'Don't discriminate against minority nationalities': Practicing Tibetan ethnicity on social media

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‘Don’t discriminate against minority nationalities’: practicing Tibetan ethnicity on social media

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Abstract: Through an analysis of popular posts Tibetans shared over the social media application WeChat in 2013 and 2014 and offline discussions about them, this paper shows how Tibetans living in and traveling through Xining City practiced and performed their ethnic identity in the face of perceived harassment. Through their viral posts, they created a cyber-community that contributed to Tibetan ethnic group formation when Tibetans interpreted their ethnic identity as the basis for unjust treatment by the Chinese state and private Han individuals. In online posts the Han are portrayed as harassing Tibetans after terror attacks across China, violating *minzu* rights, denigrating Tibetan culture and territory, and denying Tibetans equal footing as modern compatriots. Social media is changing the “representational politics” of Tibetan ethnicity, altering participation in the representation of the Tibetan ethnic group. Still, online discourse remains subject to constraints; private offline discussions remain important fora of opinion exchange.

Keywords: Tibet; ethnicity; social media; identity; China

Introduction

Smart-phone based social media is coming to play a key role in the performance of Tibetan ethnic identity in contemporary China. It is changing the equation of the “representational politics” of Tibetans in Qinghai Province, allowing more Tibetans to easily access and share information and offer their opinions on issues related to their ethnicity. Gardner Bovingdon has described representational politics as including both the content and deployment of narratives concerning a

group and who is able to politically represent that group.[1] I argue that in response to government discrimination and perceived slights from Han Chinese and the Chinese state, Tibetans living in and traveling through Qinghai's Xining City are using social media to participate in political discussions that deepen their sense of belonging to an ethnic group with a shared experience of unjust treatment.

Recently, scholars have analyzed new forms of media and their effects on Tibetan culture and ethnic identity. Telecommunications technologies and social sharing have created new venues where Tibetans negotiate the dangers of cultural commodification and where Tibetan identity can explore new forms.[2] Among the people who are today identified as and identify with the official ethnic category of "Tibetans," identity is multiple: Tibetans can find unity and division in regional identity, religious orders, forms of livelihood, or in natal villages, clans, or tribes. This paper will, however, explore the powerful sense of Tibetan *ethnic* identity that forms in opposition to Han harassment and finds expression within state categories of ethnic identity. James Leibold has argued that while many cyber-identities are ephemeral, the state category of ethnicity (Ch. *minzu*) remains strong, even "impossible to shake." [3] For Tibetans it is this form of identity that becomes most salient when they feel that their rights and privileges are being threatened. Ethnicity is here not only an analytical category, but a category of practice.[4] It enters everyday practice in moments of boundary making between Tibetans and the Han or those institutions, such as the state, seen as dominated by the Han. These boundary making practices are both physical, located in places such as checkpoints or registration desks, and psychological, used within and between social groups to identify group membership.[5] In the case of social media posts, the primacy of ethnic identity in interpretative practices is a key way that boundary making occurs; Tibetans come to understand certain events and discriminatory actions as ethnic in nature and then discuss them as such.

Social media allows for representations of perceived discrimination and harassment from the Han to be disseminated across and commented upon within Tibetan cyber-communities. Xining City works as a geographic condenser, bringing Tibetans together from different locales together for encounters and communication in the markets, restaurants, universities, and streets around population-dense sites such as Xining's Tibetan hospital. When people in Xining become acquainted, it is common practice to exchange WeChat IDs and expand one's social media network. In this way Tibetans from across and beyond Qinghai Province can read one another's posts and generate a wider Tibetan cyber-community. Those participating in this community, both in online posts and in offline discussion, felt a resonance with the experiences of other Tibetans that the state harassed and therefore deepened a sense among Wechat users that Tibetans *qua* Tibetans were being unfairly discriminated against.

This paper draws on posts shared over the social media platform WeChat and discussions with Xining residents about the significance of viral posts. WeChat is an important platform to study because of its widespread use among young and middle-aged Chinese people and the unique nature in which its posts are shared.[6] The social media platform uses an interface called the "friend circle" (Ch. *pengyouquan*) that only shows posts from a user's contacts, concealing any comments on contacts' posts from any user who is not a mutual friend.[7] Shared or re-posted messages spread out from one user to another, linking one place to another through urban-facilitated networks. While my sampling of Tibetans was largely limited to those who came to Xining City, the subject matter of posts exceeded events and happenings in that city, and extended to incidents of discrimination in other Tibetan areas.

