

## **Butterfingers: Resculpting Religion at a Tibetan Buddhist Monastery**

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### **Introduction**

‘On the advent of the Lantern Festival,’ we learn in the *Qinghai Daily*, ‘Qinghai Vice-Governor Zhao Yongzhong travelled to the Ta’er Temple on 13 February to visit all living Buddhas and monks on behalf of the provincial party committee and the provincial government.’ (*Qinghai Ribao*, 14 Feb. 2003)

This local news item from February 2003 reveals several salient characteristics of the cultural-political landscape in an outlying region of the PRC. Qinghai is a large, sparsely-populated administrative unit with a rather recent history as a province, receiving official designation as such only in 1928. Geographically it occupies the centre of the PRC’s Western Region, but imaginatively and to some extent actually it lingers at the frontier in the Chinese context, not yet free of the stigma of its *laogai* (labour reform camps) past, nor reconstructed as a firm participant in China’s odyssey of modernisation. At the heart of Qinghai’s dissonance lies the fact of its Tibetan heritage, crystallised in the PRC’s own labelling of 98 per cent of the provincial area as ‘Tibetan autonomous’ prefectures. Vice-Governor Zhao’s formal activities at the Ta’er Temple in 13 February 2003 during a festival occasion – and the terms in which it was reported in the *Qinghai Daily* – encapsulate a moment along the route to Qinghai’s multi-stranded integration into the body of the Chinese nation-state, as proposed and recorded in official discourse (Shi, 2002, 7-9).<sup>1</sup> This moment occurs annually in terms of occasion and location, although significant participating personnel may change, and shifts occur in the social and political environment in which the moment takes place.

In February 1993 I spent several days at the site visited on 13 February 2003 by Vice-Governor Zhao, as well as making return visits at non-festival periods in 1995 and 2002. I should like to comment on what the *Qinghai Daily*’s report reveals of changes in policy, society, presentation and perhaps even the future in Qinghai over a ten-year period, by reference to this serial

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<sup>1</sup> For the concept of ‘China as moments’, in which ‘China’ is given existence by people’s behavioural reference to it, and as such is a fluid entity in a temporal space. This paper borrows only loosely from Shih’s terminology but acknowledges the source. It explores not the experiential moment when an individual psyche calls ‘China’ into existence, but purposive constructions by state agencies of an event as a ‘China’ moment rather than meanings that might be primarily ascribed by other parties. This approach then suggests how closely Kubum Monastery may be corresponding to its state-assigned role through the ‘moment’ of the festival.

‘moment’ at the so-called Ta’er Temple. The event which I witnessed as the major annual Tibetan Buddhist<sup>2</sup> occasion of Monlam Chenmo in 1993 but which the *Qinghai Daily* cites in the Chinese time-and-cultural frame of the Lantern Festival in 2003 has a long history as the former. Its redefinition, or apparent makeover, in the past ten years raises questions of state and local agency, readings of the past, and particularly the political uses of space and occasion. As state agency politicises religious space and practice here, I suggest that at this politicised cultural moment, not only butter is being sculpted into new forms at this particular Tibetan Buddhist monastery. While I hope to leaven the inevitable subjectivity of personal encounters with wider analysis, based primarily in history, I also offer an individual’s perspective in the tradition of witness, contingent of course on the witness’s own informational, cultural, psychological and many other filters .

### Place and Occasion

Although moments take place in places, diverse participants, commentators and interpreters may not all conceptualise the site of action in similar terms. To start with names, the site in question – the Tibetan Buddhist monastery of this paper’s title - has two prime locally-used names, ‘Kubum’ in Tibetan and ‘Ta’ersi’ in Chinese. Tibetan Buddhist and contemporary Chinese texts agree that the monastery is the most important of its kind in the region, and one of the six great Gelugpa monastic establishments of the Tibetan world. It lies 26 kilometres southwest from the provincial capital Xining in the town of Lushar, seat of Huangzhong (Tib: Kubum) County, which used to form part of Haidong Prefecture but since December 1999 has been moved under the administration of Xining Municipality.

Haidong has been both a cultural-ecological frontier and a geopolitical frontier for centuries, whose population has experienced cultural and to some extent political integration into both the Tibetan and Chinese worlds at different times. The area lies at multiple crossroads of culture, religion and civilizational influences. Since the rise of the Tibetan Empire in the 7th century, Tibetan and Chinese civilizations have pressed the region of Haidong – east of the lake<sup>3</sup> – from the west and east respectively. Islam’s centuries-old presence links it in culture and religion to Central Asia, while Mongol hegemonies, before and after the Mongol adoption of Tibetan Buddhism, left demographic and cultural footprints into the present. Ecologically Haidong forms the sole naturally arable segment of Qinghai Province, thereby attracting the only significant Chinese settlement in the region before 1949. Beyond Haidong lie the vast grasslands and mountains of the Qinghai-Tibet Plateau where, prior to PRC development projects, Tibetan and Mongol mobile pastoralism provided the only livelihood for human inhabitants.

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<sup>2</sup> ‘Tibetan’ Buddhism, sometimes called ‘Lamaism’ or ‘Lama Buddhism’ especially in older European or contemporary Chinese texts, refers to the form of Buddhism that developed in the Tibetan ethnocultural domain from the 7th Century onwards. Adherents who are not ethnically Tibetan, notably Mongols and Monguors (Tu), nevertheless recognise the Tibetan context of their religion, according Tibet a certain reverential status on the grounds of sacred origin. Institutionally Tibetan Buddhism has links throughout Inner and Central Asia, though many of these were critically impaired in the geopolitical shifts of the 20th century.

<sup>3</sup> Qinghai (Ch.), Kokonor (Mong.), Tsongon (Tib.), the vast inland saltwater lake west of Xining.

Huangzhong became a Chinese county at the same time Qinghai became a Chinese province, in 1928, as the Nationalist Government sought to consolidate its tenuous hold over Republican China's northwestern territorial claims. Lushar was then a small shabby trading town inhabited by a variety of people, only loosely connected to the administration in Xining, more appended to Kubum Monastery about a kilometre up a hillside at the south end of town. (Rock, 1956, 6, 23) Today this pattern still echoes in the topography and atmospheric dynamic of Lushar. Kubum still in a way defines Lushar, if not culturally or demographically in a county 77 per cent Han Chinese and 15 per cent Hui (Chinese Muslims),<sup>4</sup> then touristically, as Kubum is methodically reconstructed as the major drawcard in Qinghai's tourist industry.

The wording of the article in the *Qinghai Daily* struck me so forcibly when I first saw it because it presented an event in terms that seemed anomalous with what I had seen take place ten years earlier. At that time, I and most of those who were at Kubum construed proceedings as the occasion of Monlam Chenmo, the Tibetan Buddhist year's most significant celebration, which at Kubum is distinguished by a butter sculpture exhibition that marks Monlam's end. This interpretation was conveyed to me by representatives of various nationalities, including Han Chinese, at least in the sense that the main event was the Buddhist festival, highlighted by the butter sculpture exhibition. Even a Han deputy-director of Qinghai's CITS had presented it to me in these terms, not even mentioning the coincidence of the Lantern Festival which I found out later *in situ*. Monlam Chenmo, or the Great Prayer, is held at the beginning of the Tibetan New Year which sometimes, and in the Amdo region usually,<sup>5</sup> falls at the same time as the Chinese New Year. As is well known, New Year is the most significant festival period of the Chinese lunar calendar year, and in Qinghai Province's Xining districts, where Chinese have been settled for centuries, it is celebrated in distinctive local rituals throughout the countryside as well as a mass parade in the capital city a couple of weeks after New Year's Day. The Lantern Festival (灯节 *Dengjie*, 元宵节 *Yuanxiaojie*), held throughout the hemisphere of Chinese civilisation, forms part of the series of celebrations during the Lunar New Year, or Spring Festival. Falling on the night (宵 *xiao*) of the 15th day of the first (元 *yuan*) month of the lunar calendar, when the first full moon of the new year appears, it marks the end of the Chinese New Year period. While its origins probably lie in multiple religious and cosmological sources,<sup>6</sup> in its recognisable form as Yuanxiaojie it dates at least from the Tang Dynasty (618-906AD). Basic celebratory practices include eating a special food, *tangyuan* 汤圆 (or 元宵 *yuanxiao*), symbolising family unity, and carrying lanterns around in the evening. The Lantern Festival, and the main finalities of Monlam Chenmo, thus take place on the same date: the night of the full moon two weeks into the new year.

<sup>4</sup> In the late 1980's Lushar's population was over 20,000 (*Zhongguo diming cidian*, 1990, 852), and must now be far higher. Huangzhong County's population totalled 428,000 in 1990: it had risen to 467,000 in 2000 (figures from 1990 and 2000 Population Census). See Marshall and Cooke, 1997 for a demographic analysis of Huangzhong County in the mid-1990's.

<sup>5</sup> The Tibetan region of Amdo, in which Kubum is located, celebrates Tibetan New Year on the same date as Chinese New Year, but in the other Tibetan regions the date may vary by as much as a full lunar cycle.

<sup>6</sup> Linking to ancient Chinese cosmology, the festival celebrates the birthday of the God of Heaven, the first of three in a yearly series of deities' birthdays: 1st month birthday of the God of Heaven (Shangyuan 上元), 7th month God of Earth, (Zhongyuan 中元) 10th month God of Water (Xiayuan 下元).

These days the Lantern Festival is held at Kubum, coinciding with the exhibition of butter sculptures, which may seem like a fortunate instance of multicultural cooperation, but it was not always so. In pre-PRC times the Lantern Festival was held in the town by its Chinese residents. During the 1950's requests were made to celebrate the festival at the monastery. At first the monastic authorities would not allow it, but gradually some allowances were granted, until permission was eventually given to move it to the monastery grounds as a matter of course.<sup>7</sup> When I saw it in 1993 the number of people carrying lanterns in celebratory fashion around the perimeter of Kubum was very small compared to the huge crowds making the same circuit in relation to Monlam. The *Qinghai Daily's* 2003 reportage, eclipsing Monlam by reference only to the Chinese festival, therefore struck me as a significantly selective choice in the public portrayal of a local cultural event that I had experienced differently ten years earlier.

On a bitterly cold winter's day in February 1993, I caught a packed minibus marked for 'Ta'ersi' from Xining, the bleak, polluted provincial capital of Qinghai with a population 85 per cent Han Chinese (*Zhongguo minzu renkou ziliao*, 1993); (Marshall & Cooke, 1997, 1640-1641) and the sprawling industrial-urban character imported from inland China's least civic-minded period of city planning. We rumbled for an hour or so on a roughly-paved road through a bleached farming countryside of dry terraces, and arrived at 'Kubum'. Here, on the second day before the year's biggest event at Qinghai Province's biggest monastery, activities were well under way. The monastic complex, mounting in a geometry of sombre red halls and courtyards up a hillside, already heaved with crowds of visitors. Tens of thousands of pilgrims – Tibetans, Mongols, Monguors (Tu)<sup>8</sup> – had come from the arc of Tibetan Buddhist lands now contained within the PRC, and beyond. For many, the journey had brought them from Qinghai's high-altitude grasslands far to the south of Xining, or farther, from the northern reaches of the Tibet Autonomous Region (TAR). Groups of Mongols from Inner Mongolia had arrived by the relatively easy rail connection; the Monguors more easily still from their home districts fifty kilometres away.<sup>9</sup> In the six days I stayed in the monastery's hostel, a converted monks' courtyard providing frugal accommodation, I would scarcely ever hear the place referred to except as Kubum, despite my conversations being only in Chinese. Middle-class Mongols from Huhehot and urban Tibetans coming in from Xining rolled their eyes as they explained the Chinese name: first a chöten (stupa) was built here, and later a monastery, hence

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<sup>7</sup> Arjia Rinpoche personal communication, April 2003, Washington D.C. Arjia Rinpoche remarked that the Chinese Festival now takes precedence. Thubten Norbu's description of the Tibetan Buddhist festival at Kubum in 1939 makes no mention of the Chinese Lantern Festival, either at Kubum or in the town of Lushar (1986, *Tibet*, 129-132).

<sup>8</sup> Nomenclature for this national minority varies in use and preference. Officially categorised as 'Tu' under the PRC, pre-1949 ethnographers generally referred to these people as 'Monguors', the term increasingly favoured by many members of the ethnicity (Cooke, 2008a, 33-56). This paper will use the term 'Monguor'.

<sup>9</sup> Most Monguors in the PRC live in Xining-Haidong, which includes Huzhu Tu Autonomous County and Minhe Hui and Tu Autonomous County. Inner Mongolia refers to the Inner Mongolia Autonomous Region in the PRC, of which Huhehot is the capital.

the ‘chöten then temple’ (*ta er si*) of the Chinese term, a merely structural descriptive.<sup>10</sup> Kubum, which they regarded as its ‘real’ name, meant ‘Maitreya continent of the myriad Buddha images’, a reference to its religious essence and also arising from mysterious characteristics of a sacred tree there.<sup>11</sup> Modern and historical scholarship confirms these names and usages through time with a definitiveness that highlights the district’s cultural divisions despite centuries of multi-ethnic habitation.<sup>12</sup> Over the next week the rifts and confluences of local and broader regional cultural identities would manifest through what transpired at the monastery. Even more dynamic, perhaps, were the changed relations to be seen in the life of the site ten years later.

