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**Religious Revival and De-ethnicization
in the Ethnic Minority Regions of China**

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Religious Revival and De-ethnicization in the Ethnic Minority Regions of China

INTRODUCTION

As the Chinese state adopts greater toleration for religion and religious practices over the last two decades, religion has experienced a general revival throughout the country. This has also attracted increasing official and scholarly attention on the effects of religious revival on the ethnic minority regions. One important reason is the perceived close link between religious identity and ethnic identity among the minority *minzu* (or “nationality”), such that an intensification of religiosity among these communities would have profound implications for the ways they relate to one another and with the state institutions, touching on issues such as social cohesion, competition for scarce resources, economic development, and political stability. In terms of the intensity of scholarly attention and official scrutiny, two religions in particular stand out: Islam and Tibetan Buddhism. This is because these religions have been often been linked with the ethno-nationalism and separatist movements spurred on by certain sections of the Uighur and Tibetan populations.

In this paper I discuss the possibility of a de-ethnicization process (or, *de-minzuization*, to adopt a rather awkward phrasing, but a somewhat more accurate description in the Chinese context) resulting from religious revival, a phenomenon that tends to be ignored by analysts studying religion and ethnicity in the minority regions of China. I first discuss how the Communist state attempted to make “legible” the diverse groups of people in the country through the *minzu shibie*, or nationalities/ethnic classification project. Following from this, I utilize case studies of Tibetan Buddhism, Islam and Christianity from published sources, my fieldwork data and interviews to suggest that religious revival could also result in a de-ethnicization process that can impact on the minority *minzu* in two main ways: first, exerting centrifugal pressures on sub-*minzu* groups, and second, allowing the minority groups to transcend state-defined *minzu* boundaries and facilitating their integration into larger, de-ethnicized, translocal and cosmopolitan communities.

RELIGION AND ETHNICITY AMONG CHINA’S MINORITY NATIONALITIES

That religion is an important resource for minority identity formation has been noted for a long time by the participants of the *minzu shibie* project, the public media, as well as scholars of minority affairs. For example, in discussing the support various minorities had for the Communists during China’s war with Japan, Mackerras (1994: 101, 262) argues that the Muslim Hui and Uighurs whose cultural identity was deeply intertwined with Islam, were more likely to oppose communism than to support it. Further, for the Uighurs and the Tibetans, their forceful resistance to assimilative policies since the beginning of the twentieth century is regarded as closely linked to their desire to retain their religious identity against the secularism promoted by first by the Nationalist, and later by the Communist government. In fact, for some minority nationalities in particular, religious identity and ethnic identity are often seen as inseparable. Some scholars (e.g. Gladney 1991; Sutton and Kang 2009) have used the term “ethno-religion” to describe the kind of religion that is closely related with ethnicity. For example, in their research on the impact of tourism on religion and ethnicity in the Huanglong region in western Sichuan, Sutton and Kang argue that “local identities have been tied almost indissolubly into religious practices” (2009, 191). They note that ethno-religion is especially relevant for the Tibetans and Muslims as it is a crucial mediating factor for their interactions with the state and with the Han Chinese in everyday life. They come to this conclusion:

Religion and ethnicity have been categorized and controlled in the same terms, a process that has helped to define and also mediate differences among nationalities, and in the successive periods of political change since the 1950s, the two have been suppressed and revived in tandem. 'Religion' on China's ethnic frontier appears to be almost an intrinsic aspect of ethnicity.

(Sutton and Kang 2009, 191)

Interestingly, Sutton and Kang also quote Ye Xiaowen, the long-time former director of China's Religious Affairs Bureau, which, importantly in the present context, takes the form Religious and Minority Affairs Bureau (RMAB) in the minority regions. Representing the official position, Ye expresses the view that the "religious question" is often intimately linked with the "national question":

In a nation (minzu) with a broad-based and profound religious belief, the religious and national sentiments, the religious and national psychology, and religious and national customs, religious and national culture, the religious and national consciousness of every believer are intertwined and infiltrate each other, sometimes even becoming inseparable.

(Ye Xiaowen, quoted in Sutton and Kang 2009)

The main aim of the preceding discussion is to show that for many state officials and scholars, religion is very frequently regarded as one of the key constitutive elements and markers of minzu identity in China. In fact, certain minority groups have been defined primarily in terms of their religions, such as the Uighurs, Tibetans, Hui, and Dai, just to name a few. One of the reasons is that in these groups a majority profess a particular faith. Hence in terms of the understanding of religious revival among the minorities, researchers often focus on whether the phenomenon might lead to a strengthening of ethnic identity—which involves the strengthening of ethnic boundaries defined partly or predominantly on religious terms—and what this development means for inter-ethnic relations and the minorities' interactions with the state. Since many of the minority nationalities in China live in the frontier provinces with their co-ethnics residing in neighbouring countries, to the central government in Beijing minority issues also touch on matters related to national unity, sovereignty, and development. It is thus not unusual to encounter reports in the domains of public media, officialdom and academia about the potential threat to social and political stability as a result of religious revival, such as the rise in Islamism in Xinjiang or the revival of Tibetan Buddhist monasteries and rituals. To further understand the view of many that religion and ethnicity are often inseparable, it is necessary to examine one of the most profound state interventions into the minority areas, the minzu shibie, or "nationalities/ethnic classification" project.

