Emotions under Local Nationalism: The Primordial Turn of Tibetan Intellectuals in China
by Dan Smyer Yü

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Oser, a popular Tibetan writer in contemporary China, writes in The Twin Sisters, “Wherever they [Tibetans] go, they feel exiled…those of them who never forget their homeland are the ones in exile all their lives. They may blend into this world with aches in their hearts, but it is not difficult to recognize them in every corner because on their broad foreheads is carved an invisible mark of banishment…[1] The collective sense of being exiled is a landmark of Oser’s literary works. The intensely rich feeling-tones in her expressions of Tibetan national identity are collectively shared with other young Tibetan scholars and college students in urban China. She is not alone among contemporary Tibetan intellectuals in voicing Tibetan national feelings in the context of China’s nationality politics and how they relate to social equality, environmental conservation, and cultural preservation in the midst of China’s current economic modernization. More and more young Tibetan intellectuals who are trained in urban China are participating in this type of public discourse on Tibetan national identity. In my experience with Tibetans in China, I find that the cultural constituency that Oser and other urban Tibetan intellectuals represent is strikingly distinct from their rural counterparts.

In the last four years of my annual travels to Tibetan regions of Sichuan, Qinghai, and Gansu Provinces, I have met herdsmen, farmers, and monks in nomadic and semi-nomadic sites, and Tibetan intellectuals in Chinese urban centers. While I was in rural Tibetan areas, such as Sertar County and the Golok Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture of Qinghai Province, the image of Tibetan culture is a vibrant tapestry woven with the immensely sublime landscape of grasslands and mountains, herdsmen and their yaks and sheep, and monasteries that are festively decorated with prayer flags and walls of mani stones (stones carved with mantras). In this lively cultural environment, Tibet is a lived reality rather than an idea; a reality which is not verbally expressed but shows itself in the daily activities of rural Tibetans. I share the same assessment of this as David Germano. In his “Re-membering the Dismembered Body of Tibet,” Germano points out that rural Tibetans are reviving their cultural identity but without overtly directing their cultural revitalization as a political representation of Tibet aiming at the Chinese state.[2]
In comparison, the sense of Tibetan culture among Tibetan intellectuals who work and live in Chinese urban settings is mostly not a lived reality but an imaginative representation within the backdrop of China’s ethnic politics, which particularly resembles what Benedict Anderson refers to as an “imagined community.” To have a better understanding of urban Tibetan intellectuals’ emotionally-expressed national feelings, I have worked with several leading Tibetan intellectuals who do not read or write in Tibetan but whose works in Chinese are nevertheless influential among Tibetan scholars and young college students in urban China. In the eyes of rural Tibetans, these Tibetan intellectuals could be viewed as the most Han-ized Tibetans, having adopted Han Chinese lifestyles and primarily using Chinese language in their day-to-day activities. However, what is noteworthy is that the cultural assimilation of this group of Tibetans into the mainstream of China does not silence their vocal representation of Tibetan culture in the public space of China. The search for ‘Tibetanness’ is a most animated and emotional collective work when they congregate. The most notable articulation of ‘Tibetanness’ is several Tibetan writers’ claim of a primordial Tibetan cultural identity.

In this article I wish to engage in a cultural interpretation of Tibetan intellectuals’ imagined Tibet and their evocation of an ethnic nationalism based upon the primordial past of Tibet in both a religious and mythical sense. By linking this current ethnic nationalism with the history of the People’s Republic of China’s (PRC’s) nationality identification project (minzu shibie 识别 since the 1950s, I attempt to make two claims pertaining to Sino-Tibetan studies and nationalism studies. First, Tibetan intellectuals’ current search for a primordial ‘Tibetanness’ as a modern ethnic nationalism is emotional and sentimental in nature. The roots of the collective emotions and sentiments expressed by Tibetan intellectuals are inherently connected with the stigmatization and racialization of Tibetans with modern evolutionism combined with Han Chinese ethnocentrism in the process of the China’s nationality identification project.

The second claim I make is that contemporary Tibetan ethnic nationalism is a neo-primordialism. The basis of this neo-primordialism is what Anthony Smith calls a ‘myth-symbol complex, which enables Tibetan intellectuals to exercise a Tibetan national narration of ‘Tibetanness’ with a sacred character based on Tibet’s Buddhist civilization. This myth-symbol complex is also an integral part of the latency and durability of ethnic sentiment. The primordial culture reconstructed by Tibetan intellectuals is not necessarily a lived experience but is more critically instrumental in their reclamation of Tibetan cultural identity free from externally-labeled stigmas and in their striving for social equality in contemporary China.

Eruptions of the National Feelings of Leading Tibetan Intellectuals

The Poet Yidam Tserang

In early winter 2002 I attended a Chinese national conference on Tibetan studies in Chengdu. In addition to scheduled presentations of research papers this four-day conference also became a site for the emotional expressions of Tibetan nationalism among contemporary Tibetan intellectuals. It all began on the first afternoon when the Yidam Tserang, a prominent Tibetan poet, spoke. He had his script ready in hand but did not bother to read it. He started his talk with a question directed to the conference moderator:

“This is a Tibetan studies conference. Why aren’t we speaking Tibetan?... What is the unity of all nationalities? The unity must be based on equality. Lately, people only emphasize unity without even considering the importance of equality. Since 1965, what we [cadres] have opposed is not Han-chauvinism but so called ‘local nationalism’ and ‘national tantrum’. These phrases are a curse placed upon minority cadres and intellectuals. They have been a weapon that silenced what we wanted to say. There are so many fake Marxists in China and they’re so good at beating up those who speak truths and facts. Perhaps, my big mouth doesn’t know how to praise, but at least it speaks true words. I’m seventy-one. I have to speak true words. If I don’t, my mother will regret giving birth to me...I was born from the womb of a Tibetan mother, and want to continue to be reborn as a Tibetan...I warn you – nobody should look down upon Tibetan culture. If you do, you’re not your mother’s son..."

He wiped his tears, as he continued to finish his speech. On the following nights many young Tibetan scholars gathered around this charismatic poet, drinking and voicing their national feelings in his room and out in restaurants.