Monlam Chenmo, or Great Prayer, is a religious occasion, and as celebrated at Kubum it combines devotional rituals (*pujas*) and teachings, sacred dance, artistic display, reverential viewing of holy objects, blessings by high Buddhist lamas, and pilgrimage; activities which affirm tangible, embodied elements of Tibetan Buddhist culture and history.<sup>13</sup> Lasting for over two weeks, its end is marked by an exhibition of butter sculptures. Each year intricate sculptures made entirely of dyed butter which the Kubum monks have created during the preceding months are displayed in the monastic grounds. Kubum has enjoyed regional fame for these extraordinary creations for hundreds of years, not as the originator of art in butter but as its perfecter, and their viewing elicits immense excitement and reverence. Monlam also provides a regionally-important annual socio-economic focus: a site and occasion for social gathering on a mass scale and commercial opportunities for vendors and customers, arenas in which local communities, or their representatives, involve themselves in ways generally bounded by their ethno-cultural identity, as will be examined in the section ‘Kubum 1993’ below. The sequence of activities typically runs as follows:

- Pujas are held from the first day of the lunar new year onwards until the end of five final climatic festival days attended by vast crowds from the 13th to the 17th day, the 15th being the highlight;
- Religious dances (Tib: *cham*, Ch. *tiaoqian* 跳欠) are performed on the 14th day;
- On the 15th day - the full moon - a major puja and the exhibiting of Kubum’s famous embroidered thangkas (Buddhist paintings) occur during the day, followed by the butter sculpture exhibition in the evening;

<sup>10</sup> *Qinghai Zangchuan Fojiao Siyuan Mingjian* 1993, 4 suggests this name, and meaning, dates from 1560, when a meditation room (*chantang* 禪堂) was built next to the extant chöten, supposedly constructed in 1379 by Tsongkapa’s mother and disciples at the site of his birth.

<sup>11</sup> A white sandalwood tree, its leaves and bark bearing Buddhist images, is said to have grown at the spot of Tsongkapa’s birth from blood from his mother’s umbilical cord.

<sup>12</sup> The earliest Chinese source I have found so far naming the monastery as ‘Ta’ersi’ is the *Xiningfu xinzhì* of 1746, which lists it in the section ‘Barbarian Monasteries’ (Yang, 1988, 372-373). It also gives ‘Buddha Mountain’ (*Foshansi*) as an alternate name, suggestive of the Tibetan meaning of ‘Kubum’. Pre-modern Tibetan sources that I have seen do not give the name ‘Ta’ersi’, nor do the most scholarly works on regional Tibetan Buddhist monasteries produced in the PRC since the reform era. Explanation of the Chinese name is given, for example, in: *Ta’ersi*, 1986; Zhang, 2000; Zhi, 9 Jan. 1992, 40; and Mi, 1995, 473.

<sup>13</sup> For the significance of pilgrimage in Tibetan Buddhist culture, see: (Kapstein, 1998, 95-119).

- On the 16th day the previous year’s butter sculptures are removed and destroyed, and the new sculptures assembled in the butter sculpture exhibition hall; another major puja is held; and a final ritual involving esoteric religious symbolism but pre-eminently elements of exorcism and divination for the New Year takes place;
- On the 17th day the ‘airing’ of another holy image (Manjusri) occurs.

By the 17th day, most of the attendees have begun to quit Kubum’s environs and return to their homes, leaving the monastic complex to a hushed wintry seclusion, at least until the tourist year shifts into gear around May.

Particularly since Hobsbawm and Ranger’s seminal work in the early 1980’s, (Hobsbawm & Ranger, 1983) scholarship on the often recently constructed nature of ‘tradition’ has challenged the ‘traditional’ classification of human ceremonial activities, including religious rituals, in many societies. The Tibetan case is now beginning to be submitted to similar analysis: internal cultural factors and recent Chinese state goals and assumptions may both resist the process for their own reasons. Obstacles also exist in the relative scarcity of specific social anthropology information in pre-modern Tibetan and Mongol textual sources<sup>14</sup> which overwhelmingly emphasise religious teachings and lineages, rarely precise ritual (let alone social) practice, and also post-1949 material and personnel losses which might have provided data. Case studies of the proposition that imputedly ‘ancient’ traditions may be more recent formulations propagated by elites to support their ideology of power tend to relate to modern nation-states.<sup>15</sup> Kubum’s performance of Monlam Chenmo clearly does have actual historical antecedents, shaped over several centuries and embedded in the known historical environment of the Sino-Tibetan Buddhist frontier zone in the northeastern margins of the Qinghai-Tibet Plateau.<sup>16</sup> At least two reliable eye-witness accounts of the festival from the mid and late 19th century attest to its remarkable consistency into the last decade of the 20th century, a 150-year span.<sup>17</sup> Only since 1949 under the PRC has it been enacted within a modern nation-state context.<sup>18</sup> This paper hopes to demonstrate that forces identified as cultural ritual appropriation by modern nation-states, in this case the PRC, are working on the performance at Kubum, as observable

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<sup>14</sup> Meaning in the Tibetan and Mongol languages, some of which were produced by Monguor writers, for example Sumpa Khanpo, identified as a Monguor by the translator of his *Annals of Kokonor* (c.1786, in Tibetan) (Yang, 1969, 4).

<sup>15</sup> Such as Japan (Vlastos, 1998).

<sup>16</sup> For implications of frontier zones as distinct from demarcated national borders in Inner Asia generally, see: (Lattimore, 1962). For the pre-PRC western Gansu frontier specifically, see: (Ekvall, 1939); (Lipman, 1981). Charles Keyes has suggested that in precolonial mainland Southeast Asia and China, whose empires were separated by frontiers rather than borders, fundamental differences among peoples could be considered primarily as matters of Sinitic or Buddhist civilisation; a framing that might also be applied to the Sino-Tibetan frontier (Keyes, 2002, 1171).

<sup>17</sup> Fathers Huc and Gabet witnessed the festival at Kubum in 1845 (Huc, 1982). Rockhill (1891) saw the festival in February 1889.

<sup>18</sup> Nominally the area was part of a modern nation-state under the Republic of China 1912-1949. However, regional politics during that era arguably had more in common with the frontier politics of earlier imperial periods, and recognisable administrative or ideological features of modern nation-states, such as adherence to central policy, authenticating discourse and control, operated there only sporadically.

1993-2003. Such a process will in time affect the story of Kubum/Ta'ersi, as it is presented, experienced and projected into the future.

### **History [as a Tibetan Buddhist Monastery]**

Seeking the wider dynamics of discourse and hegemony inherent in rituals and festivals, as suggested by Dirks and others, leads to recognition of history's variable cultural form and the centrality of culture to the historical problematic (Dirks et al. 1994, 6). The festival/s and accompanying rituals under discussion are enacted at a place with a readily verifiable, long-term historical presence, so for the purpose of my arguments here, I will examine two histories of the monastery, identified as Tibetan Buddhist and Chinese, terms with past and current usage in relation to culture, territory and politics. According to the lens focused on it, Kubum/Ta'ersi's history reveals different meanings and contexts, highlighting values and power relations now at least in some respects contested by the parties who converge at the site, in a variety of political, social, economic and cultural ways. The *Qinghai Daily's* reportage on the festival occasion there in 2003 signals transformations taking place at the site itself, but also far beyond the monastery into the region, the province, even the nation. A question obviously beyond the scope of this paper is whether this two-dimensional story of Kubum/Ta'ersi will continue through these contexts into the future at all, or whether only one story will survive. While the Tibetan Buddhist and Chinese histories intersect at some points in time and space, their dissonances go a long way towards explaining the dilemma represented in the performance and reporting of the festival at Kubum over the decade 1993-2002.

In 1993, most of the crowd were Buddhist pilgrims, converging on Kubum to celebrate the monastery's principal annual religious ceremony, the Monlam Chenmo. From my vantage point on site and by 'empathetically entering into the subjectivity of others',<sup>19</sup> I will confidently assert that these overwhelming crowd numbers attending the festival situated themselves primarily within a Tibetan Buddhist space and occasion: within a Tibetan Buddhist, not a Chinese, history. The butter sculptures and the Great Prayer *and Kubum itself* symbolically unite several high points of Tibetan Buddhist history:

(1) the arrival in Lhasa of what has become the religion's most sacred object, the statue of the twelve-year old Sakyamuni Buddha, popularly referred to as the Jowo, brought as part of the dowry of the Tang Chinese Princess Wencheng for her marriage to the Tibetan King Songtsan Gampo in 641. Songtsan Gampo, who consolidated the Tibetan Empire in the 7th century, accorded Buddhism royal patronage and is regarded as the first of Tibet's Three Religious Kings. It is said that local Tibetans made reverential offerings of butter to the Jowo, (Cheng, 1996, 416) (a tradition that has remained in the Tibetan Buddhist context to the present day).

(2) the birth of Tsongkapa at the site of Kubum in 1357, and his founding of the Gelug order of Tibetan Buddhism, which became powerfully embedded in Tibetan politics and religious culture. At the beginning of the Tibetan New Year in 1409 Tsongkapa inaugurated the Great

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<sup>19</sup> Norbu suggests that such an approach may assist in analysing less 'objective' elements that determine people's behaviour and action (Norbu, 1992, 17).

Prayer at the Jokhang Monastery, which houses the Jowo, in Lhasa, during which butter sculptures were displayed among the offerings. In 1431, not long after Tsongkapa's death, the custom of displaying butter sculptures in association with this religious event was apparently transferred to Kubum, (*Qinghaisheng zhi: zongjiao zhi*, 2000, 185) not yet a monastery but the site of a chöten (built 1379) marking the sacred spot of Tsongkapa's birth. Since then, butter sculpture has been brought to the highest artistic levels at Kubum.

(3) the visit of the Third Dalai Lama, head of the Gelugpa, to Kubum in 1582, where he directed local Tibetan clans to extend the small religious structures already there, and conducted rituals for building the monastery (Pu, 1990, 41) (Chen, 1997, 345, 408).<sup>20</sup> The following year (1583) he instituted the Great Prayer ceremony there. The prelate of the Gelugpa had just received the title 'Dalai Lama' from Altan Khan, the leading Tümtü Mongol prince, at a meeting between these two great Inner Asian power holders in 1578 at Altan's capital. After the Third Dalai Lama died in the region in 1588 his funerary chöten was consecrated at Kubum: though damaged more than once, its restored version may be seen in the Great Gold Tile Hall (Ch: *Dajinwadian*).<sup>21</sup> When regular teachings began at Kubum in 1612, it was formally regarded as a functioning Gelugpa monastery (Pu, 1990, 142).

All these events occurred before any Chinese association with Kubum. Its development belonged at this stage – from origin to monastic establishment – within the sphere of Tibetan civilisation, inclusive of that civilisation's regional and transnational relations, particularly with the Tümtü Mongols whose territories then lay in present-day Inner Mongolia and Ningxia to the north of Ming China. Nevertheless, the Chinese had intermittently administered a district in this corner of Qinghai since 60BC in the Han Dynasty, and were actively doing so from their then far-western border post of Xining from the Ming Dynasty (1368-1644) onwards. In Chinese terminology, Kubum 'entered inside the borders' (*ru sai nei*) in 1596, when the Ming authorities decided to build a wall encircling the monastery to the south as part of China's frontier defence system on its western borders (Yang, 1988, 372-373). Ming records do not suggest Chinese intervention in Kubum's affairs as a result. On the contrary, Tibetan and Mongol influence through support of the Gelugpa was strongly consolidated in the region from the time of the Third Dalai Lama's visits in the 1580's onwards.<sup>22</sup> At least five more Tibetan Buddhist monasteries were founded in the Kubum district alone by the mid-17th Century (*Qinghai zangchuan fojiao siyuan mingjian*, 1993, 9). On the eve of the Ming Dynasty's fall to the Manchus, when the Qosot Mongol Gushri Khan simultaneously created his core dominion in Kokonor (Qinghai) and established a protectorate over Central Tibet through patronage of the Gelugpa,<sup>23</sup> Kubum lay firmly within a Tibeto-Mongol cultural and political domain.

<sup>20</sup> At the time of his first visit to Kubum, Sonam Gyatso had only recently received the title 'Dalai Lama' from Altan Khan, in 1578.

<sup>21</sup> For the Third Dalai Lama's influence at Kubum, see *Qinghai zangchuan fojiao siyuan mingjian*, 1993, 41; Mi, 1995, 474; and Zhang, 2000, 41-42.

