

THE PROCESS OF CULTURAL REPRESENTATION: TIBET'S PLACE IN AMERICAN MEDIA

The region, the people, and the culture of Tibet have for many years occupied a special place in the American imagination. Before the Chinese invasion, popular imagery of Tibet focused on the "Shangri-La" depicted in James Hilton's Lost Horizon. Tibet and its people were represented as peace-loving, naive (to the ways of the outside world), and spiritually awakened beings, isolated in their mountain paradise. More recent depictions of Tibet reflect both the effects of the invasion and the anti-Chinese backlash following the massacre of Tiananmen Square in 1989. The movie *Kundun* and the Charlotte Painter novel Conjuring Tibet are excellent examples of this new type of cultural representation. The innocent, unified, and happy people of Tibet are attacked by the power-hungry, oppressive, and violent Chinese. Putting aside the extent to which either of these cultural representations are true of Tibet and its people, it is important that the creative factors which go into their production are analyzed, as well as the wider social and political results of such representations. By investigating why a particular culture is being represented by an outsider (in these cases, the West), and what political, economic and social factors go into the creation of representation, we can come to a greater understanding of the ways in which power can be manipulated through cultural representation.

The act of cultural representation is never an absolutely objective or unbiased practice. Cultural representation, which can be defined as any attempt by the media to depict the "reality" of a culture, will always be subject to the biases and social mores of the people (and their society at large) who create it. Even the choice of which cultures to represent in the media reflect larger political and historical issues. The fact that many issues and unconscious social norms go into the process of cultural representation is complicated by the fact that it is questionable to what extent the "reality" of an event or a culture actually exists. No two people will have the exact same description of a person, an event, or a culture--how then, can an outsider claim to be presenting the audience with the "one true reality" of the situation? A third complicating factor in the act of cultural representation is the role of the media in creating and/or reinforcing social ideas of the "Other." In innumerable cases, supposedly "true" cultural representations have had larger effects beyond entertaining and informing the audience. The media's representations of other cultures can effect political policies, social stereotypes, and, ironically, the culture being re-presented.

THE CHOICE AND MANIPULATION OF CULTURAL SUBJECT

Every step in the process of cultural representation is a reflection of the biases and priorities of the creator and his or her culture. The first step is the choice of which culture to represent. In the American media, many cultures are ignored, and it is not simply because there are no noteworthy events in those areas. The fact that the situation in Tibet was largely ignored by the popular media for decades is a testament to that fact. Politically, Sino-United States relations have changed since the 1950s. The United States no longer needs China as a political ally against the USSR in the Cold War. However, the US government does still need China's economic power. For that reason, the US is willing to harass Chinese officials over human rights violations, nuclear arms disagreements, and the "Tibet situation," but it is not willing to put its disapproval in writing. This interest in subtly haranguing the Chinese is one of the reasons for the recent upsurge in pro-Tibet, anti-Chinese cultural representations. Socially, the American public has proved very receptive to the spiritual ideas propagated by the 14th Dalai Lama. The amazing success of the recent book The Art of Happiness, written by Dr. Howard Cutler and based on a series of discussions he conducted with the Dalai Lama, attests to this fact. In a society that has allegedly been embroiled in a "moral crisis" for quite some time, new information on spirituality is more than welcome--especially if it is considered to be "trendy" by the Hollywood elite. Add to this need for "exotic" spirituality the effects of cultural globalization, and American interest in Tibet is relatively high, especially when compared to other parts of the world in which cultures are being oppressed or exterminated. According to Gordon Laird, "Tibet has lodged itself in many dreams," and has never been more appealing to both Westerners and the mainland Chinese, who are hoping to catch a glimpse of the glory of "Old Tibet" before it is gone. In this sort of political and social backdrop, there is a greater chance of an interested audience than in the past. Therefore, before the first cultural image is even produced, biases have been established, and complete objectivity is impossible.

Western media will be developed for Western audiences, with their beliefs and social mores in mind. Therefore, the next step in representation--the selection of which "reality" to represent--is also subject to cultural biases, and thereby obscures and distorts the situation. Television coverage of the Tibet situation, as well as popular cinema like *Kundun* and *Seven Years in Tibet*, almost always takes the side opposite the Chinese. On the surface, this fact is reasonable because China is a communist country, and America is always trying to propagate the expansion of democracy around the world. However, Tibet

before the invasion was extremely hierarchical, with a feudal system that left many members of its population in an oppressive situation. Internal political struggles and indigenous cultural differences are glossed over or completely ignored by the Western media, to present Tibet as a homogenous and peacefully unified country. Diki Tsering, the deceased mother of the current Dalai Lama, wrote the book Dalai Lama, My Son, and in it she described not only cultural differences among the Tibetans between the rich and poor, rural and urban, but also recounted the political turmoil that was occurring before the Chinese invasion. Decisions by the media to ignore these facts, because they would contradict Western images of "Shangri-La," are a conscious act of power, designed to instill support for the Tibetans and animosity for the Chinese.

