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Asia’s Diaspora, Geography & Peripheries

Features

Stranded in Ladakh: Land of High Passes
Benjamin Weiss

Life on the Margins: A Defector’s Story
Josh Philip Ross
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Stranded in Ladakh: 
Land of High Passes

By Benjamin Weiss
School of International & Public Affairs

“THROUGH Ladakh, I have come to see everything differently.” With those words, a zealous French tourist named François nudged Andrew Harvey, the author and religious scholar, to trek to one of India’s remotest regions. “You must go to Ladakh,” said the Frenchman, prodding further. “It will change your life as it has changed mine.”

I first read François’ plea, which opens Harvey’s classic travelogue, “A Journey in Ladakh,” during a holiday in Leh, Ladakh’s capital city. Little did I know at the time, Ladakh would soon change my own life, and I, too, would come to see everything differently.

Ladakh, “the land of high passes,” sits in the eastern portion of the Indian state of Jammu and Kashmir. Nestled high in the Himalayas on the periphery of the subcontinent, the area is known for its centuries-old Buddhist monasteries, or gompas, and breathtaking mountain scenery. “When we think of Ladakh,” the travel writer Pico Iyer has written, “the high, dry region in northern India that borders Tibet and is often called ‘the world’s last Shangri-La,’ we nearly always see in our mind’s eye one of the planet’s last centers of Himalayan Buddhism, whose people still live in sturdy whitewashed houses, amidst fields of barley and wheat irrigated by glacial snowmelt, as they might have done several centuries ago.”

It was late July 2010 when I first ventured to Ladakh. I had been living and working in New Delhi and was desperate to flee the summer swelter. Drenched in sweat, running my fingers across a map of India in search of an escape route, I recalled Iyer’s essay — and, without hesitating, made my way north to the mountains.

Like many travelers to the region, I set up a base in Leh. For the next...
eight days, I strolled through the narrow, dusty alleyways of the old city, visited the picturesque gompas clinging impossibly to the cliffs at Alchi, Thikse and Lamayuru, sipped saffron-scented Kashmiri tea and nibbled on fresh apricots, peered across the sandy shores of Pangong Lake into bordering Tibet, and gazed at the millions of twinkling stars that peppered the evening sky.

Cloudbursts Strike Leh

On my eighth night in Leh, I awoke shortly after midnight to the sound of hail and sheets of rain clattering against my window. Lightning crashed and flickered, illuminating the night sky like flashbulbs along a Hollywood red carpet. Trees contorted in the heavy wind.

The next morning brought shocking news of cloudbursts causing flash floods. “Many people missing,” we were told by a 72-year old Ladakhi man who had just returned from the city center, his English broken and his gaze pained. “50 people dead. Three-story-building come down.”

As I hurried toward Leh’s old city to get a better look, a mule galloped by, caked from head to hoof in stinky mud. Shredded Tibetan prayer flags lay strewn across the road, their typically vibrant colors faded and bland. Weary foreign travelers walked past, headed for higher ground with cases of bottled water and cans of instant soup. I hopped over a few puddles and followed the road as it descended into the center of the city — or at least to what remained of it. To my left, a giant mud hill towered over what was once one of Leh’s busiest streets. Pipes poked through the soil. Directly ahead, a massive Tibetan prayer wheel, filthy and sawed in half by a truck that had floated down in the night. A day earlier, there had been homes and schools and shops on that road. Now there was debris and dirt and destruction. Yesterday there had been life; today, only death.
Ladakhis and foreigners stood shoulder to shoulder in a dozen lines, shoveling mud, rubble and sopping garments into buckets in a frantic search for buried victims. I swung my camera around my back and jumped into a queue. Through my bare hands passed bowls and pots of dirt, crumbling bricks, shards of wood. A dank, putrid odor filled the air.

The region is geographically peripheral, to be sure, but strategically central. With so many resources nearby, was it unreasonable to expect some semblance of a relief effort?

Many of Leh’s older homes were built with mud bricks. When the rushing waters and debris came down from the hills, the mud simply melted, engulfing men, women and children as they slept. A bulldozer flipped over the mangled skeleton of a jeep. An elderly woman to my right chanted a Buddhist mantra to give her the strength to lift the heavy loads. A pair of glasses surfaced in a bucket of dirt. A muddied and cracked family photo made the rounds. All grim reminders: We were looking for bodies. Me. The Indian couple from my guesthouse. The maroon-robed monk from a nearby monastery. The young woman from Israel. The innocent child from Leh.

But, strangely, no police. No military. No government relief crews. A small handful of uniformed men stood with hands on their hips. Two or three were sprinkled in with the civilians passing buckets of dirt. A bunch sat on a nearby hillside snapping photos with their cell phones. A local politician came for a quick photo op and was off, as suddenly as he (and his motorcade) arrived.

Disaster Response in India

The scene repeated itself for days: Ladakhis and tourists arranged in rows, passing buckets of dank mud and debris, buckets of demolished lives. Corpses roasted in the summer sun, breeding fears of disease. Hundreds were said to be missing in Leh and nearby villages. ATMs ran out of cash. Shops ran low on food. Electricity was scarce. And all the while, an official response seemed all but absent.

What could have been expected in such an inaccessible region? Despite its remoteness, Ladakh is of immense strategic importance to India. Military facilities and airstrips in and around Leh serve as a staging ground for any potential conflicts with nearby China and Pakistan, as well as for security operations in restive Kashmir. The region is geographically peripheral, to be sure, but strategically central. With so many resources nearby, was it unreasonable to expect some semblance of a relief effort?

