A Discussion on the Reasons for the Change of Tibetan Buddhism Cultural Status in Modern Tibetan Areas

Xiyuan Zhang
Experimental High School Attached to Beijing Normal University, Beijing, China.

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*Corresponding author: Xiyuan Zhang, Experimental High School Attached to Beijing Normal University, Beijing, China.

Abstract

After Buddhism was introduced into Tibetan areas, its cultural and religious ideas and significance were recognized and promoted by the rulers and the ruled. During the process of its popularization and development, Tibetan Buddhism also took the political stage of Tibetan society under its cultural advantages and firmly occupied the dominant position in the area’s economy and culture. After entering the socialist period, the political and cultural status of Tibetan Buddhism changed with the gradual introduction of technological advancement, the free market system, and the corresponding humanism. This paper focuses on the fundamental reasons for the change in the status of Tibetan Buddhism, which helps understand the inevitability of the transformation of Tibetan traditional social structure, the iteration of cultural concepts, and the renewal of the social value system. The evolution of the social and political system, and the development of modern education, science and technology have changed the cultural status of Tibetan Buddhism.

Keywords

Buddhism, Modern Tibetan, Cultural Status

Introduction

The fundamental social structure of Tibetan society was feudal serfdom since the establishment of the serfdom system in the mid-13th century until its overthrow in 1959. The formation and development of Tibetan Buddhism followed the establishment and expansion of feudal serfdom in Tibet. During this period, with support from the central government and feudal serf-owners in Tibet, Tibetan Buddhism gained the power to rule Tibet politically, formed a strong temple economy financially, and developed a unique Tibetan Buddhist culture ideologically and culturally.

Since the seventh Dalai Lama, the feudal serfdom system of "the integration of politics and religion" has become increasingly profound. Tibetan Buddhism is the only example that has combined religion and politics into a unified power system throughout Buddhist history. Moreover, the integration of politics and religion of Tibetan Buddhism was based on the temple economy under its control, that is, the “trinity” of the political, religious, and economic systems (Guo, 2011). Before the democratic reform in Tibet, there were 2,676 temples and 114,925 monks, including about 500 upper-class monks, including living Buddhas. More than 4,000 monks held actual economic power, and about a quarter of the men in Tibet became monks in their lives. There were once more than 16,000 monks in the three dominant monasteries, namely Zhebang, Sala, and Canden, owning 321 monasteries, more than 147,000 acres of land, 450 pastures, 110,000 livestock, and more than 60,000 serfs (Yang, 2007).
Furthermore, Tibetan Buddhist monasteries have transformed into the center of culture and education in Tibetan areas. The monasteries resembled libraries and research institutes in collecting books and documents based on Buddhist classics; The monasteries also resembled museums displaying Buddha statues, instruments, relics, sculptures, and paintings. Before the socialist system was implemented in Tibetan areas, monasteries were the only place for Tibetan society to receive education. They taught monks Buddhist principles as well as Tibetan traditional cultural ideals. The monasteries were the only platform for Tibetan social members to realize their political ambitions, climb the hall of knowledge, and improve their religious and social status. Especially when the three sects of Tibetan Buddhism took turns governing Tibetan society for over 680 years, Tibetan Buddhist culture profoundly influenced Tibetan society's ideology, educational model, and cultural field. Moreover, Tibetan Buddhist culture has become the subjective culture of Tibetan society, with Buddhist culture, Buddhist temples, and Buddhist monks enjoying high social status. Tibetan society's politics, economy, and culture have become the guaranteed mechanism, service organization, and implementation tool of Tibetan Buddhism in inheriting, spreading, and practicing Buddhism.