Tserang Döndze – A Contemporary Historian of Tibet

A Tibetan historian and archivist based in Kangding, the capital of Sichuan Ganzi Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture, Tserang Döndze is a Tibetan scholar who is outspoken on Tibetan history with a strong feeling-tone. In the opening page of his A General History of Tibetan People, banned by the Chinese state in 2001, he states, “I am a son of Tibetan people. I deeply love my nationality which bred me. I do not have other means to repay her but use my pure painstaking labor to write our ancestors’ splendid history...This, perhaps, counts as my token of repayment to her kindness in raising me!...My subjective wish is to encourage pride in our history so as to strengthen the desire for the betterment of our nationality. A General History was one of the first comprehensive works on Tibetan history written in Chinese by a Tibetan historian. The history of Tibet in his book is based upon both historical events and mythical narratives ranging from Tibetan national heroes and the magnificent Buddhist culture to the Tibetan creation story. This painstakingly written comprehensive history of Tibet is intended to encompass all Tibetan regions.

As Tserang Döndze was also present at the Tibetan conference in Chengdu, we had several lengthy...
issued an internal directive called “Criticizing Han Chauvinism,” rather than “A General History of Tibet?” The difference is that “Tibet?” in China mostly refers to the Tibet Autonomous Region (TAR) that is only part of cultural Tibet. His use of “Tibetan People?” was meant to encompass Khambas and Amdowas in addition to central Tibetans in the TAR. Since the 1950s both Kham and Amdo regions were allotted to Sichuan, Yunnan, Qinghai, and Gansu Provinces. On a political level Tserang Döndzé’s pan-Tibetan inclusion has broken the systemic exclusion of Kham and Amdo from central Tibet. In the traditional historiographical practice of PRC scholars, Tibetan history mostly means the history of the TAR alone. Topic-wise, Tserang Döndzé was ambitious enough to cover almost all aspects of Tibetan culture and people. He intended this book to be an encyclopedic source to emphasize the magnitude of Tibetan civilization in all regions of Tibet. In the meantime, Tserang Döndzé lays out the historical fact that Tibet was once an independent nation, and contends with the Chinese state’s promotion of ‘national heroes’ of Han origin, who, in fact, committed atrocities on ethnic minorities. He writes in his introduction:

“In the history of Tibet, there were numerous national heroes who courageously resisted foreign invasions and firmly stood their ground against national oppressions. Chinese feudal rulers persecuted them as ‘traitors’ and ‘bandits’. However, their deeds won Tibetan people’s respect and love…Among the historical figures in the history of Han nationality, there were also heroes, such as Quyuan, Yue Fei, and Wen Tianxiang, who courageously fought against other nationalities. Han people widely eulogize them as national heroes…However, from the perspectives of other nationalities, these historical figures committed the crime of suppressing and massacring minority nationalities. If they were deemed criminals undermining China’s unity, Han people’s national feelings would be hurt.”

Oser – Writer and Poet

Oser, a contemporary young Tibetan writer based in Lhasa and Beijing, is currently a magnet to many young Tibetan scholars and college students in China. She begins her recently banned book, Notes on Tibet, with this epigraph: “Ah, Tibet, homeland of my many life-times. If I were a butter lamp, how I would forever burn beside you; if you were a soaring vulture, take me to the luminous Pureland!”

This personifying enunciation about Tibet is a frequent theme in many of her writings. She not only shares her private feelings about being a Tibetan with the public but also includes other Tibetans’ experiences under the rule of the Chinese state. In Notes on Tibet, she recounts the experience of a Tibetan monk named Nima Tsering who was appointed by the Chinese government in 1999 as a Tibetan monastic representative to attend an international human rights conference in Oslo, Norway. His attendance was supposed to be a testimony to the religious freedom of Tibetans under the rule of China. Oser narrates:

“On the last day of the conference, the Chinese delegation was invited to visit a famous Norwegian national park. As this young lama was happily strolling in this beautiful park, a young Tibetan woman was walking straight to him, extending her arms as if she was meeting a long lost friend. Nima Tsering was puzzled, but felt he had known her before. He could not help but extend his hands to the woman. However, he did not expect this—the woman tightly grasped his hands and broke into tears. She sobbed aloud and said to him, ‘Gushu [honorable title for monks], what are you doing here? What are you doing here with these Chinese? You’re a Tibetan. You must remember you’re a Tibetan. Don’t stand with them…’ The woman continued her sobbing, ‘Please don’t return with them…’ Nima Tsering said to her, ‘How can I not return? That’s my homeland. If we all leave, to whom are we going to leave it?’…When the airplane was taking off from Oslo airport, leaving Norway, two trails of tears quietly streamed down Nima Tsering’s thin cheeks.”

Most of Oser’s prolific works are indicative of the national feelings of contemporary Tibetan intellectuals. Oser is among the emerging young Tibetan writers and scholars who fully take advantage of the global proliferation of digital technologies, such as the internet, to make her thoughts and feelings available for urban Tibetans and the general public of the PRC. Especially since she had several books published in Taiwan, such as A Memory of Tibet – Twenty-three Elders’ Narratives of the Cultural Revolution in Tibet and Forbidden Memory: Tibet during the Cultural Revolution, she has become a admired writer among urban Tibetans.

Local Nationalism – the Chinese State’s Administering of Tibetan Ethnic Emotions

The collective feelings expressed in the public speeches and writings of Yidam Tserang, Tserang Döndzé, and Oser are not a recent cultural phenomenon. The Chinese state has deemed them an expression of “difang minzu zhuyi” (地方民族主义) or ‘local nationalism’. Originally, on the ground level, local nationalism was voiced by Chinese-trained minority nationality cadres and scholars who felt that “minority nationalities can achieve socialism without Han people’s help.” This term, however, was officially coined by the Chinese Communist Party in 1957 in a document titled “Directives on the Political Rectification and the Socialist Education in Minority Nationality Regions.” The Party politically framed minority nationalities’ resistance to the implementation of the Chinese socialist system as local nationalism. Since 1957 the phrase “local nationalism” evolved into a political and legal label to suppress the national feelings of ethnic minorities.

Ironically, prior to the official circulation of the phrase, Mao Zedong himself had admitted the cultural arrogance of many Han Chinese cadres working in ethnic minority regions. Mao termed this cultural arrogance as dahanzu zhuyi (大汉族主义) or “Han Chauvinism.” In 1953, he issued an internal directive called “Criticizing Han Chauvinism,” in which he says, “In some places, nationality relations are very abnormal.
Under this circumstance, to a Communist, it is not tolerable. We must deeply criticize the serious Han chauvinism among our Party members and cadres. Obviously Mao and his Communist Party knew of ethnic minorities’ resistance to the new socialist China.

