

Social–Psychological Bases for Inheriting Tibetan Buddhist Culture: A Case Study of a Tibetan Community

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Abstract

The research aims at revealing the specific connotations and internal mechanisms of social psychology that supports the inheritance of Tibetan Buddhist culture by applying the theoretical framework of anthropology and psychology based on the individual case of a Tibetan community. The paper first conducts an overall investigation into the inheritance of Tibetan Buddhist culture in the Tibetan community via the approaches of interviewing and observation in qualitative researches. Then it analyzes the interaction between people's inheritance and their corresponding psychological basis based on the social psychological model made up of social cognition, social emotion, social need and social attitude. The research results show that Tibetan Buddhist culture shapes the social psychology which is unique to Tibetan people, enabling them to balance their various internal needs and to meet all kinds of external challenges. The corresponding social psychology, in return, stimulates and drives the continuous inheritance and development of Tibetan Buddhist culture.

Key words: Tibetan Buddhism; Cultural inheritance; Social-psychology; Community

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INTRODUCTION

The Tibetan Buddhist culture has been melted into the Tibetan culture, the inheritance of which takes place

not just in the temples and among monks, but more importantly in daily lives and celebration ceremonies of the masses. The religious culture has penetrated into the inner heart of every people in China so that it seems to be a part of their inborn nature and people just practice it in their life spontaneously. Why people go to religious rites? No one would ask about it, nor would the monks explain it. The religious culture, as the source of life nourishment for every individual, is as important as the existence of individuals themselves. Individuals are edified in this culture upon their birth in an unnoticed manner.

The inheritance of religious culture is shown in many aspects, including worshiping, walking around a fixed route, chanting, Tibetan opera singing, epic poem learning, house decorating, drawing, festival & customs, and interpersonal communication, all of which are different forms of inheritance of Tibetan culture. Cultural inheritance is a group behavior, and the group member is its subject. The psychology of the member and the spiritual connotation of particular culture are mutually conditional. The social psychology of the ethnic group is the basis for the inheritance and development of religious culture. Social psychology is the intermediate link between social consciousness and social existence, as well as the source of various social behaviors which refer to the behaviors arising from the common social psychological factors and in return shaping the social psychology. Social behavior is not at all a simple aggregate of individuals' behaviors although it cannot be isolated from individuals. Social behavior occurs and develops in its own unique laws.

A. Problem Statement

In ongoing exploration and understanding of the outer world that is objectively existed, the awareness of individuals also expands and finally develops into beliefs, values, customs and various systems and codes of conduct. Transformation of the physical world is the reflection of human being's conscious activities as well. As the

intermediary link between the objective world and human being's awareness, social psychology has the function of linking the social existence with the social awareness. Groups of different culture develop corresponding behavioral models based on social psychology. As a result, only after we understand the social psychological basis behind various social behaviors can we deeply understand the social psychological mechanisms for the inheritance of Tibetan Buddhist culture. After sorting out the various categories of social psychology that influence the social behaviors, the paper summarizes them into four factors, namely social cognition, social emotion, social attitude, and social need.

B. Background to the Study

The internal basis for the formation and existence of religious culture rests with the shared psychological need of the ethnic group, and its development and involvement form the shared value orientation of the ethnic group, constituting the important basis of ethnic identity. Religious culture plays a significant role in dealing with the masses' daily life norms, psychological conflicts and group relations. The inheritance and development of religious culture is the important issue not only influencing the development of regional economy and culture, but also interfering with development of a harmonious society. Cultural inheritance is not just dominant, visible, material and behavioral transmission and continuation, but more importantly the implicit inheritance of concepts, attitudes and values internalized by the masses.

Since human being becomes a social group, religion comes into being in the society as a key social behavior that functions to cultivate and enhance the sociality of human being. For a long time, people lack understanding of religion, take religion to be superstitious, hold negative appraisals on religious culture, and hold wrong views on the reason for inheritance of religious culture. It will be conducive to solving the above-mentioned problems by taking inheritance of Tibetan Buddhism as the typical research object and reflecting on the inheritance and development of the ethnic religious culture from the underlying structure of social psychology.

1. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

1.1 Sampling

The approach we adopt is purposive sampling, namely to take samples that may provide maximum information about the research problem based on the research objective. There are 61 households in Xiang Ge Village located 70 kilometers east of Labrang Monastery, a large Tibetan Buddhist temple. Considering its large scale and long history, the village completely remains the various religious rites and traditional customs. We select six interviewees in all. Four of them are from the village, two men and two women respectively. The other two are the

monks from the temple near the village. We only choose the individuals with extensive experiences and strong expression abilities as our interviewees.

1.2 Data Collection

We collect data through open interviews, informal talks and field observations. The duration of each interview is about half an hour, and the place is in the house of the villagers or the monks' living quarters in the temple. We have recorded each interview after consent of the interviewees. After we return, we immediately write down what are recorded. I have talked with every interviewee for three times.

2. RESEARCH RESULTS

2.1 Social Cognition Basis for Inheritance of Tibetan Buddhist Culture

Everyone lives in a society made up with others. The social behavior of human being is not only oriented to others but also a responds to the behaviors of others. It primarily, however, relates to the response to others and their behaviors, as well as the perception and understanding of others and their behaviors. We call the perception and understanding of others and their behaviors and the laws thereof as social cognition which is the basis for social behaviors of human being. The inheritance of religious culture is also a social behavior, and the various behavioral modes and cultural symbols we see in Tibetan areas are formed on the basis of the long-term social cognition.

The social psychology of human being is existed and occurred in mutual influence and interaction between different persons, and it comprises the inner psychological process of human being and the explicit behavioral activities.(Sha, 1987) "The feeling, impression and judgment of a man and the prediction and assessment of reasons for his explicit activities are main processes his experiences in social cognition activities, which are inter-related, thus comprising the complete social cognition activities." Every ethnic group must interact with various environmental factors in the environment that inhabited by generations, and will intentionally or unintentionally make certain deductions and explanations on the various social behaviors taking place in the surroundings. Such deductions and explanations will define framework for people's future actions.

The social cognition basis for inheritance of Tibetan Buddhist culture can be summarized as follows:

2.1.1 People Keep Committing Evil Karma Throughout Their Lives, so Doing the Good Becomes the Main Objective in Their Daily Life

Tibetan Buddhism holds that killing other lives is the supreme evil karma, while it is unavoidable in interaction with the nature for the purpose of survival. Therefore, both the secular masses and the monarchical monks should

do the good in various ways. Furthermore, the happiness and hardship of a man in his life are determined by his previous good or evil doings. One should therefore try to avoid commitment of evil karma and devote himself wholeheartedly to good doings in order to divorce himself and all lives in the world from the sufferings of all kinds in the future. The general Tibetan culture also judges all aspects of a man in behaving himself through such good and evil doings, thus finally forming this unique behavioral mode in this culture.

For “Yerexi” system, the term of Yerexi is three months in places with hot climate like India, and it is in this period that all lives recover and become most active. In view of that, any monk who goes out to make a fire, cook, boil water and sit on the ground would commit much evil karma that he fails to notice. A qualified monk, therefore, should stay in the temple for chanting and cultivation in this period without crossing the boundary stone near the temple. Yerexi rites, “Suojiang” and “Dizhan” are the most important codes of conduct in Buddhist temples.¹

2.1.2 Practicing Buddhist Culture Actively Is a Way of Doing the Good

The unique view of life and the view of good and evil of Tibetan Buddhism have been integrated into people’s concept system in the long-term historical process, and the goal-directed thinking of eliminating evil karmas and turning evil into good has always been guiding the interaction between man and man, man and nature and man and himself. Doctors can do good by saving the patient, teachers can do the good by delivering wisdom, and for ordinary people, doing the good in religious ways becomes the important source that makes their lives meaningful. For masses in Tibetan areas, the male, the female, the aged and the young can do the good by practicing religious culture in either formal occasions or daily lives, which specifically include chanting, walking around the white tower, rotating the Sutra cylinder, and praying.