After the establishment of the socialist system in Tibetan areas in 1959, the systematic integration of politics and religion was abolished, which resulted in fundamental changes in Tibetan society; that is, the society was transformed from a religious community to a secular one, and the institutional mechanism of the secular society began to be established, giving non-religious people the right to become managers of Tibetan society. The socialist system restricts or abolishes the social basis of Tibetan Buddhism culture that used to rule Tibetan society, and the thought and behavior that only paid attention to karma in the afterlife began to shift to the pursuit of this life. The literature and art depicting divine life began to turn to the secular culture that expresses people's current living conditions and feelings. With the change in the cultural status of Buddha and man in the Tibetan social and cultural field, the dominant position and role of Tibetan Buddhism are declining day by day. It gradually withdraws from the secular cultural field, and only appears at the level of religious belief and religious activities, with little influence on the dominant cultural knowledge, literature and art, education, health, politics, and law in modern Tibetan areas.

This paper focuses on the main reasons for the change in Tibetan Buddhism's cultural status in the socialist period. It maintains that the evolution of the social and political system, and the development of modern education, science and technology have changed the cultural status of Tibetan Buddhism.

1. The change in the social and political system leads to the shift in the cultural status of Tibetan Buddhism

The establishment of the socialist system and governance at all levels led by the Communist Party of China (CPC) is accompanied by the abolishment of various kinds of local political power organizations. It has laid the principle of collective ownership and distribution according to each worker’s workload to abolish all forms of exploitation. On the other hand, the cultural influence of socialism is mainly manifested in social ideology, which makes people the leading force in producing and disseminating socialist culture. With the establishment of the socialist system in Tibetan areas, the systematic integration of politics and religion was abolished, resulting in Tibetan Buddhism being bereaved of its political foundation for ruling Tibetan society and its dominant status in controlling Tibetan culture. Abolishing the integration of politics and religion and establishing a socialist system is not only a general institutional change but also reshapes people's belief systems. The Tibetan Buddhist culture under the socialist system must adapt to the socialist society.

1.1 The Influence of the Socialist Political System

Guided by Marxist dialectical materialism and historical materialism, the socialist cultural theory holds that religion is an idealistic philosophy and an unsubstantiated illusory theory, and religious belief is the individual behavior of religious believers. Therefore, facing two opposing ideological systems, CPC put forward the freedom of religious belief policy, taking into consideration the religion’s believers, nationality, complexity, and long-term and cross-national nature. Monasteries can carry out everyday religious practices, and the freedom to hold the gatherings is guaranteed. However, the state's religious policies and regulations explicitly prohibit religion’s opposition to the Party and socialism, disruption of the normal social order, and interference with the socialist ideology and cultural fields. The gradual marginalization of Tibetan Buddhist culture from its dominant position is the primary manifestation of the transformation of Tibetan society from a religious community to a secular one and the restoration of the inversion of spiritual culture and humanistic culture.
1.2 Social and Cultural Status: God Versus People

In the past, the themes of Tibetan literature and art were exclusively Buddhist doctrine, the Buddhist deity system, and the worship of sacred mountains and lakes. Except for a few stories of royal rulers and their princesses who supported and promoted Buddhism, there are few literary and artistic works with the theme of ordinary people. The gods and Buddhas have infinite powers. They can incarnate at will, go to heaven and earth, and walk freely in water and fire. The beauty of Buddha has also been summarized in detail as "Thirty-Two Phases" and "Eighty Kinds of Goodness". When it comes to destroying the beauty of human nature, it depicts the "Nine Thoughts" of treating the human body as a bloated and rancid corpse and a pile of bones and ashes after being burned in the fire, which encourages people to lacerate the "Six Desires" (referring to the six images of the natural beauty of the human body) with the "Nine Thoughts" (Yang, 1991). People are the objects of God's enlightenment, and all beings are the objects of Buddhas’ and Bodhisattvas’ salvation. They are full of desires, jealousy, ignorance, troubles, and pains, so they naturally would not become the subject of literary and artistic themes. This also reflects Tibetan society's long-term practice of integrating politics and religion, an inevitable result of protecting politics with morality and promoting morality with politics. The Yuan, Ming, and Qing dynasties also adopted the strategy of governing Tibet and securing the border by religion. As a result, the religious, political, and cultural status of Tibetan Buddhism was further enhanced and consolidated.