I wrote angrily at the time of the dangerous and chaotic atmosphere, and the lack of any visible authority: of clearing debris from a clinic at a government official’s request,
only to find in each bucket of mud used syringes and potentially toxic medical waste; of learning that live ammunition from a nearby base had floated into that very clinic and could be set off at a moment’s notice; of the price-gauging tourist operators that tacked on hundreds of dollars in fees to tickets on the few commercial flights out of Leh; of the government officials promising scores of emergency shuttles out of the city, which never seemed to materialize; of the “massive relief effort” supposedly launched that seemed to lack both mass and effort, or anything close to relief; of the countless soldiers and police officers from nearby bases bribing airport ticket agents and boarding the only evacuation planes departing the troubled city, leaving Ladakhis and stranded tourists to fend for themselves; of “scheduled” and “imminent” cargo flights with capacity to evacuate people, which turned out not to exist; and of days later, finally boarding an “oversold” emergency flight out of Leh, only to find it full of empty seats, unused as we lifted off for Delhi in plain view of hundreds standing helplessly and hopelessly on the ground below, desperate for an escape.

An Epilogue on Tragedy

“Ineptitude is frustrating,” I scrawled in my journal. “When it results in death, it is infuriating.”

I wrote about the incompetence of local authorities, the military and the government; about the countless lies pedaled in the city, at the airport and by the national leadership in Delhi; about the bogus death tolls, the bogus flights, the bogus news coverage, the grossly low estimates of stranded people; about whether anyone would be held to account; about the uniqueness (or lack thereof) of these problems; about whether or not supply roads would be rebuilt before the harsh winter isolated the city; about whether glorious Leh — that historical, religious and natural gem of a city — could move beyond such devastating tragedy; and about who, if anyone, would help.

Four years on, I cannot say I have found answers to many of those questions. Time and reflection have tempered some of the anger; at 11,000 feet and with a desert climate, the flash floods in Ladakh caught everyone by surprise. Perspective has convinced me that my expectations may have been too high; whether in Port-Au-Prince or the Philippines, New Orleans, New York City or the northern periphery of the Indian subcontinent, natural disasters everywhere breed fear and disorder, rumor and confusion. Experience has counseled a tad more patience than I may have been capable of showing during those trying days in the summer of 2010. With the only two roads to Leh destroyed, hospitals collapsed, sections of the airport flooded and telecommunications infrastructure washed away, the slow arrival of relief may have had more to do with the immensely challenging circumstances than I initially let on.

Yet the difficult questions remain, so I turn, once again, to François’ prophetic words: “Through Ladakh, I have come to see everything differently... It will change your life as it has changed mine.” That much is certain.
PARK Ji-woo was born in 1989 in Hoeryeong, North Korea, a town famous for being the birthplace of Kim Jong-il’s mother. Park, whose name has been changed to protect her identity, is now a South Korean citizen with a degree in political science from Yonsei University. In her young life, she has endured frostbite and hunger, made five illegal border crossings, been bought and sold as a farm laborer, been arrested three times and detained in four countries, survived three separate stints in North Korean labor camps, fallen into debt to human traffickers and walked across the Mongolian desert to freedom. She has also gone to school, made friends, learned three languages and traveled to Europe and America.

Park’s story is her own, but it exemplifies the ways in which North Korea’s people — particularly those who leave in search of a better life — exist at the margins of the societies in which they find themselves.

Park left North Korea when she was only nine years old. She fled with her mother after enduring years of famine, sometimes surviving on only one meal a day of cornmeal porridge. In China, for protection, Park’s mother sold herself through a broker for 20,000 yuan to become the wife of a farmer. She and her mother were forced to do hard labor on the farm under constant supervision by the family that had purchased them, and Park was not allowed to attend school. Despite this, she has fond memories of the farmer’s son, three years her junior, who taught her to speak and read Chinese.

After 13 months, Park and her mother were arrested, sent back to North Korea and imprisoned, surviving on roughly 120 corn kernels a day — fewer than 80 calories — and enduring constant thirst. Beatings in prison were common, though Park never received one. Following their imprisonment, she and her mother were transferred to a labor camp. Conditions were harsh, but Park says that if you had money, the guards would sell you food at night.

After a couple of months, Park and her mother were freed in an amnesty. They visited their hometown, where Park’s father had remarried, and soon made their way back to China. Park’s mother was sold into a second and then a third marriage, which provided them enough stability that Park could attend school and live the normal life of a rural Chinese student. Over the next several years, however, Park and her mother were twice arrested by Chinese authorities, deported to North Korea and again sent to labor camps. Both times they were able to purchase their freedom for about 100 yuan, or around $15.

Escape Through Mongolia

By 2006, Park’s mother had decided they should escape to South Korea by way of Mongolia. Park was apprehensive, but she was lured by the promise of a college education. They paid a broker 1 million South Korean won up-front, with an additional 3 million won owed when they arrived in Seoul ($1,200 and $3,600, respectively). They traveled from Qingdao by train, bus and car for five days, careful to avoid the police, and at last arrived in Inner Mongolia on China’s northern periphery.