I gathered these posts and had conversations about them while I lived in Xining for a sixteen-month period between 2013 and 2014. During this time, I continuously added contacts to

my friend circle, joined WeChat groups, read my friend circle, and discussed street propaganda and online posts with urban Tibetans. I collected a total of 80 contacts; many of these WeChat friends I met through encounters in portions of the city with high Tibetan concentrations. The contacts were predominantly men between the ages of 18 and 50, but I did not document everyone's sex or age. They came from places all over eastern Qinghai Province, including Reb kong (Ch. Tongren), Khri ga (Ch. Guide), Chab cha (Ch. Gonghe), and Xunhua counties, and Yul shul (Ch. Yushu), Mgo lok (Ch. Guoluo), and Haibei Prefectures, as well as Tibetan places in bordering provinces, such as Ngawa (Ch. Aba), Lhasa, and Bla brang (Ch. Xiahe). Posts were largely in Chinese, but many were bi-lingual; viral posts were often shared in both Chinese and Tibetan. Contacts included city-dwelling students and businessmen, farmers and pastoralists visiting the city for trade or to call on unwell family members undergoing medical care, as well as workers in public office. While posts were shared across geographically-situated communities, I will specifically use the term "urban Tibetan" in this paper to denote Tibetans who were living permanently in Xining City when I met them.[8] The majority of conversations I had about posts were with urban Tibetans.

Social media research raises ethical questions about consent, expectations of privacy, and ownership. Messages that could be intended for a small audience can end up going viral, found discussed in media outlets, subject to government agency monitoring, or employed as examples in academic articles. Different approaches have been used to de-personalize WeChat content for research, such as applying filters to selfies.[9] In considering the ethical implications of my research, I have chosen to focus on the genre of viral posts and to conceal contacts' identifying information. The majority of those who share viral posts did not author them; the posts discussed below can also be found on other social media platforms and located through search engines. My focus on

WeChat reflects an interest not only in the content of posts but also in the *way* that the posts travel and how Tibetans in Xining share and encounter these messages over a very popular social media platform.

I browsed through dozens of posts everyday, and saved posts that had gone viral. WeChat posts made good conversation because of their polemical and timely nature: they often bluntly shared attitudes that were strongly held but not discussed openly. I draw inspiration from a method employed by Franck Billé, who asked residents of Ulaanbaatar to comment on articles from the Mongolian tabloid press.[10] Billé found that using tabloids as both primary sources and as starting points for discussion allowed him to explore topics that were difficult to address directly. WeChat and other social media act in many ways as a tabloid, circulating information that is of interest to Chinese citizens, yet which is less likely to be discussed through government authorized media sources.

Online platforms are places where Tibetans express their views, but the political opinion expressed on them cannot be read as entirely transparent. Bovingdon has argued that the unauthorized audiocassettes circulating in Xinjiang in recent decades occupied an "ambiguous space" in James Scott's schema of public and hidden transcripts because they contained veiled criticisms of the state in the form of poetic metaphors and innuendo.[11] In a similar way, social media allows for an unparalleled psychological immediacy in what can be written and shared publically. Yet, across China, critical online posts and other forms of political speech are constrained by a "rules consciousness," an implicit knowledge of what sorts of statements the authorities will tolerate, that defines the limits of political participation and protest.[12] Tibetans I knew were very aware that communications technology is policed and feared the repercussions of criticizing the state in unacceptable ways.[13] Some had personal experiences, and many had heard

of others' experiences with police visits that occurred after viewing sensitive websites through VPN connections. A gap remains between what is said online, potentially seen by censors, and what is said privately. In this way the state has an influence on social media and exercises an indirect, if incomplete, control over what is expressed.

The paper is broken into three parts. Part one shows how a narrative of ethnic discrimination surfaced on WeChat in the charged security climate following nation-wide terrorist attacks in 2014. Xining Tibetans faced increased surveillance and encountered a proliferation of physical and psychological checkpoints that added friction to their mobility and reminded them of their ethnic difference. Tibetans used social media to challenge their unjust treatment, appealing to legal protections for ethnic minorities. Part two discusses the discourse and constraints of political engagement on social media discussion, focusing on an online "debate" over the Chinese state's nationality system and its role in exacerbating or ameliorating ethnic tensions. Much of this discussion concerns the proper status and rights of *minzu*, a semantically malleable term that has been used as the categorical term denoting *nationality* under Communist rule, depoliticized *ethnicity*, China's 56 distinct national (or ethnic) groups (Ch. *wushiliu ge minzu*), national (or ethnic) minorities (Ch. *shaoshu minzu),* and the national identity of the entire Chinese nation (Ch. *zhonghua minzu*). Continuing friction over the meaning and implications of the term in national politics finds its reflection in Tibetans' concern that changes to *minzu* policy may harm their interests and constitutional protections. [14] Part three explores some of ways that the cosmopolitanism and consumerism of contemporary urban life is fueling ethnic tensions. Urban Tibetans discuss how Tibetans are denied travel permits and criticized by Han as dirty and lacking quality. But the criticism also flows in the other direction: middle-class Han are portrayed behaving badly as tourists in Tibetan territories and disrespecting Tibetan religious symbols.

Discrimination in Times of Terror

In early 2014, a rash of violent terror attacks swept across China. On March 1st of that year, five Uighur assailants used knives to kill or maim over one hundred passersby at the Kunming train station.[15] Three weeks later attackers in two SUVs attacked a crowded market street in Ürümqi.[16] Government organs in Xining City, which is populated by Han Chinese, Tibetans, and Hui and Salar Muslims, took efforts to prevent problems in the city and its municipal districts by reaching out to the media and securitizing urban spaces.