<sup>22</sup> Mi gives details on extensions to Kubum through donations by Tibetan and Mongol chieftains (Mi, 1995, 475).

<sup>23</sup> Gushri Khan arrived in Qinghai in 1636; by 1642 he had established hegemony there and infiltrated the highest levels of the Gelugpa hierarchy in Lhasa, declaring the Dalai Lama King of Tibet under Qosot Mongol patronage. See Stein, 1972, 81-83 and *Qinghai lishi jiyao*, 1987, 567.



About a century after Kubum's life as a formal Gelugpa monastery began it became implicated in the Manchu Qing Dynasty's (1644-1911) empire-building activities in Inner and Central Asia. To negate the Mongol power beyond its borders, the Qing manoeuvred to usurp patronage of the Gelugpa hierarchy in Tibet from the Qosot Mongols of Qinghai (Petech, 1972), in a chain of events that led to the establishment of Qing protectorates over the Tibetan territories of U-Tsang (Central Tibet), Kham and Amdo (Eastern and Northern Tibet respectively).<sup>24</sup> Though they would later present themselves as protectors of the Gelugpa, the Qing did not hesitate to remove opposition to their political plans for the Qinghai region among the Buddhist clergy. During the anti-Qing revolt of 1723-4 by regional Mongols and Tibetans they executed the Abbot of Kubum and occupied the monastery as a Qing garrison headquarters for over a year (*Qinghai lishi jiyao*, 1987, 183-186).<sup>25</sup> From this time onwards, the Qing institutionalised its influence at Kubum through the dual means of donations and insinuation into the monastery's system of incarnations, linking Kubum's tulku<sup>26</sup> into the Qing administrative apparatus for its non-Chinese subjects, and even requiring some of them to reside in Peking. Such influence could operate passively as a symbolic presence, or be called into practical politics. Through most of the 19th century it lingered in ceremonial or donational gestures, as the imperial focus waned in formerly critical border districts like Xiningfu. Meanwhile a Gelugpa revival emanating from Lhasa energetically founded new monasteries and revitalised existing ones all over the Qinghai protectorate and the culturally Tibetan districts of Gansu Province.<sup>27</sup> By the end of the Qing five Dalai Lamas and two Panchen Lamas had visited Kubum, associations with the Gelugpa's two most revered prelates whose significance to the Buddhist hierarchy and ordinary believers can hardly be over-emphasised. The Amban in Xining and any Chinese administration, on the other hand, seemed scarcely to touch the autonomous operation of Kubum.<sup>28</sup>

Kubum's worst crisis since the 1723 revolt came not from the Qing government but the Moslem Rebellion that devastated the Qing empire's northwest in 1862-1878, when it sustained heavy losses to its monastic community and property (Rockhill, 1891, 69; Bulag, 2002, 42). It recovered its prestige and wellbeing to thrive through an era of regional political contestation whose elements, and outcome, in many respects echo through Kubum's situation today. Kubum, as a major politico-cultural site rooted in its local environment, and maintaining a web of relationships stretching from Lhasa to Peking to Mongolia, became embroiled in the

<sup>24</sup> Kham and Amdo are now subsumed within the Tibet Autonomous Region and Sichuan, Qinghai and Gansu Provinces.

<sup>25</sup> For destruction of monasteries and personnel during the revolt see also Yang, 1969, 49 and *Qinghai zangchuan fojiao siyuan mingjian*, 1993, 38.

<sup>26</sup> Recognised incarnations; 'living buddhas' in Chinese terminology [*huofo* 活佛].

<sup>27</sup> By Qing administrative reckoning, Kubum lay within Gansu Province, which at the time included Xining and its surrounding districts. Kubum did not fall under a Qing county jurisdiction however. Tibetans in the area were ruled for all practical purposes by their own clan leaders, enfeoffed to the Qing, a system employed by the Qing in many border areas inhabited by non-Chinese. For Gelugpa revival in these areas see numerous entries in Pu, 1990 and Huc, 1982, 59.

<sup>28</sup> According to Rockhill, visiting in 1889, Kubum operated in a highly autonomous way, occasionally visited by the Qing's highest regional representative, the Xining Amban, but basically falling outside the Chinese administration for practical purposes (Rockhill, 1891, 54-55).

vortex of power struggles being played out in Inner Asia in the first half of the 20th century. Political loyalties were realigned or created within and across territories nominally within the Republic of China which succeeded the Qing Empire in 1912. At times it was not clear whether, or under what circumstances, the Qinghai region would even be politically part of the Republic.<sup>29</sup> Local occurrences at a prime power site like Kubum were bound to have far-reaching repercussions. When the Gelugpa lost its two principal heads - the 13th Dalai Lama died in 1933 and the 9th Panchen Lama in 1937 – remarkably their reincarnations were both found in neighbouring districts of Kubum. Though the Tibetan Government managed to convey the child Dalai Lama to Lhasa, the little Panchen Lama was kept at Kubum as the protégé of a pro-Chinese Tibetan group through the 1940's.<sup>30</sup> As the People's Liberation Army (PLA) reached Xining in September 1949 and Mao Zedong in Beijing declared the founding of New China on 1st October, the eleven-year old Panchen Lama was on hand to send messages of support from Kubum, where his enthronement had just taken place.<sup>31</sup>

### **History [as a Chinese Monastery]**

Up to this point – 1949 – Kubum's history may be seen as that of an autonomous entity which has gone through several phases essentially within the context of its arising: its origins as a sacred site; its development as a major Tibetan Buddhist monastery supported by Tibetan and Mongol believers in a Tibeto-Mongol political domain; its incorporation of Qing elements within its power matrix; its participation in the politics of Tibet, Republican China and localised Hui hegemony. Under the PRC after 1949, it became operationally, if not in self-identity, another kind of entity, one that did not function under the terms of its preceding existence. It was re-construed by the new Chinese political authority as a Chinese monastery, in the historic sense and now fully in the territorial sense, as belonging unconditionally within the Chinese nation-state. As necessitated by the twin though not identical processes of state and nation building that the PRC has been implementing, especially in the minority nationality regions (Goodman, 2004), Kubum's past and present identity has metamorphosed into that of a player within Chinese history: it is a 'moment' in this process that the *Qinghai Daily* records and reflects in its report on Vice-Governor Zhao's visit on 13 February 2003.

In common with monasteries throughout the Tibeto-Mongol regions of the PRC, the post-1949 Kubum underwent several phases of reconstruction, which directed and relocated it within its new context. Except for repairs undertaken by the new provincial authorities, Kubum was left largely undisturbed until 1958, when the Amdo revolt, not unlike the anti-Qing revolt of 1723, revealed regional opposition to changes imposed by a non-local power. The Chinese Government swiftly adopted counter-measures including the 'democratic religious reform' policy, under which Kubum was virtually shut down though ironically declared a national cultural heritage site by the National People's Congress (NPC) in 1961. Further reduced during

<sup>29</sup> A Hui warlord clan was the principal power holder in the region during the Republican years, particularly under Ma Bufang. Gelugpa influence also remained strong (Chen, 1997, 553-4).

<sup>30</sup> Complexities of the rivalries between supporters of the Dalai and Panchen Lamas are too extensive to deal with here, except to note them as a factor. Goals of pro-Chinese Tibetans were not necessarily the same as those of the Guomindang, or Qinghai's Hui warlords.

<sup>31</sup> For accounts of the young Panchen Lama at Kubum, see Mi, 1995, 478 and Barnett, 1963, 230-235.

the Cultural Revolution, only 61 monks of the over 1,600-strong 1950's community remained when Kubum was re-opened in 1979.<sup>32</sup>

Kubum's restoration and revival after the liberalisation policies adopted in December 1978 mark a turning point in the monastery's life in some ways more profound than the serial destruction of the preceding two decades. This may not have seemed so evident in the period up to the early 1990's. Reopened by the Provincial Government for 'normal religious activities' in February 1979 (*Qinghai zangchuan fojiao siyuan mingjian*, 1993, 44), Kubum was opened to the public in 1983 (*Ta'ersi*, 1986). By 1990 monk numbers had reached about five hundred, and eleven of the original 35 tulkus had been reinstated (*Qinghai zangchuan fojiao siyuan mingjian*, 1993, 43).<sup>33</sup> Its teaching, medical and printing colleges were again functioning. The Chinese Government allocated substantial funds for restoration projects. But simultaneously, new forms of administration were being set up which, though less crude than methods used in 1958 and the Cultural Revolution, more effectively linked the monastery into the state policy apparatus. With Kubum's 'new appearance and regulations',<sup>34</sup> internal affairs are under the Democratic Management Committee (DMC), established in August 1979 (*Qinghai zangchuan fojiao siyuan mingjian*, 1993, 44). Although the DMC is formed by Kubum's tulkus, it is answerable to several state departments which make and handle national religious policy.<sup>35</sup> The monastery is expected to be economically self-sufficient rather than relying on donations as heavily as in the past, although these still come in, and the officially-registered monks receive a small salary from the government.<sup>36</sup> Kubum derives income from a variety of sources such as printing, transport, medical services, a hostel and a tree nursery (*Qinghai zangchuan fojiao siyuan mingjian*, 1993, 44), but its most important income-generator is unquestionably tourism.

Like political leaders anywhere, those in the PRC Government make public visits, allocate funds and intermittently make pronouncements relating to sites and occasions seen as representing cultural significance within the domain bounded by their authority, as Vice-Governor Zhao did in February 2003. Physically Kubum easily lends itself to such demonstrative usage because of its close proximity to the regional Chinese power centre of Xining, a phenomenon already noted during the late Qing (Rockhill, 1891, 54). Since the founding of the PRC a constant procession of Chinese leaders, including several of the highest Party figures, has appeared there, most notably Peng Dehuai in 1958, Hu Yaobang in 1983, and Jiang Zemin in 1993, who in the manner of Emperor Qianlong contributed a plaque in his own

<sup>32</sup> 1,615 given as the pre-1958 number of monks (*Qinghai zangchuan fojiao siyuan mingjian*, 1993, 43; 1,983 according to Pu, 1990, 143).

<sup>33</sup> Number given as 534 in c.1992; 520 (Pu, 1990, 141).

<sup>34</sup> This description on p.484, though appearing in Mi's *Huanghe shangyou diqu wenwu*, was not written by Professor Mi.

<sup>35</sup> Democratic Management Committees (DMC's) were first set up in monasteries in the 1950's, then reinstated when monasteries reopened after closure during the Cultural Revolution (1966-1976).

<sup>36</sup> Arjia Rinpoche personal communication, April 2003. Arjia Rinpoche at this time placed the number of officially-registered monks at 400. *Qinghai zangchuan fojiao siyuan mingjian* (1993, 44) mentions 3,600 monks at Kubum's height (exact period not specified).

calligraphy over the Butter Sculpture Exhibition Hall.<sup>37</sup> Visits to Kubum by Party leaders often coincide with important Central policy adoptions or their successful implementation; emblematically their successive attendance at the site re-forges and maintains the purported historic connection between Kubum and the Central Government. The State Council's declaration of Kubum as a national heritage site in 1961 and Central Government provision of funds for structural repairs illustrate the Centre's interest in maintaining the site into the future. Kubum thus plays a performative role as symbol of the party-state interface in the Tibetan regions, a photogenic backdrop for political point-making and a marker of prevailing cultural policy in this polyethnic region of the PRC.

More invasive of religious administration and the future direction of Kubum, however, are measures which manipulate how Kubum will be able to function *as a monastery* and indeed how, and what as, it will be required to function within the guidelines set by the party-state. It is here that Kubum's relation with the ruling Chinese political power today diverges from its relations with the Qing Dynasty, extending beyond imperial patronage into conformity on multiple levels with state policy. In other words, the religion itself at Kubum is considered a legitimate field for state decision-making (Cooke, 2009, 130), a situation that did not arise under the Qing. Chinese Communist Party (CCP) pragmatism leads it to assume certain roles in religious affairs that might seem disjunctive for a declaratory atheist political party. Some of these occur visibly at Kubum, and represent a more or less direct takeover of functions formerly performed by the Qing court.<sup>38</sup> Post-imperial Chinese governments' equation of the Qing geographic imperium with the territory of the modern Chinese nation-state has received increasing attention from Western sinologists in recent years, as has the Qing Dynasty's ideological and ritualistic system for managing the people and lands within its vast political reach.<sup>39</sup> As a modern state founded on a comprehensive ideology, the PRC's system for managing its citizens at core or periphery operates in a more activist mode (Norbu, 1992, 197) infiltrating religion as much as any other sphere of social life and leading it to try to manipulate religion's symbols, rituals and power relations. For Kubum in particular, the CCP's intervention in the Tibetan Buddhist process of identifying reincarnations of high lamas has profound implications in symbol and substance (Congressional-Executive Commission on China (CECC), 2007). Both state and religion identify the process as important to the future in their respective spheres of interest, and recognise Kubum as a space where outcomes will have active significance.