ETHNIC GROUP MADE "LEGIBLE"

China party-state's basic policy towards the country's minority nationalities is encapsulated in Article 3 of the first Constitution adopted in 1954:

The People's Republic of China is a unitary multinational state. All the nationalities are equal. Discrimination against or oppression of any nationality, and acts which undermine the unity of the nationalities, are prohibited.

All nationalities have the freedom to use and develop their own spoken and written languages, and to preserve or reform their own customs and ways.

Regional autonomy applies in areas where a minority nationality lives in a compact community. All the national autonomous areas are inseparable parts of the People's Republic of China.

(Constitution of the People's Republic of China 1961, 9)

There is a large body of literature on the state's project in the identification of "nationalities", known as the minzu shibie, and my intention here is primarily to draw on certain important insights from the existing literature to illustrate my central argument in this paper.

Stevan Harrell has provided one of the most compelling accounts and critique of the minzu shibie project undertaken by the CCP. The project is not only about the imposition of political control over the unruly minority regions. Guided by ideas of evolutionary Marxism which classify peoples according to their prevailing modes of production, minzu shibie was simultaneously a cultural project that slotted peoples into a hierarchical system that ranked them according to their economic and cultural achievements. When the Communist leadership first came to power, it needed detailed descriptions of the peoples under its rule in order to determine "the ladder of history a particular group might have been at the time of the Communist takeover" (Harrell 2003, 42). The minzu classification project, like Sun Yatsen's notion of the Republic of Five Nationalities (*wuzu gonghe*) decades before, was carried out in the service of development, national integration, and crucially, ordering. The main difference was the CCP's reliance on evolutionary Marxism and the Stalinist criteria for identifying nationality: a "nation" refers to a group of people who share common language, territory, economy, and psychology manifesting as culture. In addition, the nations in a multinational country could be classified in a hierarchical order in terms of their progress, at the point of identification, along the evolutionary stages of modes of production. One important result of this hierarchical ordering was the positioning of the Han majority, which wielded political power at the central government, as having attained the most advanced stage of civilizational evolution. The Han minzu were thus held up as the model for the other minority peoples. As Louisa Schein (2000) argues, state-produced representations of the minority Others through the minzu shibie did not just entail the construction of cultural differences; they also served to create and to legitimize hierarchies structured along the axes of class, gender, education and region.

While in present-day China the minzu classification system has become some sort of Durkheimian social fact imbued with features of coerciveness and immutability, a number of scholars have shed light on the complexity and contingent aspects of the minzu shibie project. Thus, Stevan Harell has analysed how ethnic identification and practices in the everyday life of the minority peoples do not conform neatly to the state's system of minzu classification that stresses exclusivity and permanence. This rigid system as currently applied by the state in its effort to classify, order, and control—i.e. to make "legible"—the diverse populations of China has been superimposed upon a highly fluid and complex reality, one "in which members of local and regional communities relate to each other in a variety of ways according to a variety of identities based on different combinations of the four factors specified in the minzu definition and other factors that are not there, such as religion, class, and political control or allegiance" (Harrell 2001, 313).

The ethnic identification project was not as systematic and "scientific" as many have assumed. Citing James Scott (1998) and his idea of "legibility", Thomas Mullaney (2010, 2011) has argued that when the Communist regime first initiated the minzu shibie effort it was highly reliant of a group of experts—ethnologists, linguists, historians, philologists—for their taxonomic methods and advice to gain an understanding of the complexities of the minority regions and to eventually demarcate the boundaries that set one ethnic group from another. In his book, *Seeing Like a State*, Scott seeks to investigate why grand projects of the state often failed, with many producing the very opposite of the intended effects. From a broad survey of large state-sponsored projects from across the world,

Scott comes to the important conclusion that the fundamental problem behind the failure lies in the modern state's penchant for drastically simplifying reality to fit into its neat administrative categories. One serious consequence of this is the neglect or dismissal of local knowledge, which Scott argues is crucial for effective management of the complexities of the natural environment and social life. Practically, this implies that in order to control its subjects and territory, the state must necessarily "narrow its vision". This narrowing of vision involves processes of simplification, codification and abstraction—the "dismembering [of] an exceptionally complex and poorly understood set of relations and processes in order to isolate a single element of instrumental value" (Scott 1998, 21), a condition that Scott describes as "legibility". When the domain of the state becomes "legible", its people and physical environment can then be subject to state's manipulation. Minzu shibie can be seen as an attempt by the Communist state to render legible the diverse groups of people living within the country.

Thus, at the initial stage of the minzu shibie project, this group of participating scholars were not so much "seeing like the state" than assisting the state "to see". For the Communist leadership to understand, manage, and ultimately control the various ethnic groups in the country, it needed to establish visible units into which these groups can be assigned. The problem is that for effective management the number of such units cannot be prohibitively large:

Authorities decided that, if minzu was truly going to be one of the axes of Chinese citizenship, the state could not permit people to choose their own designations at will. There would have to be a predetermined set of authorized minzu categories from which each person would select. These categories would have to be mutually exclusive, limited in number, of a reasonably large size, but also sufficiently grounded in local realities so as to elicit popular support.