By 1957 the criticism of Han chauvinism fizzled out, and the Party, instead, launched a campaign to root out local nationalisms which were in essence the opposition of minority nationalities to Han chauvinism. In this ongoing campaign, the Chinese state has lumped together the emotional expressions of ethnic minorities as ‘national tantrum’. ‘National tantrum’ is my rough translation from the Chinese phrase minzu nao qingxu (民族情绪). The most nuanced part is qingxu which refers to emotionally-expressed discontents and complaints, especially when situated in the political culture of the Chinese Communist Party. In the Party’s history of ‘thought reform’, the phrase nao qingxu (闹情绪) or ‘to disturb with emotional disgruntlement’, was frequently used to quell or dismiss political discontent.

In the context of Tibetan intellectuals and cadres in the PRC, their emotions or qingxu are deemed a potential source of separatism. Dawa Hsiao, a Tibetan scholar based in Beijing, pointed out that since the founding of the People’s Republic of China, no single ‘Han chauvinist’ has been publicly denounced or prosecuted, but more than 100,000 intellectuals and cadres of minority nationalities were persecuted as ‘local nationalists’. The same historical practice often repeats itself in the twenty-first century.

Tserang Dondzé’s A General History was abruptly banned in China’s book market less than six months after its publication. In a small gathering of Tibetan scholars during the conference in 2002, Tserang Dondzé narrated to me and other Tibetan scholars the rationale for the Chinese state’s censorship of his book:

“Early this year, my book was officially banned. The publisher forwarded a letter to me from ‘above’ [unspecified authority] without the name of the critic and his work unit. This anonymous letter lists six reasons why my book was banned: (1) It was written with the author’s presumptuous inclination and partiality; (2) It overemphasized warfare between Tibetans and the Tang Dynasty; (3) It has too little depiction of the influence of Han culture on Tibetan culture; (4) It mistakes Princess Wenchen as the sixth wife rather than the first wife of King Songtze Ganpu; (5) It intentionally raises the social position of religion higher than it should be. The fact is that ‘religion is the opium of the people’, and (6) it negates the historical fact that Tibetan monks were subordinate to the rulership of the Song Dynasty, and it limits Tibetans’ relation to the Song Dynasty to mere economic exchange. Towards the end of the letter, this anonymous critic says, ‘This book has grave political problems. The author has poor scholarship. Because of his arrogance and conceit, the author lists many ‘firsts’ of Tibet. Basically, I feel, because my book was accused of being a tool of ‘local nationalism’, it was dismissed...’

Oser’s Notes on Tibet was banned in early 2004. Here is the verdict of the Chinese authorities:

“[The book] exaggerates and beautifies the function of religion in social life. Several chapters reveal the author’s veneration and belief in the Dalai Lama. Some contents even express narrow nationalist thoughts and viewpoints that do not benefit the unity of China and the solidarity of all nationalities. Some parts of the book turn a blind eye to the achievements of reforms in Tibet in last few decades, and indulge the ‘old’ Tibet based on unfounded hearsay. This book makes incorrect value judgments and betrays correct political principles. The author misplaces a contemporary writer’s social and political responsibilities for building an advanced culture. [The ‘advanced culture’ here refers to Chinese socialism.]”

This type of censorship is the Chinese state’s ongoing reduction of Tibetan national feelings and emotions to a ‘local nationalism’ and ‘national tantrum’. As a modern nation-state, China has shown its painstaking effort to restrain collective emotions that subvert its intended national unity of all ethnic minorities. To understand this ongoing censorship of Tibetan ethnic emotions, I think that it is crucial to connect it with the Chinese state’s nationality identification project in the 1950s and 1960s – a project to classify the frontier peoples of China, who are not of Han nationality but who have been deemed critical for China’s territorial imperative. The principle of this nationality identification project was based on Stalin’s demarcation of a nationality with four identifiers, namely, common territory, common language, common economy, and common psychological nature. Stevan Harrell refers to this historical project as China’s socialist “civilizing project. Half a century later, this theoretically sound socialist project has proved itself as an ethnocentric project but in the guise of the principles of socialist universalism and Marxist-Maoist social evolutionism. What this socialist civilizing project has brought to common Tibetans is what Stevan Harrell calls a “stigmatized identity that gives many contemporary Tibetans “a sense of themselves as backward, uncivilized, dirty, stupid...” This stigmatized identity emerges from the Chinese state’s invention of a new socialist Tibet that continuously denounces and demonizes the traditional Tibetan, and from racializing Tibetans as a “backward people.

**Nationality Identification as a Project of Inventing a Modern Tibet**

In Benedict Anderson’s demarcation of nation he points out, “No nation imagines itself coterminous with mankind. The most messianic nationalists do not dream of a day when all the members of the human race will join their nation...” However, if I read his “coterminous” from the angle of ideology, Chinese nationalism seemed to contradict Anderson’s claim by imagining itself coterminous with humankind based on the Marxist-Maoist ambition to ‘liberate all mankind’ (jiefang quanrenlei 解放全人类). Chinese nationalism was embedded with a conscious communist agency whose teleology was to ultimately transform the plurality of human societies into one single communist utopia. Historically, Chinese communist nationalism started out as a missionizing project for the messianic coming of this distant utopia in which all human differences would disappear. This utopia was imagined along with the Marxist claim of a universal human development—that is, communism as the inevitable destiny of all human societies.
In this respect the Chinese communists were inventing a new socialist tradition for Tibetans. The feature of this new tradition is identical to Eric Hobsbawm’s idea of invented traditions that were “constructed and formally instituted…within a brief and datable period.” According to Hobsbawm, an invented tradition refers to “a set of practices normally governed by overtly or tacitly accepted rules and of a ritual or symbolic nature, which seek to inculcate certain values and norms of behavior by repetition, which automatically implies continuity with the past.” To be noted here, ‘continuity’ in this sense is not the continuity of an unbroken indigenous past but connects itself with certain modern turning points, such as revolutions. In other words, turning points refer to those intentional historical events that decidedly attempted to break away from a particular past in order to establish a new tradition. In the communist revolutions in Eastern Europe and China, this particular past was pinpointed as age-old traditional culture. The invented new socialist tradition was meant to replace these old traditions and to command the populace to break away from them. So, in this sense, the old tradition was supposed to be either weakened or destroyed by the new one.