After waiting in a safe house, they set out at night into the frozen desert. Their guide left them at this point, telling them to walk west into Mongolia proper. That was all they knew. After a harrowing 14 hours,
they caught sight of two Mongolian soldiers on horseback. To Park they looked like fairytale princes. They put her on one of the horses — she had never ridden one before — and carried her back to their encampment. For the first time in her life, Park and her mother were now beyond the reach of the North Korean government.

Resettlement in South Korea

Mongolia does not repatriate North Korean defectors (NKDs), but lets them choose among Japan, the United States or South Korea for resettlement. After six weeks of administrative processing, Park and her mother were sent to Seoul, where they were questioned by intelligence officials before being sent to Hanawon, a mandatory reeducation and job training program for North Korean defectors. Park studied hard there, where she also met many Protestant Christians, preferring them to Buddhists and Catholics because they offered more food and seemed friendly.

After Hanawon, Park’s mother received resettlement funds, which she used to pay off her debt to the human traffickers. Park’s mother eventually brought her third Chinese husband to join her, and recently Park’s sister was able to escape North Korea and join them as well. But they still feel like outsiders, lacking the common cultural bonds of most South Koreans. Park’s best friend and her ex-boyfriend are both NKDs, and her mother has started a business selling kimbap (a Korean dish resembling sushi) with five other North Korean women. In South Korea, NKDs tend to be poor and often mistrusted. They are not quite a minority community, but they are not fully South Korean either.

A continuing problem for North Koreans, no matter what country they may reside in, is the lack of civil society institutions to promote and safeguard their interests. In North Korea, a totalitarian government forbids any independent institutions. In China, defectors are illegal aliens, unable to form coherent communities or public organizations. In South Korea, however, the obstacles are more subtle: Defectors often face discrimination, and in some cases their families suffer retaliation in North Korea, forcing many like Park to keep their identities secret. Furthermore, South Korea is anything but neutral ground in the conflict with North Korea, and its politics and laws limit the scope of discussion about North Korea’s future.

The plight of NKDs is a moral and practical challenge not only for North Korea, but also for China and South Korea. North Korea seeks to keep its citizens from escaping into China, but also punishes them when they return because their back-and-forth travel and trade is disruptive of the regime’s attempts at isolation and information control. China is faced with two equally unpalatable choices: It must either absorb a floating population into its underdeveloped northeast, where defectors’ illegal status breeds organized crime and enslavement, or return these refugees to North Korea and risk international condemnation. South Korea has a moral and legal obligation to accept any refugees who make their way to third countries, but has found absorbing and integrating these refugees a cultural and political challenge.

Perhaps Mongolia offers a solution. So far, the country has been quick to relocate the North Korean defectors who arrive there, but what if it granted them residence instead? Mongolia has good relations with both Koreas, considerable trade with South Korea and a rapidly growing economy that could absorb a migrant labor force. Defectors could live outside both Koreas while interacting with Mongolia’s population of South Korean expatriates and tourists. Mongolia could be encouraged to facilitate such a program in exchange for funds it desperately needs to develop critical infrastructure, particularly for the mining of rare earths used in electronics.

Mongolia could become a neutral space for North Koreans to argue among themselves about the future of their own country and culture, perhaps giving a marginalized group of defectors the political agency necessary to effect change back at home. When and if the two Koreas unify, the benefits of a North Korean civil society beyond Pyongyang’s control could be invaluable in easing the transition.

Life Outside the Margins

I met Park last year when she was studying English at Baruch College and enjoying opportunities that are unimaginable for most of her compatriots. Living in the United States gave her a sense of freedom and inclusion that she does not always feel in South Korea. Here, she was just another immigrant in a society of immigrants. The broad contours of her story, however — including famine and deprivation, border crossings, an unstable life in China with no legal protections, harsh punishment upon repatriation and difficulties adjusting to life in South Korea — mirror the experiences of many other NKDs who cannot share her sense of freedom. Park’s journey spanned multiple state and cultural peripheries, and unless a long-term solution is found, many other NKDs may be destined to live on the margins without the political status needed to thrive as both citizens and Koreans.
China’s Periphery & Tibet’s Future
An Interview with Robert Barnett
By Reece Garrett Johnson
School of International & Public Affairs

ROBERT Barnett founded and directs the Modern Tibetan Studies Program at Columbia University, the first Western teaching program in this field. He is a frequent commentator on Tibet and nationality issues in China for the BBC, CNN, NPR, The New York Times, the Washington Post and other media outlets. His most recent books are “Tibetan Modernities: Notes from the Field,” with Ronald Schwartz; and “Lhasa: Streets with Memories.” Professor Barnett agreed to talk about Tibet and its future from the perspectives of “core” and “periphery,” two concepts that often shape discussions about culture, politics and identity.

How are core and periphery understood inside China, and is it a perspective you favor when it comes to evaluating China’s relationship with Tibet?

Chinese foreign policy analysts tend to treat the periphery as of critical importance. In one recent article, two leading analysts in Shanghai described periphery policy as “the core of China’s external strategy,” and they wrote that the most serious challenge to the People’s Republic of China (PRC) in its initial years came from the periphery. So concern about the border areas may be much more important to Chinese policymakers than we might expect.

They were probably referring to the 20 neighboring countries that border China, but that is just its outer periphery. It also has an inner periphery — the areas within the PRC that touch its outer borders but are within it — and for security people within China, it is the interaction between these two spheres that is particularly important. They are acutely concerned, for example, about support Tibetans in Tibet might be receiving from Tibetans in India or Nepal, interaction between Uighurs in Xinjiang and those in Central Asia, or perhaps even political influence among the Dai people in Yunnan from related groups in Southeast Asia.

