Is Tibet (really) Chinese?

Already for some time, Tibet appears to be of substantial interest and concern both to the West and to the Chinese government. Their concern may be substantially different, yet, as many questions are the same, Le Tibet est-il Chinois? Réponses à cent questions chinoises, in which Blondeau and Buffetrille and other Tibet specialists take on one hundred existing Chinese questions regarding Tibet would appear a fascinating undertaking.

Since the annexation of Tibet in 1951, the PRC has faced a continuous series of challenges in its attempt to convince the world of its claim on Tibet. Human rights organizations and Tibet support groups often portray the Chinese Communist Party’s (CCP) policy towards Tibet, and also towards other ethnic groups, as one of crackdowns, intimidation and questionable modernization, involving a continuous influx of Han Chinese workers. The primary fear of the international community is that the increasing commercialization of Tibet that has accompanied the extensive programme of Chinese investment in the region will simultaneously weaken the attraction of traditional Tibetan culture for Tibetans, while strengthening their loyalty to the economic opportunities that China can increasingly offer. The religious and ethnic cause of Tibetans has been the main reason for anti-CCP dissidents among Tibetans, and has received much international attention in recent decades. In the late 1980s, a booklet in various languages was available at Chinese embassies around the world: Le Tibet, cent questions et réponses (A Hundred Questions and Answers about Tibet, henceforth “Cent Questions”) summarizes the official Chinese stance on the status of Tibet.1 Now, 14 years on, a team of 15 leading Tibetologists provide their own answers to those questions in Le Tibet est-il Chinois? Réponses à cent questions chinoises (Is Tibet Chinese? Answers to a Hundred Chinese Questions, henceforth “Réponses”), clearly emphasizing the fundamental preoccupation of the Chinese government (widely stressed in Cent Questions) is the protection of the territorial integrity of the country and the unity of the many ethnic communities of the PRC (pp.171-193).

Indeed, over the past four decades, the official position of the Chinese government on Tibet-related issues has not substantially changed. For the government, the integration of Tibet was full-filled in 1965 following the creation of the Tibet Autonomous Region (TAR). Tibetan nationalist dissent is thus considered to be a threat to the PRC’s territorial integrity, rather than a direct threat to CCP leadership over China. It should be remembered, however, that any attempt to reshape China’s borders would seriously undermine the legitimacy of the ruling party.

Religion, together with language and culture, are nationalistic elements that the Chinese government is trying hard to keep under tight control. The return of capital punishment for Tibetan political prisoners this January, reminds us that as the Tibetan movement for religious freedom and self-determination gains impetus, the Chinese authorities do not hesitate to apply harsh measures to suppress the Tibetan resistance movement. However, the question remains to what extent the Western powers will be prepared to confront Beijing as Tibet moves up the international agenda.

1. The authors refer to the French edition.


Antonia Terraone, MA is a PhD candidate at Leiden University’s Research School CNWS where he is completing his doctoral thesis on the gur ma tradition of Buddhist teaching transmission in present-day Tibet. terraone@iet.leidenuniv.nl