Two days after the train station attack, religious leaders in Xining City from all major represented religions - Buddhism, Christianity, Islam, and Daoism - gathered together in front of TV cameras to denounce the Kunming attack.[17] A line of stern-looking militarized police carrying automatic weapons appeared at the exit of Xining's train station, where they watched over the emerging crowd. Although national media outlets suggested that religious extremism and outside separatist agitators were responsible for the violence, the local government administrations of Xining's urban neighborhoods rushed to stress harmony among ethnicities. For the remainder of that spring and summer, urban religious structures in Xining carried banners condemning the Kunming attack, and police vans were dispatched to commercial areas, where ostentatiously armed police forces kept a look out for signs of danger among shoppers.[18]

Even though the Chinese media and the Xining municipal government attempted to assuage ethnic tension in this time of crisis, they continuously performed a theater of ethnic difference. Government organizations at the levels of community district, local police stations (Ch. *paichusuo*), and large religious structures such as mosques and temples contributed banners and posters to the visual landscapes of their respective jurisdictions. These images were most notable

in the city's East District, where many Hui and Tibetans live. The East District became saturated with colorful images of cheering ethnic minorities, red banners, and slogans promoting peace and harmony.

Under regular circumstances my Tibetan interlocutors viewed the signs as empty annoyances, if they noticed them at all. But when the propaganda organs kicked into gear, the signs took on a quality of harassment. One Tibetan man from Reb gong, who lived permanently in Xining, held a strong opinion about such signs, reading the Chinese conception of harmony (Ch. *hexie*) against a Buddhist notion of harmony (Tib. *zhi bde*). He pointed out the hypocrisy of state policy: "I have many thoughts about this. This was made by the government. We Tibetans live in harmony, but the Han won't even think of helping others. Our Tibetan religion says a lot about helping and living in harmony."

Signs posted by the local government and shared on social media took on other meanings. Given a new context and renewed intensity, the signs could draw stronger reactions. Qinghai's Xinhai Road Police Department, a neighborhood-level police jurisdiction, affixed one notable sign to a wall in a housing complex in Xining's West District. When the image of the notice was posted on WeChat, it elicited strong emotions from my online contacts. The notice proclaimed:

> For every housing building in this jurisdiction, from this day forth all homeowners with visitors (Xinjiang people, Uighurs, or Tibetan Monks) must register at the police station. If during inspection anyone is found to be unregistered, this will be pursued as the homeowner's responsibility.[19]

This notice was posted on March 4th, only three days after the event in Kunming. It clearly revealed the police's interest in two sorts of minorities: Uighurs and Tibetans. Responses included:

> "[Xinhai Street Police Station] is discriminating against minority nationalities, manufacturing contradictions between the nationalities. The Zhonghua People's Republic is comprised of 56 nationalities. Don't discriminate against minority nationalities. This must be vehemently condemned."

In another version of the post, the dweller posted the picture and this text in Chinese and Tibetan: "This is the attitude that the [Xinhai Street Police Station's] takes against the Mass Line and *minzu tuanjie*! Is this how harmony among nationalities and public security will be established?"

This wave of harsh criticism of the police station did not go unnoticed. In what appeared to be a post from Xining City's Public Security Bureau's official Tencent Weibo account on March 5th, a response was written:

> First, thanks to all of our internet friends who told the West District Security Work Bureau their careful understanding and criticism. Our Xinhai Road Police Station on March 4th called for the floating population to have their ID cards examined. Because the Police Station's ideological work was neglected, their work style was simplistic. In writing their "Police Notice," their wording was inappropriate and hurt ethnic feelings. We have instructed the police station leadership and the district police to make a formal examination and to submit it to the City Public Security Bureau's Police Inspector Department. We hereby sincerely apologize to our vast number of internet friends. We accept your criticism. From now on we will discuss how we can strengthen police education and training, enhance national unity, ensure social harmony and stability and work hard. Thanks to everyone for correcting public security work.

A screen grab of this alleged police apology was widely shared. For Tibetans it was an affirmation of what they suspected: the government was singling out Tibetans. And more significantly, they had been caught in the act and forced to apologize.

In May 2014 a self-recorded video of an airport security inspection circulated on Wechat. The video portrayed a Uighur man who is accusing the airport security staff of profiling him and making him remove his shoes, a procedure that is usually not required for Chinese domestic flights. The man argues with multiple airport staff and other airport travelers as they attempt to tell him that his nationality was not the reason for the request. This video hit a cord with some Xining Tibetans, who sympathized with a man who was treated unfairly by circumspect airport employees. In a separate WeChat post from May 2014, an incident at Xi'an's main airport was described. Two Tibetan passengers were forced to remove their shoes and belts at the security checkpoint, while Han passengers didn't have to do either. In the post, the individual wrote:

> National minorities are also citizens of the Zhonghua People's Republic. Why did Xianyang Airport security undermine *minzu tuanjie* in this way? Their security is discriminating against minorities' distinctiveness. The Constitution makes clear that citizens of the Zhonghua People's Republic of China are equal.