In their inventing of a communist tradition for Tibetans the Chinese communists also developed their revolutionary continuity by demolishing the indigenous governing body and cultural ballast of Tibet, that is, its chos i ngyur or “polity in which religion and political affairs are joined together” with its accompanying Buddhist monasteries throughout Tibetan regions. The newly-founded People’s Republic of China, in fact, endowed the Chinese communists with the position of messianic nationalists who were bringing the gospel’ of Marxism modernity in the name of liberty, democracy, and justice. This forceful current of communist moral ‘surplus’ was a force of what Pickett calls the modern “progressive destabilization throughout the globe.” The target of this destabilizing force was anything traditional prior to the revolutionary events of the communists. The moral surplus of the Chinese Communists has been imparted to minority nationalities who were allegedly mal-nurtured in their own traditions but had potential to be ‘rescued’ and transformed into new socialist citizens.

The Chinese State, as an agent of Marxist modernity, assigned itself the communist universalizing mission to transform all peoples within its political boundaries into socialists. It possessed an “agentive mode” with the power of both Marxist ideology and the new socialist empire. This agentive mode of power resembles that of the 19th-century Christian missionaries in Africa because it bears a “totalizing moral economy” that invalidates the indigenous and forcefully inserts the exogenous so as to establish a new order based on an envisioned future without any indigenous historical roots. In this agentive mode, Marxist modernity, in essence, was a project of the “conquest of the mind” or the “colonization of consciousness” in which historical and cultural realities are re-interpreted only on the economic scale of the polarizing classes of the bourgeoisie and the proletariat; thus, complex indigenous social relations were reduced to mere ‘class struggle’. Regardless of the historical absence of these extremely polarizing classes, a new socialist Tibet was expected to rise from the Tibetan masses’ denouncement of their traditional establishments. Tsering Shakya points out that the entrance of Chinese Marxist modernity in both ideological and military terms meant the demise of traditional Tibet which is represented as merely serfdom filled with moral darkness, barbarism, and oppression based on Marxist economic determinism.

In Inventing Nations Pickett says, “Socialism is a charlatan because it has repeatedly failed to transcend the exclusivist habits of authority endemic to nationalism…Socialism is obsessed with greed, however, though it generally assigns that vice to a class of human beings rather than to general human nature. By externalizing its chief vice, it is able to vilify an outsider group as a pariah ‘class’ that must be eliminated.” In the Tibetan context, this ‘pariah class’ was often comprised of religious figures and their symbolic infrastructures, such as incarnate lamas as the cultural icon of Tibetan civilization. In his reading of socialism-based nationalism, Pickett notices that there is an embedded force, which specifically aims to annihilate traditions prior to the inception of modernity. He points out, “The authoritative use of all force in the modern age has as its purpose the abolition of an ancient definition of human nature.” In this destructive process, Marxist economic determinism in the manner of ‘class struggle’ was the primary ideological tool to dismantle Tibetan traditional cultural institutions. This massive class struggle uncompromisingly targeted the “pariah class” of the Tibetan nation. The Chinese communists pressed thousands of common Tibetans into the ‘class struggle’ which was clearly aimed to “amputate the traditional defining relations from the individual in order to render him or her an unencumbered and compliant subject of the modern state.”

According to Dawa Norbu’s study, the Chinese implementation of class struggle in Tibetan regions encountered stiff popular resistance that was spontaneous rather than organized. It mostly involved common Tibetans. Marxist ideology was culturally alien and religiously offensive to the Buddhist value system of Tibetans. In essence, the class struggle ideology was a threat to Tibetans’ Buddhist faith. In his comment on Tibetan uprisings in Kham in the 1950s, Dawa Norbu points out, “The Chinese liberators were called bstan dgra – enemies of the faith; the Khampa guerrillas who led the Tibetan nationalist movement
were popularly called *bṛtan sruṅg* – defenders of the faith; and the main aim of the movement was the defense of Tibetan Buddhism as personified by the Dalai Lama.\[32\]

Similar uprisings also occurred in the 1960s after the Dalai Lama left Lhasa for India. Oser has recently collected narratives from Tibetans who were involved in the uprisings. These narratives are particularly revealing about how common Tibetans rejected the Chinese socialist system. For instance, Ani Chenli Chutse, a nun in her early thirties at that time, led over a hundred common Tibetans to resist the Chinese socialist reforms in Nimu County of Tibet Autonomous Region in 1962. They were armed with Ani Chenli Chutse’s ritual empowerment and primitive weapons such as swords and daggers, aiming to drive out the ‘red Han Chinese’ from Tibet. As they were outgunned by the Chinese army, they were killed. What needs to be highlighted is that all her followers were what the Chinese called ‘liberated serfs’ who, in fact, had a deep Buddhist faith. Based on her research, Oser says, “This series of events were called ‘counter-revolutionary incidents’. At the time the Tibet Autonomous Region had a total of seventy counties. Fifty-two of them were involved in these ‘counter-revolutionary incidents’. Over seventy-four percent of people were persecuted as ‘traitors’. Although the suppressing military campaign ended in 1969, it had nevertheless reached a most horrific degree.\[33\]

In the early twenty-first century when Tibetan intellectuals and cadres, who were trained in this Chinese socialist fashion, look back at the historical path they have traversed along with the Chinese communists since the 1950s, what they see are the destructive acts of Chinese communists to Tibetan culture, the demolition of Buddhist monasteries, and the political division of one group of Tibetans from another. For example, Yangling Doji, one of the retired governors of the Tibet Autonomous Region, released a figure at the 2002 Tibetan studies conference in Chengdu which says that during the Cultural Revolution over 160,000 common Tibetans were criminalized as “new traitors\[34\] to socialism in the Aba Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture of Sichuan Province, which has fewer than 350,000 Tibetans. Almost half of the Tibetan population there became the victims of massive “class struggle.\[35\]

From common Tibetans’ perspectives, what happened to Tibet between the late 1950s and the mid-1970s was a Tibetan national trauma. This is why contemporary Tibetan intellectuals in China are making an effort to demonstrate a public testimony of their national trauma. Pentsö Wangjel, one of the first generation of Tibetan communists, worked closely with Mao Zedong and Zhou Enlai on the ‘peaceful liberation’ of Tibet. Afterward, he was imprisoned for eighteen years in Qincheng Prison in Beijing, reserved for political prisoners. In his biography, written in Chinese, he comments on Han Chinese cadres who persecuted him in the past: “Under the empty words of an abstractly acknowledged equality of all nationalities, deep in their souls hide ‘noble thoughts’ of their subordination of minority nationalities to Han nationality.\[36\]

The Racialization of Tibetans as a Consequence of Marxist-Maoist Modernity

In his study of modern Chinese nationalism, Prasenjit Duara points out that nationalism, as the project for the genesis of the national self, is a site of contestations and negotiations because “nationalism is often considered to override other identities within the bounds of the imagined nation – such as religious, racial, linguistic, class, gender, or even historical ones - to encompass these differences in a larger identity.\[37\] In other words, this larger national identity contains various ‘smaller others’\[38\] in empire-like nation-states such as the PRC. Since the 1950s, Tibetans have become one of the ‘smaller others’ of socialist China.