One of the principal issues for the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) in the 1940s was the fear that Mongolians in Mongolia might promote an independence movement in Inner Mongolia. Since then, China has tried to prevent those nations just outside its borders from seeding any such problems within its territory. It has done this primarily through generosity — offering to assist those neighbors through trade, aid packages, diplomatic prestige and so on. On the surface it’s somewhat similar to the frequent promises of economic development and advancement made by Beijing to the peoples in its inner periphery, except that there it uses force as well.

The gift-giving approach characterized China’s initial relations in the post-Soviet era with the Central Asian republics, now grouped together as the Shanghai Cooperation Organization. But in fact that pact started as a Chinese effort to stop those nations from giving support to any dissident Uighurs who had fled from China — possibly a recollection of the time when 60,000 Kazakhs and Uighurs escaped from China to the Soviet Union in the 1960s. So this is an example of the sealing up of a nation’s borders to prevent the wrong people from leaving the country, as well as to stop the wrong people entering.

It’s this that seems to have been behind the massacre in Kunming this March, reportedly an act of revenge by a group of Uighurs who had tried to leave China by its southern borders but found that exit route blocked to them, just as with the northern borders. A similar incident, which led to seven deaths, took place in mid-April on
China’s border with Vietnam. Most of Tibet today is also sealed off: Since a group of Tibetans traveled to India in late 2011 to attend teachings by the Dalai Lama, it seems that no Tibetans from the Tibet Autonomous Region (TAR) have been allowed to get a passport or travel abroad unless they are officials.

As for the core/periphery concept in general, it is a view that looks at issues from a single perspective, that of the metropolitan center. But, of course, people living in what the metropolitan center thinks of as the periphery see their land and culture as a center, until their brains are remolded to think of themselves as marginal citizens belonging to a nation with a capital somewhere far away. Once that happens, they’re at risk of devaluing and losing their own cultural heritage. Leadership positions will go to people from the central areas, and there will be interregional inequality and unequal distribution of resources. This is one of the endemic distortions within modern states that empires didn’t struggle with quite so much. And it produces a strange distortion among historians, too: The future of nations is often driven by peoples from the border areas, but they tend to receive the least attention. The only successful invasions of China in history came from its peripheries, but you hear relatively little about their origins; it’s somehow explained as a cultural victory by the people from the center. So it’s a very intriguing, elusive notion.

How have China’s concerns about its inner periphery affected states in its outer periphery?

RB This kind of policy, trying to seal off the inner from the outer, can become problematic. We can see that by looking at China’s dealings with Nepal in the last five years. Before 2008, 3,000 Tibetans on average fled each year from Tibet to Nepal, crossing the Himalayas without permits on their way to join the exiles in India. But now the Chinese authorities have poured large amounts of money into the Nepalese military, required the Nepalese to set up a paramilitary border force, given training to that force and insisted that Tibetans no longer be allowed to flee. This works: Only 200 Tibetan asylum seekers made it across the border last year. The leak has been plugged.

But this approach involved a shift from benevolent neighborliness to a more assertive mode. Since 2008, plainclothes Chinese police have been operating freely in the border areas well within Nepal; I was shadowed and questioned by four of them last time I was there. At China’s request, the Nepalese authorities have blocked some 5,000 Tibetans from moving to the United States despite having been offered U.S. visas some six years or more ago. And any event or celebration by Tibetans in Nepal hinting at support for the Dalai Lama is now broken up by police, apparently because of pressure from the Chinese Embassy in Kathmandu.

So the policy of dealing with the outer periphery on friendly terms can change to interventionism if you come to view it as necessary and natural to reorganize the behavior of your weaker neighbors — even one that is helpful to you, like Nepal. This seems logical to the more powerful player, convinced as it is that émigrés want to split or weaken it. Here we see a third periphery policy emerge: The outer neighbors that are seen as weak are dealt with differently from those, like India or Russia in this case, that are known to be strong. So the periphery is a kind of elastic concept in which a stronger nation tends gradually to extend its power and to probe its neighbors for vulnerabilities. It can then end up behaving like a hegemonic force instead of a friendly neighbor, and, as we’ve seen with many other countries including in the West, that can lead to major shifts and tensions.

So you think this geostrategic insecurity between the inner and outer peripheries is a trait of hegemonic powers more generally?

RB I think it’s a quality found with most powers; the Crimea is only the most recent of many examples. You can think of it, as many people used to, as being the incomplete transition of old-style empires to new-style nations-states. A new-style nation-state thinks it has a very clear border and that its power stops there, but in reality it still acts like an old-style empire with borders that are only boundaries — they’re zones of influence that extend in varying degrees to wherever it thinks its power needs to go, or where its interests need to be protected or asserted. So you get a disconnect between what’s actually happening and what a state is saying. It says it’s going to operate according to borders which are completely fixed, but in practice it’s rather different. It may not use a military lever, as the Russians have; it will more likely use economic levers, or sometimes what people call soft power, or some other means to extend influence in areas where it feels threatened or to which it is attracted.

