

EX ORIENTE LUMINA
HISTORIAE VARIAE MULTIETHNICAE

**Festskrift tillägnad Juha Janhunen
på hans 61. födelsedag 12.2.2013**

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**Tiina Hyytiäinen, Lotta Jalava,
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Helsinki 2013

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BARGAINING FOR DEITIES AND CHATTELS: RECENT DEVELOPMENTS IN XIAHE AS REFLECTED IN THE LOCAL ANTIQUES TRADE

Juba Komppa

When one has seen all the palaces and “done” all the temples and tombs, there still remains a never failing source of interest and amusement in Peking – the curio shops. They are the happy hunting ground of the collector in search of things Chinese, beautiful or bizarre. Few strangers can resist the temptation to bargain for old porcelains, bronzes, embroideries, or whatever appeals to individual taste, and in the resident this habit, sooner or later, develops a special mentality. We shamelessly examine the pictures on each other’s walls, turn over our host’s dishes at table in search of marks to prove their origin, pick up his lacquer after dinner to feel its weight, boldly inquire the price of his latest acquisition. Such manners, which would be considered ill-bred in Paris or London, are tolerated and understood in the “old curiosity shop”, as a witty traveller once called Peking, and if you stay long enough you will acquire them yourself. (Bredon 1922: 410)

Even though Xiahe 夏河 has never approached Beijing in terms of scale, yet by serendipitous turn of events in 2007 it was one of the best “old curiosity shops” in China: far surpassing Beijing, both in terms of pieces on offer and ease of access, and was rivalled only by the antique market in Xian as far as I could tell.¹

For most people, whether living in or travelling to Xiahe, the most significant thing about the place is its famous monastery – the “Castle of the Lamas” as Ekvall *père* called Labrang *bla-brang* (Ekvall 1907: 48) – and the place’s reputation as a Little Tibet since its opening for tourism in the 1980s. The monastery has been there since its establishment in 1709, but unlike most people seem to think, history in the area predates the monastery: perhaps most tangibly in the form of some wonderful little bronzes the locals have unearthed in the nearby Ganjia 甘家 grasslands and which could be found for sale in one of the antique shops along the main street of Xiahe. While it is impossible to say where they originated from, some were Tibetan (a roundel with the figure of King Gesar

¹ I would like to thank Rosalene Schenberg and the anonymous referee for their careful reading of the article, corrections, and suggestions.

mounted on a horse), others more likely Mongolian (a totemistic wolf's head plaque), some perhaps Central Asian or Chinese (a roundel in the shape of a lotus flower). Some were certainly Buddhist – like a small bronze buckle used to fasten wooden sutra covers, with a seated Buddha on it, or the lotus flower – but others may well have been pre-Buddhist or shamanic, like the wolf's head and even in the figure of King Gesar one could see, simply, a nomadic rider or a warrior (see Samuel 2005: 149–150). Part of the charm of such things arises precisely from the possibility of multiple interpretations. It seems, however, safe to surmise that the bronze pieces were once lost and then found in the same places, separated by some six centuries or more. For the local Tibetans, somewhat sweepingly, they all come down to being *thogchags* (*thog-lcags*), ancient amulets.

These bronzes can also stand for the local attitude and the more general situation as regards antiques too. Local interest in old things is motivated above all by monetary considerations and the possibility of making – at least seemingly – easy money fast. At the same time the local knowledge about antiques remains very limited. This is so in part because the pieces are seen mostly as means to an end: that of making money. While the lack of resources to learn more about antiques – whether Tibetan, Chinese, or Mongolian – is a real issue for the locals as well, things seldom came to pass so as to make this a very relevant point. The motivation behind the local trade in old things has also given it its distinctive form and in keeping with it, the most commonly used reference materials are the various auction catalogues – both domestic and international – that trickle down against the flow on the trail that leads from the source to Sotheby's.

The only other awareness I came across in Xiahe during my fieldwork or on subsequent revisits was that of supply and demand. Antique dealers should be well aware of such matters – yet even this is not so obviously so, given the fact that many other things intimately connected to their trade and the very pieces they handle are regularly completely ignored; such as provenance, age, condition, or even at times the function of the piece in question. The actual source communities – in the case of Xiahe more often than not the nearby nomadic pastoralists, local villagers or monks or frequently some of the visiting pilgrims – have a fair notion of the desirability of the old things they may possess or carry, yet rarely do they have any notion of the realistic value of their pieces, either locally in Xiahe or in the wider art world of Tibetan and Asian antiques. Often, as I came to realise from a somewhat unlikely source, the main difficulty is simply in not making the connection between things and a completely different set of values.