(Mullaney 2010, 329)

The result is that out of more than 400 applications for recognition as minzu, only 56 were eventually endorsed.

In an essay on minzu shibie, Yang (2009) discusses the contingent and pragmatic ways with which researchers, under state's employment, determined which groups to be classified as minzu. Using the case of Yunnan, Yang shows the inconsistent ways researchers and officials narrowed down the large number of minzu applications to just around 22, depending on factors such as the amount of time the researchers had in the field, whether the elites of the minority groups are convincing in pressing their case to the researchers, the nature of ties between local elites and the Communist party officials, etc. In addition, Yang's study shows that the criteria for the determination of groups as minzu did not always conform to the Soviet model as many have believed. Minzu as a distinctive category "includes all kinds of ethnic or pro-ethnic groups, no matter which state of society they are in...[and] could be a mix of several ethnic groups, one single ethnicity, a sub-ethnic unit or just a tribal community" (2009, 767).

As an ideological practice, the minzu project has evolved into a system of ethnic classification that stresses exclusivity and permanence, with the invented minzu categories as units that allow for strong state intervention into society. The Communist regime's "national identification" project in the early 1950s can thus be regarded as its effort to make the many ethnic groups in the country "legible" and hence to be understood, manipulated, and disciplined for the broader goal of nation-building.

Minzu policies are therefore double-edged: theoretically all peoples are considered equal, and many ethnic minorities have been given spaces to for voicing out and resources are made available on the national stage. However, this national stage is also dominated by the Han Chinese, indicating that the minzu system is also a state-formulated hierarchical system imposed on the ethnic minorities. The system has also allowed for state penetration into affair of ethnic minorities to an unprecedented degree (Yang 2009). With this discussion of the minzu shibie project, in what follows I shall examine how religious revival among the minority minzu could disrupt the boundary-making effort of the state.

RELIGIOUS REVIVAL AND SHIFTING ETHNIC BOUNDARIES

As highlighted previously, the classification effort of minzu shibie has reduced hundreds of self-identified ethnic groups into a more manageable number, for both reasons of political expediency and scientific taxonomy. One good example that illustrates this process is the Hui, of whom the main ethnic marker is the Islamic faith. As studied by scholars such as Dru Gladney, the Hui are dispersed throughout different regions of China, in cities and the rural areas, many of whom do not share one or more of the Stalinist criteria for nationality, namely common territory, language, cultural practices, and economic activities. It is worthwhile to present a lengthy quote from Gladney's extensive study of the Hui:

For Hui communities in Northwest China, Islam is taken to be the fundamental marker of their identity...Hui urban communities, such as that in Beijing, then to express their identity in terms of cultural traditions: the pork tabu, entrepreneurship, and craft specializations...In southeastern Hui lineages, genealogical descent is the most important aspect of Hui identity. To be Hui is to be a member of a lineage that traces its descent to foreign ancestors, who just happened to be Muslim.

(Gladney 1998, 126-7)

This last group of approximately 60,000 no longer practice Islam, but adhere to folk religion, Buddhism, Daoism, Christianity, and Marxist secularism (Gladney 1998, 112). When we further examine the religion-ethnicity nexus, we see a complex picture of the Hui as comprising of different communities adhering to different Islamic sects. Muslims in China are overwhelming Sunni, which in turn is divided into four main branches: the Gedimu or the "Old School", Sufism, Ikhwan/Yihewani, and Xidaotang. This means that a revitalization of religion could conceivably impact on the sub-minzu sectarian affiliations, resulting not so much in the revitalization of the Hui as a minzu as accentuating existing divisions among the sub-minzu communities that make up the Hui. Indeed, some recent studies of the Hui have highlighted such a trend.

For example, Susan McCarthy's (2005) study of the Islamic revival among the Hui in Yunnan shows an intense debate raging among them over what constitute "authentic" Islam. On one side stand those who support close links between Islamic and Chinese cultures in the forging of the Hui identity. For these Hui, mainly of the Gedimu/Qadim sect, a comprehensive, authentic Islamic education comprises not only Islamic theology, philosophy, history and Arabic, but also Chinese philosophy, history, language and literature. The main aim of this curriculum is to cultivate Muslims who are also culturally Chinese. On the other side of the debate stand those, like the Haba Hui, who believe that an authentic Islam should be largely shorn of Chinese cultural influence and should re-orientate itself towards the Arabic world. For them, "pure" Islamic education should focus solely on the study of Islamic theology, philosophy, history and Arabic, and mosques should be built in accordance with Arabic architectural style with cupolas and minarets instead of resembling Chinese temples. Some young Haba Hui even view their future as being tied more closely to the Middle East than to China,

with their religious identity increasingly associated with a global Muslim community, with Arabic as the universal Islamic language.