In what sense, then, is Kubum a Chinese monastery? Firstly, in the sense that much published discourse in the PRC says it is. Portrayed in tourist brochures, research works and official

<sup>37</sup> Major official visits to Kubum I have been able to identify to 2003: April 1956 Chen Yi on his way to the TAR; October 1958 Peng Dehuai visits Qinghai; April 1966 Bo Yibo and Li Lantao on trip investigating Qinghai work; July 1983 Hu Yaobang to Qinghai; August 1990 Qiao Shi; December 1992 Tian Jiyun; July 1993 Jiang Zemin tours Qinghai; May 1995 Wu Bangguo; July 1996 Li Ruihuan; June 2003 Luo Gan.

<sup>38</sup> Principally funding for monastic building; small stipends for registered monks; donations for monks' feast at the end of Monlam; leaders writing name-plaques over lhakang entrances. A major difference between the Qing and CCP positions is of course that the Qing performed these functions as the patron of the Gelugpa, in which relationship the Emperor was recognised as an incarnation of the Bodhisatva Manjusri.

<sup>39</sup> For Qing imperialism see for example, Millward, 1998 and Perdue, 1998. On Qing imperial rituals see Farquhar, 1978 and Zito, 1997.

outlets such as websites as, to take a few examples, ‘one of the six great lamaseries of China belonging to the Shangui sect’ (*Ta’ersi*, 1986), ‘the centre of Buddhism in China’s Northwest’ (Chen, 1997, 407), built to commemorate ‘the famous reformer in our country’s Buddhist history, Zongkaba’ (Xining Municipal Government, 19 Aug. 2003), Kubum’s ‘belonging’ in the Chinese territorial, cultural and religious context is invariably stated as its initial identifier, whatever descriptions may follow. Enfolded within Chinese national culture, Kubum becomes discursively available for national purposes. Secondly, transformative actions continue to take place initiated not from within Kubum’s intrinsic life as an autonomous Tibetan Buddhist monastery but from the Chinese state. Policy statements and regulations handed down by relevant official departments draw clear parameters for Kubum’s personnel, economic and religious life. Concerning the monastic body, numbers and registration allowance are set by the government. Democratic Management Committees, responsible for the monastery’s administration, report to the government. Political campaigns that manipulate religious belief and practice can be run in the monastery, and are increasingly underpinned by a body of laws relating individual conduct to state directives. Economic requisites mean it is not up to the monastery or its supporters to decide how it will sustain itself: participation in economic projects defined by the Party is mandatory (Cooke, 2009). Most recently, as Vice-Governor Zhao reminded the DMC in February, Kubum is required to contribute to social prosperity and provincial strength by developing tourism, in line with the spirit of the 16th Party Congress (*Qinghai Ribao*, 14 Feb. 2003).

The CCP has chosen Kubum as a double symbol, of Tibetan Buddhism within the party-state, and of the party-state within Tibetan Buddhism. As a historically-embedded choice for the task, Kubum now forecasts the state’s preferred future for Tibetan Buddhism and the regions where it historically flourished. On that note, I should like to return to the ceremony at Kubum in 1993, and what I found there of the Tibetan Buddhist and the Chinese monastery.

### **Kubum 1993**

After a couple of short visits on days before the festival really began in earnest, I arrived at Kubum from Xining on 4 February 1993 and stayed until 9 February. By staying at the monastery hostel it was possible to spend the entire time on site: two Tibetan brothers ran a good restaurant at the hostel, the size of Kubum and the unceasing activity offered rich opportunities for observation, casual acquaintances could be sustained for days. Granting the subjectivity of witnessing, my experiences at Kubum in 1993 provided a vivid perspective for later consideration of developments at Kubum, or more widely in the relevant cultural-political contexts of the PRC. As I saw it enacted in 1993, the festival unfolded in the sequence described in an earlier section. The most spectacular components were undoubtedly those occurring on the 14th and 15th days of the first lunar month; the sacred dances, the displaying of the thangkas, and the butter sculpture exhibition, this latter taking place in conjunction with the Lantern Festival. All but the Lantern Festival segment have antecedents in Monlam Chenmo as it was held at least 150 years ago, evidenced by eye-witness records. As one of the six great Gelugpa monasteries, Kubum has been a centre for the Tibetan Buddhist arts, noted for its ‘three arts’ of embossed thangkas, mural painting and butter sculpture, as well as highly

developed religious dance. All contribute to the yearly realisation of Monlam Chenmo in performative and visible ways.

The sacred dances, performed by strikingly-costumed and masked monks over more than two hours on the afternoon of 5 February, took place in the packed courtyard of the Manjusri Lhakhang (Ch: *Jiujiandian*), combining dramatisation of Buddhist tales, ritual components, music and comedy.<sup>40</sup> At certain points the audience responded enthusiastically with religious gestures - prostrating, touching their heads to the dancers' robes, throwing khatas. A row of civil officials showing only moderate interest in the spectacle sat sequestered under the verandah of the Manjusri Lhakang, together with a few religious figures in red robes. Like much else in the historical and ideational fabric of Kubum, the dances link to the Dalai Lamas through origin and current performative space. Instituted by decree of the 7th Dalai Lama in 1718, who watched their first performance at Kubum during Monlam in 1719, they became a fixed part of the ritual for the next two and a half centuries (*Qinghai zangchuan fojiao siyuan mingjian*, 1993, 42); (Zhang, 2000, 50).<sup>41</sup> In 1993 the monk dancers used the hall containing the reliquary chöten of the 3rd Dalai Lama for their point of entry and exit into the courtyard performance space, an allusive factor impressed on me by people in the crowd many times. At the conclusion of the dances many followed the monks into the hall or remained outside to make prostrations, a sitting of reaffirmed, regenerated religious energy.

By Tibetan Buddhist calendrical calculations, the following day (6 February), the 15th of the first lunar month, carries magnified powers for generating merit through religious activity. The spectacular events of this day – the afternoon display of thangkas and the evening butter sculpture exhibition, preceded by a major puja in the morning, are intended both as reverential offerings and opportunities for receiving blessing at a moment of particular potency. Kubum's unique collection of embossed and appliquéd thangkas, normally protected in the dim confines of the halls, is brought outside only once a year and hung into a triple-tiered tent-like structure of silk images in the space between the Great Sutra Hall (Ch: *Dajingtang*) and the Manjusri Lhakhang, outside the main entrance into the courtyard used for the dances the day before. As artistic phenomena they were extremely beautiful. For the delight and blessing of the spectators, the walls of thangkas flapped in the wind and glowed in the sun against the blue sky. Just standing under them as they undulated like rainbows above produced an exotic, sensual, spiritual experience, though fleetingly. When a dust storm blew up in mid-afternoon a team of monks hastily dismantled the structure, packed the precious thangkas away in boxes and returned them to their usual dark habitation. That evening, the even more amazing butter sculpture went on display at a site higher up inside the monastic complex. As the masses of people swelled up the hill, one could see, looming out of the darkness, what appeared to be an illuminated carved edifice, its upper reaches seeping into the night sky. Surrounding a central figure of Sakyamuni, human and divine figures, flowers, animals, birds and architectural features, sculpted entirely from hardened butter and mounted on a wood frame construction,

<sup>40</sup> For a description of content and significance of these performances see Powers, 1995, 197-199.

<sup>41</sup> The 7th Dalai Lama was resident at Kubum during this troubled political period in Qing, Mongol and Tibetan relations. He watched and officiated at the Monlam dances in 1719 together with the Qinghai Mongol *qinwang*, a significant symbol of religious power relations for regional Mongol culture at the time.

represented episodes from the Jataka (Life of the Buddha). This art in butter requires months of work in freezing conditions by the monk creators. Even when forewarned of the spectacle, the giant array's composition of butter, painted and gilded, seemed incredible on sight. Provincial dignitaries appeared in front of the sculpture as a sign that the ceremony had opened. As Arjia Rinpoche, Abbot of Kubum, appeared too, the crowd grew restive as if sparked by an electric current, some prostrating where they stood in the crush of people. Officials and a few police had photos of themselves and their families taken with the Abbot before his retinue escorted him away, then the crowd surged forward, directed by police through a narrow channel which allowed everyone to pass right in front of the holy object. The sea of people wound up the hill to make the *khorma* (reverential circuit) around Kubum, many stopping to sit on the slopes and view the sculpture from a higher vantage point. Chinese in the crowd now lit their lanterns in celebration of the Lantern Festival, the dots of coloured light winking in the freezing night as the human lines swayed around Kubum's perimeter under a rising full moon. By 10.30, when I left due to the cold, the crowd was still moving.

Next morning no trace of the *thangka* display or butter sculpture festivities remained where they had taken place. Monks loaded the new butter sculpture, stored overnight in the Manjusri Lhakhang, onto carts and pulled them up the hill to the butter sculpture exhibition hall. There, the creation of the previous year was dismantled and dumped unceremoniously on other carts to be taken downhill for disposal, a testament to the impermanence of all things. Passers-by boisterously collected fallen butter-petals or more boldly broke off whole flowers, figures, horses, elephants. The old sculpture's successor would be reassembled inside the exhibition hall and housed there for the rest of the year before its replacement next Monlam Chenmo.

Later that afternoon another ritual - an exorcism of evil forces to ensure a clean and safe new year<sup>42</sup> - took place in the small square between the monastery's main gate and the Eight Chöten standing outside it. A sizeable mixed crowd, including a large contingent of the People's Armed Police, attended. The ceremony's centrepiece was a pyramidal construction of sticks and butter called a 'sur' (*zur*), brought in a palanquin on horseback escorted by a procession of monks in yellow hats blowing Tibetan horns (*gyaling*). More dances were performed by four dancers, a bonfire was lit, the sur thrown into it amidst much excitement among the onlookers, then the procession marched back into the monastery.

The final act of the festival, a much smaller ceremony on the following day (17th day, 8 February), involved the 'airing' of the Manjusri image from the Great Sutra Hall. Again yellow-hatted monks blowing horns brought their precious charge outside in a little palanquin, lamas prostrated, then worshippers presented khatas and touched their foreheads to the image, and the palanquin returned through the Manjusri Lhakhang courtyard to deliver Manjusri home for another year. The next morning I returned to Xining.

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<sup>42</sup> Powers describes this ritual in full, though states it takes place on the 19th day of the first month of the lunar calendar (Powers, 1995, 196-7). At Kubum in 1993 it occurred on the 16th day.

On each of these days, crowd sizes were huge, running into tens of thousands, but especially so on 5 and 6 February when the principal events of the whole festival took place.<sup>43</sup> The majority were, by far, Tibetans, Mongols and Monguors, participating in a religious event embedded in the Tibetan Buddhist culture to which they historically ascribed. Judging by appearances, notably the wearing of pastoralists' woollen or sheepskin chubas, many Tibetans among them had come from outside the local administrative units, Xining and Haidong Prefecture, which at that time included Huangzhong County which contained Kubum.<sup>44</sup> People I could identify as Mongols came from Inner Mongolia, though others from Qinghai and Gansu and perhaps other provinces undoubtedly also attended. Monguors, who were locals from within Haidong, could easily be distinguished from Mongols and Tibetans if they were in traditional dress. In Xining and Haidong, dress codes are not a particularly accurate guide to ethnic identity, however, as urbanised and many agricultural Tibetans, Mongols and Monguors have adopted full or partial modern apparel. Of the over 400,000 combined Tibetan-Mongol-Monguor population of Xining-Haidong in the early 1990's,<sup>45</sup> a very large number had come to the year's biggest Tibetan Buddhist festival for their region, accessible to most of them via public transport.

Other locals were there too, in the main more as spectators than participants. Han Chinese and Hui (Chinese Muslims), who together numbered two and a half million in Xining-Haidong in 1990, contributed to the crowd in noticeable, though far from majority, numbers. Most appeared on the main festival day, the 15th of the 1st lunar month, concentrating on the thangka display where they took many pictures of themselves; few attended the dances the day before. Chinese families and especially parties of young people joined the Lantern Festival celebration on 6 February though I was surprised how few of them had actually brought lanterns. Some Chinese - primarily those whose residence in Qinghai pre-dates New China - are Buddhists, which made the festival religiously significant for them but less so, in a personal cultural sense, than for the Tibetans, Mongols and Monguors.<sup>46</sup> For local Hui, it offered the attraction of festival activity, but Hui presence was far more consequential outside the monastic compound than inside. They composed the main merchant force among the numerous sidewalk stalls set up near the entrance and lining both sides of the street leading from the centre of the county town to the monastery. Now as before 1949, they performed as commercial facilitators in the Sino-Tibetan contact zone, a role they rapidly resumed in the reform era after 1980.<sup>47</sup>

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<sup>43</sup> A well-researched Chinese tourist reference book estimates 100,000 people may attend the evening festival with the butter sculpture exhibition and Lantern Festival (Zhang, 2000, 51). Several people told me the crowds were less than usual in 1993.

