

An Anthropological Field Study in a Tibetan Community of Chengdu

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Abstract

This paper is based on extensive ethnographic fieldwork in Chengdu of China, capital of Sichuan Province, using anthropological research methods such as participant-observation and individual interviews of devotees, and collecting first-hand information during July 2010 and March 2011. Through descriptive analysis of the Tibetans' life in Chengdu, this paper explores changes to the traditional Tibetan cultures and challenges faced by Tibetans while coping to this new environment in the context of urbanization and globalization. By means of one of the Tibetan's stories happened in the Wuhou District in Chengdu, the paper attempts to show how the traditional Tibetan culture adapts to the change. The result shows that Tibetans have established a new urban community that has many functions, and plays a significant role for Tibetans migrants, preservation of the Tibetan cultures, and the development of Chengdu and the Tibetan countryside

Keywords: minority street, Tibetans in Chengdu, Tibetan traditional culture, challenges and adaptation, Tibetan migrants

1. Introduction



Figure 1. Minority street, Chengdu (Minzu Jie)

Since the 1980s, urbanization has progressed rapidly all around China, and at present a massive campaign of urbanization is held in most rural areas of China, particularly in areas inhabited by ethnic minorities. As a result, many people from rural areas migrate to urban centers in order to make a living. In western China, it is the case of many minorities who used to live in rural areas, such as Tibetans.

Since the 1980s, there were some Tibetan people entered in Chengdu and gathered in the several adjacent streets of Wuhou District, and lived on doing little business, actually selling the traditional Tibetan clothes and ornaments in their shops rented from local people. At that time, there were only several shops, after 30 years development, the street has gradually taken the colors and character of a Tibetan community, with some people from Hui minority and some foreigners adding to the peculiarity of this street, later named Minority Street. It also become an interesting tourist attraction, the same as in Wuhou District near the two famous touristic places of Jinli (a beautiful park that there are some special buildings and local foods) and Wuhou temple (a temple for commemorating a famous man in ancient China). Some Tibetans have bought apartments, others prefer to rent. They decorated their homes in Tibetan style, but still enjoy the use of most of usual modern appliances. Most of Tibetan migrants still wear the traditional clothes in Tibetan style, and use Tibetan language among themselves, but communicate with customers in Chinese. About 300 Tibetan cultural commodities shops, Tibetan teahouses, Tibetan restaurants, Tibetan book stores, Tibetan cultural design companies and family hostels are found in this wonderful street. Upon entering this area, one is overwhelmed by the Tibetan traditional character of this street that at the same time never hides entirely the traits of a multi-cultural metropolis such as Chengdu.

Tibetans make a living selling valuable traditional cultural products, such as incense burners, thangkas, Buddha statues and Tibetan robes; their life combine traditions with modern urban living. Like Barkhor Street in Lhasa, the street has become an entry gate for Tibetans from rural Tibetan areas, enabling a gradual exposition to the outside world and facilitating its understanding. The traditional goods sold in this street are objects of collection in contemporary Tibetan society, and it is like a window to understand modern Tibetan society. Most importantly the urban community contributes to improving the relations and understanding among Tibetan and other Chinese ethnic groups. The Tibetan community and Tibetan cultural products do not only support the life of Tibetans in Chengdu but are also an effective way to calm conflicts among ethnic groups, and preserve traditional Tibetan culture.

Through the establishment of family hostels and shops selling religious goods the street has seen the birth of this urban community, which nowadays is the entry gate for newly arrived Tibetans and a way to understand the outside world. Furthermore, they have developed a special type of marketing and exchange, which enables Tibetans to make a decent living in Chengdu, while keeping the Tibetan traditional culture alive in a modern society. Lastly, when returning to their hometowns, they bring back new ideas, and exert great influence on their respective societies.

2. Methodology

First-hand materials the author collected during her ethnographic fieldwork for PH.D during July 2010 and March 2011 constitute the basis of this paper. It explores the associations between traditional Tibetan culture and urbanization as well as globalization. Specifically, The major research methods of this paper focus on anthropological research methods such as participant-observation and individual interviews of devotees.

2.1 Participant Observation

Through participant-observation and questionnaire to get information of Tibetans' living conditions in the Minority Street located in Chengdu's Wuhou District, where the Tibetan community resides, and also collected the materials which relative to the Tibetan shops. The author lived in Tibetan family hostels of the Minority Street about six months in total, and met several hundreds of Tibetan people residing there temporarily. She lived, cooked and ate with families running the hostels she stayed at, and observed their daily life. During this fieldwork she discussed with Tibetans or used open interviews to obtain related materials, such as their hometown, ethnicity, occupation, their current living conditions, purposes and feelings in Chengdu, etc.