As to why people spare great efforts to holding of “Mani” chanting ceremonies, the most popular claim is that people think they have committed a lot of evil karmas such as cutting down trees and weeding, so people circle out seven days by negotiation to do sincere praying and chant Sutra for the main purpose of eliminating their own evil karmas. Chanting Mani is not for the health and wellbeing of this life, but for elimination of all the evil karmas one has committed, so there are many old people in this chanting. They tell us that they will be blessed by the Buddha in the future life.²

2.1.3 Karma of Good and Evil Are Taken as the Bases for Codes of Conduct

In inheritance of Tibetan Buddhist culture, the logic of karma has gradually developed into the internal basis

for various codes of conduct for members of Tibetan culture in production and life. The explanation of Tibetan Buddhism on good and evil and their relationship shapes the shared value consciousness of the Tibetan people, which is manifested in interaction of daily life by the uniformness of cognitive attribution and orientation, imposing deep influences on thinking mode, behavioral mode, symbol creation and life interest of Tibetan people.

The older generations tell us that it is wrong to cut down trees especially near the holy mountains, which will incur numerous disasters, because there are holy spirits. If you cut down trees there, you will infuriate the holy spirits. In that case, you will be infected with Sores and your crops will be flooded. That is why no one cuts down trees near the holy mountains and the trees in such places are still well preserved now. Furthermore, the children should not roll down stones from the mountain top, or otherwise, they will bring them back to the top in their future life. Now we can see that although this is a claim used to frighten the children, it is actually not good to roll down the stone, which is possibly to damage the people or livestock at the foot of the mountain. In addition, it is not allowed to set fire on the mountain, because many small lives are growing there.³

2.2 Social Emotion Basis for Inheritance of Tibetan Buddhist Culture

Social emotion is also a special social psychological process which is acquired in the socialization process, and also completed and developed continuously in this process. Social emotion, as a psychological feeling of individuals, is represented as a kind of stable and deep emotional experience, like sense of responsibility, sense of happiness and sense of grace, all of which profoundly show the combination of individual consciousness and group consciousness.

In the life of a man, the shared cultural mode of a group shapes the life style of an individual, and even the natural emotional bond of father-son or mother-son is branded with the shared cultural mode. The social emotion of the members of Tibetan culture has also been profoundly influenced by the religious culture. The tough life has endowed the Tibetan individuals with unique psychological features (Badeng, 2000). “People often internalize pain, overcome series of rational and emotional conflicts, reach harmony and unity between environment and themselves, and force themselves to adapt to various tough objective environments” Pursuit for Tibetan Buddhist culture is a kind of ultimate happiness, and only the social behaviors that are oriented to this goal can enable people to experience happiness, calmness and self-identity. Going after calm and kind-hearted orientation of emotion can both drive and orient the social behaviors of members of Tibetan culture. Such a kind of social emotional urges people to dedicate themselves to practice of beliefs and to strive for this goal.

¹ Interviewee: Gai Le from Tamshing Lhakhang, (a 41-year-old monk); interview time: July 16, 2012; place: Gai Le’s living quarter.

² Interviewee: Ka Maocuo from Xiang Ge Village (a 43-year-old female farmer); interview time: July 28, 2012; place: Home of Ka Maocuo.

³ Interviewee: Danzheng Jiabu from Xiang Ge Village (a 47-year-old male farmer); interview time: July 26, 2012; place: Home of Danzheng Jiabu.