For most ordinary Tibetans, who after all as a rule are very devout people, the idea of buying and selling religious items for profit remains quite alien. There have always been commercial transactions vis-à-vis Buddhist statuary, *thangkas*, even

the erection of whole religious edifices – but these have been couched in terms of donations or offerings. Even the price for a Buddhist statue or *thangka* was traditionally set individually for a customer and subject to their ability to pay. Spending on religious things made merit in turn. Deities were maintained a world apart from the more mundane commercial transactions, pure and simple. There was a bargaining of a different order when it came to sacred objects; just as there was a fair notion of use value in pricing of most chattel that were necessary for a Tibetan daily life, whether nomadic, settled, or monastic. Luxury items, then as now, were a category onto their own. Whatever else old things and antiques may be in the eyes of ordinary local Tibetans today, they certainly are luxuries – both in the sense that most people cannot afford them and, more importantly, they are all in all superfluous things in their daily lives. Certain families have some very old things that are considered treasures and are of great value, that is, amulets, *ga'u* boxes, utensil used during weddings and other important ceremonial occasions, and so on.

As for not connecting things, a Tibetan grandmother in Xiahe explained to me how it was only after getting to know me and seeing how I collected antiques that she began to take note of old things and see value in them; though for her, the value in such things continued to be my interest and delight in them, not anything financial. Yet she began to make connections between old things and the Chinese runners for architectural salvaging companies who had shown up in her home village located on the mountains down the valley eastward from Xiahe, and in nearby communities, looking and asking for anything old they could buy – domestic chattel, old latticework window panels, doors, and other architectural pieces. Apparently such items thus obtained were sold by Chinese architectural salvaging companies in Lanzhou and further to the east, ending up with individual clients, sometimes in antique shops and galleries, or often as décor in trendy restaurants, guesthouses and hotels wishing a touch of the Tibetan ethnic exotic. In contrast, the ethnic exotic ambiance in Xiahe is created by way of present-day Himalayan Tibetan arts and crafts, most often coming from Nepal, rather than using more locally authentic native traditional chattel.

Antiques and old things, thus, can tell us – besides the past – also much about contemporary life and changes in Xiahe in the present.

Most of the pieces fall into two sets of categories, namely: religious objects and nomadic chattel; although the boundaries are not always clear-cut, nor mutually exclusive. Whether one thinks of equestrian chattel or *thangkas* – the first instinctively associated with Tibetan nomads, the second with monks and monasteries – in fact most Tibetan households have and had *thangkas* (among the nomads, they were even preferred for their ease of transport to statuary on home altars), just as the saddle was arguably the most quintessential thing of

all things Tibetan: in so far as everyone and everything travelled and moved in Old Tibet on horseback or on yaks – lamas, royalty, merchants, traders, nobility, nomads, caravans, shepherds. If every household had thangkas, in a like manner they had saddles, too.

By 2007, motorbikes had replaced horses for most Tibetans in the Labrang area and thus old saddles were found for sale in large quantities in Xiahe. Most were simple and basic if elegantly fashioned seats made of pinewood; some of the very fine ones were made of solid burlwood, embellished with elaborately chiselled silver or gilt plaques. Saddle cushions were rare. The few I saw were beautifully crafted, one filled with fine wool, another with reeds; and both were studded with silver ornaments that had been lost or cut off when the cushions were abandoned. Sometimes the saddles came with old stirrup leathers still attached. The amount of saddles was matched by the number of stirrups on sale. Most stirrups were made of cast iron, often plain, yet frequently decorated with silver inlays. I never saw gilt ones, but did come across a fine pair made of brass. There were also saddles for pack animals, but these were never seen in the shops. Presumably such things were never offered to the dealers to buy, and they never thought of asking themselves; but these saddles were strikingly simple, with beautiful pure lines and ones made of good wood and in good condition would have sold well. Another curious omission amidst the items offered for sale were the stepped ladders made of a single log; although they were more common in the Tibetan areas across the Sichuan 四川 border, notably in Aba 阿坝, there was one by a Tibetan house along the road from Xiahe to Linxia 临夏, and there may have been more. Most likely it was for the simple reason that Tibetans had no interest in such pieces – old saddles or ladders – either to sell, buy, or keep. Significantly, such things were secular chattel and nothing has become as clear to me during my research as the fact that Tibetan culture equals Tibetan Buddhist religion.² This is the single point where the attitudes of the Tibetans themselves, Han Chinese and foreigners all converge. It remains the case to this day, even though several scholars in the field have made efforts to draw our attention to the secular. One of the most compelling, finely nuanced points was made by Andreas Gruschke (2001: 1):