The message goes on to demand an apology from the Xianyang Airport for their botched work. Unlike in the police notice incident, I never saw an apology shared. For my Tibetan interlocutors, the video was more proof of a pattern of discrimination. The video triggered conversations about similar experiences: being turned away at hotels, pulled aside at airport security, treated icily when registering a business, and other frictions that occur at supposedly disinterested bureaucratic checkpoints. In these stories the psychological estrangement always began at the moment in which the traveler revealed their ID cards, which clearly demarcated their ethnic identities.

Even the use of social media could contribute to ethnic othering. In a gathering of friends and acquaintances at Xining's 2014 Tibetan assembly (Tib. *bod tshoks*), an officially authorized

annual celebration of Tibetan culture held upon the city's South Park (Ch. *nanshan gongyuan*), the discussion quickly turned to Han suspicion of Tibetans. Cellphones were not working and no one could check WeChat. They suspected that the gathering was unwanted by the Xining authorities, and that cellphone reception was being blocked. I asked how they could know this for certain, and one interlocutor responded, "Of course they are doing this. Do you think they would allow so many Tibetans to gather here without doing something? They don't want it to be easy for us to communicate." They suspected that the crowd was full of plainclothes police officers.

Police officers and security forces are a frequent topic on social media. One widely shared post was a series of photos of bloodied men in a hospital whose injuries were allegedly caused by the Special Police (Ch. *tejing*), an organization founded in 2005 that has a direct lineage from an earlier anti-terror force.[20] In my discussions with Xining Tibetans, the special police are largely imagined as a force that has been created in connection with ethnic unrest, often deployed to their home areas. A pair of posts, one in Tibetan and one in Chinese, showed images of several bandaged and swollen faces:

> Friends spread the word: Mdzod dge County (Ch. Ruoergai) Special Police today gave my hometown people a beating like this. Over ten people are in the hospital, one of them is in critical condition and is going to Chengdu, the oldest is 65 years old. The deputy village leader is lying in bed. What happened is that the tollgate at the entrance to our village would not allow though a truck carrying supplies for the renovation of a Buddhist Pagoda. The village leader took the lead to go request permission. Suddenly, special police came with this sort of solution. This is the Party's Mass Line? Everyone spread the word and ask for justice.

This post most likely had local significance and multiple meanings for the residents of Mdzod dge, located in Sichuan, but for Tibetans in Xining, members of the wider Tibetan cyber-community,

it could be interpreted within the wider context of negative experiences with the armed police. The text embedded in the image about the Mdzod dge violence appeals to the Mass Line, a Maoist approach to governance that stresses the Party should work with and learn from the masses. Recently, the Mass Line has been revived as part of Xi Jinping's anti-corruption campaign - the campaign's mass appeal being that it should reduce local corruption and the abuses of petty officials, including those that use violence.[21] In both the Mdzod dge post and a 2015 viral post that showed special police forces amassed at sku 'bum (Ch. Ta'ersi) Monastery during the 2015 Mon Lam Prayer Festival, state violence seems to be targeting Tibetan religion. WeChat sharers were quick to invoke the intersection of Tibetan Buddhism (Ch. *zangfo*) and Tibetan ethnicity (Ch. *zangzu*).

Ethnic Policy and Discrimination

The PRC has always held that its diverse population is united as one, a principle that the state has supported through its *minzu* policies. With social media *minzu* protections have become a site where the changes to Tibetans' representational politics are revealed. In response to apparent violations of guarantees for their language and autonomy, Tibetans have taken to social media to reveal state discrimination. The discussions that moved through WeChat were often centered around the rights and protections that Tibetans ought to have as an official *minzu.* This is in part because of the hypocrisy that local governments exhibited: they stressed "amity of nationalities" (Ch. *minzu tuanjie*) while behaving with increased suspicion towards minority ethnicities. This reflects the tension that Uradyn Bulag has explained is at the heart of the concept of *minzu tuanjie*: unity based on equality and amity between distinct ethnic groups, and potential fissure and generation of difference along ethnic lines.[22] Ethnic minority citizens must be careful not to

publically state anything that might be construed as contributing towards fissure. So while online posts can be pointed or ironically suggestive, they remain in a liminal space between the public and the private.

One example of an online discussion that critiqued state guarantees comes from an image from a copy shop in a Tibetan area of Sichuan. Like so many other posts, I watched it first gain in reposts on WeChat, then heard it enter conversation about local attempts to suppress or eliminate Tibetan language.[23] A police notice from the Tibetan Autonomous County of Aba in Sichuan Province was photographed and posted online; the notice read: "Internet security police notification: to copy or print in Tibetan please register your ID card in person." The following text accompanied many WeChat repostings:

> Tibetan is a Zhonghua People's Republic constitutionally recognized legal script, the Tibetan people are an inseparable member of the Zhonghua People's Republic, but in some individual areas the law enforcement bureaus still racially (Ch. *zhongzu*) discriminate against the Tibetan people. America's pattern of racial discrimination against blacks in the 1950s is today appearing within the borders of the Zhonghua People's Republic, which is very lamentable! This is one of the factors of instability in Tibetan areas. Shouldn't this be a vestige of the era of Zhou?