As regards de-ethnicization, we are able to draw two lessons from McCarthy's case study of the Hui in Yunnan. First, as highlighted by scholars such as Gladney, Hui is a highly differentiated minzu, divided along not only regional but also sectarian lines. Religious revitalization among the Hui impacts on different sub-minzu communities in multifaceted ways, and could actually lead to greater division rather than strengthening of the Hui as a minzu as conceived by the state. Second, as the Arabization movement indicates, religious revival among the Hui can involve a de-ethnicization process that reconfigures the vector of integration away from particularistic minzu identity towards a more universal identity of global Islam.

While the preceding discussion of the Hui highlights the process of de-ethnicization in terms of religious revival's impact on sub-minzu and transnational relations, what follows is an examination of how religious revival and de-ethnicization do not necessarily lead to societal fragmentation but can indeed facilitate greater integration with the market and the Chinese polity. Tibetan Buddhism will serve as an illustrative case.

Tibetan Buddhism has received intense scrutiny partly because of its association with the Tibetan government-in-exile in northern India, which until recently was led by the 14th Dalai Lama who had fled Tibet in 1959 following the Tibetan uprising against Chinese rule. While the Dalai Lama has long ago rescinded his demand for Tibetan independence from the People's Republic, the relationship between the China and the Dalai Lama and his followers is still fraught with immense tension over issues such as the interpretation of what is "real autonomy" for Tibet, the appropriate paths for its development, and the possibility of the Dalai Lama's return to his homeland. Adding to these contentious issues is the existence of a hard-line group of Tibetans which disagree with the Dalai Lama's moderate "Middle Path" and are engaged in efforts to fight for full Tibetan independence from China.

The re-opening of Tibetan Buddhist monasteries and the state's greater toleration for the practice of religion by the Tibetan people in the Reform era has paved the way for a general revival of Tibetan Buddhism in the Tibetan cultural areas. Some scholars have noted how key religious figures and the religious communities they have set up have exerted a centripetal force that draws in large numbers of faithfuls and provided huge impetus to the revival of Tibetan culture in general (e.g. Germano 1998; Huber 1999). The strong link between religious revival and ethnicity has also been noted by Lawrence Epstein and Peng Wenbin (1998) in their study of a folk ritual known as the *luröl* ("music festival") in the Repgong region of Qinghai. As part of Tibetan "folk religion" with "rituals consist of a series of dances, sacrifices, propitiation of local mountain deities, and rites that celebrate village solidarity and purity, long life and fertility" (Epstein and Peng 1998, 124), the *luröl* rituals were prohibited during the Cultural Revolution and subsequently experienced a revival when restrictions were lifted, and when the Repgong region, with its famous monastery, began to welcome substantial number of tourists. Epstein and Peng show that the revival of the *luröl* rituals was vital for the maintenance and strengthening of the Tibetans' links to their locality, gods, and ethnic identity. In fact, Epstein and Peng argue that the rituals were anti-hegemonic in that they seek to undermine the state's effort at assimilating the Tibetans and their culture under its vision of the Chinese nation by enacting strong symbolic boundaries that reaffirm the separateness of Tibetans as a minzu.

Melvyn Goldstein's (1998) study of the revival of monastery life in the famous Drepung monastery on the outskirts of Lhasa shows how a significant number of monks at the monastery has been caught up with the struggle over the political status of Tibet vis-à-vis China. As the state authorities

slowly loosen its grip over religious life in Tibet and elsewhere, it also faces real prospect of challenges to its vision of a united country when religious personnel with sympathies for ethno-nationalism and separatism take on prominent roles in protest movements. Goldstein demonstrates that in the case of Drepung, many monks are actively involved in the struggle over the state's harsh control over Tibet, bolstered by a new found confidence in the general revival of Buddhism in Tibetan society and the material support they manage to garner from ordinary Tibetans.

Studies such as those discussed above tend to present a picture that highlights the intimate links between religious revival, rising ethnic consciousness, and for some, political dissidence. While I do not seek to deny the valuable insights presented by such studies, it is also important to be aware that religious revival, strengthening of ethnic boundaries and political dissidence do not always go together in the minority regions. In fact, if we were not careful, we might end up "seeing like the state" when we wittingly or otherwise see cultural differences and boundaries in somewhat absolutist terms. No doubt there is some truth in the above view about the link between religion and ethno-nationalism. But I wish to suggest that its explanatory function is not exhaustive, and that we should not fall into the temptation to see like the state in terms of its minzu classification. Tibetan Buddhism is a domain not only for the Tibetans, but also other minzu such as the Mongolian, Naxi, and increasingly, the Han. Mathew Kapstein (2003), in his broad survey of Tibetan Buddhism outside the Tibetan Autonomous region, found that the religion's popularity has been rapidly growing among non-Tibetans, many of whom are Han from the cities and overseas Chinese. If we take the multi-ethnic feature of Tibetan Buddhism into account, it is possible to argue that Tibetan Buddhism's revival lead not necessary to socio-political fragmentation but could in fact facilitate integration among different ethnic groups.