In Tibetan areas cultural relics are mostly of a religious nature, although this should not lead to the assumption that Tibetan culture is entirely religious

² This would seem to ignore the many Tibetans who are Bon or who are deeply affected by local practices that include archery, horse races, and spirit medium rituals that do not seem to have a very firm connection to Buddhism. Even so, in most people's articulated views this nonetheless remains the case.

culture. Buddhism may play a major role in Tibetan society, as religion does in any traditional society, and religious belief of Tibetans may seem stronger than that of many other peoples, yet the people of Tibet have always been very rich in various customs and traditions which are not of a religious nature. The Tibetan oral folk-literature, handicrafts of daily life, ordinary housing, folk music offer beautiful examples of such secular culture.

For the Xiahe trade in antiques, this has meant that truly old secular chattel were readily available and at much lower prices than comparable religious pieces, for no one wished to keep it, and almost no one valued it. Yet, at the same time, it was impossible to tell whether the brass and copper utensils came from private homes, nomads' tents, monks' quarters, or the monasteries – unless they were obviously ceremonial or religious items or, as occasionally was the case, their nature was betrayed by the decorations on them. Similarly with rugs and carpets: like saddles, everyone had them and very few of them were ever actually Tibetan, made in the region or in Tibet proper. As with ceramics, most carpets were of Chinese manufacture or else came from Mongolia.

Xiahe has a strong Mongol connection: Labrang Monastery was founded on land donated by Mongol nobles from the Ganjia grasslands and endowed by the local ruling Mongol prince. Labrang's foremost lineage of incarnate lamas, the Jamyang Shepas ('jam-dbyangs bzhad-pa), continued to rule in the Mongol prince's name well into the 1950s. But today only a few telltale signs of the Mongol past remain. In the antique market, most of the now rare blue things – such as blue silks or prayer beads of blue Peking glass – are of Mongolian origin; knife cases with two knives instead of a single knife and a pair of chopsticks are an older design and oftentimes Mongolian, too. Given the high social status and wealth of the local Mongol nobility, some of the more striking pieces on sale in Xiahe once belonged to these aristocratic families: an Inner Mongolian kang table elaborately inlaid with darkwood; some lacquered and painted small, portable furniture for use on a kang or transportable on horseback. Occasionally one would come across pieces adorned with the four-clawed princely dragon: the always exceptional quality of such pieces combined with the fact that they were few and far in-between, suggested that they once belonged to Mongol princes or their extended families.

No doubt, many of the Mongolian pieces had come to Labrang in the old days by way of pilgrims from Inner and Outer Mongolia; in a like manner, there could have been a fair amount of chattel brought back from pilgrimages to Lhasa or upon return, in the case of the monks, after the completion of their studies in the great Central Tibetan monastic institutions; yet such pieces would obviously have been treasured for their connection with holy Lhasa and kept, and they may

have been rarer to begin with than one may assume, given the circumstances of a student or a pilgrim, financial and otherwise.

The image painted above is rather impressionistic, but nonetheless it conveys an idea of the variety and richness of the antiques available in Xiahe in 2007.

As for sacred, Tibetan Buddhist antiques, there exists a wide range. Of the genuinely old thangkas, most are in very bad condition or else of inferior quality already when created; at times the brocades they are mounted with are older and finer than the image itself. Although thangkas are perhaps the most iconic of all Tibetan objects, fine pieces rarely appear for sale locally in the antique shops. Instead, they are traded privately among the Tibetans. If they are monastic thangkas, they are kept within the monastery and rarely parted with. Fine old pieces are occasionally sold directly to collectors or dealers in Tibetan art in the Chinese first tier cities, or overseas.

