

Conference on ‘Contemporary Tibet: Politics of transformation, identity and resistance’ organised by Dibyesh Anand and Tsering Topgyal, London, 28 February 2014

Dibyesh Anand and Tsering Topgyal

This one-day conference was a joint event between the Universities of Westminster and Birmingham. The conference was divided into three panels tackling different yet overlapping themes: (1) transformations and (re)assertion of Tibetan identity; (2) Chinese policies and Tibetan resistance; and (3) the international politics of Tibet. The conference speakers included both established and up-and-coming Tibet scholars.

Chaired by Tsering Topgyal, the first panel opened with Katia Buffetrille (Ecole Pratique des Hautes Etudes, Paris) who spoke about how Tibetan nomads in Amdo are caught between harsh Chinese policies, especially forced ‘sedentarisation’, and the purist exhortations of lamas to adopt vegetarianism. Katia Pisetzsky-Tsarkova (PhD candidate, SOAS) talked about Tibetan nation-building and resistance through the construction of a literary, virtual world which bridges the diaspora-homeland chasm and provides a resilient space for reproducing Tibetan identity. James Connell (University of Birmingham) spoke about how exile Tibetans remember, reconstruct and challenge class in traditional Tibet in ways that resist the Chinese claim of having liberated the Tibetans from serfdom.

In the second panel, chaired by Dibyesh Anand, Martin Mills (University of Aberdeen) tried to put the self-immolations inside Tibet in the broader context of rights violations and resistance in contemporary China. Next, coming from an anthropological perspective on material culture, Imogen Clarke (PhD candidate, Oxford University) analysed the Tibetan use of traditional dress to resist assimilationist pressures from the dominant Chinese, Indian and Western cultures. Lama Jabb (Oxford University) then showed us how Tibetan writers in Tibet are commemorating the 10 March uprising through poetry. Finally, Kate Saunders (International Campaign for Tibet) spoke about the new narrative of cultural resilience spreading across the Tibetan plateau and straddling the diaspora-homeland divide as a formidable challenge to Chinese control.

Martin Mills chaired the third panel and Tsering Topgyal began by arguing that China has moved on from a strategy of trying to deny the Tibetans international political space to one of trying to shape both the exile Tibetan discourse as well as what foreign governments say about Tibet. Following this, Seokbae Lee (PhD candidate, University of Westminster) analysed the nature of Chinese interests in Tibet. Dibyesh Anand closed the panel by pointing out the precariousness of the Tibetan exile polity in India, arguing that India is becoming increasingly hostile towards the Tibetans.

Each panel was followed by lively discussions based on questions from the audience and exchanges among the panellists. For an academic conference, the event attracted an enviable number of attendees.