The wording in this post is deliberate. I translate the term People's Republic of China (Ch. *Zhonghua renmin gongheguo*) as Zhonghua People's Republic because the writer employs this formal name in order to highlight the term Zhonghua, the conceptual mechanism and unifying principle that brings all of China's diverse peoples together as one.[24] The term is employed to argue for Tibetans' position as an officially distinguished nationality, equal with other national groups within the Chinese state, and therefore their right to use their language unmolested. The

rhetorical use of the term "race," which is not a term used in official discussions of China's ethnic make-up or internal affairs, connotes that such discrimination is something that is not proper to China. Such discrimination only makes sense in the context of other places, like America. The implication is that China is backsliding into racial strife, which, in Chinese Marxist dogma, is proper only to the Imperialist countries of the West.[25] The "Zhou era" is a reference to former PRC "security czar" Zhou Yongkang, the largest target of Xi Jinping's anti-corruption campaign in 2013 and 2014. Among the Chinese public, Zhou is notorious for his work in stability maintenance, the impacts of which were felt among ethnic minority groups.[26]

Just as all national minorities are said to be inseparable parts of China's Zhonghua nationality, territories of China are often popularly presented as "belonging" (Ch. *shuyu*) to China, such as in the slogan "Tibet Belongs to China" (Ch. *xizang shuyu zhongguo*). One participant criticized the term "national minorities" (Ch. *shaoshu minzu*) because she felt it was derogatory. She explained to me that China acts like everything is theirs, and that although "minorities" might be small in number compared to the Han Chinese, they are innumerable in their own lands, which make up so much Chinese territory. The logic of this domineering "belonging" is occasionally exploited on social media. One of the first WeChat messages that started circulating among Xining Tibetans after the March 1st attack contained the text: "Xinjiang's oil is called 'Sinopec,' Xinjiang's natural gas is called 'China LNG,' Xinjiang's Mineral Products are called 'China's Assets,' so why can't Xinjiang's terrorists be called 'China's terrorists'?" This cleverly worded text exploits the logic that minorities and their territories belong to China, pointing out the hypocrisy of bracketing off those elements of Xinjiang that the state desires from that which it is quick to disown.

One morning in mid-May 2014 I attended a history class that I was auditing at Qinghai Nationalities University in Xining; this class had no Tibetan students but was comprised of Han and Hui students. That morning my professor and classmates were debating the points of two articles that were posted on WeChat. My professor was exceptionally animated that morning, and asked everyone if they had seen a pair of posts that were circulating online. He remarked that the topics of these posts would usually be considered too sensitive for the classroom, but that their subject matter was a pressing matter in light of the terror attacks. He went on to discuss the following two articles.

In the first article, Beijing University ethnologist Ma Rong offered his take on the so-called "Nationality Question." Elsewhere,[27] Ma Rong has advocated for the elimination of the legal category of "nationality," (Ch. *minzu*) arguing that it reifies political distinctions and contributes to internal division within the nation-state. He argues that a state territorially structured through nationality categories risks fissure, as evidenced by the breakup of the USSR into independent states.[28] In the post that circulated over WeChat, Ma Rong aligns himself with national minorities, citing his time living among Inner Mongolians in the 1960s and his own Hui minority status. Ma empathizes with minorities who do not feel represented in mainstream Chinese culture, criticizing Han Chauvinism and the lack of minority representation in minority areas' local government. He, however, implicates the nationality system as the ultimate source of difference and strife, warning that the nationality system contributed to the dissolution of the USSR: "Every ID card had a nationality designation on it. It strengthened each nationality's national consciousness, and lead directly to the disintegration of bonds with the central government."[29]

Shared alongside and in response to Ma Rong's article was one penned by Wang Dahao, a Xinjiang-based government researcher and prolific online writer. Wang Dahao authored an essay

that went viral on WeChat after the Kunming bombing; it was popular among Tibetans because Wang Dahao repudiates Ma Rong's insistence on eliminating the legal and political distinction of the nationalities.[30] He mocks Ma Rong's "Name Change Theory" for proposing that changing the word nationality (Ch. *minzu*) to ethnicity (Ch. *zuqun*) could possible resolve the crisis. For Wang, nationality is a "natural community of interest," in which members see an attack upon one of them as an attack upon the whole group. The best way to prevent conflict is to satisfy the needs of a group, an approach that deals with root causes, rather than treating nationality as something that is purely an ideational construct.

While Ma Rong's ideas are increasingly disseminated and have gained in popularity among Chinese liberals,[31] they are not popular among Tibetans, even though some of their concerns do seem to overlap. For example, Tibetans also see how mundane uses of ID cards work to reinforce ethnic difference. Yet for many Tibetans, the rights guaranteed to nationalities in the constitution, such as language policy, autonomous regions, and the institutionalization of ethnic culture, are extremely important. They fear the linguistic, cultural, and social bases of their distinctiveness will be worn away by the culturalist forces that Ma Rong argues should be embraced. In contrast, Wang Dehao argues that nationality problems are just that: they must be solved through appealing to the interests of a nationality group, which is lived and felt as a concrete reality. This is a position more palatable to Tibetans who fear losing protections for their language, culture, and identity.