THE INTANGIBILITY OF "REALITY"

According to Stuart Hall in his lecture "Representation and the Media," in the past representation could be judged on the extent to which it accurately or inaccurately portrayed events, people, or cultures. This implied that there is a tangible reality, which can in fact be represented in an image. He argues that current academics in the field of cultural studies are coming to the realization that the extent to which events can have one "true" meaning is questionable. There will never be just one interpretation of an event, let alone one meaning given to an entire culture. Therefore, we cannot simply analyze representations on the basis of how close they come to truly representing fact--we have to realize that "fact" is in itself constantly changing and being reinterpreted, by people both inside and outside the situation. He states that "reality does not exist outside the process of representation," which is why people engage in the process continually, as an exercise in creating culture. If reality can never be fixed, then every representation of it is constitutive, in that it will form the basis of a person's ideas about that culture, those people, or that event.

The media is a single-sided transmission of culture. The audience, in almost every case, has little or no power over how the situation is represented. The media then has the power to frame events in a context that suits its own interests. The current movement in anthropology to give voice to the "Other," to give the camera to the indigenous population being studied, is proof that people realize that representation is power. However, dominant Western media does not yet reflect this move to pass on the power of representation. For many reasons, there are still patronizing aspects of colonialism in place, and the assumption is that only we, the outsiders, can depict this situation with objectivity. Of course, in Tibet there are many reasons why the indigenous people cannot represent themselves in every circumstance--

government oppression and lack of resources and technology--but every Western representation that claims to be depicting the reality of Tibet is still engaged in a questionable process, one that is controlled by power relations and by cultural stereotypes. The power media assumes when it depicts the situation in Tibet is aimed at fixing the meaning of the events, in such a way that the Western audience can either be entertained, be brought into sympathy with the Tibetan cause, or instilled with an anti-Chinese political stance. Since reality is intangible, every image is created to make it more fixed, so that the audience can understand the situation. However, since the media rarely is willing to admit that its representation is not the "only" representation, cultural stereotypes persist, and can become a part of the dominant cultural ideology.

THE EFFECTS OF CULTURAL REPRESENTATION

Cultural representation affects the ways in which people, their society, and their government view the world. This is especially the case when geographical distance makes other types of cultural knowledge (travel, personal communication, and access to locally-produced media) difficult or impossible. According to Phillippa Atkinson, "The reach and influence of the media in the modern world is so pervasive that it shapes, unconsciously, the way we think about foreign cultures--with which we have little contact." Tibet is a long way, geographically and socially, from the West. For that reason, the images presented by the media are nearly the only factors which produce Western ideas about the region and its people. Coverage of the Tiananmen Square massacre in China (which itself was only widely available to people in the West because the revolutionaries were supporters of democracy), brought the failures and violent tendencies of the Chinese government into the national spotlight. In this context, the Dalai Lama was able to gain access to the media, and present himself and his fellow Tibetans (exiled or not) as a "culture in crisis." This movement eventually led to the bestowment of the Nobel Peace Prize on the Dalai Lama, and a large amount of media attention. However, the type of media attention available in the West is largely one-sided, and focuses only on the viewpoint of the Tibetans. With this relatively homogenous collection of images to choose from, most people in the West have assumed the stance that China should get out of Tibet, even though most people do not know exactly where Tibet is, how many people live there, or whether it has been, as the Chinese claim, a part of the Chinese empire for a very long time.

