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Tibetans, Han ignore politics to build uneasy ties

Though it may seem counterintuitive, Beijing's harsh rule has helped unite Tibetans while exposing more Chinese to the allure of Tibet's unique religion and culture

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REUTERS, TONGREN, CHINA

Tibet's troubled politics may have grabbed headlines for decades, but the relationship between Tibetans and the dominant Han Chinese is far more complex and multifaceted than the bitter public arguments suggest.

The two peoples share a long historical attachment to Buddhism, which years of Communist rule has never managed to kill. China's economic boom has also opened previously hard-to-reach Tibetan areas to Han visitors, leading to a mingling of cultures.

Tibetans in at least one area with looser political restrictions than Tibet proper say their beef with the government in Beijing does not extend to all Chinese, and that some controversial policies may even help bring Tibetans together.

All this belies the tense ties between Beijing and exiled Tibetans, and the harsh stance of supporters of both sides, which have been in the news after last week's meeting between US President Barack Obama and the Dalai Lama.

The deeply religious Tibetans revere their exiled spiritual leader the Dalai Lama as a living Buddha. Yet so do some Han, despite Beijing's frequent lambasting of him as a separatist who espouses violence, charges he strongly denies.

These Han do not see that as a contradiction, especially those who visit Tongren, a heavily Tibetan region in the arid, mountainous northwestern province of Qinghai, where the Dalai Lama was born in 1935.

"He is the holiest of them all. My heart jumps a beat whenever I see his picture. He is the most important of all the living Buddhas," said Xiao Li, a Han from the wealthy eastern province of Jiangsu and a fervent Buddhist.

"Of course, even living Buddhas make mistakes," she said, when asked about the Dalai Lama's frequent overseas trips, the ones the Chinese government gets so angry about. "We are all human, and it does not change my respect for him."

Some of Tongren's Tibetans are equally able to separate their bitterness about official religious policies, which they feel trample on their freedom to follow their chosen leader and spiritual path, and their feelings about Han Chinese.

"I do not think that the views of the Chinese government necessarily represent those of all the Han race. I don't think that all of them are bad people. Some are very good," said monk

Tedan, who like many Tibetans goes only by one name.

Buddhism is an ancient faith in China, dating back more than 1,000 years. The religion was introduced to both China and Tibet from India.

Though there are no hard and fast figures, some Chinese surveys put the number of practicing Buddhists in the country today at around 100 million, including Tibetans, Han, Mongolians and a few other ethnic minorities such as the Dai.

There are perhaps as many Muslims and Christians, though some Christians worship in underground churches not recognized by the state.

FASCINATION OF RELIGION

The Communist Party has had an uneasy relationship with religion, despite a constitutional guarantee of freedom of worship. During the chaos of the Cultural Revolution, fanatical Red Guards smashed up temples, churches and mosques.

Those policies have mellowed considerably in recent years, with the Party seeing religion as an important force for social stability, even if it continues to exercise control over the appointment of senior religious figures.

One monk who has faced repeated police questioning for illegally traveling to India to study at a religious college run under the auspices of the Dalai Lama, said he counted many Han from Beijing and Shanghai among his students of Buddhism.

"They are looking for meaning in their lives and find that we as Tibetan Buddhists can give it to them," said the monk, who asked for anonymity because he feared repercussions for discussing a politically sensitive topic with a foreign reporter.

"We help them understand the scriptures," he added, waving a book of the Dalai Lama's teachings printed in the Sanskrit-based Tibetan script.

Qinghai's Tibetans say they are given far more leeway to practice their religion than those living what is formally called the Tibet Autonomous Region. Pictures of the Dalai Lama are openly displayed at major temples in a way unthinkable in Tibet.

At Lunar New Year celebrations last week, monks at one monastery freely carried out a complex ceremony complete with ornate, embroidered silk costumes that culminated in

the unfurling of a giant image of the Buddha on a nearby hillside.

It attracted a small, though fascinated, crowd of Han Chinese tourists, who marveled at the religious devotion shown in a country run by a staunchly atheist Communist Party.

"They have far more complex emotions than we do," said Fan Liqing from the southern province of Guangdong, watching a procession of vermilion-clad monks.

"I think we can learn a lot from our Tibetan compatriots. They must be doing something right," she added.

BENEFITS OF CHINA

Signs of official mistrust of Tongren's Tibetans are never far away, even if the security forces have so far this year kept a low profile.

A large army barracks sits on the outskirts of Tongren's county seat, not far from one of the main temples, ready to respond to any trouble, as they did when serious anti-Chinese violence erupted across Tibetan areas in March 2008.

Such obvious reminders of who is really in control naturally sit uncomfortably with Tongren's residents.

Beijing says its rule over the Tibetans has brought development — from roads and hospitals to schools and economic opportunity — to an area once racked by poverty, and still far less developed than China's rich coastal regions.

Its critics counter that Han are the main beneficiaries of the government investment, and that change is coming at the cost of traditional culture and language.

But even some of the most proudly Tibetan citizens in Tongren grudgingly admit Beijing's efforts have improved some aspects of everyday life. In some cases they have also helped unite a people fragmented by the harsh terrain.

One man who travels widely in his job as a tour guide and who also asked not to be named, said the promotion of Mandarin in education had actually brought some Tibetans closer.

"We have three different dialects in Tibetan, and they are not easily mutually comprehensible," he said.

"We Tibetans have lived so spread out from each other we knew little of each other's existence, and could not talk even when we did meet. I now speak Chinese to Tibetans who don't understand my dialect, and it's been a real unifier."

Main photo: A Tibetan monk talks to a Han visitor in front of a monastery earlier this month in Tongren, a heavily Tibetan region in China's mountainous Qinghai Province.

Top: Han visitors take photos of a Tibetan monk outside a monastery in Tongren earlier this month.

Middle: A worker helps in the renovation in April 2008 of a hall at the Yong He Gong Lama Temple, a Tibetan-style landmark in Beijing.

Above: Tibetans march in protest of the Chinese occupation of Tibet, in Dharamsala, India, on March 22, 2008.