After the socialist system was implemented in Tibet, the old theological ideas could not continue to dominate in the new society. The core contents of social reform in Tibet were to interpret and guide Buddhist theology with socialist political theory. The key to the reform was to replace the vanity of God's salvation with humanism and, more specifically, to constitute the people's dominant position, to exclude the third-party gods and Buddhas from occupying the dominant position of secular culture, and to replace religious culture with secular culture. Therefore, many literary and artistic works began to emerge, depicting people’s lives, reflecting social changes, or praising socialism and the Communist Party. Whether it is in music, dance, painting, sculpture, movies, TV series, novels, poems, dramas, cross talk, newspapers, or magazines, it is the ordinary people in secular society that are described, shaped, and recorded. Therefore, the status of Tibetan Buddhism has gradually become marginalized and secularized in terms of literary and artistic representation. Since then, man and God’s social and cultural status has undergone fundamental variation and conversion. In contrast, some cultural practices created by Tibetan Buddhism have been inherited and carried forward as an essential part of Tibetan traditional culture. They are viewed and studied as pure culture and art and are not passed on with spiritual meaning.

1.3 Strengthening the Cultural field of the Society

Material and spiritual cultures created by humans contain rich thoughts, feelings, and aesthetic concepts. People's emotions originate from the social and natural environments and interpersonal communication; people's aesthetic concept has both generality and individuality. It is almost impossible to demand everyone with pure and inactive Buddhist religious feelings, experiences, and aesthetics, and it is also impossible to satisfy everyone's emotional and aesthetic needs with a single thought or theory. During the heydays of Tibetan Buddhist culture, both the folk culture and the art of Tibetan society were influenced and restricted by religion across time and space, from subject matter to form, which, to some extent, restrained people's thoughts and feelings and limited their aesthetic choices. Tibetan secular society’s cultural life and activities are reflected in the cultural and sports activities spontaneously organized by ordinary people at major festivals or activities organized by monasteries. God-oriented contents were the central theme of these activities, yet a few people-oriented contents were contained.

During the socialist period, Tibetan society ushered in great prosperity and witnessed the flourishing of literature and art. The main reasons are stated as follows. First, the state unified the establishment of songs, dance troupes or art troupes, Tibetan opera troupes, libraries, group art galleries, theaters, bookstores, and other cultural institutions and places in all autonomous counties, prefectures, cities, and autonomous regions in the Tibetan area. Second, the state extensively selects and absorbs folk artists and trains Tibetan art talents. Third, various art forms and literary genres are promoted and encouraged. Fourth, the area fully implements the spirit of literature and art to serve the people and vigorously reflect the lives of Tibetan farmers and herdsmen in the new era and new society and the deeds and achievements of modernization builders in Tibetan areas. These literary and artistic works are well received by the people, and they have achieved the purpose of enriching and activating their cultural life, publicizing the party's principles and policies, and reflecting on people's lives. Getting rid of the control or influence of religious culture in the primary culture of Tibetan society has played a decisive role in the socialist Tibetan culture and

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art that is becoming more national, regional, contemporary, and social. Therefore, the culture and art of expressing and propagating Tibetan Buddhism thoughts and theory gradually returned to its temple culture. Of course, it is regarded as an essential religious culture and art in Tibetan history, and the research results of it are still published in large numbers, and it is also copied, reproduced, and circulated as works of art.

2. The Influence of the Secular Education Development

2.1 The Popularization of Basic Education

In the process of Tibetan social development, Tibetan education is integrated with spreading Buddhism and its Buddhist knowledge. Before Buddhism was introduced, there were no formal and centralized educational places, full-time teachers and systematic educational system in Tibetan society, and the educational mode was to educate people about production knowledge, life knowledge, and religious beliefs through family and society, which used to be widespread in the historical process of Tibetan society. In addition, Tibetans also have "Zhong" and "De" education methods: Zhong education method is to tell their children and grandchildren in the form of singing and talking about what happened in the world through the creation and processing of speakers, who later transform into full-time rappers; "De" education method was to spread all kinds of knowledge in the form of riddles.