This split was reflected in my interlocutors as well. My professor praised Ma Rong's logic and position, noting the constitutive power that government policies have in making *minzu* a political factor. He saw development as creating unrest in Xinjiang, but said that it was being channeled into ethnicity as political agents sought to take advantage of the situation. Afterwards, I went with some Tibetan university students to a restaurant where we had a conversation on the

same topic. The same articles had been shared and read by everyone at the table. Yet their readings of the articles were quite different. Ma Rong's article simply indicated his close relationship with the government, which had a concerted plan to erase Tibetans' cultural particularities. One of the students expressed interest in writing his own opinion on all of this, but said that it would be a bad idea to do so. Despite the sharing and reading of many of these online posts, neither my professor nor these Tibetan students felt completely free discussing the topic.

Urban Modernity and Ethnic Offense

Another way that the Tibetan ethnic identity is performed against the Han can be found in posts that show Tibetans being denied aspects of China's urban modernity and Han mistreating Tibetan sacred objects and images. In early October 2013, a story circulated on social media that explained the plight of a handful of young Tibetan girls from the countryside who had obtained permission to go abroad to study, but were denied passports. As Radio Free Asia reported the story, girls from multiple schools in Qinghai Province were selected to go abroad in July by foreign schools in Japan and the United States.[32] Although they had cleared the appropriate examination barriers, passports were ultimately not issued to the girls. I met many students at Qinghai Nationalities University who cited this event as evidence that Tibetans were not allowed passage abroad for study and that the government would not issue Tibetans passports.

One shared WeChat message lamented that these students were reduced to taking to the streets of Xining to personally campaign for their right to go abroad, carrying a banner alluding to the Chinese Dream. The text of the message accompanying the photo declared that "The design of the 'Chinese Dream' seems to not permit Tibetan children to have a 'Passport Dream' or a "Go abroad Dream'." Indeed, the "temporary" permit (Ch. *dengjizheng*) that Tibetans must use to visit

Lhasa have been labeled as passports (Ch. *huzhao*). The following post was shared with an image of one of these blue permits: "For Tibetans Lhasa has already become a foreign country. On the street we encounter many closures. Coming to Lhasa then requires getting this passport. Why do Tibetans need to get this kind of passport?"

These Tibetan students' troubles can be contrasted with the highly visible and seemingly unrestricted movement of Han going abroad. Traveling abroad is increasingly part of the aspirations of China's burgeoning middle class, as can be seen in television serials about youth going abroad such as "The Children Came Home" (Ch. *haizi huiguole*).[33] Among Xining Tibetans, permission to move freely within and beyond Chinese borders is largely felt to be the privilege of Han. Tibetan natural environments and religious sites are popular not only among Tibetans and foreigners, but for Han tourists. Some Tibetans have grown resentful of Han tourists who are disrespectful to Tibetan religious sites. The texts accompanying the following images, which appear to show Han tourists, revealed a racialized anger at the Han:

> Domestic animals from inner China, if you come to Tibet (Ch. *zangqu*) you must respect Tibetan culture. Even a dog cannot be compared to you, you see life but only know death, see culture but only know destruction. Dogs with no quality (Ch. *suzhi*), I hope you are eliminated from this planet.

These images were offensive to some Tibetans because the tourists are indulging themselves to the point of sacrilege. In some of the photos, Buddhist sacred objects and texts are being pressed to the ground under people's shoes; in others, tourists are shown putting their feet on an offering altar and grabbing the head of a Buddha statue. While comments such as the one above expressed vehement anger, others revealed a desire for greater understanding between ethnic groups:

> Under your feet are our heads. Your ignorance is my life's pursuit, thank you for honoring us with your presence, but you absolutely will not be permitted to trample our beautiful dignity. If you enter Tibet you must respect customs and beliefs. Please extend this message to your Tibetan and Han friends: Respect the Tibetan people's customs. Thank you everyone!

Urban Tibetans also face a dilemma as they attempt to fit into an urban modernity that posits modern furnishings, civilization and the consumer society as its hallmarks. When Tibetans behave as unmarked urban inhabitants, they may still be discriminated against because of their minority status. One of my friends and teachers told me how one day she was walking near the large shopping district at the heart of the city when a few Han tourists asked her for directions. She gave them the directions and, after exchanging some pleasantries, asked for her phone number. After stating her Tibetan name, however, they drew back from her, no longer wanting her contact information. She said that they looked upon her like she was dangerous. Several Tibetans confided in me that they had heard Han discussing Tibetans' backwardness and dirtiness. One young Tibetan woman from Xunhua related an upsetting experience during an afternoon meal at a noodle shop. The Han guests seated at the table behind her were discussing the wildness and dirtiness of the Tibetans. In both of these cases it seems that the Han are operating under dominant cultural assumptions about Tibetans as wild and backward. One social media post that circulated on and off throughout my time in Xining was an appeal to unnamed outsiders to abandon their assumptions about Tibetans on a range of matters, including hygiene, civilization, and the presumed financial dependency of Tibetan areas on the rest of China; the audience is clearly Han Chinese:

> Please don't say that Buddhist-worshipping Tibetans wear very dirty clothes or are totally unhygienic. Because of their hearts (Ch. *xinling*), they are cleaner than anything! They have clean hearts and dirty clothing, yet some people have clean clothing but have filthy hearts! If it weren't for the national policies prescribing the development of tourism in Tibetan areas, I really wouldn't welcome into this land people without faith or people with bad beliefs.