The social emotional basis for inheritance of Tibetan Buddhist culture can be summarized as follows:

2.2.1 Restore the Negative and Unbalanced Emotion to a Stable Level

In daily life, the unbalanced emotion should be neutralized by good emotion in the deeper sense. This process is also an interactive activity between individual and himself, forming people's ability to adjust their emotion effectively. Considering that religious culture has been rooted in people's inner heart, practice of Buddhist culture can arouse active and harmonious psychological experiences in the deeper level, and therefore dissolving the various psychological conflicts in daily life. By targeting people's suffering to a nice final future, such suffering can be translated into an active emotion, thus eliminating many sources of negative emotion in life. Although it is hard to grasp the incentive mechanism for positive emotion in the deeper level, it can be concluded from the personal experiences of many individuals and illustrative examples in other aspects that this function is real.

It is sure that there are particular or specific experiences to describe the particular emotional experiences of religion. For example, when you are distracted and absent-minded, if you go to worship the Living Buddha, tell him your inner doubts and request him to hold corresponding rites for you, you will immediately feel calm in your inner heart after you leave, and become oddly happy. All these bad feelings just vanish in a flash.⁴

The eighth day and the fifteenth day of each month are the lucky days. If you are distracted and absent-minded, or feel alarmed for something, just go to the temple or the Buddhist hall in your village to light a butter lamp or incense and walk around a fixed route, and then you will restore the peace in your inner heart and have full of confidence.⁵

2.2.2 Bestow Senses of Belonging and Safety on Individuals

Practicing Buddhist culture actively is a way of doing the good, and accumulating good deeds is building an ultimate destination that is free from hardships for oneself and all lives. Family, ethnic group and nation are the sources of people's senses of belonging and safety, while the studious experiences in building an ultimate destination bestow deeper and superior senses of belonging and safety on people. From another point of view, there are varied ways of doing the good, which is reflected in all aspects of daily life, so the members of this culture can rely on continuous inheritance activities to acquire and enhance this emotion.

As soon as each spring festival ends, the Living Buddha would ask people to chant corresponding scriptures as well as hold other religious rites, and after you complete all the chanting tasks and Buddhist activities required by the Living Buddha, you will restore your heart to peace and serenity. The precious

Buddhist doctrines are not visible and cannot be touched, but once you run into a matter of life and death or a hopeless situation, you will know the influence of the Buddhist doctrines. We cannot tell you where the Buddha exactly is, but if you are pious enough; you will always be blessed by the Buddha unexpectedly.⁶

2.2.3 Shape the Extensive and Harmonious Emotional World of Individuals

The inheritance of religious culture is the unification process between cognition and emotion. From the perspective of emotion, the contents of its inheritance mainly relate to experiences of different types. The guidance and cultivation in a series of inheritance activities in actual life is beneficial for people's mental growth. By enriching the emotional world of individuals, people can have more profound understanding of life. The enrichment and perfection of individuals' emotional world are not only resulted from people's enjoyment of cultural wealth, but also reflects on the vitality of this culture. The life significance and existence value of individuals are realized in this process step by step.

The Buddhist activities fit in well with people's daily life in their arrangement. For example, after each spring festival, you will ask monks to chant Sutras for the New Year and hold all the Buddhist activities which you complete at the beginning of the year to pray for good harvest, family's health and smooth work in the New Year. When the tree leaves begin to wither in autumn and the crops have been harvested, you will then remember the late people, all the spiritual and material resources you are using now and the fact that your whole life is the gift of the late people. For the purpose of showing gratitude to them and blessing for them, you will hold Mani chanting ceremonies or ask monks to chant Sutras in your home, and conduct sacrificing activities. All these have become traditions, and you will just do it at the right time.⁷

2.3 Social Need Basis for Inheritance of Tibetan Buddhist Culture

The multifarious physiological needs of a man, including breathing, dieting, dwelling and clothing, are in vivo automatic balancing tendency and selection tendency caused by physiological deficiencies. Social needs are the proactive automatic balancing tendency and selection tendency caused by deficiencies in social life, and social need is a unique feeling existed in every society. In addition, social needs and physiological needs are inter-related. The latter is the material basis of the former and the former is the expansion and improvement of the latter. Tibetan Buddhist culture is the quintessence of Tibetan culture basically oriented to be a tradition which seeks wisdom from human beings themselves, and promotes development of social culture in an introspective manner. Religious culture, as a consequence, focuses more on satisfaction of man's spiritual needs than material needs.

