Columbia University

Rock in a Hard Place:
Cultural Innovation in Contemporary Tibet

Lecturer: Dr. Robert Barnett
Sessions: Mondays, 210-4.00pm
Class size: maximum 30 students, any level

The Course

Since Tibet was absorbed into the People’s Republic of China some 50 years ago, it has undergone a turbulent and contested history. But since about 1990 the years of conflict and warfare over Tibet’s status and sovereignty have increasingly given place to arguments about culture. International powers have been drawn into arguments about tradition, heritage, culture and continuity, and accusations of cultural extinction or degradation have become common, with many people saying that Tibetan culture as a distinctive entity had been lost from Tibet or wiped out, or replaced by a pale simulacrum. How useful or meaningful is this kind of narrative? Is it even possible or productive to describe contemporary Tibetan culture in a way that might not be part of in the political debate? And what is a culture anyway?

In this course, we study films, poems, stories, paintings, pop songs and other forms of cultural product that have been made by Tibetans in the last 3 or 4 decades, together with some made by others in their name or in their areas. We discuss questions of identity, survival, history and the politics of representation. We’ll look at questions about cultures and continuity; about whether and how we as outsiders can come to understand or interpret the culture of a country whose language and history we may barely know; about the interplay of texts, politics, and power; and about ways of reading and interpreting artworks and the meanings that they generate in politically charged societies and communities.

The course will be primarily a seminar led by students, together with lectures. Besides theoretical and background readings, students will watch films and TV shows, study artpieces, read stories and listen to pop songs. Translations will be provided and no previous knowledge of Tibetan or Chinese or of their histories is required.

Course Requirements

There are no prerequisites for this course. Any student can attend, and no previous knowledge of the area or of the relevant languages is required.

The course will consist of one session per week. Each session will begin with a 15 minute introduction, followed by a joint presentation by two students, who will then lead a discussion, lasting in total for one hour. The presenters can use a projector for powerpoint presentations or distribute handouts, if they wish. The discussion will be followed by a brief lecture. Images and film clips will be shown.

Students should attend classes regularly and participate in class sessions. Non-attendance or repeated late attendance will affect grades. You will be expected to complete all required readings before the classes, and to read or look briefly at optional pieces wherever possible. Most or all of the reading materials will be included in course packs or on the web, since some of them are hard to find. By each Sunday evening students will be required to post a brief comment on one or other of the required readings for the coming Monday's class. There will be at least one additional session for film viewings.

Assignments

1. Post your responses to one or more of the readings for the Monday class to the rest of the class, at least two paragraphs (Undergraduates) or one page (Graduates) in length.

2. Two students will each give at least one class presentation during the term, with their summary of and comments on a reading for that class, and will lead part or all of the discussion for that session.

3. There will be one take-home paper at mid-term.

4. One month before the end of the term, each student will submit a one page proposal for their research paper, due at the end of the term.

5. There will be a research paper requiring some basic library or similar research.
Reading List - Books

Required Texts


Optional Texts:


Readings which are out of print or difficult to obtain will be available in photocopy in the course packs or as files which you can access on the Columbia course website. Copies of the reading packs will be held on reserve at the East Asian Library. The correct, updated version of the syllabus and the web-readings are on the courseworks site.

Readings and Syllabus for each Session

The readings will be available on the web or in photocopy in the course packs. The reading load will be heavy at the beginning of the course, but lighter in the second half of term.

*U* means that this reading is required for undergraduate and graduate students.

*G* means that this reading is required for graduate students and should at least be skim-read by undergraduates

Optional readings: Some optional texts are listed here for reference only; you should treat this as a bibliography in case you want to further research in the future. You should try to read at least one optional reading and to skim the others wherever possible, even if you don't have time to read them in full. Presenters must read at least two of the optional readings for their week and produce a summary of their contents for the rest of the class.

Introduction

Session 1: Background to the course and the subject

Briefing papers will be handed out giving background information, including notes on pronunciation, spelling systems, chronology and geography.