This is something that Owen Lattimore and other scholars wrote about extensively in the 1930s and 1940s, when they were much more attuned to looking at states and political alignments in terms of geography — geography not in the sense of land formations, but in terms
of how people survive on those terrains, and how communications, transport systems, rivers, trains, economies and so on operate. It was very clear to these scholars of geographic history that borders were porous zones that were talked about as fixed lines, and that power tends to seep out through those zones to protect itself from vulnerabilities or to claim more things it needs. It was Lattimore who pointed out that the Great Wall of China functioned to keep subjects from leaving as well as to stop outsiders from coming in. He and his colleagues saw this as a feature of all empires — Roman, British, Byzantine — because their options to sustain the use of force diminish as their lines of logistical support extend.

So this happens with many nations-states today. And China also has this very striking problem, also common to most countries, that the areas seen as remote from its so-called center are areas where its own majority population has never lived, or not until recently. So it has no cultural affinity with those places, and its officials may find it difficult even to know how to produce crops in those places, or to maintain roads or transport routes across them. They might start thinking of these areas as places that have to be garrisoned, or repopulated, or mined for their resources, leading to problems of sustainability and cycles of animosity. This is what has happened in China and many states, reproducing in these areas models of organization familiar and convenient to those living in the heartlands, but alien and exploitative to the original inhabitants.

Notions of federalism are often attempts to get around that kind of problem. The CCP proposed that system in the 1930s, based on the Soviet model, and even promised independence for minorities, though these were quietly dropped a decade later. Many Chinese analysts argue now that it was concessions to the periphery that led to the collapse of the Soviet Union. So they’re not keen on any hint of a federal solution. But the unreconstructed core/periphery model leaves them, and any state, with huge tensions which still have to be worked out.

These tensions seem to be increasing inside Tibet, but it is not entirely clear how they will unfold in the future. Do you think commitment to the Middle-Way policy, which seeks genuine autonomy through non-violence for greater Tibet, is diminishing?

There’s an increasingly tense struggle within the exile Tibetan community about the Dalai Lama’s “Middle Way” policy; the evidence is unclear so far about whether there is such a divide within Tibet as well. Those who oppose his policy, even the most passionate, avoid criticizing him by name and instead attack the exile government and its supporters. The pro-independence group has a potent story to draw on from the past, is prominent on the Internet and in the media and seems to be growing, but we don’t know how many actually support it. At the other extreme are the more conservative figures among the exile leaders, who can be aggressive and manipulative, trying to insist on absolute and unquestioning support for the Dalai Lama. The majority of exiles are largely silent, but everything suggests they retain overwhelming support for the Dalai Lama and his proposal for historic compromise with China, even though it is a bitter pill for most to swallow. That is almost certainly the case inside Tibet, too, where almost every reported protest in the last 10 years has included pictures of the Dalai Lama or slogans calling for him to be allowed to return.

The government of the Dalai Lama is inevitably weaker now that he has resigned his position as its official leader; it will take time and skill for it to gain authority. Beijing has not given any concessions in response to the major compromises offered by the Dalai Lama as part of the Middle Way policy, so that has weakened both the Dalai Lama and the exile government, and strengthened the arguments of the pro-independence activists. And the Internet is a forum that does not tend to favor middle-ground views; it gives prominence to people with stronger voices, to the politics of rhetoric rather than pragmatism. So I would think that the Middle-Way policy is under serious stress. It’s hard to measure, but I think it’s very likely.

Beijing’s strategy probably includes encouraging just such a weakening of support for the Dalai Lama as he ages, and may be designed to fuel an increase in division among Tibetans. That does not mean that the conservatives among Tibetans should be allowed to stop criticism and debate, as they try to do. Criticism is essential to effective politics. But real leadership is needed on both sides if debate is to be productive. But many advanced democracies now have shifted to zero-sum politics, what we can call polemical democracy — the demise of the loyal opposition in democracies is a global crisis, not just a Tibetan one.

This means that as the Dalai Lama ages and withdraws increasingly from exercising power or influence, support for his very difficult policy of compromise is likely to diminish. And when he dies, it could collapse cataclysmically overnight. A lot of people are going to say that he made
major compromises for 30 years, and that most people reconciled themselves to renouncing independence — in effect, they gave up on their ideals — but got little or nothing back from China. I think many people would predict chaos, or even major violence, across Tibet. Of course there will be others who will argue for acceptance of the status quo, given the sheer power differential. And China is gambling that rising wealth within Tibet will make the pragmatists the majority. But even if that happens, there’s a risk of a long legacy of acute and widespread bitterness towards China if the Dalai Lama dies outside his homeland.

Once he dies, there will be no national figure among Tibetans for Beijing to engage with. The Chinese leaders have spent 60 years trying to find pliable figures whom they can claim as the leaders of Tibetans. That’s what a Communist state always tries to do in its less radical phases — identify a local leader, equip him with a narrative, define him as traditional, ideally anoint him as a lama and get him to say that he supports their rule. But it hasn’t worked in Tibet, and instead they have resorted to requiring people in their hundreds of thousands to sign documents or give statements attesting to their loyalty. It’s a cruder version of what Chomsky and others talked about as manufacturing consent, and it has often worked quite well in China generally. But it’s very hard to pull that off with members of a totally different culture, unless you have a charismatic leader on hand whose support is independent of the credentials given to him by the state. You can’t really manufacture that sort of charismatic status.