In forging a new socialist identity for the ‘smaller others’, the Chinese state addresses non-Han populations as *shaoshu minzu* (少数民族) or minority nationalities. Both the Chinese State’s and the Han people’s popular usage of “nationality\[39\] almost exclusively refers to non-Han peoples, in phrases like “nationality regions\[40\] (minzu diqu 地区) and “nationality cadres\[41\] (minzu ganbu 干部). It conveys a sense of otherness. The political and popular use of ‘nationality’ resembles that of ‘ethnic’ in the West, which conveys a sense of strangeness and of being an outsider. The popular use of ‘nationality’ in China is what Frederik Barth calls ‘ascription by others.\[42\] In essence, it is an issue of domination. This otherly-ascribed marker shows that the dominant group does not address itself in ethnic terms, whereas a dominated, minority group is represented as an ethnic group in the public space of the dominant group. In the context of China, ‘nationality’, as an ascription by others is also an inherent consequence of China’s nationwide proliferation of Marxist-Maoist evolutionism\[43\] which measures the social and cultural progress of each minority nationality on a unilinear evolutionary scale from the ‘backward’ to the ‘advanced’.\[44\]

When this logic is in practice, it manifests itself in what Johanne Fabian calls the “denial of coevalness\[45\] of others. It refers to the intentional temporal displacement of others, in which the coevalness or the sense of contemporaneity among different peoples of the earth is broken up into separate temporal units of backwardness and forwardness. In the case of China’s nationality identification project, time itself serves as a racializing device severing the shared time of Han Chinese and Tibetans. In the process of Chinese Marxist conquest of the ‘smaller others’, time can be understood as “Typological Time,\[46\] as Fabian says:

> “It [typological time] indulges in grand-scale periodizing. It likes to devise ages and stages... Typological Time underlies such qualifications as preliterate vs. literate, traditional vs. modern, peasant vs. industrial, and a host of permutations which include pairs such as tribal vs. feudal, rural vs. urban.\[47\]

In other words, the quantitative appearance of chronologies is metamorphosed into the qualitative measurements of human histories. Calendrical dates are imbued with sociopolitical meanings, and function as taxonomic references to map out the grand scheme of the classification of cultures with temporal dimensions, such as ‘tradition’ and ‘modernity’, and ‘the barbarous’ and ‘the civilized’. These phrases immediately distance contemporaneous human groups. In the context of China, the Marxist-Maoist evolutionary paradigm reinforced Han
Chinese traditional prejudices toward non-Han populations as savages and barbarians.

This is what has happened to Tibetans under Chinese Marxist modernity. Tibetans are temporalized, spatialized, and racialized as an ‘other’. The Chinese state’s nationality identification, in essence, is a political representation of its ‘smaller others’. This type of representation involves volition and worldview defined by the dominant. In the postscript of Notes on Tibet, Oser writes, “Out of ideological needs, Tibet, at the outset, faces deformation… This image-management process operates with a standarized and legalized system of representation with specialized vocabularies. For the last half century, the image of Tibetans as ‘liberated serfs’ has saturated the populace of China. The adjective ‘liberated’ signifies the modern socialist tradition in Tibet, while the noun ‘serf’ continues to suggest the ‘dark’, ‘oppressive’, and ‘barbarous’ past of Tibetan civilization. These popular stereotypes took effect especially after the Chinese state released a film titled Serf in 1964, which portrayed a common Tibetan named Qiangba who suffered from abject oppression from Tibetan monastic and aristocratic establishments and who was thankful for ‘liberation’ by the Chinese army. Another classic piece of socialist propaganda was called ‘The Wrath of Serfs’ and consisted of a series of sculptures in the Soviet style as a visual narrative about the oppressive nature of traditional Tibet. It was first initiated by the Tibetan Revolutionary Committee in 1972. Photographs of the sculptures were compiled into a pictorial issued in 2005 for the celebration of China’s fortieth anniversary of Tibetan Autonomous Region. These standarized images continue to typecast Tibetans into a social evolutionary specimen of a ‘barbarous’ past.

Wang Lixiong, an independent Chinese scholar based in Beijing, pointed out that what Tibetans have faced is cultural imperialism not socialist liberation. He states in his recent article “A Cultural Reflection on the Tibet Question.”

"Contemporary imperialism is not merely military and political in nature; neither is it only the consequence of acts by a handful of imperialists in power. It is also expressed in cultural terms with the participation of the citizens of the empire. It evolves from political imperialism to cultural imperialism. If a political empire would one day collapse or be ended with structural changes, cultural imperialism will not undergo such dramatic transformation because it exists in the heart of every imperial member. It has become a collective consciousness that is difficult to change. The primary expression of cultural imperialism is self-centered arrogance… This arrogance not only exists among ruling officials. Those ordinary Han people living in Tibetan regions all feel they are higher than native Tibetans. When speaking of Tibetans, even rickshaw drivers, fruit vendors, and construction laborers, with contemptuous looks on their faces, do not hesitate to look down upon them as the ignorant and backward."

This contemporary imperialism in Wang’s allegation is a mixture of the modern racial hierarchy constructed with the scientific racism and age-old Han Chinese ethnocentrism rooted in the civilizing disposition of dynastic China. The former, scientific racism, was implemented through China’s nationality identification project as a Marxist-Maoist ideology concerning the social evolution of humankind. On the scale of the Marxist use of Lewis Henry Morgan’s (1818-1881) unilinear human evolution from the primitive and the barbarous stages to the civilized stage, Tibetan culture was identified as a worst case of barbarism. This modern ideology of social evolutionism disguised the existing Han Chinese ethnocentrism.