The formal monastic education in Tibetan society began in Chisong Dêzain's period. With his support, a Buddhist Dojo was built to welcome Buddhist masters, encourage Tibetans to become monks and create a place to translate scriptures. Buddhist monasteries have been inclined to serve as educational places for accepting cultural knowledge and Buddhist theories, so Buddhism has gradually controlled the power of cultural education. Monastery education has replaced school education in Tubo and later Tibetan society. Until the 13th Dalai Lama, there was no formal secular school in Tibetan society. Buddhism controlled the educational power of Tibetan society and changed the educational mode, turning the scattered and individual family-based educational mode into a full-time and centralized monastic educational mode with full-time teachers, a specific subject knowledge system, an academic level system, and an organizational system. The nature of monastic education determined the content and object of education, which played an important role in the enrichment and development of Buddhist monastery culture and monk culture but had little influence on Tibetan secular society’s economic, cultural, and social progress.

After 1959, after entering the socialist period, Tibetan areas made great efforts to construct a modern education system and widely built schools of all levels and categories. By the end of 2020, the Tibet Autonomous Region had established a modern education system covering preschool education, primary education, vocational education, higher education, continuing education, and special education, with 3,195 schools of various levels. The gross enrollment rate of preschool education in three years was 87%, the net enrollment rate of primary schools was 99.93%, and the gross enrollment rates of junior high school, senior high school, and higher education were 106.99%, 90.2%, and 56.11% respectively. There are 3,195 schools in Tibet, including 827 primary schools, 143 ordinary middle schools, 12 specialized secondary schools, and 7 institutions of higher learning. The educational project construction in the last fifty years has broken the way that only through Buddhist education in monasteries can one reach academic excellence and provide various ways and channels for Tibetan teenagers to realize their ambitions.

Moreover, the knowledge system of the modern education system is entirely different from that of monasteries in training talents in terms of the differences between science and theology. Although both are components of human society and culture, their outlook on the world, life, values, methods, and results of understanding things are entirely different, and the process of knowledge formation is also different. Science serves the progress and development of human society, and theological knowledge serves religious beliefs. Socialist cultural education has transformed the education that used to serve Buddhism in Tibetan society into serving the people and social development, which has fundamentally reversed the situation that theological knowledge dominates the society. Therefore, the education of Tibetan society is divided into two different education systems: temple education and social education.

2.2 The Popularization of Mandarin Education and Teaching Materials

In the past, monastic education, monk official education, secular official education, medical arithmetic education, and private school education in Tibet were all traditional educational subjects provided exclusively to the aristocratic class under the system of "integration of politics and religion", and only Tibetan language was implemented for teaching. Songzän Gambo (629-650) ordered Thon-mi Sangbum to create the Tibetan language to govern state
From 1980 to 1994, Tibet introduced and revised several policies and regulations on the Tibetan language in primary and secondary schools: Morality and Laws, Chinese, and History. Since the establishment of the standard national language became a priority. Almost all the students of Tibetan language classes in primary schools in Tibet were faced with the "switch" from Tibetan language teaching to Mandarin teaching after they entered middle school. However, their Mandarin ability often failed to meet the corresponding requirements. Therefore, the Tibet Education Department stipulated in 1984 that primary school students who graduated from Tibetan language teaching classes should have a one-year preparation period, mainly used for Mandarin tutoring, to adapt to Mandarin teaching in junior middle schools. This has formed a teaching system in which four-year and three-year junior high schools coexist. This unbalanced "dual-track system" was not conducive to the development of education and the growth of students. Therefore, the Tibet Education Department stipulated: "The common national language is the basic education and teaching language of schools and other educational institutions, and schools and other educational institutions should use the common national language for education and teaching. Schools and other educational institutions in ethnic autonomous areas, where minority students are the main ones, proceed from reality and use the common language of the state and the common language of their own or local nationalities to implement bilingual education". So far, "bilingual education" that focuses on national common language education has become the direction of ethnic education.