But anyway, things don’t stand still. There will be new problems to confront and new alliances will form. There’s the risk of major violence in Tibet when the Dalai Lama dies, but, ironically, that could play out as a mid-term advantage to China, because it will fragment Tibetans, justify militarization and placate international criticism. Even if that doesn’t happen, deep cleavages are likely to emerge among Tibetans along regional and sectarian lines. Economically, as massive state investment creates an expanded middle class among Tibetans, different interest groups could emerge which can’t afford to challenge Chinese rule; if that happens, the exiles and the activists could find themselves isolated, something which could happen very fast. That’s the gamble that Beijing seems to be relying on.

Do you think that, short of independence and given the precarious status of Tibetan exiles — especially where they have no legal recognition — Tibetans will always remain on a periphery in one sense or another?

Many pundits like to argue that the Tibet case has always been treated as peripheral, whether by China or the West, because of fantasies about mysticism, remoteness, strangeness and so on. But that is also a fantasy, a detail of rhetoric: the more likely reason is because it’s landlocked. Politicians and strategists tend to treat maritime states — states with naval power — as the important forces in the world. But actually, it’s places where the only contact is through land that we send our young men and women to die on our behalf. Although they are often seen as marginal to international discussions, most of our wars take place in landlocked or almost landlocked countries — Afghanistan, Chechnya, South Sudan, Rwanda, Palestine, Iraq — or across land borders. So elite assumptions about such places are not always reliable.

At the same time, underlying perceptions of Tibet seem to be shifting in the media from that of a remote zone of fantasy to an international hotspot, at least in terms of ecology. People now point to the fact that it’s the source of most of Asia’s water supplies and key to global warming. But there are also geostrategic factors: it’s the interface between two major powers, the highland of Asia, it covers a quarter of China’s landmass and, historically, Tibetans have posed repeated obstacles to China’s ability to integrate large parts of its nation. Plus they’re largely united by religion and easily mobilized, presenting a constant risk of challenge to Beijing. So, ironically, it now looks as if the popular perception of the importance of Tibet, albeit expressed through exotic imagery, turns out to have been at least as useful as those of the professional analysts. Ordinary wisdom was right, in a way.

Of course, it’s not currently in the interest of China to speak publicly of Tibet or Xinjiang like that. This is even more the case with India, the giant neighbor to the south, where Tibet is also treated as peripheral, quaint and in the past. Just like people, nation-states develop rhetorical strategies, often very odd ones, which give prominence to what suits them rather than to the realities on the ground. So the way Tibet is thought of internationally may not change abruptly. But I think informed opinion will increasingly regard Tibet as significant, as the question mark hanging over China’s rise, and over regional relations, too. Perhaps we would do well to think more about why Tibet and other similar places have remained unsettled for so long, and to reassess our presumptions about peripherality and its role in history.
Train to Protest: Diaspora Conflict in Flushing

By Ryan Allen
Teacher’s College

Photos: Ryan Allen

NEW York’s Chinatown is located between Broome Street and Chambers Street, next to Little Italy, in lower Manhattan. The Chinese diaspora has historically used the area as an enclave for Sino-focused business and social organization. After years of gentrification in Manhattan, however, old Chinatown has increasingly become a tourist spectacle.

The new Chinatown of New York City is arguably in Flushing, Queens, as it boasts one of the densest Chinese populations in the city and has become the epicenter for mainlander arrivals. To get there, take the 7 train to the very last stop, Flushing—Main Street, walk out from the underground, and find yourself in a new New York, immersed in bubble tea shops, karaoke room ads and hawkers selling bootleg Chinese TV shows — and all of it in Mandarin tones or Chinese characters.

Along with the Chinese community’s food, language and culture, there has been an importation of the political divides that plague the Chinese state today. On any given day, the crowded street corner around Flushing’s subway exits are dotted with political protestors.

The Falun Gong have been accused by the CCP of attempting to subvert the ruling party’s legitimacy, and their religious practices have thus been barred from mainland China.

A Falun Gong (or Falun Dafa) protest group can usually be found displaying claims of barbarism perpetrated against their members by the Chinese Communist Party (CCP), with vivid signs and pamphlets depicting beating marks or wounds. This group, whose members use meditation and focus as an expression of their religious beliefs, has been accused by the CCP of attempting to subvert the ruling party’s legitimacy, and their religious practices have thus been barred from mainland China.

Often juxtaposed next to the Falun Gong devotees is the Chinese Anti-Cult World Alliance, a political group that condemns and counter-protests the Falun Gong movement, disparaging the religion as a dubious cult. Hanging behind these demonstrators are large banners that read, “Drive out the evil cult to usher in the Spring,” and, “Keep away from the evil cult Falun Gong,” in both English and Mandarin.

Because of the close proximity of the dueling groups, there is a noticeable tension between their entourages, as well as competition to get people’s attention — one demonstrator even bragged about how many more pamphlets he gave out than the Falun Gong group. With this tension comes mistrust, and all of the protestors interviewed on both sides were noticeably apprehensive of any questions, with a few declining to comment despite loudly proselytizing on a crowded street corner.

When asked why they were protesting, the Falun Gong group claimed to be highlighting crimes that the CCP committed against members of their movement (including purported organ harvesting) or even against themselves and their families. All of the Falun Gong protesters came from various parts of China, but were granted political asylum in the United States because of their persecution.

Looking back into China’s past can offer insight into why the CCP
leadership is suspicious of religious and populist groups such as the Falun Gong today. China’s last imperial dynasty, the Qing dynasty, was nearly toppled in the mid-nineteenth century by a native Christian movement known as the Taiping Revolution.