Traditionally, non-Han populations, especially those residing in southern and western China were described as man (蛮) or barbaric. For instance, the Yi, Dai, and other southern ethnic groups were looked down upon as nanman (蠻) or southern barbarians. Prior to the establishment of the People’s Republic of China, Han Chinese classified Tibetans into two types, namely shengfan (生番) and shufan (熟番). The former refers to those Tibetans who had no cultural interactions with Han Chinese. The word sheng means ‘strange’ and ‘raw’. The latter refers to Tibetans who were Han-ized, or as the word signifies, ‘familiar’ and ‘cooked’. Since the mid-20th century Tibetans have no longer been depicted in the terms of ‘raw’ and ‘cooked’ under the rule of Chinese socialism; however, the ethnocentric legacy of Chinese imperial eras continues to be present in the PRC’s evolutionary approach to identifying ethnic groups within its political boundaries. In comparison with its imperial counterparts in the past, the Chinese socialist civilizing project is also culturally self-centered. Harrell points out that the tenets of socialist policy on the minority issue are not meant to “make the peripheral peoples more like those of the center, but rather to bring them to a universal standard of progress or modernity that exists independent of where the center might be on the historical scale at any given moment.”

Tibetan Intellectuals’ Primordial Turn – Reclaiming Tibet with a Sacred Character

In the contemporary world, Anthony Smith points out, “The ethnic renaissance has the power to heal the rift in the alienated consciousness of marginalized men and women, and to draw from them its special ideological character.” In facing the cultural imperialism of a socialist empire, the ideological character of current Tibetan intellectuals’ ethnic revival is their primordial turn to the sacred character of Tibet in terms of Tibet’s distinct Buddhist civilization. As a young Tibetan scholar and writer trained in a Chinese nationality university, Oser is well aware of current Western scholarly works on colonial studies, which have been translated into Chinese. In one of our conversations, she told me that Edward Said’s Orientalism and Culture and Imperialism are her most cherished books. She said, “Several years ago, a friend gave me a copy of the Chinese translation of Said’s Orientalism. It was such a thick academic book. Initially, I was reluctant to finish reading it. But, one day I switched the words ‘the West’ and ‘the East’ with ‘China’ and ‘Tibet.’ The book suddenly became very easy to understand. It touched my heart. Surprisingly, this Palestinian
man became as close as my kinsman.

Many of Oser’s works resemble Said’s prototype of colonized intellectuals, who regard story-telling and searching for the pure images of their past history as methods of asserting “their own identity and the exercise of their own history.” Frequent images in Oser’s works are the Dalai Lama and her nostalgic evocation of the pure snow mountains of Tibet. On July 5, 2005, Oser posted a poem dedicated to the 14th Dalai Lama on her blog hosted at a website run by several Tibetan writers in China:

*On a pilgrimage –*

My eyes well up with warm tears;
My bosom holds the most beautiful flowers in this world.
Before they wither,
I am racing to find him – an old man in a maroon robe,
Presenting the flowers to him –
A magnificent jewel and an enlightening smile.
I will forever fasten my coming life-times to him.

In December, 2005, Oser posted another poem on her blog:

*These mountains with melting snow are not my snow mountains.*
Mine are the snow mountains of the past.
They are far away on the horizon of the heavens – how pure!
They are blossoming lotus flowers.
These withering lotus flowers are not my lotus flowers.
Mine are the lotus flowers of the past.
They surround the snow mountains – how splendid!
They are rainbow-colored prayer flags flapping in the wind.

Yidam Tserang’s works also show a similar primordial articulation of a Buddhist Tibet. He frequently expressed his pride that his birthplace was the same as that of the 14th Dalai Lama. The snow lion is a most frequent image in his literary activities. In *The Snow Lion’s Roar*, one of the collections of his poems, he says:

“Tibetans regards snow lions as sacred, especially in our nomenclatures of all sorts. The Buddha is also called ‘The Lion’s Roar Buddha’; Bodhisattva Manjusri has a title called ‘The Lion Rider’; Bodhisattva Yangjamma is known as a ‘Lion Teaser’; and one of Padmasambhava’s names is ‘Lion’s Roar’. Sometimes, when an infant just comes into the world, parents would name it Sangbengjia, which means ‘the might of ten thousand lions’ and ‘peace with dignity’. Obviously, the snow lion has become the mighty protecting deity of the Land of Snows...

As a son of the snow mountains, it is my irresistible responsibility to inherit and promote the culture of the Land of Snows. Whenever I think of the snow lion, I’m elated.

At one point during the Tibetan studies conference in 2002 Yidam Tserang told a crowd of young Tibetan scholars about how he had responded to a Han Chinese scholar’s doubt about the existence of the mythical snow lion in Tibet. Yidam Tserang’s reply was, “Have you, the children of dragons, seen your sacred dragon that looks like a reptile and a beast with chicken claws and deer horns?”

In his primordial turn Tserang Döndzé speaks of Buddhism with familiarity and even kindredness. In one of our conversations, he explained why Tibetan Buddhist culture is the dominant theme in his *A General History of Tibetan People*:

“You see, since Buddhism was fully established in Tibet, it has become the centripetal force of Tibetan culture, and its monasteries are the center of cultural education for common Tibetans. Monks were intellectuals. Also, in traditional Tibet, there were many Tibetans who called themselves chiedi that means ‘subjects of Dharma’. Their tribal chiefs had temporal authority over them, but had no say on their religious affairs. Buddhist culture is everywhere, even in our native religion, Bon. Even the highest peak of the Himalayas is called Jomo that is another way to say ‘nun’ in Tibetan...

In this context the ethnic primordiality that Tibetan intellectuals are invoking resembles what Anthony Smith calls a “myth-symbol complex” in which the past of Tibet is narrated in both mythical and symbolic terms regarding the origins of the Tibetan nation and its people. ‘Myth’ here is a generative process of collective story-telling. Its aim is to search for the historical and mythical origins of an ethnic group for the purpose of instituting its legitimate ethnic sovereignty in the eyes of neighboring groups. The myth-symbol complex of the contemporary Tibetan ethnic revival possesses much religiosity centered upon Tibetan Buddhism in which the Dalai Lama and the sacred sites of Tibet appear as Tibetan national hierophanies or manifestations of the sacred. They are the bedrock of many Tibetan intellectuals’ collective sentiment.