We can see the de-ethnicized, or *de-minzuized*, integrative aspect of Tibetan Buddhism clearly on Mount Wutai (*wutai shan*), Shanxi province, a mountain sacred to the Buddhists as the abode of Bodhisattva Manjushri. Gray Tuttle, through his observations over a decade, has been struck by the revival of Tibetan Buddhism on Mount Wutai partly due o the intense interest shown by non-Tibetans—especially the Han Chinese and the Mongols. As evidence that not only the ethnic Tibetans are closely associated with Tibetan Buddhism, Tuttle presents the stories of three ethnic Chinese Buddhist masters, Dharma-master Fazun (1902-80), Nenghai Lama (1886-1967), and Dharma-master Qinghai (1922-90), who have been instrumental in the transmission of Tibetan Buddhism among the Chinese during the Republican and Communist eras. As one of Nenghai Lama's closest disciples, Qinghai had started his studies at the Jinci Temple in Sichuan and subsequently followed his master Nenghai to Mount Wutai. While he had never been to Tibet proper for his training, Qinghai had the opportunity to receive the oral transmission from the revered Tibetan monk and scholar, Sherab Gyatso, when the latter visited Mount Wutai in the 1950s.

Dharma-master Qinghai was especially influential in the revival of Tibetan Buddhism in Mount Wutai in the decade post-1978 till his death in 1990. During this time he played a critical role in the renovation of several important temples damaged during the Cultural Revolution and managed to attract a strong following. When religious freedom was restored after the Cultural Revolution, Dharma-master Qinghai began an intensive project to revitalise Tibetan Buddhism on Mount Wutai. Apart from overseeing repair work on a number of temples, he was also took it upon himself to propagate Tibetan Buddhism among the Chinese. Currently, the Yuanzhao Temple where Qinghai took up residence in 1984 is the central temple associated with the master and the transmission of Tibetan Buddhism among the Chinese. After Qinghai passed away, his Chinese followers sponsored the building of a gigantic Tibetan-style stupa as a memorial to their master, one among many that have been erected in recent years. Indeed, Tuttle attributes the rapid growth in the number of new stupas on Mount Wutai to the strong presence of Chinese Tibetan Buddhists in the last two decades (Tuttle 2006, 20). The rapid growth of Tibetan Buddhism on Mount Wutai, supported in no small

part by the Chinese and Mongolian Tibetan Buddhists, further illustrates how the revival of a religion normally associated with a particular minzu in China can involve a universalization, and hence de-ethnicization, of the religion concerned, with important implications for inter-minzu relations. As Tuttle notes,

What is most impressive about the flourishing of Tibetan Buddhism at Wutai shan is the ability of people of various ethnic backgrounds mutually to co-exist in a Buddhist community...In this atmosphere, ethnicity is less important than Buddhist learning and practice...When Chinese, Mongols, and Tibetans are living together in various temples, through their common language is Chinese, their shared practice and affiliation is Tibetan Buddhism.

(Tuttle 2006, 24)

Beyond the borders of China, Tibetan Buddhism has in recent decades been globalized through travelling monks, the global media, international support of non-Tibetans for the Dalai Lama and the Tibetan government-in-exile, and the ever growing number of faithfuls in different countries worldwide. To explain the attraction of things Tibetan in the West, some scholars have examined using psychological theories how Westerners have projected their fantasies and nostalgia onto the Tibetans. This has occurred partly through a long history of Tibet's relative seclusion from the rest of the world due to its harsh environment and unwelcoming rulers, and partly due to the popularisation of myths surrounding the Himalayas as the abode of the gods (Bishop 1990; Hutt 1996). Fascination with Tibetan Buddhism and the Tibetans intensified following the conferment of the Nobel Peace Prize to the Dalai Lama and the support given to the Tibetan cause by Western celebrities. In recent years, Tibetan lamas have been travelling the world giving dharma classes and talks, opening religious and cultural centres, collaborating with scholars on Tibetan studies at prestigious European and American universities, and attracting ever-growing number of devotees (e.g. Lopez 1998; Capper 2004; Samuel 2005). What this development reveals is that while the globalization of Tibetan Buddhism has no doubt contributed to the revitalization of Tibetan culture in China and strengthened ethnic identity among the Tibetans, it has simultaneously universalizes the religion away from the particularistic domain of the Tibetan minzu. In short, the globalization of Tibetan Buddhism, similar to the fate of other so-called world religions, can result in its de-ethnicization. In the rest of this section, we shall briefly explore the case of Christianity, mainly based on my own research in the last few years among the Tibetan Catholics in China.

Joseph Xiao was a twenty-year old Catholic from Gongshan County in the Nujiang Autonomous Prefecture, northwest Yunnan, bordering the Tibetan Autonomous Region (TAR). In 2005 he served as my guide when I embarked on a fieldtrip to the mountainous county to conduct research on the Catholic communities in this remote corner of southwest China. At the time, Joseph was enrolled as a seminarian in a junior seminary in Xi'an, Shaanxi province, hoping to become a Catholic priest and eventually return home to serve his community. Joseph was also a Tibetan.