Another site of virtual antagonism between Tibetans and Han Chinese comes from posts showing Tibetan Buddhist imagery being worn as or on clothing. In these examples the Han's apparent disrespect for Tibetan religion is revealed through the crass appropriation of fashion. In a series of photos shared on WeChat, models are shown wearing Buddhist wind horses, a chörten, prayer wheels, and several other objects such as clothing. Again the Han were singled out as instigators, and some contacts shared text using a Chinese slur for women to describe the women wearing the dresses. The rise of consumerism in clothing provides new forms of contact between Tibetan material culture, the human body, and the ground; more opportunities for sacred symbols to be polluted or mistreated.

One friend chided me for wearing slippers that I had taken from a hotel in Reb gong because they had Tibetan characters on them. I was puzzled because I assumed that if a Tibetan hotel was producing such slippers, Tibetans couldn't find it an offensive practice. I had seen WeChat posts deriding images of sneakers with Buddhist images on them, but these slippers simply stated the name of the hotel. My friend explained to me that this was a Chinese hotel practice that Tibetan hoteliers had regrettably appropriated as they endeavored to create more modish hotels. While these hoteliers could be seen as corrosive of ethnic identity as the Han, ultimate blame is placed on the Han. Such Tibetans are discursively bracketed away, their behaviors compromised by Hanification (Ch. *hanhua*).

Conclusion

I have argued that widely accessible social media is allowing for Tibetan representational politics to find new voices, and contributing to a more politicized sense of Tibetan ethnic identity that is experienced and discussed in contrast with Han people and the Han dominated state. With great speed, these viral posts used criticism, irony, and insults to challenge Tibetans' harassment and mistreatment.

The saliency of ethnicity in these social media posts and related discussions demonstrates that ethnic identity is a strong category of practice for Tibetans, as it is for the state. When local governments responded to terror attacks in 2014, they immediately employed the language of *minzu*. Likewise, Tibetans then interpreted harassment through the language of *minzu*. Additionally, the predominance of the Han in representations of urban modernity and instances of offensive Han behavior in Tibetan areas are also interpreted through an ethnicized lens.

Yet when WeChat posts criticize the state's unfair treatment of Tibetans, they typically adhere to state-approved frameworks that, while allowing for a genuine airing of grievances, remain within acceptable bounds of criticism and perpetuate categories of the state. As Uradyn Bulag has suggested in the context of Inner Mongolia, appeals to state communism and the frameworks it generates "provide for a higher moral ground, enabling Mongols to criticize Chinese chauvinist and racist attitudes and practices."[34] But this approach is more than instrumental; Xining's Tibetans have a genuine investment in state *minzu* policies that ought to safeguard their ethnic rights to language and autonomy and guarantee them equality.

Finally, the disintegration of the state monopoly on discursive production has allowed criticisms to spread quickly and take on a biting urgency. The Chinese state has difficulty

persuading many Tibetans to accept the official narrative that declares its actions are in the best interest of all of China's ethnic groups. Online and offline, Tibetans were more likely to talk about state discrimination and the subaltern position of Tibetans than to castigate state bugbears such as terrorists, meddling foreign powers, or the Dalai Lama, much less defend the state and promote its justifications for increased police presence or the implementation of travel permits. To fully grasp the significance of these social media posts, it is important to attend to private conversations, which frequently question the true intentions of discriminatory agents. Time will tell whether social media will continue to be a platform for state criticism and the expression of politicized ethnic identity.

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Notes

1. See Bovingdon, *The Uyghurs: Strangers in Their Own Land,* 7-9.
2. See Yeh, "Blazing Pelts and Burning Passions: Nationalism, Cultural Politics, and Spectacular Decommodification in Tibet" for the former; and Kehoe, "I am Tibetan? An exploration of online identity constructions among Tibetans in China" for the latter.
3. Leibold, "Performing ethnocultural identity on the Sinophone Internet: testing the limits of minzu."
4. Brubaker and Cooper, "Beyond 'Identity,'" 4.