<sup>44</sup> Huangzhong and Huangyuan counties were moved under the Xining Municipality administration in December 1999.

<sup>45</sup> 409,253 in 4<sup>th</sup> Population Census in 1990 (*Zhongguo minzu renkou ziliao*, 1993).

<sup>46</sup> Chinese Buddhism has its own long history in the Xining-Haidong districts, possibly since the 3rd century AD, and like Tibetan Buddhism is enjoying revival since the more liberal reforms adopted in late 1978. Several Chinese Buddhist temples exist in the districts, notably the Nanzhao Temple in Xining. Mutually-influenced sites and practices also occur, particularly in marginal districts: some examples are the White Horse Temple (Tib. Martsang Drag, Ch. Baimasi) in Huzhu Tu Autonomous County, several in Ledu, or even beyond Xining-Haidong in towns of pre-PRC Chinese settlement, such as the Yuantong Temple in Tongren (Tib: Rebgong) County.

<sup>47</sup> For pre-1949 period see Ekvall, 1939; Lipman, 1981; and Van Spengen, 1995. For post-1949, see Cooke, 2008b.



I should of course mention the monks and lamas of Kubum as a distinct group, since they embody an aspect of Tibetan Buddhism, the Sangha (monastic community),<sup>48</sup> revered by practitioners as one of the three objects of refuge.<sup>49</sup> Their monastic vows bestow sanctity on the actions they take within the Great Prayer's rituals, including creation of the butter sculptures. In early 1993 their numbers were probably around 700, 400 of whom were officially registered, while the rest lived or at least studied at Kubum without official permission. There were also eleven tulkus, some of whom enjoyed very high prestige throughout the Tibetan Buddhist world. Some also held political appointments from the Chinese Government at the central and provincial level. Kubum's Abbot since 1990, Arjia Rinpoche, at this time held several, including Committee Member of the CPPCC, Deputy Chairman of the Qinghai People's Political Consultative Conference, Deputy Chairman of the Chinese Buddhist Association, President of the Qinghai Buddhist Association, Deputy Chairman of the Chinese Youth League, and Deputy Chairman of the Qinghai Youth League.<sup>50</sup> His appearance at the opening of the butter sculpture exhibition, in the company of other state officials, excited a rapturous response from the Buddhists among the crowds.

Finally, there was the 'state presence': civil officials and security personnel. The officials - few, regulated, of various ethnicities - watched the dances from the verandah of the Manjusri Lhakang on 5 February and stood at the top of the line to view the butter sculpture on the evening of the 6th. The far more numerous security personnel - members of the Public Security Bureau (PSB) and the People's Armed Police (PAP) - had a visible role to play every day. They formed several lines amidst the spectators at the dances on 5 February, filed into the Great Sutra Hall on the 6th before the puja began, and stood around the courtyard on the 7th for the ceremony there. A PSB photographer kept a constant record of the masses pouring in and out of the main venue (Manjusri Lhakang courtyard). Otherwise they could be seen dotted about the monastery anywhere, anytime. Although with such large crowds an organising presence could only be expected, their numbers and the military precision of some of their operations seemed wildly out of proportion for a religious occasion. Crowd control, formerly managed by the monk constabulary (Tib: *dobdob*),<sup>51</sup> was now a state domain whose parameters for unacceptable behaviour extended into political areas of no concern to the *dobdob*. Early 1993 was still enjoying the last moments of the religious liberalisation and tolerance that had prevailed, at least in Qinghai, through the 1980's, despite serious dissidence and resultant crackdowns in Lhasa at the end of that decade. Nevertheless, the security people were prepared for trouble should it arise, not only by their strength of numbers. The police had also brought crowd control devices to Kubum: I know because I found myself sitting on their tear-gas gun and ammunition boxes while watching the dances in the Manjusri Lhakang courtyard.

<sup>48</sup> In the strict sense, the Sangha refers to the Buddhist monastic community, but in a more liberal or modern sense its meaning can be widened to include lay Buddhists who observe some disciplinary vows in daily life, take teachings, and engage in other religious activities.

<sup>49</sup> The Buddha, the Dharma (Law), the Sangha.

<sup>50</sup> Arjia Rinpoche, testimony at hearing on religious freedom in China organised by Commission on International Religious Freedom in Los Angeles, March 16, 2000.

<sup>51</sup> The *dobdob*'s function could be considered analogous to a monastic policeman, but more like a rough 'cop on the beat' keeping basic public order than a professional officer of the law. See description in: (David-Neel, 1931, 104-105); also (Huc, 1982, 111).

Over the six days I spent inside Kubum I gathered a group of acquaintances whose home bases reflected Kubum's Tibeto-Mongol historical links – Alashan, Hailar and Huhehot in Inner Mongolia; Xiahe and Minle in Gansu; Minhe, Huzhu, Gonghe and Xining in Qinghai; Lhasa in the Tibet Autonomous Region. All had come for Monlam, in some cases for extended pilgrimage of six months, and were staying either at the Kubum hostel, with monk relatives in their rooms at the monastery, or in the hostels (*luguan*) in the Lushar county town close to the monastery. The pre-eminence of religion as motivation and purpose, drawing participants often from hundreds of miles away, was palpable. Certainly the whole occasion involved spectacle, but it was religious power and symbolism, through which many societies construct and affirm shared values, identity and history, that provided organic linkage. Continuity with past celebrations – the maintenance of a tradition - held deep significance for these people, by their own frequently-offered statements to me at the time, and aspects they considered deviant from such continuity disturbed them. A major discrepancy from the old days involved the butter sculpture's production and subject matter, for instance. Once a competition between two groups of monks who kept their work secret until the festival day, the sculpture was now reduced to a single image, whose subject matter was often dictated by state ideology, namely the marriage of the Tang princess Wencheng to the King of Tibet in 641, or even socialist construction of dams and land reclamation. Many people pointed out these interventions in the original fabric of the occasion's performance and presentation.<sup>52</sup>

Non-Han people I spoke to showed no interest in the congruity of the Lantern Festival, though no animosity towards those who were celebrating it. Aside from the religious purpose of their visit they enjoyed the market scene outside Kubum's main gate, where they could find the best range of Tibetan Buddhist items for sale in the PRC outside of Lhasa (in the TAR) and Xiahe (in Gansu). The Huangzhong county town as a whole was hardly a thriving economic centre, with no hotels for foreign tourists, only the basic shops, and even few hostels for Chinese citizens. As a religious occasion with appended commercial dimension, Monlam at Kubum in 1993 seemed to be operating in the typical pattern for pastoral societies of Tibet and Mongolia. The economic dimension of the festival existed for the participants: 'tourism' *per se* appeared to have no part in it. No more than a handful of domestic tourists risked Qinghai in the winter; international tourists came even less.<sup>53</sup> I saw no other Western tourists, and even the Japanese friend I arrived with left the following morning. Once I had paid the three *yuan* entrance fee I was left to my own devices inside the monastic complex.

I had last seen Tibetan areas of the PRC in 1980 (Jansen & Cooke, 1981): the ebullient resurgence of culture and religion evident at Kubum seemed almost miraculous compared to the bleakness of that earlier time. While aspects of the state presence impinged on the place and occasion, by and large these were self-propelled festivities, as far as I could observe and sense.

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<sup>52</sup> Arjia Rinpoche mentioned that the former competition's demise was a great disappointment to people, and that the depiction of the Princess Wencheng story was a Chinese innovation, not previously used (personal communication April 2003). This information also appears in (*Qinghaisheng zhi: zongjiao zhi* 2000, 185). See Huc, 1982, 97-101 and Norbu, 1986, 129-132 for descriptions of these aspects of the festival pre-1949.

<sup>53</sup> Personal communications from Xining CITS staff.

But as a PRC scholar has noted in relation to the late Qing period, Kubum is a worthwhile site for studying Chinese government policy towards economy, religion, culture, art and history in the Qinghai-Tibet region (Chen, 1997, 407). This is no less true in the multiethnic unitary state of China today.

### **Ta'ersi by 2002: Short-circuiting Dissent**

The ten years between February 1993 and February 2003 turned out to be especially eventful for the world of Tibetan Buddhism under the PRC, not least for Kubum itself. After a decade of comparative liberalisation under reforms adopted since late 1978,<sup>54</sup> the crisis of the democracy movement in 1989, and unrest in Tibet and Xinjiang 1987-1990 challenged the Party to re-formulate aspects of its approach to social control and economic modernisation. A Party document of 1991 introduced more repressive and regulatory themes in national religious policy, expressed in such key terms as 'adapting religion to suit socialist society' and 'supervision according to the law'.<sup>55</sup> Subsequent official speeches and publications confirmed that religion was to be bonded to the state's political and developmental agenda through increased bureaucratic management, containing religion within the limits of law and policy.<sup>56</sup> As well as this generalised politicisation of religious practice, the controversy over identification of the 10th Panchen Lama's reincarnation, which unfolded during 1989 to 1995, deeply affected Kubum due to its particular position within the Tibetan Buddhist institutional sphere.

In June 1994 the Party held its most significant strategic meeting on Tibet policy for a decade, the Third Forum on Work in Tibet. Although the Work Forum's principal objectives were publicly framed as economic, its political purpose could also be discerned as integrative and assimilationist. In the array of economic and cultural directions announced for the future of the TAR, harsh attacks on religion as a field harbouring dangerous separatist elements were supported by calls for heightened security and the practical measures to increase control of religious institutions foreshadowed prior to the Forum.<sup>57</sup> In a shift from the existing official attitude, the Work Forum adopted strident rhetoric in personal and political terms against the Dalai Lama himself, not only his Government-in-Exile, coded as 'the Dalai clique'. By the time Patriotic Education, one of a trio of political campaigns targeting Tibetan separatism and culture, was launched in monasteries in the TAR in 1996,<sup>58</sup> its content and the administrative

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<sup>54</sup> Policies, especially affecting economy and culture, adopted at the 3rd Plenum of the 11th Central Committee of the CCP in December 1978.

<sup>55</sup> Circular issued by the Central Committee of the CCP and the State Council on Some Problems Concerning Further Improving Work in Religion, Document No.6, 5 February 1991 (Human Rights Watch/ Asia, 1997, 7): the document arose out of a national conference on religious work held in 1990. In Qinghai the provincial PSB inspected all Tibetan Buddhist monasteries in the province in 1991 (Pu, 2001, 383).

<sup>56</sup> Significantly Jiang Zemin at the United Work Front Work conference November 1993; May 1994 government regulations on management of sites for religious activity and registration of personnel. See Luo, 1997, 65-70 and Ye, 1997.

<sup>57</sup> In some cases already being implemented: work teams (*gongzuodui*) had entered monasteries in late 1993-early 1994 in the TAR, according to information I received in Lhasa at that time.

<sup>58</sup> 'Patriotic Education', 'Strike Hard' and 'Spiritual Education' were implemented nation-wide, but involved a particular political agenda in regions where national minorities were suspected of ethnic nationalism, such as Tibet.

mechanisms for its implementation had already been constructed in the previous half-decade of religious policy-making.

While the PRC's administrative boundaries, which subdivide the region of historical Tibetan habitation, imply that the Work Forum's policies formally apply only in the TAR, they inevitably have strong influences on Tibetan policy in adjacent provinces too. In any case trans-provincial ethnocultural links continue to animate local actions outside the TAR and consequent responses by local authorities. The political environment of Qinghai in which these actions and counter-measures took place was already characterised by official perception of a growing security threat from separatism. In 1992 media sources revealed a province-wide security awareness policy (Zhi, 9 Jan. 1992).<sup>59</sup> Tibetan nationalist dissidence and arrests of protestors coincided with Jiang Zemin's tour of the province in 1993 for the 40th anniversary of national minority autonomy status for much of the region.<sup>60</sup> During 1994 Kubum was reorganised under the scrutiny of the three relevant bodies controlling religious policy on the pretext of its 'huge floating population and complicated issues' (TIN Briefing Paper, 1999).<sup>61</sup> Suppression of dissent intensified throughout the Tibetan areas in 1995, evidenced by increased political arrests (Marshall, 199, 48) Although occurrences of political protest in Qinghai only mildly echoed those in the TAR in the period 1987-94 (Tibet Information Network, 30 July 1999), the controversy over the recognition of the Panchen Lama's reincarnation penetrated deep into Kubum in the mid-90's and created intense turmoil there because of its institutional associations with the Panchen Lama lineage.