Take the symbol of the Dalai Lama for an example. ‘Dalai Lama’ is not the name of a person, but is a religious and cultural institution of Tibet. It is an integral part of Tibetan Buddhist cultural system called *tulkus* which means reincarnation. It also refers to incarnate lamas. The current Dalai Lama is the most well-known incarnate lama among Tibetans. In the early 1980s, when China began its nation-wide economic reform, it allowed the Dalai Lama’s fact-finding delegations to visit Tibetan regions. The Chinese officials were expecting common
An incarnate lama is not merely a conventional person. He possesses a dual-descent, meaning that in addition to his biological parents, he is an embodiment of a spiritual lineage; therefore, he is a public figure with a sacred character. From a Durkheimian perspective, an incarnate lama is a social fact of Tibetan Buddhist culture, meaning that an incarnate lama is a spiritual substance of his community. This is because an incarnate lama constitutes "the beliefs, tendencies and practices of the group taken collectively" and expresses "a certain state of the collective mind."

In the case of Tibetan intellectuals, the search for the lost nation of Tibet is synonymous with a collective quest for the sacredness once in possession of the lost nation. This sacredness is not historically unfounded imagination but has been well practiced in traditional Tibet. In this sense, I see that the public surge of Tibetan national feelings resembles religious nationalism in the twenty-first century because in these collective feelings and their emotional expressions, nation and religion bear mutual representation for one another, and both are signifiers of the same cultural identity that is given a sacred character. In his study of religious nationalism, Peter van der Veer points out, "They [sacred sites] are the places on the surface of the earth that express most clearly a relation between cosmology and private experience. A journey to one of these centers is a discovery of one’s identity in relation to the other world and to the community of believers—ritual construction of self that not only integrates the believers but also places a symbolic boundary between them and ‘outsiders.’"

The Emotionality of the Modern Intellectuals and an Injured Collective Identity

Contemporary Tibetan intellectuals’ collective emotions are double-edged. On one side, it is their positive emotions that rest upon the sacred realm of Tibetan Buddhist culture. These emotions generate a collective sense of pride in their national identity. On the other side, there are also negative emotions resulting from Tibetans’ social marginality and stigmatization as a ‘backward’ people in modern China. These negative emotions are intrinsically connected with suppression, repression, and depression; however, their public expressions are an instrument of resistance. In this sense, Tibetan intellectuals’ emotions can also be looked upon as what Randall Collins refers to as “emotional energy," which is "a continuum, ranging from a high end of confidence, enthusiasm, good self-feelings…to a low end of depression, lack of initiative, and negative self-feelings."

However, all varied shades of this collective emotional energy produce the group solidarity of Tibetan intellectuals. In many ways, this collective emotional energy has engendered a community of feelings among numerous contemporary Tibetan intellectuals. They utilize their professional conferences as a platform for expressing their cultural solidarity and challenging the Chinese state’s nationality policies. They also use the internet to establish websites and discussion forums to promote positive images of Tibet, as Oser has been doing since 2005.

Anthony Smith characterizes the crucial role of indigenous intellectuals in modern ethnic revivals as “the new priesthood of the nation." In the case of Tibetan intellectuals their “new priesthood status is a very recent occurrence. Yidam Tserang was among the early Tibetan intellectuals who joined the Chinese Communist Party in the late 1950s. At the time, as a young man from a common Tibetan origin, he was highly romantic about China’s socialist revolution. Here is an excerpt from one of his early poems eulogizing China’s socialism in the 1950s:

Snow mountains, Oh, Snow mountains...
The star you hold up above is our eye for guidance.
A million serfs have broken their shackles and freed themselves.
We have pronounced a death sentence to the cannibalistic society!"

Since the early 1990s, prior to his death in 2005, Yidam Tserang had shown his leading stature in resisting China’s ethnocentric and racializing socialist project in Tibetan regions. His concern was the inequality resulting from China’s nationality identification project and its subsequent policies. In both 2002 and 2003, while I met with Yidam Tserang in Sichuan and Gansu, he expressed that on the ground level many Han Chinese cadres, in the name of the unity of all nationalities, are in fact practicing minzu tonghua (民语化) or “nationality assimilation," meaning that the unity uni-directionally demands minority nationalities to assimilate themselves into Han Chinese culture. He also criticized the Chinese state’s ongoing campaign for the “reinforcement of patriotic spirit (jianghua aiguo zhiyi jingshen 强化爱国主义精神). According to Yidam Tserang, in practice, this is the “dilution of national consciousness (danhua-minzu yishi 淡化民族意识) and the “extraction of cultural nerves (zaichu wenhua shenjing 摘除文化神)" of minority nationalities.
Tserang Dondze, who is about twenty years younger than Yidam Tserang, grew up with China’s socialist education. As a young man, he also had the same romanticism about China’s socialism as Yidam Tserang. He was trained in Sichuan Provincial Institute for Minority Nationality Cadres based in Kangding. In the 1990s, he also began to question the malpractice of China’s nationality policies in Tibetan regions. In his My Hope banned in 1996, Tserang Dondze overtly contends the dominant position of the Han nationality in China’s nationality identification project: “National consciousness is a kind of social consciousness. As long as nationality exists, such consciousness also exists…Overall, national consciousness reflects the existential value of one’s nationality, demands social recognition from other nationalities and being brought into full play and development…National consciousness is a kind of social collective consciousness.\(^{[58]}\)

Similar to the life experiences of Tserang Dondze, Oser was born into a Tibetan revolutionary family in 1966. Her father, born of Han and Tibetan parents in Kham, was a military officer in the Chinese army. For most of her life, Oser has lived in a Chinese urban environment. She was converted to Tibetan Buddhism in the late 1990s. Like many other Tibetan intellectuals who live and work in China, what is left of Oser’s Tibetan cultural tradition is slim. In one of our conversations, Oser said, “All I have now is my Tibetan name and blood…I’m learning my mother tongue.\(^{[59]}\) Oser’s personal life is an inherent part of the consequences of China’s socialist ‘liberation’ project in Tibetan regions.