In October 2017, the Report of the 19th National Congress of the Communist Party of China put forward: "Comprehensively implement the party's national policy, deepen the education of national unity and progress, build a strong sense of the Chinese nation's community, strengthen exchanges and exchanges among all ethnic groups, and promote all ethnic groups to hold together like pomegranate seeds, and work together to achieve common prosperity and development" (Xi, 2017). On September 27th, 2019, Chinese President Xi pointed out at the National Commendation Conference for National Unity and Progress: "We should do a good job in all kinds of education at all levels in ethnic areas, comprehensively strengthen the national common language education, and constantly improve the scientific and cultural quality of all ethnic groups" (Xi, 2019). On March 5, 2021, Xi once again emphasized that cultural identity is the most profound identity, the root of national unity, and the soul of national harmony when attending the deliberation of the Inner Mongolia delegation at the Fourth Session of the 13th National People's Congress. "We should conscientiously do a good job in popularizing the national common language and writing and fully implement the use of the unified national textbook" (Xi, 2021). Improving the quality and level of education in ethnic minority areas and increasing the promotion of the standard national language has become the goal of the 14th Five-Year Plan for the national economic and social development of the People's Republic of China.

An important measure to comprehensively strengthen the national common language education is to use three textbooks compiled by the state in primary and secondary schools: Morality and Laws, Chinese, and History. Since 2017, China has attached great importance to textbook compilation. In July 2017, the National Textbook Commit-
tee was established, which is responsible for coordinating the national textbook editing work and strengthening unified leadership and management under the leadership of the Central Leading Group for Education. The Ministry of Education organized experts to compile three textbooks on compulsory education. After being reviewed by the National Textbook Committee, they were put into use in the beginning grades of primary and secondary schools across the country in the autumn of 2017. According to the deployment arrangement of Tibet, the use of three textbooks compiled by primary and secondary schools has been actively promoted, and the national common language education has been strengthened.

With the popularization of modern school education, the number of students and the team of high-level talents trained by them has far surpassed monastic education, and monasteries have lost their position of ruling Tibetan social education, which has brought monastic education into its original scope, duties, and functions. At the same time, with the deepening of materialistic ideological education and the popularization of scientific knowledge in Tibetan society, people's religious ideas and purposes have gradually turned from spiritual beliefs dominated by the cycle of life and death. They rely less on religion to realize political aspirations, get wealthy, cure diseases, provide relief, master cultural knowledge, and change their life destiny.

3. The Influence of Modern Science and Technology Development

Industry on the Qinghai-Tibet Plateau, especially modern industry, emerged with the birth of the Republic of China. In old Tibet, only one ordnance factory was opened in 1931, and it closed after two years of operation. In addition, there was a small mint workshop and a 125kW hydropower station, but all of them were closed or semi-closed. There was a military supplies factory in Qinghai in 1930, and a Northwest Industrial and Mining Company was established in 1946. There were also wool washing, machinery, textile, matches, glass factories, and other sub-factories, but most were workshops. In 1941, the National Government Resources Committee and Qinghai co-organized a diesel power plant and hydropower plant, which can be regarded as modern industry. There were no modern enterprises in the eastern Tibetan areas before 1950. In 1949, there were less than 20 industrial enterprises on the Qinghai-Tibet Plateau, with a total industrial output value of only 22.1 million yuan (Zhang, 1991). At the end of 2020, Tibet’s gross industrial output value index was 456,144.2, 1,782 times that of 1957 (the index was calculated at comparable prices).