A short explanation of the Panchen Lama's association with Kubum is in order here for its contribution to the sweeping changes I saw myself since 1993 and which I think the *Qinghai Daily* article reflects. After the Dalai Lama, the Panchen Lama is Tibetan Buddhism's most revered incarnate lama. As a high prelate of the Gelug sect he embodied considerable political as well as religious prestige in the Tibetan Buddhist world before 1949, a position exploited by Qing, Nationalist and CCP leaders. Kubum is the Panchen Lama's second seat after his principal seat in Tashilhunpo Monastery in Shigatse, the second-largest urban centre in the TAR, and as such provides the lineage with a regional site of influence at a key Sino-Tibetan contact zone. The fact of the 10th Panchen Lama's birth not far from Kubum, the PRC's engagement of him in their political apparatus and his various visits to the monastery during his lifetime kept Kubum in the ambit of contemporary political-cultural significance, its role in Sino-Tibetan relations re-nuanced but still linked to this particular figure. Kubum's indigenous political profile as a major Gelugpa monastery associated with the Panchen Lama has made it a

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All the campaigns had antecedents in earlier periods. See: (Marshall, 1999, 5-6). Zhao Puchu (President of the Chinese Buddhist Association) brought up 'patriotic education' at a seminar for religious leaders in November 1994 (Human Rights Watch/ Asia, 1997, 11). For coverage of the Patriotic Education campaign in Qinghai see: (Tibet Information Network 1999).

<sup>59</sup> This article describes intensified development of militia forces to safeguard national unity, nationality solidarity, anti-separatism, and economic construction.

<sup>60</sup> That is, establishment of minority nationality autonomous prefectures over most of Qinghai by 1953 after the founding of the PRC.

<sup>61</sup> Citing (*Qinghai Daily*, 9 Oct. 1994). The three bodies were the county Nationalities and Religious Affairs Office, the local Public Security Bureau and the local Party Committee.

target for political dominance in the PRC era in ways not relevant for many other monasteries. On the religious level, the Dalai and Panchen Lamas are not rivals but mutually-assisting Bodhisatva incarnations, who take part in identifying the other's reincarnation and religious education of the young incarnate. It is this relationship that the Chinese Government wishes to control. With the Dalai Lama in exile, only the Panchen Lama could be so implicated, making him a prime focus for Chinese efforts to manipulate the lines of power and reverence so influential in Tibetan Buddhist societies, and in any case the United Front methodology of co-opting major Tibetan Buddhist figures that the CCP has always preferred.

In late January 1989, the 10th Panchen Lama died during a visit to Tashilhunpo. With permission from the Chinese Government a search committee for his reincarnation was set up, headed by Chadrel Rinpoche, the Abbot of Tashilhunpo, and including Arjia Rinpoche who had recently taken up his position as Abbot of Kubum. The committee understood it was authorised to consult the Dalai Lama on this matter.<sup>62</sup> But as dissent and official crackdown gathered momentum in the Tibetan areas, the search for the new Panchen Lama found itself foundering in a harsher political climate with a virulent anti-Dalai Lama element, apparently heading towards a Chinese Government decision over the identity irrespective of the religious process involving the Dalai Lama. To forestall what was considered in Tibetan Buddhist circles a grave religious error, the Dalai Lama in India announced the identity of the incarnation (Gedun Choekyi Nyima<sup>63</sup>) on 14 May 1995, ahead of the Chinese declaration. For dealing with the Dalai Lama, Chadrel Rinpoche was arrested on charges of treason and the rest of the committee members, summoned to Beijing, were ordered to denounce Chadrel and the Dalai Lama's nominee.<sup>64</sup> In November 1995, following the 'Golden Urn' selection process insisted on by the Central Government, a candidate acceptable to them as the 11th Panchen Lama emerged from the ceremony held in Lhasa.<sup>65</sup>

Kubum's difficulties in relation to the controversy now began to manifest more obviously, as unrest fermented at the monastery. In October 1995 pro-independence posters had appeared at Kubum; in May 1996 a school founded by Arjia Rinpoche in 1990 for teaching Tibetan literature and writing skills to novice monks was closed; and monks deemed illegally resident - perhaps half the monastic body - were expelled (TIN Briefing Paper, 1999, 12). At least twelve monks were arrested in this period, one being released in a coma from abuse suffered while in

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<sup>62</sup> Testimony of Arjia Rinpoche, 16 March 2000. Tibetan Buddhist tradition assigns a prime role for recognising the Panchen Lama's successor to the Dalai Lama, assisted by the high lamas of Tashilhunpo Monastery, the Panchen Lama's seat.

<sup>63</sup> The boy and his parents disappeared after the Golden Urn ceremony. Their whereabouts has not been disclosed since, though Chinese authorities say they are well and living a normal life.

<sup>64</sup> In April 1997 Chadrel Rinpoche was convicted of conspiring to split the country and giving away state secrets; he was sentenced to six years imprisonment.. Although released in 2003 he is reportedly under house arrest somewhere (Senior lama sentenced, 9 May 1997) and his current whereabouts unknown.

<sup>65</sup> The 'Golden Urn' process originates in a 1792 Qing proclamation on the recognition of high incarnations, in which final candidates were drawn by lot from a golden urn. While the method does have historical precedent, the precise manner of its use in 1995 and the bypassing of the Dalai Lama's recognition of Gendun Choekyi Nyima caused misgivings among many Tibetan Buddhists over the identity of Gyaltzen Norbu as the Panchen Lama. According to the official view, 'The central government [of China] has supreme authority on the selection of the reincarnation of the Panchen Lama' (*Renmin Ribao*, 1 Dec. 1995).

custody.<sup>66</sup> In October 1997, a year after it began in the TAR, the Patriotic Education campaign was launched at Kubum and other major Qinghai monasteries. As the presumed hard core of splittist activity and sentiment,<sup>67</sup> religious communities were targeted by Patriotic Education at an intensified level of manipulation and intrusion that included a requirement for monks and nuns to accept the Chinese-selected candidate for Panchen Lama. At Kubum, where this controversy had already caused anxiety and disturbance, more severe consequences ensued. After struggling for years to work within the system and regarded as 'patriotic' by Chinese authorities, Arjia Rinpoche found himself conscientiously unable to comply with the demands of Patriotic Education. Not only was he unwilling to denounce the Dalai Lama, a crisis for most monks and nuns. Acceptance of the Chinese choice of Panchen Lama involved additional difficulties for him because, as Abbot of Kubum, he stood next in line after Chadrel Rinpoche to become the boy's religious tutor and thereby show endorsement of the Chinese choice. With Chadrel now in prison and Tashilhunpo not compliant in offering a monastic home for Gyaltzen Norbu, he came under increasing pressure from the Chinese Government to accept this responsibility.<sup>68</sup> In 1998 he escaped into exile.<sup>69</sup> In 2000 he was formally removed from his political posts (*Xinhua News Agency*, 24 June 2000). As Kubum's most respected religious teacher and one of the highest figures in the Gelugpa hierarchy, who had also been innovative in his efforts to sustain Tibetan Buddhist culture under difficult circumstances, Arjia Rinpoche's departure represented a serious loss for Kubum.<sup>70</sup> The state's failure to co-opt one of the few senior figures of Tibetan Buddhism still within the PRC illustrated the government's dilemma and also religious leaders' boundaries of personal conscience.

By late 1995 Kubum certainly appeared, to me as a visitor, subdued as a working monastery but advancing in the process of touristification since my last sighting two years before.<sup>71</sup> A substantial complex of tourist facilities had appeared outside the monastery's entrance in the form of a CITS hotel, the Bank of China, a long strip mall of shops. Older shops were cleared away and the carpark was now paved, the Eight Chötens outside the main gate railed off. More convenient oversight by the police could be conducted from a new Public Security Bureau (PSB) office there. The whole reconstruction was imposing enough, in size and implied style (neo-imperial), to rival the monastery it confronted. Inside the monastery, little regular religious activity could be detected but tourist construction had proceeded there too, in the form of a viewing point, signs in Chinese, ticket checking points, contrived additions like false walls. As our visit occurred within days of the staging of the Golden Urn ceremony in Lhasa, the

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<sup>66</sup> Jamyang Yeshe (Tibet Information Network, 30 July 1999)

<sup>67</sup> Monks and nuns made up 70% of known Tibetan political prisoners in the 14 year period 1987-2001 (Marshall, 2002, 10).

<sup>68</sup> Arjia Rinpoche, personal communication April 2003.

<sup>69</sup> Arjia Rinpoche explained his decision in the following terms: 'Had I remained in Tibet I would have been forced to denounce the Dalai Lama and my religion and to serve the Chinese government. This meant also participating in government practices that went against my religion and my personal beliefs. As Abbot of the Kumbum Monastery, I would have been forced to help the government have its choice of the Panchen Lama accepted by the Tibetan people. This would violate my deepest beliefs. It was at this point that I knew I must leave my country.' (Testimony, 16 March 2000).

<sup>70</sup> As the reincarnation of Tsongkapa's father, Arjia Rinpoche has lineage links with Kubum at the profoundest religious level.

<sup>71</sup> For the situation at Kubum and in Huangzhong County in 1995, see Marshall & Cooke, 1997, 1686-1711.

atmosphere may well have reflected the specific tensions of the Panchen Lama controversy. Local police we encountered were certainly pre-occupied with it, as a troubling predicament over cultural and state loyalties.

Since my visit to Kubum in 1995, the Chinese Government had enforced its own conclusion in the dispute over the 11th Panchen Lama, implemented the Patriotic Education campaign, published a White Paper on Religion in 1997, carried out the 'Three Stresses' campaign in 1999,<sup>72</sup> inaugurated the Great Western Development project in 2000, held the Fourth Tibet Work Forum in June 2001, and a national Religion Work Conference in December 2001. The Qinghai United Front and Religious Affairs Bureau made a survey of all sites of religious activity and personnel in the province in 1996, in line with the new registration and management regulations (Pu, 2001, 384). All these directly impacted life at Kubum. When I returned in late 2002, Kubum evinced the same patterns I had seen seven years earlier, only more advanced in both directions. Tourism heralded the way to the monastery. At the junction where the road to Kubum branches off from the main highway from Xining, a sign arched across the road announcing entry to the 'Ta'ersi tourism special district' in Chinese and 'Taer Temple Tour Highway' in English. Grand imperial-style hotels loomed on the hillside opposite the monastery. An impressive gate in the Kubum Sino-Tibetan style now stood near the Eight Chötens to serve as a sale and organisation base for the site's tourist dimension. All tourists, domestic or foreign, were required to purchase a thirty yuan entry ticket there. A bevy of guides, costumed (if they were female) in a pantomime-like version of Qing drapery with Tibetan characteristics, were available for hire: many Chinese visitors accepted their services. Inside the monastery Chinese-language plaques identified sites of interest; at the Flower Hall<sup>73</sup> tourists could have their photos taken, for a fee, in imaginary Tibetan - or a form of Qing-era - dress. Chinese tour groups and I gazed at the exhibit in the Butter Sculpture Hall: the story of Princess Wencheng in butter, left over from this year's Monlam Chenmo.

As a religious institution the monastery seemed more moribund than ever. Few monks were to be seen. A handful of monks and lay worshippers prostrated at the closed doors of various lhakangs; other monks sat at open doors to make sure tourists paid the entry fee. Far outnumbered by the tourist groups the few pilgrims seemed uncertain and furtive, moving in a space not clearly belonging to them. I could not but observe the air of sadness and resignation among the residents, monk and lay,<sup>74</sup> as if resting in a bland and sterile twilight as the monastery went through its regulated paces in the new service of state-mandated tourism. Kubum appeared more like a museum, or a theme park, than the living entity I had seen in 1993, now objectified for tourism which, ultimately, was being developed to expedite economy and integration. These personal observations, and the enunciations of Xina Rinpoche in response to

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<sup>72</sup> Three Stresses (study, theory, sound healthy trends), a nation-wide ideological education campaign to reinforce unity within the Party: in Tibet it also addressed anti-separatism, anti-Dalai Lama, nationality relations, and religious and cultural questions (New campaign, 20 May 1999).

<sup>73</sup> The Huasi, or Jishoudian, built in 1717 by Hongda Lama to pray for the long life of the 7th Dalai Lama who was then resident at Kubum. A white sandalwood tree (not the one marking Tsongkapa's birth site) in the courtyard is associated with Tsongkapa's mother (*Qinghai zangchuan fojiao siyuan mingjian*, 1993, 41).

<sup>74</sup> Some pilgrims stay for long periods at monasteries to perform religious rituals that may take months.

Vice-Governor Zhao as he visited Kubum in February 2003, show how far the ‘religious work’ of the Government has come in a decade.

### **Deconstructing Media Coverage**

To return now to Vice-Governor Zhao’s visit to Kubum on 13 February 2003, or under the circumstances to ‘Ta’ersi’: in the first instance, the article in the *Qinghai Daily* is at one level just a piece of political reportage, the generic kind produced for official provincial newspapers in the PRC. Although the Chinese press has undergone great changes in scope, style, openness and authorship since Reform and Opening Up, a marginal province like Qinghai mostly retains the familiar politically-conformist tone and content for its official media mouthpiece, and an unattributed item like this one seeks to do no more than impart the government line as it describes an official performing his duties. But as propaganda is by nature an exercise in intentional signalling, deconstruction of this article can take us through a local occasion into wider dimensions of centre, provincial and local relations, religious and cultural policy, national development plans, ethnic relations, and state discourse in general.

