest internal threat to Tibetan nationalism. This is, however, not addressed in the book and is one of its shortcomings.

The book is based on the author's thesis, which won her the Institute Prize for the Best Thesis in History and International Policies in 2010. Although the analysis could be extended in places, it is an excellent overview of Tibetan nationalism, and for those interested in the issue—especially if not expert in the area—it is a worthwhile read.

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