The Gongshan Dulong-Nu Autonomous County and the neighbouring counties of Deqin and Markham—the latter is located in the TAR—form an area where members belonging to what I term Tibetan Catholicism can be found (Lim 2009a). This group of around six thousand Tibetan Catholics—made up of both Tibetans and non-Tibetans such as the Naxi and the Nu—is the legacy of the effort by French and Swiss missionaries to convert the Tibetans to Christianity from the mid-nineteenth century to the early 1950s, when all foreign missionaries were expelled by the Communist regime. When I first started my ethnographic research, there was one Tibetan Catholic priest serving the faithfuls, with at least three other young Tibetan men at various stages of their seminary training. The reasons why I use the term “Tibetan Catholicism” are two-fold. First, many members of this community, who are dispersed throughout different neighbouring counties, have a strong

awareness of the history of the Tibetan mission and see their community as its legacy. Second, regardless of their actual official minzu status, the Catholics rely on Tibetan-language prayers (such as the Lord's Prayer and the Hail Mary), hymns, and Bible readings produced by the missionaries for both their daily devotions and in the Mass if it is presided over by a priest who proficient in Tibetan.

While Joseph's father is Tibetan, his mother is Nu; Joseph is officially registered in his identity card as Tibetan, but his sister is registered as Nu. The example of Joseph and his family and their religious faith confounds the state's effort to classify peoples according to neat categories of minzu. Tibetan and Nu are the main languages spoken in Joseph's family, while Tibetan is the dominant language among the different minzu in the area. Joseph is Tibetan, but he is a Catholic and not a Buddhist. Minzu identity within the Joseph's family and others are often chosen with pragmatic aims in mind; Joseph's sister was registered as a Nu to take advantage of the preferential treatment that the Nu minzu—but not the Tibetan—enjoy in the Gongshan Dulong-Nu Autonomous county. Their Catholic religion has experienced a strong revival since the 1990s, when a wealthy returnee from Taiwan donated and managed to raise large sums of money to rebuild many village chapels; when the whole region opened up for tourism which saw a large influx of tourists visiting this highly exotic community; and with visits by Catholics from other places in China and overseas who often offer material and monetary donations. By the early 2000s, fifteen village chapels in the Gongshan county had been either refurbished or rebuilt, the main church in Deqin county which was built in 1905 had been renovated, and a new massive church building had been erected in Yanjing, in the Markham county in the TAR (largely through the financial support of a French missionary order). In this case, the revival of Tibetan Catholicism has not resulted in the strengthening of Tibetan ethno-nationalism but a revitalization of a religio-ethnic community (cf. Madsen 1998) that is composed of a number of different minzu. Meanwhile, the Tibetan Catholic community is becoming increasingly integrated both with Catholics of other minzu in the rest of China, and with the global Catholic church (see also Lozada 2001; Cao 2011).

In the next section, I shall explore the impact of tourism, especially ethnic tourism, on the revitalization of religion, and discuss how this may in turn lead to another form of de-ethnicization that integrates minority minzu into the emerging national and global market economy.

TOURISM, RELIGION, ETHNICITY

Since China embraced market reforms in earnest in the early 1980s and started opening up to the rest of the world by welcoming both capital and tourists, the tourism industry has become one of the engines of economic growth for the country and has drastically transformed the country's physical environment as well as its socio-cultural landscapes (e.g. Sofield and Li 1998; Oakes 1998; Nyíri 2006; Lim 2009b). During the Maoist era people's movements were severely restricted, with only a small number of the country's citizens able to travel for leisure (often as part of working trips or officially-sanctioned patriotic educational programmes). In this period, tourism was more a tool of the regime's propaganda machine than a viable industry. Distinguished foreign visitors were shepherded around the country viewing first-hand China's major industrial "achievements" as it embarked on an intensive modernization programme to showcase to the world the success of socialism. During the Cultural Revolution, as part of their "ideological work", Red Guards travelled throughout the country to visit prominent sites associated with the Communist Revolution (Nyíri 2006, 3), a type of domestic tourism that is the harbinger of present-day "Red Tourism" (*hongse lüyou*). Following the market reforms of the early 80s, the state started to realize the tremendous potential of tourism as an engine of economic development, especially for the impoverished remote minority areas, and began to open the country up to foreign tourists. Many to these early international tourists were overseas Chinese who had maintained a keen interest in their ancestral

homeland and wished to travel to China to visit either relatives or get acquainted with elements of Chinese culture. In the last two decades, the massive surge in international tourist arrivals has occurred in tandem with China's increasing economic, political, and cultural prominence in the world stage, culminating in the 2008 Beijing Olympics.

Meanwhile, domestic tourism in China receives a further boost from the rapidly expanding middle class in the country. Rising income has meant that more and more Chinese people are able to participate in the consumerist economy that has been the result of market reforms, and many are travelling both domestically and overseas for their holidays. As I have discussed elsewhere (Lim 2009), one of the most significant developments in China's tourism scene in recent years has been the growing number of "independent" tourists and backpackers, who mostly work and live in the cities. They tend to rely on the internet to plan their trips and to form travel communities that involve activities such as the sharing of post-trip feedbacks, holiday advice, gossips, literary and photographic works; buying and selling of travel paraphernalia; arranging meetings for meals and drinks; organizing volunteering trips to the needy communities; and mobilizing members in aid of disaster relief efforts. For many such independent tourists—and also for other Chinese and international tourists on packaged tours—a sojourn among the minorities to experience "simple" and "authentic" folkways (*minfeng*) is one of the most popular activities.