To begin, the article sets Vice-Governor Zhao’s visit (13 February 2003) in Chinese sociocultural time, the occasion of the Lantern Festival, which in actuality takes place two days in the future (15 February 2003). A Chinese festival with no fundamental Buddhist dimension, it does, however, coincide with a Tibetan Buddhist occasion, in fact the most important one of the year: the celebration of the Great Prayer at the beginning of Tibetan New Year which sometimes, though not always precisely, occurs at the same time as Chinese New Year. In a mixed ethnocultural frontier zone such as that where Kubum is located, this intersection affects local people in profound ways pertaining to their sense of identity and cultural meaning, as well as more banal effects like the extensive period taken for Chinese New Year work closures in Qinghai, at least in the early 1990’s, when some government work units not uncommonly closed down till about May.

The history of the Great Prayer and its transmission to Kubum has been described above. As explained, its performances unfold over several days, its appeal (its cultural relevance) stretches across a wide spatial and ethnic dimension, and both its origin and development over multiple centuries have been encompassed by the parameters of Tibetan Buddhist civilisation. Neither Chinese nor Tibetan texts suggest anything else. As also explained above, the Lantern Festival’s association with Kubum is quite recent: beginning after the establishment of New China, its relocation to Kubum was the result less of mutual wishes than of altered power relations.

Setting the scene spatially and temporally takes but a short introductory paragraph in the *Qinghai Daily* report.<sup>75</sup> The bulk of the article recounts in detail Zhao’s message to the ‘living buddhas and monks’, as well as the much shorter response from Living Buddha Xina, the current Abbot of Kubum and successor to Arjia Rinpoche. Zhao places his audience of religious personnel within the current provincial development programme: its achievements,

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<sup>75</sup> The paragraph contains 57 characters.



and their inseparability from the support of Tibetan Buddhist circles and believers. According to Zhao, (Zhang, 16 March 2003) Ta'ersi is situated within a range of widening concentric circles, from society to the province to the nation and finally to the world, and through these socio-geographic zones emanates Ta'ersi's 'extensive influence'. But on what basis? Zhao denotes Ta'ersi as a religious base and a scenic spot for tourism. He then explains what is expected from Ta'ersi the place and its Democratic Management Committee. In brief, Ta'ersi will be supported by the government and its internal management as a tourist site, in line with national policy on socio-economic development emerging from the 16th Party Congress held in Beijing in November 2002. Ta'ersi has its place in the building of the nation. His statement that 'the political authorities have always (*li lai*) attached importance to nationalities' religious work, showed concern for the monastery's construction, and put ... considerable funds into protecting national cultural relics and building scenic spots' decrypts into specific political and economic goals for Kubum in the current policy context, whose implementation has brought 'great changes ... in the appearance of Ta'ersi'. Above all Zhao's speech targets the DMC to remind them of their main task: to actively co-ordinate with the government to implement its directives (Zhang, 16 March 2003).

Xina's response, on behalf of Kubum's religious community, concerns itself entirely with this last point. First expressing gratitude for provincial Party and Government concern, he then pledges support for these authorities and their goals in the wide spectrum of politico-legal and socio-economic aims for nation and province. Xina's exact expression (or as reported) is worth reproducing here as the officially-projected roadmap for Kubum's future: he promises to 'consciously subject himself to the government's legal management of religious affairs, actively explore the road of gearing religion to socialism, and make due contribution to the reform, development and stability of Qinghai'.

Zhao's speech and Xina's response contain various ironies that would not be lost on some of the *Qinghai Daily's* local readers. The main brace of ironic terms flags the controversies between the DMC and state authorities during the 1990's. Zhao hopes the DMC will 'as always' (*yi ru jiwang*) coordinate with the Government; Xina promises that 'in the future' he (as DMC chairman) will certainly do so; a situation whose non-happening before provides the specific reasons which indeed brought 'great changes' to Kubum. Xina is replying as DMC Chairman only because the former incumbent, Kubum's principal tulku Arjia Rinpoche, found himself conscientiously unable to 'co-ordinate' with the government, and his leaving in 1998 cleared the way for Kubum's present phase of transformation. Zhao's assertion that the provincial party and government 'have always' 'attached importance to nationalities religious work', while accurate in the sense of the party-government always having a policy on religion in nationalities' areas, also invokes double entendres for those who lived through the wholesale destruction of religious culture in 1958 and the Cultural Revolution. More recently the Party's 'nationalities religious work' has focused on strengthening monastery management, effected through the DMC's, considered the pivotal administrative tool for controlling monks and nuns, who have been the prime visible dissidents in Tibetan areas.

Another paradox is the imputed influence of Kubum, apparently extending even to the international arena. In the past, Kubum's influence in the world it inhabited, that of Tibetan

Buddhism, arose from its religious identity: its sacred associations and their maintenance through living religious practices at the monastery.<sup>76</sup> Impressive though it is, the physical site of Kubum per se would seem insufficient to invoke extensive influence of the kind Vice-Governor Zhao maintains it does, or that it should strive for in the realm of socio-economic development. With its inner power muted, it becomes just a tourist site, an historical relic to be admired and a locale for visitors' photo opportunities. These are among the reservations expressed by some PRC citizens of various nationalities who have been there, and by the former Abbot Arjia Rinpoche.<sup>77</sup> But Vice-Governor Zhao means what he says in the context of Qinghai. After fifty years of rule by an atheist CCP whose religious policy barometer has so far fluctuated between destruction and limited tolerance, leaders from religious circles still have exceptional influence, if not direct political power, within some of Qinghai's societies. Zhao's message to Ta'ersi's religious leaders continues to recognise a CCP practice of dealing with non-Party elements in positions of social influence through the United Front and other organisations. Zhao and the Provincial Government he represents thus charge Ta'ersi's DMC with influencing the Tibetan Buddhist community towards goals 'defined by the provincial party committee'.

The final irony of the *Qinghai Daily* report may be that having set Vice-Governor Zhao's visit to Ta'ersi in the general time slot of the Lantern Festival, no further mention is made of it. None of the points raised by Zhao or Xina relate to it, and the only ritual gesture described, without cultural affiliation, is Zhao's presentation of 'hada' (Tib. khata) and greeting gifts (*weiwenpin*) to the religious personnel. The official visit took place two days *prior* to the Lantern Festival, actually during Monlam Chenmo, which involves the monastery and visitors to it at this time more significantly than the Lantern Festival, yet the Great Prayer and butter sculpture exhibition remain invisible in the newspaper's coverage.<sup>78</sup> The article essentially reports an episode of political affirmation, at which power relations of authority and compliance between the state and a particular group of its citizens are re-declared publicly. Not the Tibetan Buddhist Monlam Chenmo but the Chinese Lantern Festival provides the cultural occasion for this performance, a hegemonic choice linked to the culture of the state's dominant ethno-cultural group, the Han Chinese and thus, demonstrably, the 'national culture' of the PRC.<sup>79</sup>

### **Resulpting Religion: Turning Kubum into Ta'ersi**

Since Vice-Governor Zhao's visit in February, the monastery's life has continued to unfold more in the direction of Ta'ersi than Kubum. The key to this transformation, practically speaking, is the apparatus for religious administration through which government policy is

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<sup>76</sup> 'The fame of Kubum, due originally to its connection with Tsongkapa, is maintained today through the good discipline of the lamasery and the high standard of its teaching' (Huc, 1982, 109).

<sup>77</sup> Arjia Rinpoche personal communication in April 2003; conversations with domestic visitors, including Han Chinese.

<sup>78</sup> The *Qinghai Daily's* report on officials visiting Ta'ersi the year before makes minor reference to the butter sculpture exhibition in its last line (*Qinghai Ribao*, 26 Feb. 2002), though not to Monlam as such, nor even the Lantern Festival. The official party has gone to the monastery to 'convey festival greetings' (*weiwen*, .... *jieri de wenhou*), and of course deliver a political message closely related to that of 2003.

<sup>79</sup> On the 'national culture' of polyethnic states see: (Norbu, 1992, 184).

executed. Zhao Yongzhong's concentration on the smooth compliance of the monastery's on-site administrators, together with Xina Rinpoche's assurances of the same, signal a stage in a process which became clearer in the months following his visit. His predecessor visiting Taersi for the festival period in 2002 had already emphasised the importance of monastic management in accord with government regulations and policy.<sup>80</sup> In March 2003 Ren Qingjia, director of the provincial United Front Work Department ( a position held the year before by Zhao), visited the principal non-Han religious centres of Xining Municipality, Dongguan Mosque and Ta'ersi, reportedly to make a special investigative study of religious administration. Though he referred passingly to cultural and legal aspects in his report, Ren's message was polemical, concerned with 'actively guiding religion to suit socialist society' and the measures that should be taken to do this. Ren made it clear that he was mapping out what religion must do to survive in the environment of the future:

Religions all need to adjust to the times and societies in which they exist so as to survive and to continue. China is a socialistic country. Religions in China exist and are active within socialistic conditions. They must suit socialistic society. .... Religion can be made suitable to socialistic society, but it must do the following things. First, it must uphold the socialist order, uphold the leadership of the communist party, love the motherland, and safeguard its unity. Second, it must actively accept the government's lawful administration and operate within the scope permitted by the constitution, the laws and policies of the government. Third, it must be of use to the development of productive forces, be useful in motivating the broad masses which espouse religion to exert themselves in developing production, and shaking off poverty and attaining prosperity. Fourth, it must be of use to the building of socialist political civilization, materialist civilization, and spiritual civilization. (Guo, 29 March 2003).

In June, two months after Ren's report was made, Kubum received one of the periodic visits from a central Party leader that signifies important developments in state-Tibetan Buddhist relations, this time Luo Gan. At the time a member of the Politburo Standing Committee and the State Council's representative at the Golden Urn selection ceremony for the 11th Panchen Lama in 1995, Luo Gan has a strong background in law enforcement and political campaigns (*AFP Hong Kong*, 5 Aug. 2003).<sup>81</sup> Then at the beginning of August, the Chinese-appointed Panchen Lama, Gyaltsen Norbu, arrived at Kubum as part of an eleven-day tour of the Northwest, his first ever appearance at this Gelugpa monastery so closely associated with his lineage.<sup>82</sup> In the eight years since his enthronement ceremony at Tashilhunpo Monastery in December 1995,<sup>83</sup> Gyaltsen Norbu had lived in Beijing without visiting any Tibetan areas.

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<sup>80</sup> Sang Jiejia (Sanggye Kyab), deputy-secretary of the provincial party committee and chairman of the provincial CPPCC, delivered the key address to Kubum's DMC, stating that among Ta'ersi's accomplishments over the past year, its acceptance of government management and implementation of the Party's nationality religious policy were outstanding. (Mao, 26 Feb. 2002).

<sup>81</sup> A protégé of Li Peng and a hard-line specialist in law and order, Luo Gan became Secretary of the Party's Political and Legal Affairs Commission in charge of law enforcement and judiciary affairs at the 16th Party Congress in November 2002, and oversaw the second nation-wide 'Strike Hard' campaign in 2001 (the first was launched in 1996).

<sup>82</sup> Gyaltsen Norbu has been kept in Beijing, where Chinese authorities say he will have best chance of a good Buddhist education. In fact they are well aware he is not accepted in Tibetan Buddhist circles. In 2003 they had still been unable to engage a high lama as his tutor, nor convince a monastery to take him as a resident.

<sup>83</sup> For official coverage of the proceedings, see: (*Xinhua News Agency*, 8 Dec. 1995); (Liu, 1996). These are in striking contrast to the account given by Arjia Rinpoche, a front-row witness, to myself and others in April 2003.

Stringent security surrounded the boy's visit and non-official reports suggest the ceremonies that took place were directed in a tense, coercive atmosphere, some monks apparently leaving the monastery rather than take part (Saunders, 18 Aug. 2003).

Gyaltzen Norbu's presence at Kubum represented the achievement of some state goals and could not disguise its failure in meeting others. On the positive side for the state, the process of 'strengthening temple management', implemented from 1993-2003, succeeded in co-opting Kubum's administrators sufficiently to stage a symbolic moment in state control of Tibetan Buddhism that carries potentially critical consequences into Tibetan Buddhism's future, as both state and religious circles recognise.<sup>84</sup> The monastic community apparently went through the performance required of them so that positive public reports could be made (Jiang, 13 Aug. 2003). State authorities had enough confidence in the wider security environment of parts of Qinghai and Gansu to allow the boy's visit there at all. Yet the visit also represented costs: loss of one of the only senior lamas in the PRC during the 1990's prepared to work within the system, ongoing political education campaigns in religious circles, the need for extreme security measures during the visit, and the continuing refusal of Tibetan Buddhists to accept the validity of the declared successor of the 10th Panchen Lama.<sup>85</sup> These signs that religion still deviates from prescribed channels suggest its resculpting is far from complete.