2.2 Personal Interview

During fieldwork, the author collected many interesting stories that happened in this street, but the paper selected a representative story about a 'great man' (Dantsen's story) whose successful story shows a way to adapt to the challenges of the metropolis. Author had been as a assistant in his shop about one month, and has become his good friend. By Dantsen author made other Tibetan friends and collected their stories happed in the street when they immigrated from their hometown. The Tibetan businessman's stories reveal how the Tibetan cultural and economic practices evolve in contact with the Han Chinese society and urbanization.

3. Results

3.1 Traditions and Creation: Tibetan Bowls

According to China's most famous anthropologist of the 20th century, Prof. Fei Xiaotong, traditional culture crosses the boundaries of time, space, and ethnicity. Culture has infinite energy, thus traditional cultural values

are not easily changed by only one person or one kind of idea: *“Globalization always changes people’s traditional life style and their ideas, but the nature of traditions that are rooted in the people’s daily life never disappears”*. (Note 1) The following story about a Tibetan man talented at making Tibetan bowls presents a good case study.

Dantsen is from Seda District in Gârze Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture (Sichuan Province), and owns a shop in the Minority Street called *The Tibetan Plateau Cultural Industries Development Co. Ltd.* In addition, he also leads the *Tibetan Child Film-Video Studio* and the *Tibetan Plateau Special-Education Schools for the Disabled*, and works as secretary for the *Association for the Conservation of Nianbaoyuze Ecology and Environment*. Looking at his Tibetan bowls displayed on his counter, the various designs and scriptures graved on them attracted my attention. Dantsen accepted to participate in the interview, and thus I listened to his story and his passion for Tibetan bowls.

At the age of six years old, Dantsen entered the Labrong Monastery as a little sami (novice in Buddhist monasteries). Besides his study of traditional religious thought, he was interested in Tibetan arts including music, design, thangka paintings, masks and so on. He particularly enjoyed the art of making Tibetan bowls. The monastery had provided a calm place to study Tibetan bowls, and he got to understand many aspects of this art. At the age of 20 years old, he left the monastery to resume his secular life, and from then on he devoted his entire time to the collection of ancient documents and studied in depth the art of Tibetan bowls. To him, the popular culture and beliefs around Tibetan bowls are wonderful. Bowls represent Tibetan history and legends. They are important for Tibetan people’s life, and are used on many occasions such as wedding and funeral ceremonies, religious ceremonies, or simply as gifts. From the many Tibetan documents he collected, he learnt that different bowls have been attributed different religious functions. Some bowls make children cleverer, while others are good for health. The colors, patterns and shapes of these bowls are all different. According to Dantsen, the culture and beliefs around Tibetan bowls are not only a symbol of Tibetan culture, but also a carrier of historical memory.



Figure 2. Tibetan bowls exposed in Dantsen’s shop



Figure 3. Dantsen’s shop

However, in modern society, Tibetan culture is facing the challenges of globalization and urbanization like many traditional cultures all around the world. Dantsen tried his best to find a way to preserve the best out of Tibetan traditional culture: *“You have to display these cultures before the modern customers, and combine the traditional elements with popular cultural elements. You must adjust old ideas, breathe fresh air, and make the traditional culture alive through the use of new ideas and technologies. But beware of not destroying traditions by your hand, it must continue its life from generation to generation”*.

Dantsen is not alone in the art business. He has many friends in Chengdu who have professional knowledge and skills in Tibetan arts, such as Thangka painting, Buddha engraving, and so on. They often help each other, and explore the market’s possibilities, in order to make new marketable products of Tibetan culture. He also collaborates with a porcelain factory in Jingdezhen (Jiangxi province), a famous city for Chinese porcelain, and combines the art of Tibetan traditional bowls with advanced skills of porcelain making, enhancing quality of his bowls and thus gaining in popularity among Tibetans. Besides his shop in Chengdu, he owns several shops in Seda and Shiqu Districts (Gârze Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture, Sichuan Province), and in Xining (Qinghai Province). Although his dream is to be an expert in the art of Tibetan bowl making rather than a successful

businessman, making business enables him to preserve his traditional culture.