At the same time, movements that did eventually lead to the toppling of the Qing government were grassroots-led, and the CCP’s own rise and takeover shared a similar grassroots heritage. To many in China, Falun Gong fits into these historical narratives given its far-reaching membership and religious foundation.

As for the Chinese Anti-Cult World Alliance members, their motives for being on the street were a bit murkier. Their organizer, Michael Chu, who also runs the Flushing Neighborhood Watch, stated that they were demonstrating because Falun Gong was a “bad representation” of the Chinese people.

He then presented a paper describing behavior considered unacceptable for the Chinese, yet with no mention of the Falun Gong: “No Spitting… No Littering… Don’t Talk Loudly… Please Stand in Line… Help Each Other…”

“They destroy the Chinese image. China is not like that. China and Chinese have many problems, but not like the way that they show,” said Chu, motioning towards the rival protestors.

The Falun Gong members gave a different reason for Chu and his group’s opposition and involvement in street protests. “Because they were… bought off by the CCP to do this bad thing,” said Ms. Wang, who requested not to use her full name. “[The CCP] poisons the normal people, also they poison the Chinese people.”

When asked why other Chinese nationals were protesting their group, all of the Falun Gong members claimed that the CCP was paying the group to disparage their religious movement. There is no real way to determine the truth, as the anti-Falun Gong group rejects any notion of a CCP connection.

“We are a non-profit organization… we have 1,500 volunteers… established four years ago,” said Chu, denying any connection to the CCP and emphasizing his group’s community watch component.

The two groups mostly protest peaceably and are not overly aggressive when handing out materials, just loud and in the way. Yet their close proximity to one another sometimes brings small clashes. On occasion, the police have had to intervene in squabbles over protesting turf and regulations.

“You see, she should have a sound permit,” said Chu, gesturing towards a Falun Gong protestor holding a radio that was broadcasting a message...
The daily spectacle of dueling protesters would send earthquakes through society back in China, or at least through the CCP ranks, but it only blends into the typical chaos here.

in Mandarin. “It’s so noisy, she has the right to express her opinion, okay. But, she is making noise. I told her, I wish an officer would come here or someone call 911; it’s really a nuisance. When the police come, I can complain.”

Chu then proceeds to confront Ms. Wang, and an argument ensues. The other Falun Gong demonstrators come to her assistance, and after a short shouting match, Chu laughingly backs off.

Despite his passion, Chu could never sensibly explain his disdain for the Falun Gong that he and his organization protest weekly. He also exhibited strange behavior when approached initially, as he tried to secretly take pictures of me and refused an interview until he realized I was only writing an article and not associated with the Falun Gong group. The Falun Gong protesters claimed that he sends the pictures to CCP officials.

As for the local community’s attitude toward these demonstrations, each group is adamant about its importance to the neighborhood. Yet, most residents walk by quickly, ignoring the chants critical of the CCP, muddled with shouts calling the Falun Gong a cult. No one here seems to care much about the high-strung political battle each group is waging on American turf, much less what it means back in China.

The daily spectacle of clashing protestors would send earthquakes through society back in China, or at least through the CCP ranks, but it only blends into the typical chaos here — the grocery hawkers, the karaoke ads, the protestors and the rest of the Chinese diaspora in Flushing, Queens.

TOP: A Falun Gong poster describes the religious group’s founding by Li Hongzhi in 1992. It explains that, as he lectured across the country, he eventually gained 70 million followers in China alone by 1998, with a total of over 100 million followers in over 100 countries today. Li Hongzhi has been a permanent resident of the United States since 1998

BOTTOM: Michael Chu, leader of the Flushing Neighborhood Watch, confronts a Falung Gong practitioner who claims the rival protestors are acting on behalf of the Chinese Communist Party under the guise of concerned local residents. Chu himself says he is annoyed by the noise level of demonstrators.
MUCH ado has been made of Japan’s recent efforts to shore up its defensive capabilities. Indeed, Japan has made tremendous strides in this area in the last year alone, including the creation of a national security council and a noticeable increase in defense spending. Why now? For more than a thousand years, Japan’s unique geographic profile has shaped the Japanese civilization and its interactions with the world. The same is true today. There are four main geostrategic concerns — demographics, natural resources, the North Korean threat and the rise of China — that demonstrate the need for Japan’s stronger defensive posture, and which will undoubtedly shape its future interactions with the rest of Asia.

Importance of Geography

The forces of globalization have seemingly diminished the significance of geographic borders, but this conclusion would be misleading in the case of Japan. In fact, geography has never been more important than it is today. Geography’s immovable quality has always limited the ability of states to alter and exploit their natural environments. Thus, geography factors prominently into the strategic calculus of human beings, which forms the conceptual basis of strategic geography.

Japan is a nation composed of four main islands located off the east coast of Asia with a population of around 127 million. Despite its total surface area being larger than that of Germany, Japan’s land yields very few natural resources and is largely regarded as inimical to human habitation given its geographic characteristics. Surrounded completely by water, Japan has transformed itself over the last century and a half into a maritime, industrialized nation heavily dependent on external resources and the movement of large volumes of international trade to sustain its economic drive. Across the Sea of Japan, Korea sits just 118 miles away and China just 497 miles. Its geographical separation from the Eurasian landmass has fostered a form of cultural remoteness, remnants of which continue to define Japan’s uniqueness and isolation.