⁴ Interviewee: Ladai from Xiang Ge Village (a 54-year-old female farmer); interview time: July 24, 2010; place: Home of Ladai.

⁵ Interviewee: Danmu Qianjia from Xiang Ge Village (a 59-year-old male farmer); interview time: July 23, 2012; place: Home of Danmu Qianjia.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Interviewee: Luo Zang from Tamshing Lhakhang, (a 46-year-old monk); interview time: July 15, 2012; place: Luo Zang's living quarter.

In the successive development of Tibetan Buddhist culture, its ideological connotations have been completed and deepened, finally developing into systematic belief systems and constituting unique Tibetan social needs and behavioral frameworks.

The social need basis for inheritance of Tibetan Buddhist culture can be summarized as follows:

2.3.1 Inheritance of Religious Culture Includes Satisfaction of Individuals' Needs at Both Material and Spiritual Level

People have needs that should be satisfied either immediately or in the future. The immediate needs are more likely to be material, including plentiful fruits of labor, and curing of diseases, while future needs are more likely to be spiritual, including wellbeing for future life and blessing for the whole life. People's needs integrate both material and spiritual needs. One important function for practice of religious culture is to meet people's spiritual needs, including the needs for mental consolation, the needs for explanation and understanding of death, and the needs for external happiness.

"'Mani' chanting ceremony is held for wellbeing of the future life, but not for the blessing of this life. The more you do the good, the less you will be afraid of death. The aged would claim that it is not important when they die from now on, because they have repeated 'Mani' for billions of times. They show no fear for future life because no suffering would fall on them anymore. Worshiping 'Deke' is conducted for blessing of this life, such as for prosperous wealth, so both chanting and sacrificing are undertaken for different purposes to meet different needs."⁸

2.3.2 Religious Beliefs Offer You Psychological Support When You Are in Dangers

Except the natural processes of birth, death, illness and old age, people will go through other disasters in their life. In face of any crisis that is hard to bear, you may need a psychological support, in which process Tibetan Buddhist culture plays an indispensable role. As long as unpredictable dangers are threatening people, the needs for mental consolation in the face of such situations will always be there. This is also one of the reasons for the inheritance of religious cultures, including Tibetan Buddhist culture.

There are many such statements in daily life. For example, thanks to Buddha, or other I must have lost my life; I am sure that the Buddha will be always with you; and thanks to my sacrifice this morning, or otherwise I would have hit the skids today. Such examples involve relief of torture from disease, exemption from natural and man-made disasters, and protection in emergencies like car accident. To sum up, such statements are widespread.⁹

⁸ Interviewee: Danzheng Jiabu from Xiang Ge Village (a 47-year-old male farmer); interview time: July 25, 2012; place: Home of Danzheng Jiabu.

⁹ Ibid

2.4 Social Attitude Basis for Inheritance of Tibetan Buddhist Culture

Social attitude is a comprehensive psychological process made up of social cognition, social emotion and social motive. In inheritance of religious culture, religious beliefs first act on people's views of life and the world that will further act on individuals' cognition, emotion and motive (Zhou, 1997).

The situational regulation of cognition is mainly represented by the assessment and judgment of attitude object. When one assesses his own attitude object or living environment as being meaningless or unable to display his own abilities, then he will not go after it, thus conceiving pessimistic and negative attitude. Only on the condition that one assesses the attitude object or environment as being meaningful or able to display his own abilities will he conceive an optimistic and positive attitude.

The purpose of Tibetan Buddhist culture is to eradicate all perplexes in life, and to find out the significance and value of life via individuals' practices and efforts, so that individuals can form positive and optimistic attitude in face of changeable living environments. It is therefore a humanistic religion in some sense, and it puts the function of man in the first position.