Partly to stimulate economic growth, the minority regions have been embarking on a drive to develop the tourism industry by attracting local and outside capital for investment in tourism infrastructure such as hotels, airports, roads, utilities, and tourist attractions. Tim Oakes (1998) is right to suggest that tourism development in the minority areas is not just an economic activity. It is also a political and cultural project of the state to "civilize" the poor and backward minority regions to be modern citizens through efforts in stimulating "cultural development" (*wenhua fazhan*). In nation-building terms, the *minzu* culture is usually essentialized as unchanging culture, which paradoxically requires modernization through efforts of the state and the outside world. On the one hand, the state hopes that tourism as a means of economic development would bring to the minority peoples advancement in material culture and an improvement in the standard of living, so that they are able to catch up with the supposedly more "modern" Han Chinese people who are held as the model *minzu*. On the other hand, the introduction of private and state capital in the development of tourism can bring about deeper integration between the minority regions and the national economic-political orders.

In terms of tourism resources, the minority areas not only possess plenty of enchanting physical landscapes such as high mountains, pristine forests, sweeping deserts, and expansive grasslands. The "tourist gaze" (Urry 1990) constructed by the tourism industry and media—based on the principle of difference—tends to represent the minority peoples and their own cultures as exotic attractions to satisfy the nostalgic feeling for a relative more "authentic" (*chunzhen*) and "simple" (*zhipu*) life among the city dwellers. The state's ideological construction of the minority peoples as relatively "backward" *minzu* with their traditions supposedly still "untouched" by modernity—the very ideological construction that seeks to integrate the minorities into the multi-national Chinese civilization led by the Han—opens up opportunities for the commodification of *minzu* cultures to be exploited by the surging influx of tourism capital in the minority regions. The increasing importance of tourism as a viable source of income for both the local authorities and the ordinary people in the minority areas has resulted in the *minzu* cultures being promoted as investment enticement and commodities, now subjected to continuous invention, revitalization, and manufacture as part of local specializations to attract tourists and capital. Yunnan, for example, began to embrace ethnic tourism in the early 1990s and a site called Yunnan Ethnic Folk Villages was built on the outskirts of the provincial capital, Kunming, in order to preserve and showcase diverse ethnic cultures of Yunnan, and to attract tourists to Kunming and to other parts of the province (Li 2011).

As an important component of minzu culture, religion and its recent revitalization in the minority regions have to be examined in the context of tourism development. In recent years, throughout the minority regions many temples, churches, mosques and other religious sites are being renovated and promoted as interesting tourist attractions; tourism guidebooks and brochures highlight important religious festivals of the minorities to entice both tourists and pilgrims; and religious specialists such as monks, nuns, priests, *imans*, and shamans act as “culture brokers” in their occasional service as tour guides and interpreters for the visitors. Sponsors lavish enormous amount of monetary and material support for the organization of religious events and rituals as part of local status and political contestations. Ordinary people’s growing awareness of religious practices and artefacts as important tourism commodities further accentuates their commitment to preserve and promote their religious traditions and institutions. In the context of this paper’s substantive concern, tourism-induced revival of a religion that is usually associated with a particular minzu, i.e. an “ethno-religion”, can draw into its ambit the participation of other minzu and groups, contributing to the de-ethnicization of the religion. An interesting illustrative case is that of the revival of Tibetan culture and religion in a county in northwest Yunnan renamed recently as Shangri-La.

The renaming campaign started in 1996 when Zhongdian county officials planned to promote nature and ethnic tourism to create jobs for the local population, to increase county revenues, and to eventually transform the larger Diqing prefecture into a “leading” Tibetan area in China. With the help of a number of experts, they began to collect evidence to show that county was actually the famed Shangri-La, a mythical land in the Himalayan region where people do not age and live harmoniously with one another and with the environment. In short, a paradise on earth. The huge irony is that the term “Shangri-La” was first coined by the American author, James Hilton, in his novel, *The Lost Horizon*, which was later made into a film. The experts and county officials of Zhongdian, both Tibetans and non-Tibetans, accepted Hilton’s fictional descriptions of Tibetan Buddhist lamas, the various ethnic communities, and the physical environment of Shangri-La as true accounts, and apparently saw striking similarities between Hilton’s Shangri-La and Zhongdian (Hillman 2003).

The fact that “Shangri-La” was Hilton’s invention—some say it is the corruption of the Tibetan term, Shambala, the western paradise in Tibetan Buddhist mythology—and did not have local provenance did not matter to the officials bent on creating a paradise in this part of Yunnan in their effort to promote tourism. As Ben Hillman shows, they turned the “four phonetic syllables from an English-language word into four distinct words of local Tibetan origin”, to mean “the heart’s sun and moon” (Hillman 2003,178). In support of the county’s application for the name-change, Yunnan provincial government prepared a report for the State Council which underscored that “the name represents what people of all races are searching for—a desire that among people and between people and nature there be no conflict, no chaos (*qingluan*), only economic prosperity, national unity (*minzu tuanjie*) and social stability” (Ibid., 179). In December 2001 the State Council approved the application to change to the county name from Zhongdian to Shangri-La, and in May the following year the county marked the name change with a huge Arts Festival. Since then, the county and the surrounding region have witnessed a revival of Tibetan religion and profound transformation in the region’s sacred landscape. Hordes of tourists mix with Tibetan Buddhist pilgrims to circumambulate the major monasteries such as the Songtseling and the sacred mountain of Karwa Karpo. Government bureaucrats, many of whom are non-Tibetans, consider religious sites primarily as “cultural resources” for attracting tourists. Many of these state officials have huge economic stakes in the tourism industry as they are also entrepreneurs running hotels, restaurants, shops, travel agencies, and other tourism services (Kolås 2004).