Natural Resources & Trade

Japan is notoriously resource-poor. It is not endowed with the resources needed by industrial or post-industrial states, lacking significant deposits of coal, ores, oil and many of the other basic raw materials required for manufacturing. Thus, Japan’s security interests are directly linked with its ability to be self-sufficient, and its reliance on imported goods requires an active consideration of the supply chain and the forces that influence it. For example, in response to the Japanese Coast Guard’s (JCG) detention of a Chinese fishing boat captain who rammed a JCG vessel in disputed waters just off Taiwan, China cut off exports of rare earth elements (REE) to Japan in the fall of 2010. For Japan, REEs are a critical component in the production of numerous defense technologies including precision-guided munitions, electronic warfare capabilities, electric drive motors (components in the F-35 Joint Strike Fighter), radar and sonar. As a result of incidents like this one, Japan has grown increasingly wary of China’s monopoly on REEs and other strategic resources.

Japan’s ongoing and anticipated investments in critical infrastructure throughout Asia are intended to enhance the connectivity of the entire region, thereby shaping and diversifying logistical, supply-side dynamics in a way conducive to Japan’s economic interests. This creates new vulnerabilities, however, as shipments routed through the South China Sea and other Southeast Asian waters are susceptible to shipping stoppages and diversions by China, which has shown an increasingly aggressive posture in these same waters. For Japan, this necessitates securing the freedom of the seas, as it cannot risk a disruption in the flow of critical resources without sustaining a damaging blow to its national security. Protecting commercial transit routes, as well as deterring states that may interfere with them, is one strategic rationale for enhancing Japanese defensive capabilities.

Changing Demographics

An accurate projection of future Japanese strategic capabilities cannot be divorced from a serious consideration of Japan’s impending demographic disaster: a rapidly aging population in tandem with an equally declining birthrate. Japanese government projections estimate that total population will fall from its current 127.5 million to 116.6 million...
China Territorial Disputes

The rise of China is menacing, as it has grown acutely adversarial due to territorial disputes in the East China Sea over the Diaoyu/Senkaku Islands. Japan's imperial conquests in the early twentieth century led to the colonization and subjugation of parts of China, and this chapter of oppression has woven anti-Japanese sentiment into the fabric of Chinese national identity.

In September 2012, Japan purchased the Diaoyu/Senkaku Islands from its private Japanese owners, and shortly thereafter, China began to challenge Japanese administrative control by announcing that it would initiate its own patrols of the disputed islands. To date, there have been over 70 aerial and maritime incursions by the Chinese in the waters surrounding the disputed islands, and each time risks miscalculation and misinterpretation that could easily escalate into armed conflict.

The bigger picture shows a disturbing trend: China's pattern of aggression and willingness to up the ante to test Japan's limits is a dangerous game of brinkmanship. In November 2013, China unilaterally expanded its air defense identification zone (ADIZ) to encompass the Diaoyu/Senkaku Islands. Both Japan's military and commercial aircraft have refused to acknowledge China's new ADIZ and comply with its accompanying rules.

Given this backdrop, there is sufficient urgency for Japan to reconsider force capabilities in order to neutralize both the threat of armed conflict and the pressure put on its defenses by China's frequent maritime and aerial incursions. That China has engaged in a rapid military modernization program fueled by its vast economic resources reflects corresponding advancements in its capabilities, inciting great alarm for Japan, which has constitutional restrictions and financial constraints that limit its ability to keep pace with the Chinese military (its navy in particular). Over the course of the last 10 years, China has increased its military spending by an astonishing 175 percent to become the second largest military spender after the United States, which saw an increase of 32 percent over the same period. Given this, Japan's defense preparedness over the vast expanse of its southwestern territories has become a priority for policymakers in Tokyo — and rightfully so. Furthermore, embracing a stronger defensive posture is arguably encouraged by the United States, and allowing Japan to fortify its existing defenses will alleviate the American share of the security alliance.

Stronger Defense Posture

The strongest case for a reorientation of Japan's defensive strategy and capabilities lies with its strategic geography. Japan's demographics and natural resources, in addition to its relations with neighbors and potential adversaries like China and North Korea, all coalesce to form a sense of urgency in Japan about the emerging security environment it now faces. For Japan, geography is destiny, and if it wishes to influence this destiny, then it must tailor its grand strategy to take account of the geographic dimensions and constraints to which it is subject. This forms the foundational argument for how, due to its geographic context, Japan is justified in its current pursuit of a more muscular defense posture. After all, Japan has historically shown a propensity for change, having completely reinvented itself twice in the last century and a half with the Meiji Restoration starting in 1868 and the post-war rebuilding in 1945. Japan will therefore continue to do what it has done so exceptionally well: adapt and survive.

The North Korean Threat

Japan's geographical proximity to North Korea subjects it to the unpredictable and unstable whims of a totalitarian regime. In the last decade alone, North Korea has engaged in a series of provocations, mostly aimed at South Korea but also against Japan. As recently as March 2013, North Korea warned Japan that it would face a horrible strike for colluding with the United States after the United Nations imposed more sanctions on the reclusive regime. In April of 2013, in response to Japan's placement of PAC-3 missile interceptor units around Tokyo after North Korean provocations that March, North Korea reportedly warned Japan that it would be its first target, in addition to major U.S. military installations in Japan. Due to the unpredictability shown by the nuclear-capable regime in recent decades, Japan cannot stand idly by in the face of North Korean belligerence. An enhanced defensive orientation would be a significant deterrent that is likely to influence the strategic calculus of North Korea.

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