After the founding of the People's Republic of China, the country’s development has benefited the Tibetan areas, directly promoting the progress of Tibetan society. With the implementation and application of science and technology in Tibetan areas, Tibetan society has developed by leaps and bounds, changing people's perceptions and awareness. The popularity of electric lights, telephones, televisions, and computers in Tibetan areas makes people's lives, including monks, increasingly dependent on electronic technology. People are gradually more convinced of the power and function of technology, eliminating the influence of theology on production and life. The development of modern medicine, especially the accuracy and scientifcity of modern instruments in diagnosing diseases, the achievements of high-tech surgical treatment, and the powerful effects of vaccines have altered or reduced people's religious behaviors such as worshipping Buddha, chanting scriptures, and exorcising ghosts while seeking medical treatment. On August 9th, 2012, the living Buddha Chenglie Gengcha in Yushu Temple in Qinghai Province received a consultation from a patient's relative. The living Buddha replied that "You should go to a big hospital to diagnose your illness and follow the doctor's advice on whether to operate. There is no need to make a hexagram" (Losan Kaizhu, 2012). Nowadays, people in towns and pastoral areas in Tibet rely entirely on modern medical treatment, and religion has withdrawn from the prominent role of Tibetan people in diagnosis and treatment.

Modern means of transportation are generally suitable for people's travel in Tibetan areas. In the past, a day's ride by horse could now be completed in an hour by car, while a hundred oxen or horses were not as good as the carrying capacity of a truck today. In such a way, new Tibetan expressions emerged, including Iron Bull (car), Heaven Way (railway), and Condor (plane). There is a famous proverb among people in Tibetan areas: "It is said that Bodhisattva walks freely like a bird, and fairies are like clouds flying in the blue sky. Whether it is true or not has never been seen before. Nowadays, blackheads are like saints, walking freely in the sky". These new Tibetan utterances illustrate the convenience brought by modern technology to people's lives from one aspect, and it seems that they also contain people's dialectical materialism thinking of the authenticity of the benefits of science and technology and the questioning of the existence of immortals.

Another example is that modern meteorological observation and the accuracy of weather forecasts are undoub-
tedly accepted by Tibetan monks and laymen and guide the arrangement of farming, husbandry production, and travel time. Modern science and technology are increasingly applied to people's real lives, and religious ideas and activities are weakened and reduced in people's living and production.

4. Conclusion

In its formation and development, Tibetan culture has been deeply influenced by the cultures of ancient civilizations from the north, the west, and the east. This culture rises and falls with politics, which aligns with its epochal and variable characteristics. The main reason Buddhism was accepted and promoted in the Tubo Dynasty was that its ideological theory met or conformed to the need of the Tubo Dynasty to govern state affairs. During the separatist period, Buddhism revived again as emerging local forces and convinced the aristocrats' and monks' higher social status was reasonable and legitimated by Buddhist theories. The subsequent formation of the ruling system of the integration of politics and religion started when the sectarian forces gained support from the central court and were authorized to manage local affairs in Tibet. Thus, the phenomenon of prospering religion with politics and protecting politics with religion appeared, and the Tibetan area ultimately entered a religious society.

After the Tibetan society entered the socialist period, the changes in Tibetan Buddhism's cultural status were mainly reflected in the weakening of religious conception and sentiment, the reduction of religious activities, the diminishing of religious and social influence, the banishment of religious values, and the tendency of religious consciousness to become more scientific and rational. These changes are the inevitable consequence of the transformation of social ideology and political power status because the ideological and theoretical system of Tibetan Buddhism is incompatible with or infringes the socialist ideology. The modern mode of production and the development of science and technology further dethroned religion's political autocracy, economic privilege, and cultural subjectivity.

Social revolution and cultural evolution are the inexorable laws of human’s historical course. Whether people can accommodate, recognize, and reinforce the new state and regime of society depends on whether this social system can revamp their surroundings, ameliorate their living standard, possess the sustenance of their thoughts and emotions, and satisfy their religious beliefs and religious activities. Secularization is the historical trend of spiritual development, and the change in Tibetan Buddhism's cultural status does not affect its historical and cultural status and spiritual belief value.

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