Session 2: Tibetan History and Civilization: Key Representations

Web Readings


*U* Tiley Chodag, *Tibet, The Land and the People*, New World Press, Beijing, 1988, pp. 3-21, 281-283


Optional/For Reference:


Uradyn E. Bulag, “From Inequality to Difference: Colonial Contradictions of Class and Ethnicity in 'Socialist' China” in “Post-colonialism and Its Discontents”, special issue of *Cultural Studies*, 2000

Pictures: early Tibetan emperors, kings and palaces

**Session 3: The Commissar: CCP Views on Art**


*G* Chen Kuiyuan, *Lantian baixue* ('Blue Sky, White Snow'), Beijing Chubanshe, Beijing, 1999 (selections in translation)


**Optional:**

Deng Xiaoping, "Congratulatory Speech at the Fourth National Literary Representatives’ Meeting”....

Pictures: Images, signs and architecture; websites and blogs. See Transational China site at Rice

**Session 4: Chinese Representations of Minority Culture**

**Web Readings**


**Optional/Reference:**


Pictures: See Stefan Landsberger’s site on CCP posters.

**Session 5: Religion and the post-1980 religious revival of Buddhism in Tibet**


Optional:


Pictures: Religious activities in Tibet

**Session 6: Modern Literature and the Dispute over Chinese Tibetan and Tibetan Tibetan**

**Web Readings:**


U Dhondup Gyal (Tsering Shaky, translator) "The Waterfall" (from *Manoa*, http://muse.jhu.edu/journals/manoa/v012/12.2cover_art00.htmlSong of the Snow Lion) (available at http://muse.jhu.edu/journals/manoa/toc/man12.2.html)

U Tashi Pelden (Yangdon Dhondup, translator) “Tomorrow's Weather Will be Better” (Manoa, http://muse.jhu.edu/journals/manoa/v012/12.2cover_art00.htmlSong of the Snow Lion) (available at http://muse.jhu.edu/journals/manoa/toc/man12.2.html)

U Yangtso Kyi (Lauran Hartley, translator), "Journal of the Grassland" (from *Manoa*, http://muse.jhu.edu/journals/manoa/v012/12.2cover_art00.htmlSong of the Snow Lion) (available at http://muse.jhu.edu/journals/manoa/toc/man12.2.html)
Optional/Reference

Session 6: Course Assessment

Quiz on information covered so far in the course, and class discussion about issues raised so far.

Session 8: Chinese Tibetan? Modern Sinophone Literature by Tibetans


* U Yidam Tsering (Herbert Batt, translator) “Two Poems” (from *Manoa*, http://muse.jhu.edu/journals/manoa/v012/12.2cover_art00.htmlSong of the Snow Lion) (available at http://muse.jhu.edu/journals/manoa/toc/man12.2.html)


Optional/Reference
Alice Grunfelder (in manuscript - title to be completed)
Laura Marconi, “Yidam Tsering”, in *Journal of Latse Library, 2006* (title to be completed)

Session 9: Modern Art: Socialist Realism and the Sweet Teahouse Group

* U Clare Harris, *In the Image of Tibet: Tibetan Painting after 1959*, Reaktion Books, 2000, pp.7-15, 150-191


Optional:


Pictures: Han Zhuli, Gade, Nyima Tsering, Tsewang Tashi, Nortse. See Mechak website.

Session 10: Tibetan Modernity: images, language and programming on Tibet TV

Video: Extracts from Tibet TV

Additional viewing session to watch TV Dramas

Session 11: Television Drama Series: The Rise of Local Family Dramas

TV Films:
* Lhasa wangshi (Lha sa’i ‘da sor gtam rgyud, or Lha sa’i sngon byung gtam rgyud? Old times in Lhasa), CCTV/Tibet TV, 2001
* Xiangwang Lasa (Lha sar phyogs pa - In the direction of Lhasa, Tibet TV, 2002)
Yangdon, “God Without Gender” in Herbert Batt, Tales of Tibet: Sky Burials, Prayer Wheels, And Wind Horses, Rowman and Littlefield, 2001, pp. 177-88, 266-67

Additional viewing session to watch Films

Session 12: Films
Magpa (Tibet TV)
The Silent Mani-Stone (dir. Wanma Caidan, 2005)
Longing (dir. Phagmo Tashi, 1993)

Ljangbu, “A History of Tibetan Film”. Available in manuscript.

Session 13: Pop Music

Music and lyrics: Tseten Drolma, Dechen Wangmo, Dadron, Yadong, Namchak.

Session 14: Assessment and Conclusion
Discussion about the course, final research papers and the findings of the research so far.