The social attitude basis for inheritance of Tibetan Buddhist culture can be summarized as follows:

2.4.1 Bless for All Lives in the World is the Main Attitude Characteristics

Social attitude is a comprehensive embodiment of joint action of social cognition, social need and social emotion, and it is the direct factor that influences cultural inheritance. In inheritance of Tibetan Buddhist culture, people, most importantly, pray for all lives in the world to get away from the sufferings and gain happiness apart from holding religious activities for passing away of the aged or for harvest and safety of their own families. The social attitude that is mainly targeted for happiness of all lives in the world plays a governing role in communication between man and man, man and nature and man and himself, and such a typical social attitude of the member of Tibetan culture is embodied in the behavioral modes and cultural symbols of this group from time to time.

Activities of worshipping "Deke" have been held more and more frequently. Although everyone has different motives and purposes in his mind, a pious man should, if he worships "Deke", pray for the happiness of all living things, the long life of eminent monks and Living Buddha, the peace of the world, the harmony of environment, and the exemption from natural disasters. These are the main purposes of worshipping "Deke".¹⁰

2.4.2 One Should Maintain Optimistic Beliefs and Practice Them Actively Whether He Is Protected or Not

Individuals' practice of religious culture is motivated by their material or spiritual needs, including many praying

¹⁰ Interviewee: Danmu Qianjia from Xiang Ge Village (a 59-year-old male farmer); interview time: July 23, 2012; place: Home of Danmu Qianjia.

and sacrificing activities that are conducted for realizing immediate needs. Since it is common that immediate needs are in disaccord with the results in daily life, it is required to form the uniform social attitude in the cultural system to respond to such a situation. In inheritance of Tibetan Buddhist culture, people skillfully transfer the situation in which they are not protected into a motive for them to practice this culture more actively, which supplies a strategy in dissolving all categories of conflicts in life. Such an optimistic social attitude lays solid foundation for inheritance of religious culture.

Even if you have doubts yourself, others will persuade you to continue your belief by claiming that you have doubts sometimes just because you are not steadfast enough to your belief and you have not undertaken enough good doings. Chanting and worshiping are beneficial for your future life. It is sure that it does not work on the spot at any time. You should be convinced that it will be helpful for you sooner or later.¹¹

CONCLUSION

In the Tibetan history, Tibetan Buddhism has incurred huge impacts on Tibetan culture. In conflict and interaction with Bonism, a local Tibetan religion, the Tibetan Buddhism has been internalized into the ethnic spirit and grows into the core of the whole cultural heritage. (Li, 2005)

Speaking of influence of Buddhism on Tibetan culture, it is really great. All political, educational, economic and artistic issues and languages, texts, customs and habits have shown the shadow and connotation of Buddhism. Even the diet and daily life also show the Buddhist spirit.

The religious value constitutes the main part of the Tibetan social value, and it determines the basic orientation of all other values. The fundamental feature of religious value is to apply the spirits and thinking logics of the religion to observe, understand and assess all kinds of social and natural phenomena, and to take religious virtues and principles as the absolute measures of value and codes of conduct.

Being the main social consciousness system of Tibetan society, Tibetan Buddhism determines people's views of the world and life with its viewpoint of the society, life and virtue. The judgment of good and evil by Tibetan Buddhism is mainly measured by the stakes for all lives. The motive and act to bear the sufferings of other lives lie at the core of Tibetan Buddhist thoughts. When people live, they should keep in mind the happiness of others, and after they die, they should leave their bodies to the hungry vulture groups. Such a behavioral mode gives expression to the most fundamental value orientation of Tibetan Buddhist culture. In the guidance of such a moral value, the Tibetan Buddhism has formed the rules for

protection of natural environment, protection of flora and fauna, and prohibition of killing, stealing and fraud. These systems of rules have played a positive role in protection of grasslands, forests, water resources and other natural ecologies and wild lives in Qingzang Tibet Plateau and other regions, development of the society, the families and the social relations, and promotion of folklore and social customs. To be particular, it plays an indispensable part in perfection of virtue cultivation and psychological quality of Tibetan people.

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¹¹ Ibid.