Obviously, current social opinions in the West towards Tibet are formed by the media. However, I would argue that even now, people in the West are still be influenced by the older representations of Tibet

as an isolated, snowbound paradise, the "Shangri-La" of myth and legend. Some scholars have argued that the perpetuation of this image has actually harmed the Tibetans, because few people are able to believe that such a beautiful place could, in fact, be invaded. The clash of images of violence with images of peace and harmony is simply too much to bear, and so people avoid the situation altogether. This positive image has harmed the Tibetans as much as any stereotype--it de-individualizes the populace, and turns them into the "Other." It is hard to extend political or social help to a population which seems so different from our own. According to Tom Grunfeld, the new image of Tibet as a culture in crisis is harmful as well, in its effects on the Chinese government. He argues that "Hollywood's cinematic (and other) contributions to the cause have resulted, ironically...in a greater threat to Tibetan culture inside Tibet." This is because Western media (which affiliates itself, to some extent or another, with the Dalai Lama) is consistently anti-Chinese, which forces the Chinese government to distrust the Dalai Lama. In the context of ongoing peace talks, distrust on one side can be very harmful. The government has continued to distrust the Dalai Lama, because anti-Chinese Western media claims to have his support--this makes it more difficult for the Dalai Lama's propositions for compromise to be taken at face value.

PRESERVATION OF CULTURE THROUGH REPRESENTATION: WHY TIBET?

Almost every Western media representation seems to agree on one point: Tibetan culture is in crisis. The notion that culture is something worth preserving is a relatively new idea in the course of human history. In the past, exploration and colonialism wiped out indigenous cultures and populations, with no thought to the fact that they might be losing something of value. Obviously, this opinion has changed, and the field of anthropology is based on the fact that human culture is a worthy topic of study. There are several reasons why the preservation of culture is of anthropological and social interest. First of all, culture is, by definition, a human product. I would argue that efforts to preserve culture are based on the premise that humanity, and its many variations, is valuable. Each culture is unique because it is based upon historical, geographical, and political circumstance. Preservation of culture is similar to the preservation of human remains, literature, and knowledge, because it allows us to understand both where we come from, and where we are going. Now, within the discourse of cultural globalization, a lot of work is going into the process of examining which cultures are being lost, and how to preserve them. However, I would argue that

in many international situations of war, invasion, and genocide, people place more concern on the loss of human life than on the loss of human culture.

The Tibetan situation, and the media representations of it, are different to the extent that more value is placed on preserving the culture and religion of the area than on the individuals within the population. There are several reasons for this. First of all, Tibet is relatively closed-off from the rest of the world, for political reasons--this makes the stories of individuals more difficult to find and examine. Secondly, Tibetans, to put it colloquially, do not look like us. The war going on in Serbia-Herzegovina is an interesting contrast, because these are Europeans, and in recent history the Western media has rarely been able to represent a population that doesn't look like an alien one in a very alien situation. A Western audience will therefore be more sympathetic with the plight of these people, because they look familiar to us. This is not the case with Tibetans, and I would argue that because Tibetans look alien to us, the media is aware that we, in Western society, will not be able to identify with them. If that is the case, then there is little purpose in showing them as individuals. However, I think that the most important reason why Tibetan religion and culture are focused upon as the main articles in need of preservation is because they are so attractive to people in Western society. This is because Western culture, especially America, yearns for a new kind of spirituality. The Americanized Tibetan Buddhism presented in books like The Art of Happiness and many Tibet Internet web sites, with its doctrines of peace, equality and compassion, is incredibly appealing to a country suffering the effects of inner spiritual turmoil caused by violence, the stressing effects of capitalism, and the failure of Judeo-Christianity to meet modern needs. These representations, I would argue, are encouraging a form of cultural appropriation. They allow Americans to co-opt the aspects of Tibetan religion and culture that they need or desire, and avoid any of the more complicated aspects. The extent to which Tibetan culture is truly being preserved in Western representations is therefore questionable--as I mentioned before, The Art of Happiness is an extremely popular book, and many people are obviously open to the precepts of Tibetan Buddhism found within it. However, Western cultural representations of Tibet exclude the ability of the Tibetans to give their own voice, to have power over the ways in which their culture is being preserved. Perhaps the only place it is truly being preserved is in the government-in-exile in India, but of course even that environment will constantly be affected by the culture around it.

CULTURAL REPRESENTATION AS AN ACT OF POWER

The ability to manipulate cultures through media representation, the intangibility of the reality depicted, and the known effects of media representation complicate the extent to which any image of the Other can be taken at face value. The truth is that every person attempting to depict a culture is engaging in an act of power--some people are willing to admit this, and some are not. Many directors or writers who address the question of Tibet do so with the best possible motivation--to help free an oppressed people. However, because of what Stuart Hall calls the politics of the image, the products of cultural representation can be used and abused in many different ways. Modern anthropologists are much more likely than their predecessors to place at least some of the power of cultural representation into the hands of their informants. This shifting of authority, while problematic in some ways, improves the extent to which the indigenous population will be represented accurately.