In harnessing Kubum to serve the state integration and modernisation project, the process must work on many fronts, not least because the stakes are high for both sides. Kubum may lie within a district of ethnocultural diversity, of which many exist in the PRC. But on significant cultural, ethnic and historically political grounds, that diversity can be broken down to a binary consisting of the Chinese state and the Tibetan Buddhist populations of Tibetans, Mongols and Monguors, between which deep contestations potentially and at times actually appear. Unlike many of China's non-Han populations, Tibetans and Mongols have had strongly demarcated identities connected to polities outside, or even in Chinese terms only loosely within, a Chinese state, in living memory. Those identities involved a religious dimension to political and social structures, a feature that all modern regimes in the region - warlord, Republican Chinese or Communist Chinese - have had to address in trying to enforce control and legitimacy. Current policy and law theoretically uphold the right of national minorities to maintain their own cultural practices, including religious ones, within prescribed limits: the PRC has always recognised the cultural diversity among its populations, whether encouraging or repressing it. Some manifestations of that diversity are considered important enough for national-level scrutiny and intervention; others are left to more localised agencies. Kubum's location in an ethnocultural frontier zone, its accessibility to the provincial seat of that zone, its high religious significance and its historical prominence in interactions between Chinese and Tibetan Buddhist political powers have made it a test-site and a symbol for state religious policy. The visit of the Chinese-selected Panchen Lama is the latest big test wherein the state attempts to

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<sup>84</sup> Staging this moment had not been possible when Arjia Rinpoche was Kubum's Abbot and an appointee to several high political offices.

<sup>85</sup> Since his selection in 1995 I have never seen a photo of Gyaltzen Norbu displayed at a Tibetan Buddhist site, or in any Tibetan Buddhist home, in complete contrast to the usual practice when an important reincarnation has been found. I have very occasionally been shown, with extreme caution, a copy of the only known blurry portrait of Gendun Choekyi Nyima, whose image is banned from display or possession.

co-opt religious practices to support national objectives, performed in an environment constructed over a long period for that purpose.<sup>86</sup>

Developing Kubum into a tourist site is the other main tool in the resculpting process, working in tandem with politicisation of its management and culture. In this respect the state has made conspicuous strides. The body of policy, law and other official documents and statements direct national minority culture to adapt to the market, a component of culture's adaptation to the socialist system with Chinese characteristics: this is hard policy, not an open choice.<sup>87</sup> National political strategy formulation advocates significant changes in the fabric of society in China's West, where Kubum is located,<sup>88</sup> and national religious policy remains focused on religion's task to adapt to socialist society and the socialist modernisation programme (Sun & Yin, 12 Dec. 2001). Research into the process of cultural adaptation in other national minority areas of the PRC reveals a multiplicity of effects, participatory levels and modes, directions, resistance and acceptance as diverse as the national minorities who are implicated.<sup>89</sup> Ethnic tourism and cultural commodification in the Tibetan Buddhist parts of the PRC deserve a separate paper: I am concerned here with the transformative methods and effects on a particular religious site with strong signifying features for both state and Tibetan Buddhists. The convergence even in the last two years of official statements on the subject with observable features of the site show that policy and implementation are combining effectively at Kubum.<sup>90</sup>

The monastery's latest incarnation as a prosperity-generating tourist site, a player in economic development aiming at the domestic as much as the international market, propels it towards a future as 'Ta'ersi' more than as 'Kubum'. Its recasting as Qinghai's major tourist attraction utilises its religious identity iconically while disinheriting it from the forces that made it religiously powerful, namely the presence of high lamas, authentic teaching, and the enactment

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<sup>86</sup> Charles Keyes has discussed the possibility that following decades of repression as a means to remove religious elements considered inimical to state objectives, China may begin instead to try co-opting resurgent religious practices in support of state goals (Keyes, 2002, 1159). See also: (Cooke, 2009, 125-150). The PRC has generally attempted to enlist elite religious support especially through its United Front work. The 'love religion, love the nation' (*aiguo aijiao*) campaign has been propagated at all levels of society in the 1990's and into the present, with the aim of identifying religion with Chinese patriotism. The entire Panchen Lama selection controversy, including its current stage of seeking acceptance of the Party's candidate, is an example of a Party effort to co-opt religious practices for the realisation of state goals.

<sup>87</sup> Regulations allow local autonomous governments to propose modification, partial implementation, or delayed implementation of laws, but this requires approval by higher level organs (Revised Nationality Regional Autonomy Law, Articles 19 & 20). However, Article 7 indicates the approach expected from local governments: 'Organs of national autonomous areas should place the overall interests of the state in the first place and actively fulfil all tasks handed down by higher-level state organs.'

<sup>88</sup> 'Implementation of the strategy of large-scale western development is a profound social transformation. The course of this process will inevitably affect all aspects of political, economic, and cultural life in keeping with adjustments to economic structure and various profit relationships (Li, 2000).' Li Dezhu remains head of the State Council's Ethnic Affairs Commission.

<sup>89</sup> See, for example, Schein, 2000; Oakes, 1999; and Chao, 1996.

<sup>90</sup> Some examples, see Ta'ersi DMC affirms to officials that Ta'ersi has turned itself into a popular site for tourists (Mao, 26 Feb. 2002); Vice-Governor Zhao hopes Ta'ersi will 'diligently bring to success tourist development' (*Qinghai Ribao*, 14 Feb. 2003); Ren Qingjia of the United Front reminds religion it must be of use to the development of productive forces (Guo, 29 March 2003) and Qinghai Governor Zhao Leji marks tourism as one of five major industries for provincial development in the next five years, as per state plans (Zhang, 16 March 2003).

of authentic rituals and monastic practices. Such effects will be received differently by different parties: some tourists find it satisfyingly accessible, others disturbingly sterilised, while monks experience debilitating levels of intrusiveness into their religious life and lay practitioners find the appeal of the site reduced (Tian, 25 Aug. 2000; Stewart, 10 May 1999).<sup>91</sup> Intense religious activity by monks and nuns, pilgrims and local worshippers at less regulated sites illustrates the concerns, preferences and values of Tibetan Buddhist adherents.

For tourism at Kubum to succeed the monastery's 'exotic' characteristics - which derive from its religious culture - must be maintained at a sufficient level to provide tourist fuel. The state has made serious financial investment in infrastructure at the site,<sup>92</sup> citing Kubum's cultural significance *to China*. At the same time, the state believes its potentially confrontational elements have to be tamed, or at least muted, to ensure social and political stability, thereby admitting that contestations continue to exist in the region. Ta'ersi is visibly busy as a tourist site today, apparently adapting to the state's modernisation drive by exploiting its tourism potential in the way it was directed to do. The process nevertheless involved troubling incidents and transformative effects whose purposes appear more political than economic to many Tibetan Buddhists, and confirm their fears of damaging state intervention in their most cherished cultural practices. The political dimension of tourism at Kubum - its utilisation as a transforming instrument, economic motivation notwithstanding - distinguishes it from some of the tourist industry's characteristics at other sites representing national minority cultures, where cultural preservation, local participation or outside entrepreneurial interest appear as strong motivational factors. The efforts of state agencies to manipulate Kubum into Ta'ersi reveal the fissures along which challenges to the state's integration project lie, whether they are expressed as minority cultural backwardness and contradictions among the people (in PRC official terminology) or ethnic nationalism and religious freedom (outside PRC). State discourse and policy make no secret of their intent to orchestrate deep changes in society in China's 'West' where significant national minority populations live, nor the targets and instruments of choice for the purpose. Kubum focuses a cluster of concerns for the state: in the process of attempting to redefine political-cultural formations in TB societies in the PRC, its festival/s too may become sites of reformulation.

For the pilgrims I saw at Monlam at Kubum in 1993, the occasion offered a religious experience of meaning, emotion, power and spectacle. As I did not attend the 2003 festival I cannot say how it was performed or how it felt atmospherically. But I can record the shock of the reporting style, assumptions and emphasis in the *Qinghai Daily* on the basis of observations made only ten years before at the same time and place. In the Sino-Tibetan borderlands, the eye-witness accounts of occasional Western travellers have often provided some of the few recorded unofficial views available until very recent times.<sup>93</sup> With wider research opportunities and materials now on offer, these can be more objectively contextualised. Identifying the festival period under consideration as 'the Lantern Festival', with no reference at all to the

<sup>91</sup> See also: (*CNN Online*, 10 Oct. 2003); (Huber, 2002).

<sup>92</sup> 37m yuan from the Central Government, 2.73m yuan from the Qinghai Provincial Government, as well as 3m HK dollars from the Hong Kong business and movie magnate, Run Run Shaw (*Xinhua News Agency*, 23 Aug. 1996). Arjia Rinpoche had been in charge of the renovation project 1990-1996.

<sup>93</sup> For insights into the cautionary use of such sources relating to a particular event, see: (Van Spengen, 2002, 7-8).

Tibetan Buddhist significance of the occasion signals how far the situation has shifted at least in public representation. On-site experience at Kubum shows that transformation is not simply a discourse, but has tangible features, real changes that have been produced by deliberate efforts on the part of the state. As an emblem of many things - national minority policy in the Northwest, integration of a frontier zone into the nation-state, religion adapting itself to socialist society, the economic possibilities of ethnocultural tourism – Ta’ersi is serving the state quite well. The resculpting of religion that such success has entailed has, however, rather diminished Kubum.

### **Conclusion: Conceivable Outcomes?**

Half a century since the boy Panchen Lama issued his declaration of support for the CCP, Kubum’s public identity, though not necessarily self-awareness, would appear to be moving towards a marker in Chinese history and away from prominence in Tibetan - a signifier of a new stage in nationality relations, components of Chinese culture, and the new physical boundaries of Chinese nationhood. In the official seizure of cultural performance, space and occasion that the *Qinghai Daily* report and on-site developments at Kubum represent, one may see hegemonic processes effectively at work. By now, Chinese sources feel able to speak of the history of the Lantern Festival at Kubum as ‘traditional’ (*Ta’ersi*, 1986); (Chen, 1997, 416); (*Qinghaisheng zhi: zongjiao zhi*, 2000, 185); (Mi, 1995, 478), and more - that events are taking place there *for* the Lantern Festival, encapsulating a set of meanings and actions from one culture within the context of another. The PRC has engaged in the re-shaping of many aspects of society, not least the cultural ideas and practices of its non-Han populations in order that they fit incontestably into the nation and state-building projects. While events at Kubum do not become the ‘tradition’ of the Lantern Festival just because official discourse frames them in those terms, a hegemonic reformulating process is evident discursively and practically which serves state goals in this region through this specific site. Vice-Governor Zhao’s visit to Kubum was not important principally as a state ritual, but because the state actually does intervene in religion at Kubum and elsewhere.

At Kubum the state showcases its plans for Tibetan Buddhism: national minority culture and religion serving stability, prosperity and unity. But showcase conditions cannot always be reproduced everywhere. While the strategically-guided trajectory for Tibetan Buddhism has made apparently devastating inroads at Kubum and aims to affect society at large in Qinghai, outcomes could still run in various directions. Management is sometimes less heavy-handed in Tibetan Buddhist monasteries outside Xining-Haidong, where demographics and distance make both ethnocultural conflict and mass tourism less likely. Kubum holds specific advantages as a site for Chinese state activity. Its location on the geographic edge of the Sino-Tibetan divide, in a district dominated by Han Chinese and Hui, make it more available and ‘safer’ than places deep in the Tibeto-Mongol expanses of Qinghai; its history in Sino-Tibetan Buddhist relations suggests an historical context for intervention; and finally its particular association with the Panchen Lama lineage provides a complex but direct tool for manipulation. These features do not apply to most other Tibetan Buddhist sites in the region and as such Kubum could be regarded as an extreme symbol of state goals, not the generally achieved situation. Elsewhere in Qinghai Tibetan Buddhism appears determinedly active as far

as local climate allows within the national framework. Nevertheless, experience of religious policy under the PRC and evidence of change at a major site like Kubum do not convince lay or monastic Tibetan Buddhists that their culture and religion face no future threats from the state. Developments at Kubum represent specific fears they have for the potential future of their culture, from exploitation of prime religious figures to the general marginalisation of a site's religious life by tourism.

This contention could perhaps be framed by asking the question, what is Kubum important for – Chinese state or Tibetan Buddhist values and goals? Both sides see these as being in conflict to some degree. While the state has successfully intervened at Kubum for its own purposes and national policy for the region aims ideationally to cause sweeping economic and socio-cultural changes, there remain uncertainties at the local level about actual implementation of such plans. In the politics of belonging (Pandey, 1998, 33). Kubum and what happens there have been utilised as symbol and substance by players on both sides. Currently the balance of values and goals looks to be tipping - perhaps to have tipped - in the state's favour, if assessed by reference to changes at Kubum over the past decade. In terms of the state's national integration project and the shifts it hopes to engineer in the socio-economic environment of its Western Regions, including Qinghai, it remains to be seen whether Kubum will serve as a wider example.

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