

Tibet: a disappearing culture



[Photo taken by the author]

Abstract

The unique Tibetan culture which is more than 2 000 years old is now facing serious cultural crisis. Since the Chinese occupation of Tibet, 97% of Buddhist monasteries (6,000) were closed or ruined, 100,000 monks and nuns were defrocked and 1.2 million Tibetans died. [1] This research analyses policies implemented in Tibetan Autonomous region and their impact on Tibetan culture and identity.

Religion

In Tibetan society, Buddhism is considered to be a crucial element of Tibetan cultural and national identity. Unfortunately, freedom of religion in Tibet is restricted. The current governmental policies control the size of monasteries and nunneries and the creation of new religious institutions is prohibited. The government requires monks to sign a declaration denouncing the Dalai Lama and children are banned from going on religious pilgrimages or visiting temples. Any reference to the Dalai Lama, the Nobel Peace Laureate, is strictly avoided and mentioning Buddhism could be often problematic. In recent years, the increased number of self-immolations among Buddhist monks and civilians has occurred.



[Photo taken by the author]

More than 143 people set themselves on fire since 2009 calling for free Tibet, protection of Tibetan language, tradition, identity and the Dalai Lama to return home.

Language

Language is an instrument of communication and a way of asserting people's identity. China has adopted a bilingual educational model in Tibet in order to achieve equity between national minorities and Han Chinese. However, the Tibetan language education is systematically created without a mention to Buddhism and almost no references to Tibetan culture.

93% of Tibetan refugee children were not educated about Tibet's history, its Buddhist religion or culture when they studied in Tibet.[2]

The course materials on Tibetan history are restricted and the university professors are only allowed to lecture on certain topics. As a consequence, the current educational system favouring Chinese language in the economic and social sphere can be seen as a threat to ethno-cultural existence and national identity of Tibetans.



[Photo taken by the author]



Development

Many development projects in Tibet disproportionately benefit Chinese residents, leaving Tibetans at risk of cultural assimilation and marginalization.

The government supports an influx of Chinese migrants into Tibetan region.

The Western Poverty Project was designed to transfer over 57 000 mostly non-Tibetan farmers into the region. In addition, it is argued that the developing infrastructure, especially the Qinghai -Tibet Railway connecting Beijing and Lhasa, facilitates military operations and contributes towards an assimilation of Tibet into China [ibid]

The forced resettlement of Tibetans represents another issue. The resettlement drastically changes traditional way of life of the Tibetan communities and often causes the identity crises.

According to Freedom House (2013) over 1.85 million of farmers and herders have been resettled within the Tibet Autonomous Region.

Summary

Although, the investment in Western region of China is facilitating development and is raising the standard of living, the Chinese immigration and governmental policies intentionally or unintentionally affect the traditional way of life in Tibetan region. With education system preferring Chinese language over Tibetan, restrictions on religious belief and cultural assimilation, Tibetans are facing uncertain future. Therefore, it should be a responsibility of China and the whole international community to help to protect and preserve the unique Tibetan culture and its heritage

References:

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