Dantsen also likes Tibetan masks; many colourful masks are hung up on the wall of his shop. To him, making Tibetan masks is like painting Thangkas or making Buddha statues. Fabrication process never changed over the years, and their real meaning remained: they present the traditional Tibetan society and culture. As an artist and creator, he could change only their “explicit culture”, which are the materials and skills used in fabrication. In his opinion, the new culture created by the artist making the mask is very small compared to the implicit traditional traits that never change, despite modernization or globalization phenomenon. His masks present a good example. As we know, Tibetan masks are used in religious ceremonies; however, Dantsen turned them into popular products, making puppets out of masks. Thanks to a studio that makes small film-videos from famous Tibetan fairy tales and folklores, he made many Tibetan cartoons, which he later burned into VCDs and gave freely to children of Tibetan autonomous areas. Another success creation of his are miniatures of Tibetan masks, a souvenir popular among tourists passing by this street, and a symbol of Tibetan culture.

It took a whole month to the author to get Dantsen’s story. While the author stayed at his shop and listened to him, many Tibetans passed by to buy his beautiful bowls, even though some of them are quite expensive, other tourists bought miniatures of Tibetan mask as gifts for their relatives or friends. Because of these new bowls and masks, Tibetan cultural products have landed on the market and survived in modern society, just like usual daily goods. When a person uses the traditional bowls or buys a mask, the Tibetan culture is revived and like an energetic seed, it tries to find a wise way to exist.



Figure 4. Tibetan mask displayed in Dantsen’s shop

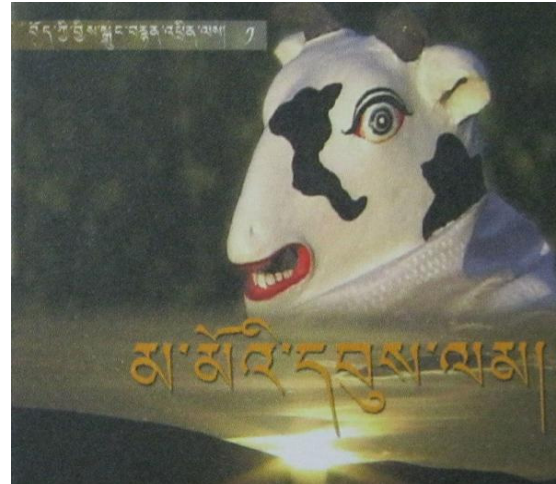


Figure 5. Tibetan puppets made out of a mask

There are many stories like this in the minority street, and they reflect changes of the Tibetan society and Tibetan culture. As a kind of special product, bowls, masks, Thangka paintings and other products of Tibetan culture carry a mission of cultural continuity. Like many other shopkeepers, Dantsen thinks that what he produces or sells are not only marketable products. On the contrary, they are symbols of the culture of ethnic minorities. However, most of his customers are Tibetans, so what they buy are not only simple “products” for daily use, but a feeling of Tibetan culture. This feeling may well be the reason why the street is so prosperous. This street and many similar stories reveal a truth: Tibetan traditional cultures an asset for making a living in a modern metropolis, and it will not disappear because of changing time and space, but will remain and adapt itself in a suitable way.

3.2 A New Symbol of Ethnic Identity: Tibetan Family Hostels in the Minority Street

The Minority Street consists of two distinctive parts, the first one are the shops, as described above, the second one are Tibetan family hostels. Some rich Tibetan people from Tibetan areas (Xizang, Qinghai and Gansu province) bought or rent apartments to live or to use as family hostel. Nowadays the Tibetan family hostels are very popular, many shop keepers live in it. Most importantly, it provides a place for those who came to Chengdu to visit or see a doctor. For such people, hostels are the most familiar and comfortable accommodation. Hostels are decorated in Tibetan style, and the waiters are all Tibetans from neighbouring autonomous areas. They can speak Tibetan and provide Tibetan food. After dinner they often watch TV together. Living in a hostel run by fellow Tibetans, travelers don’t have any pressure caused by differences or clashes between modernity and

tradition, city and village, center and border. Thanks to their similar cultural background and education, they will consider themselves as one family.