Like other Tibetan intellectuals of her age she attended one of China’s nationality universities that are designated to train ethnic minority students to be educators and cadres for the purpose of China’s governance of its frontier peoples. Their loss of Tibetan language and customs does not indicate an abandonment of their national identity with traditional Tibet. In Notes on Tibet, Oser poses a question to her Tibetan blood, “It resembles a hidden river. If it persistently flows up stream, would I return to my true homeland?\(^{[59]}\) In addition to her prolific writings, she also uses web technology to share her articulation of Tibetan national feelings with other Tibetan scholars and students in China. Since February 2005, her blog hosted at www.tibetcul.net has received over 260,000 visits with numerous threaded discussions following her postings on topics that range from the atrocities that the Chinese communists committed against Tibetans in the 1950s and 1960s to issues of Han Chinese immigrants in Lhasa and Tibetan intellectuals’ contention with the Chinese state’s stigmatization of Tibetans as a “barbarous people.\(^{[40]}\)

Tibetan intellectuals’ collective emotionality in their search for Tibet’s primordial past can be understood as what John Comaroff calls “neo-primordialism,\(^{[58]}\) which holds:

“that ethnic consciousness is a universal potentiality which is only realized – objectified, that is, into an assertive identity – under specific conditions; viz., as a reaction, on the part of a community, to threats against its integrity or interests. From this perspective, ethnicity is not a thing in or for itself, but an immanent capacity which takes on manifest form in response to external forces.\(^{[60]}\)

In other words, neo-primordialism refers to a hybrid of primordialism with instrumentalism. The former refers to an ethnic origin that is regarded as time-immemorial, while the latter signifies the political function of the primordial claim in establishing a unified ethnic solidarity in facing the dominant. To Tibetan intellectuals residing in China, the primordially-invoked nation is mostly not their lived nation, but is an instrumentally constructed national space-in-time that differentiates “us” from “them.”

The primordially-oriented ‘new priesthood’ status of Tibetan intellectuals indicates that culture, in a modern ethnic revival, is not merely a substance of the past, but is, more critically, a multi-functional instrument. Culturally, as many Tibetan scholars live away from their homeland in urban China, the primordiality of Tibetan culture enables them to sustain the collective memory of their past. Politically, their active construction of the primordial Tibet is obviously meant to cleanse the socialist stigmas attached to their identity. In the meantime, it empowers them to place Tibetan civilization on equal footing with that of the Han Chinese. The equality of all nationalities in China is the primary concern of Tibetan intellectuals as shown in Yidam Tserang’s opening talk at the aforementioned conference. Unlike Tibetans in exile in India and North America, the issue of Tibet independence is not the primary concern of Tibetan intellectuals in China whom I met. Many of them have expressed that they wish to be treated as equals with Han Chinese and to have an equal economic share in China’s modernization program as it is rapidly widening the gap between the rich and the poor, and between the Han majority and ethnic minorities, among whom Tibetans reside, in over one quarter of the PRC’s territory.

In this context striving for equality is the most critical undertaking in many Tibetan intellectuals’ agenda. The indisputable social reality is that Tibetan scholars and students are mostly educated in China’s ‘universities for nationalities’. Besides the Central University for Nationality in Beijing, every single province on China’s ‘ethnic frontier’ such as Gansu, Sichuan, and Yunnan, has its own version for training ethnic minorities.

It could be said that currently these institutions are a form of “affirmative action” that assists students of minority nationalities to fulfill their professional potentials in China. In reality, Tibetan college graduates, intellectuals and cadres are far from being a part of the mainstream in China. They are limited to jobs that are only related to Tibetan affairs. Many Tibetan intellectuals I have met are motivated by the promise of the same kind of modern lifestyle that urban Han Chinese have. These Tibetans want to be able to send their children to universities other than those “for nationalities,” and want them to be bioengineers, pilots, doctors, administrators, and even astronauts. Tserang Dondze himself is expecting his college-bound daughter to get into Beijing University or Fudan University instead of a university for nationalities. In one of our conversations, he rhetorically asked, “If Han people can govern Tibetans, why can’t we also govern them? Why can’t a Tibetan be the mayor of Shanghai or Guangzhou?\(^{[40]}\) Clearly Tibetans in these institutions are spatially confined. They are ‘united’ with China but are not equal.
Tibetan intellectuals in the twenty-first century are taking the lead in gaining social and economic equality from the Chinese state and its general public consisting of a Han majority. On the cultural level, their “new priesthood status” is crucially re-orienting the younger generations of Tibetans to re-embrace their magnificent indigenous past with emotionally and sentimentally expressed images of Tibet’s purity. As Edward Said pointed out, pure images of a culture are meant to “exclude unwanted elements” and are intended for self-definition that is recurrently personified with a consecrated homeland and heroic national figures. In this self-defining process, the intellectuals of the dominated group, who were trained by the dominant, possess a self-assigned mission to rescue their lost nation. They feel a strong sense of responsibility to lead their ethnic and national revival. In one of the collections of his poems, Yidam Tserang states, “As a son of the snow mountains, it is my irresistible responsibility to inherit and promote the culture of the Land of Snows.” Oser’s current project is titled “Stories of Our Old Kinsmen,” for which she intends to re-construct traditional Tibet with narratives of numerous old Tibetans who have lived through both the traditional and the new socialist Tibet.

I concur with Anthony Smith’s observation that ethnic consciousness is durable in this modern globalizing era. The overarching large multi-national states like the former Soviet Union and the PRC have not been successful in achieving a full dissolution of ethnic differences; instead, these differences are not only returning but are also gaining social and political momentum. In western scholarship the notions of culture and civilization are rapidly being de-essentialized and de-primordialized. However, parallel to this Western scholarly de-reifying process of culture and civilization, newly emerged nationalisms worldwide are expressed in the language of essentialization and primordialization. Contemporary Tibetan intellectuals’ primordialization of Tibet is a telling example of modern ethnic nationalism. The ‘new priesthood’ status of Tibetan intellectuals like Oser is almost inevitable because they are situated in the heart of China’s superstructure that has both physically and symbolically injured the Tibetan nation and stigmatized Tibetans. In this sense, modern Tibetan ethnic durability is fueled by China’s injurious ideological justification of its ‘liberation’ project in Tibet. This durability is clearly shown in many contemporary Tibetan intellectuals’ effort to evoke their cultural tradition prior to the establishment of China’s socialist Tibet. In this sense, I regard Tibetan intellectuals’ search for a primordial Tibet as their collective work to resist the Chinese state’s stigmatization of Tibetan culture and to break its containment of Tibetan national expressions.

Endnotes
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