Thus the religious revival witnessed in Shangri-La County has to a considerable extent been facilitated by the development of tourism there. What is important to note is that the transformation of Zhongdian into Shangri-La to be the leading Tibetan area in China, is a multi-ethnic enterprise. At the Arts Festival during which the new name was launched, officials who presided over the ceremony were from diverse ethnic background (Hillman 2003, 185). Non-Tibetan tourists flock to the county and the Diqing prefecture looking to satisfy their fascination with the “mysterious” Tibetan religious culture packaged by the tourism industry and state bureaucrats using the exotic, albeit American-inspired, name of Shangri-La. In her study of the revitalization of Tibetan culture at Shangri-La County, Kolås writes that

‘Shangri-La’ provides an answer to the dreams of urban Chinese, attracted to a place where people live ‘in harmony with each other and the environment’. For whatever reasons, this is something that people in Diqing are becoming aware of, and that further affects the meanings they attach to the place where they live.

(Kolås (2004, 275)

In contemporary contexts of tourism and popular culture, Tibetan Buddhism is not solely the domain for the Tibetans and their ethnic identification. It draws into its sphere diverse groups of people with their own respective interests and agenda, the same time as its boundary stretches beyond the Tibetan minzu to incorporate other ethnic communities.

CONCLUSION

At the beginning of this paper I noted the penchant of many analysts of contemporary minority affairs in China to link religious revival in the minority areas to a heightening of ethnic consciousness and ethnic pride. With regard to the Uighurs and Tibetans, it is common to see comments and analyses highlighting the possibility that religious revival and rising ethnic feelings, if left unchecked or unaddressed, can foster ethno-nationalism that challenges the hegemonic rule of the Communist regime, and even foment separatist movements that might result in the fragmentation of the country. Underpinning many such analyses are the implicit assumptions ethnic boundaries are compounded by religious markers and that cultural differences are absolute—very similar to the way the Communist state constructs minzu through the minzu shibie.

Minzu shibie can be seen as an example of modernist social engineering, an effort which can be understood with the concept of “legibility” proposed by James Scott. One defining characteristics of the modern state is its reliance on universally valid, objective and precise measures and systems of knowledge that have been derived from processes of simplification, abstraction, and codification. The minzu shibie project, as a kind of disciplinary regime, represents one particular historical instance when the state attempted to make legible an inherently complex, fluid reality: multiple possible ways of being ethnic in the life of ordinary people were reduced, simplified, and curtailed by the imposition of a system based on the principle of cultural difference that slotted people into mutually exclusive minzu categories. Although the initial stages of the minzu classification project were plagued by ambiguity, contingency, political manoeuvring, and arbitrariness, eventually it involved the state’s imposition of a strict order upon a highly complex social reality.

The institutionalized minzu system presents to us a “primordialist” model of ethnicity that emphasizes strong historical continuities in people’s attachments to community, territory, and culture. However, recent theories on culture and ethnicity have shown cultural differences are not absolute and boundaries are constantly shifting and negotiated. It is undeniable that religion is an important source of identity formation, be it ethnic, gender, political or cultural. However, we

should be wary of reductionist thinking that constantly conflates religion with identity, and avoid habitually accounting for religion's revival or persistence "purely in terms of the identity it can bestow on its followers" (Coleman and Collins 2004, 3). Hence, in the context of this paper, even the revival of an "ethno-religion", such as Tibetan Buddhism, does not result solely in the strengthening of minzu identity in China. As my discussion of Islam and the Hui minzu has shown, religious revitalization can exert centrifugal pressures on sub-minzu units: members of the Hui minzu belonging to different Islamic sects can be at odds with one another over the interpretation of "authentic" Islam.

Thus, religious and ethnic boundaries do not always neatly coincide among the minority nationalities in China, contrary to the assumptions of the minzu system. Religious revival can lead to a process of de-ethnicization, or more precisely, *de-minzuization*. By highlighting the processes of de-ethnicization I do not wish to suggest that religious revival has nothing to do with ethnicity. What I attempt to do in this paper is to both highlight the pitfalls of "seeing like the state", and to direct our attention to a process, brought about by religious revival, that re-draws boundaries and situates groups of people in relationships which are either sub-minzu or trans-minzu, and which are often also translocal or transnational. An examination of the effects of tourism and cultivation of translocal ties has further illustrated how religious revival can also facilitate the integration of minority groups into the market, the state, as well as de-ethnicized and cosmopolitan communities.

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