Like many shopkeepers I almost lived in a Tibetan family hostel while doing this fieldwork, and there are about thirty similar Tibetan family hostels in the street. The apartment I rented out is owned by a Tibetan woman, about one hundred and twenty square meters, five rooms decorated in Tibetan style furniture, include beds, chairs, prayer niches and shrines to Buddha, Thangka paintings and so on. The hostel even provided a special place and services to pray or chant. In a month there were twenty-five people who lived in the hostel, most of them were Tibetan people from Tibet, Sichuan Tibetan areas (Gârze and Ngaba prefectures), and others included tourists from Beijing, Shanghai and Guangdong. They left the hostel by day to work or travel, and returned for the night. We often chatted together like a family without solitude and strangeness.



Figure 6. The Tibetan staffs in a hostel



Figure 7. The Tibetan family hostel, where the author resided

Tibetan family hostels have three important functions in the development of Chengdu. First, people with ethnic backgrounds have a stable place to return to when facing the challenges of adaption to the metropolis and its new and complicated environment. Newly arrived Tibetans find a hostel run by Tibetans, through which they access the Tibetan urban community. They get help from the community to sustain their first steps toward economic and social integration in the city. Tibetan migrants depend particularly on such neighbourhoods to gain a feeling of security. Besides, mutual comfort and help among fellow Tibetans establishes a strong capacity to solve concrete problems. Moreover, hostels feed strong ethnic and cultural identities. Hostels are like their new homes, though their co-residents come from different Tibetan areas, they must all work in the same direction to adapt to the city. The hostel has become a new ethnic symbol in the city, and helps stabilize their identities. At the same time, Tibetan stake pride in the space owned by their fellows, and it can protect their self-esteem and self-confidence. The city belongs to diversity: different people, different ethnic nationalities, and different cultures. Finally, Tibetan family hostels are a meeting point for all. They promote understanding between Tibetans and other nationalities and have a positive role in this aspect. Not only Tibetans but also many Han Chinese people stay in Tibetan family hostels, they have sometimes dinner together and exchange ideas, talking about their different cultural habits and values, sharing their own interesting stories.

4. Discussion

4.1 Recognizing the Potential of the Minority Street: A Successful Case in the City

The Minority Street has seen about 30 years of continuous development, and it presents a picture of prosperity. As a successful case of integration of migrants from ethnic minorities in a metropolis, several aspects deserve reflection.

4.1.1 An Open City and a Bridge between Cultures

As the main components of the Minority Street, Tibetan family hostels and shops have become highly frequented places both by tourists and Tibetans. Like a bridge, the street links the Tibetan areas with the urban metropolis. The street is like a window, from which Tibetans can observe the outside world and outsiders get to understand the Tibetan world. The street has survived despite conflicts between modernization and tradition, even more than that, it has kept a function of dialogue between Tibetans and the metropolis over the years, emphasizing

communication between cultures.

4.1.2 Migrants' Role in the City and Countryside Development

Nowadays migrants play a positive role not only in the metropolis but also in the development of their respective hometowns. In Chengdu, the Minority Street has become the ethnic cultural landscape and attracts many tourists, Chinese as well as foreigners, so the local government took some effective measures to help developing the street, such as enhancing propaganda through media, decorating the shops, and providing advisory services. So far the street has become a booming market on which Tibetans make a living. At the same time, migrants bring money and new ideas to their hometown, enhancing exchanges with rural areas and contributing to their development. Appropriate policies, especially in capacity development, could highly favour further integration and mutual benefits.

4.1.3 Strengthening Loyalty and Identity of the City

To the Tibetans, the street is an open space to share customs and symbols that are similar to their hometowns. A dynamic Tibetan community has gradually established itself and a friendly social relation network has taken form, strengthening loyalty and identity to the city. Migrants start to enjoy the city, and follow its rules. They thus begin to regard the urban community as their second hometown, and provided that they get access to the same rights and services as Chengdu citizens, they could contribute highly to the development of the province's capital.

4.1.4 A Living Museum Protecting the Traditional Tibetan Culture in the City

Finally, like a huge living museum, Tibetan shops and family hostels of the Minority Street safeguard the heritage of traditional Tibetan culture, such as Tibetan clothes and ornaments, Tibetan gastronomy, Tibetan Buddhism and religious thought. Though the old cultural framework is changing and adapts to its new modern environment, changes are only superficial (Zhou, 1997), because the original culture still has great inherent power, it has the ability to protect itself and preserve its core, and the ability to adjust, as shown in Dantsen's story with Tibetan bowls and masks. Using new technologies, new materials, and new ideas is only a way to help traditional Tibetan culture survive in a modern society.

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Note

Note 1. Personal interview by the author, August 2010, Chengdu.

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