5. For a discussion of psychological, or virtual, boundary making, see Migdal, "Mental Maps and Virtual Checkpoints: Struggles to Construct and Maintain State and Social Boundaries."
6. In my experience, this social media platform was by the most popular in Qinghai and Gansu during the period September 2013 – December 2014. It is called WeChat (Ch. *Weixin*, Tib. *skad 'phrin*). WeChat's parent company Tencent reported that the platform had around 400 million active users in mid-2014 (Danova 2014). Other popular social media sites, such as the microblogs Sina Weibo and Tencent Weibo are more publically oriented and accessible.
7. There are also also closed groups and subscriptions where information can be shared in even smaller groups or through one-way dissemination from a personage to his or her followers. All of the information shared in this paper, however, traveled through the main friend circle interface. In the English language version of the app, friend circle is translated as "moments," which less accurately describes how it functions.
8. Permanent meaning either owning housing or paying rent for housing in Xining versus sojourning there; for example, staying with family or at a hotel.
9. Seta and Proksell, "The Aesthetics of Zipai: From Wechat Selfies to Self-Representation in Contemporary Chinese Art and Photography."
10. Billé, *Sinophobia: anxiety, violence, and the making of Mongolian identity.*
11. Bovingdon, 95; and Scott, *Domination and the Arts of Resistance: Hidden Transcripts.*
12. Perry, "A New Rights Consciousness?"
13. This was most obvious because of the large number of Tibet-related websites that are blocked within China, and the frequent disruption of popular software such as Gmail. The Chinese government has a record of restricting access to foreign websites that discuss Tibet and foreign run social media sites. See Zittrain and Edelman, "Internet Filtering in China." I found that online censorship and the anti-rumor drive launched in 2013 are public knowledge.
14. Since 1995 the Chinese government has translated *minzu* into English as ethnicity instead of nationality. In regular use *minzu* connotes many of the same ideas as the English word ethnicity, but the 56 official *minzu* of China also have institutional support, constitutional protection, and "autonomous" territories. I will translate the term as ethnicity when I talk about discrimination and translate the term as nationality when speaking of legal implications and official definitions.
15. Xinhua, "Violent Terrorist Attack at Kunming Train Station" and The Associated Press, "China Executes 3 Over Kunming Knife Attack That Killed 31."
16. Jacobs, "In China's Far West, a City Struggles to Move On," Xinhua, "Xinjiang Ürümqi Terror Case Cracked – Four Suspects Killed and One Suspect."
17. Guo and Luo, "Representatives from all of Qinghai's Religions Censure the Kunming Terrorist Attack."
18. Further contributing to a climate of fear, in June, a small explosive was set off in a trash can at Xining's airport. See Huang, "One injured as explosion hits Xining airport car park in Qinghai."
19. The term "Xinjiang people" likely refers to historically restive Xinjiang ethnic minorities that include but exceed the Uighurs, such as the Kazakhs and Hui. Xinjiang Hui are understood as more radicalized than their co-ethnics in Ningxia, Gansu, or elsewhere in China. As James Leibold has indicated, the term Xinjiang people has also been promoted

as a pan-ethnic regional identity with positive connotations, Leibold, "Performing ethnocultural identity on the Sinophone Internet: testing the limits of minzu," 282.

20. Wang, "Uncovering the Fascinating Chinese Special Police Forces;" and Wang, "On the Special Police Forces."
21. For more on the Xi's Mass Line, see Heberer 2014: 117-119.
22. Bulag, *The Mongols at China's Edge.*
23. Copy and print shops are commonly visited places in western China, where people copy or alter important documents and have books and readings printed and bound. Unsurprisingly, Tibetans often want to copy texts in Tibetan. Because it is often unclear to Tibetan illiterate authorities what is printed in Tibetan, fears sometimes arise that subversive texts are being mass-produced and disseminated.
24. At the turn of the 20th century, the influential modernist thinker Liang Qichao was a proponent of a single Zhonghua nationality that would build on China's supposed powers of assimilation to construct a new post-Imperial Chinese nation. Liang's thinking was affected by America's purported melting pot culture. In the "Manifesto of the Nationalist Party" Sun Yat-sen promoted racially assimilating diverse groups into the Han and creating a Zhonghua national order. The Communists also appropriated the category of Zhonghua, but tailored it to fit the demands of both Marxist thought and the construction of a unified nation-state. Leibold, Reconfiguring Chinese nationalism: how the Qing frontier and its indigenes became Chinese, 34-35, 43, 152.
25. Dikötter, *The discourse of race in modern China*, 191-192.
26. Zhou was a key figure in the strengthening of the "preserving stability" (Ch. *weiwen*) policy under Hu Jintao, see Feng, "Preserving Stability and Rights Protection: Conflict or Coherence?" *Weiwen* extends to mass incidents and online policing.
27. Ma, "Some Questions Concerning Nationalities Research;" and Ma, "A New Perspective in Guiding Ethnic Relations in the Twenty-first Century: 'De-politicization' of Ethnicity in China."
28. According to James Leibold, these ideas have gained considerable traction in recent years: "Through prolific scholarship, years of persistent advocacy, and a legion of students and supporters, Ma Rong's once-eccentric views now permeate much of contemporary Sinophone discourse on ethnic relations and policy." Leibold, "*Ethnic Policy in China,* 14.
29. Ma, "Ethnic Relations | Ma Rong: I continue to reiterate my opposition to Han Chauvinism," np.
30. Wang, "Wang Dahao: Turning 'Nationality' into 'Ethnicity' is foolish tossing about."
31. Leibold, *Ethnic Policy in China*, 27-28.
32. Lumbum Tashi and Dorjee Tso, "Tibetan Students Denied Permission to Travel for Overseas Study."
33. An increasing number of such movies and serials are being produced, not to mention other programs that feature characters with international aspirations and experiences. Titles of programs based around the topic of studying abroad include: "My Own Private Germany," "Wait for me in Sydney," "Little Study Abroad Students" and "Seven Hour Time Difference." The characters are overwhelmingly Han.
34. Bulag, 173.

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