Oftentimes it is easier to trace where the object came from, rather than where it was subsequently sold to. In the years 2007–2010, much of the ceremonial chattel from the Red Hat (Nyingma) Temple 红教寺 appeared for sale in a particular antique shop in Xiahe. Pressed for details, I was told the monks were selling their old implements and replacing them with new ones – a reasonable explanation as many religious establishments were wont to renovate themselves and the practical way to achieve this was to sell old things and use the proceeds to acquire new ones. Thus some very fine old wooden panels painted with Tibetan deities came from a small temple further down the Xiahe River valley. The monks wished to sell them to pay to have their temple decorated anew. Everyone involved seemed content: the monks with a newly refurbished temple, the antique dealer made some money as a middleman, and the buyer was pleased with a coup of genuine panels from a genuine Tibetan temple. The panels themselves, while not in mint condition, which made them less than desirable to the monks, the patina of age and the quality of the painting made the panels attractive to the collector. The dealer was indifferent to the mixed quality of the various panels which were of the same general dimensions, and therefore all priced uniformly. I was unable to learn what the true cost of any of these items had been for the dealers – their best kept secret. Xiahe dealers did not sell things at loss – although they occasionally gave a piece away as a gift. At the same time, most customers were given individual prices based on any number of considerations at the dealers' discretion.

It needs to be said, however, that the antiques rarely came from Labrang Monastery itself. There are sometimes items from the properties of recently deceased lamas; occasionally the monks sell some of their personal chattel, whether religious or secular in nature. The focus appears to be on ceremonial objects and garments when they are openly religious: *tsha-tsha* (*tsha-tsha*) and

torma (*gtor-ma*) moulds, ritual daggers, hand bells, parts of costumes used in 'cham dances, and so on. The ceremonial implements of the Red Hat Temple mentioned earlier was a rare case of wholesale deacquisition of dozens of pieces. There is, moreover, a distinction to be made between objects from the monastery and objects used in the monastery. On a more private side of things, there are seals, prayer rugs, garment chests, trinket or *tsampa* (*rtsam-pa*) boxes, bowls for tea, and various utensils.

Most dealers are Hui, with some Tibetans involved in the trade. The Muslim Hui have traditionally been the traders in the region and as native to the area they are all bilingual in the local Chinese dialect and Amdo Tibetan. The Hui dealers were the most successful, they also bought more directly from the Tibetans and sourced extensively and actively for antiques. The best dealer in town was frequently leaving for trips to Hezuo 合作 and areas southward towards the Sichuan border (Maqu 玛曲, Zhuoni 卓尼, Diebu 迭部). Another was a young Hui who spent weeks on trips in Aba and along the border between Sichuan and Tibet, invariably returning with some truly remarkable pieces. In contrast, the foremost Tibetan dealer went north: to the Ganjia grasslands and Linxia. The grasslands were Tibetan areas, but Linxia is primarily a Muslim city with most antique dealers being Hui Muslims, too. Though it is impossible to draw firm conclusions based on three people and their contacts, it is of note how the patterns cut across ethnic divides.

Moreover in 2007, Xiahe had a regional reputation as a place to source old things and antiques, attracting dealers from Xining 西宁 and Linxia to Xiahe to acquire new things for themselves. It was in part this trade-within-the-trade that explains in part the large stocks of several of the Xiahe Hui dealers at the time, their relatively high asking prices for walk-in tourist trade, and how they stayed profitably in business.

Trading has always been an offshoot of pilgrimages. Today, the pilgrims continue to visit Labrang, but the chief source of income for the monastery and the town is tourism. The division between tourist and traveller is somewhat moot point at times and in places; while some of the modern-day pilgrims blur these boundaries in both directions as well. The monastery still remains the *raison d'être* for the market town and is the source of its prosperity, as has been the case for nearly three centuries. As far as the local antique trade is concerned, the monastery brings potential customers to Xiahe, while the centuries of its past presence have successfully guaranteed a steady supply of pieces to sell.

Much of this has come to an end with the Tibetan riots in 2008, coinciding with the local changes and developments that arose from them. In hindsight,

2007 now stands as the last year of “old Xiahe”: carefree, alluring, very Tibetan, and filled with marvellous old things in comparison to a bleaker present.

The reasons for Xiahe’s currently plummeting fortunes in the antique trade are manifold. The abundance of pieces for sale in 2007 may have represented the high point in the supply of objects. Certainly, Xiahe and the greater Labrang area had untold riches in terms of old things and antiques that could be successfully tapped. That many dealers also sourced pieces further in the field as well, added to the local supply of antiques locally. Yet even under normal circumstances the demand would gradually surpass the supply. This in turn would render the remaining antiques rarer and their prices higher – as has been the case in Xiahe. As of this writing, the prices in Xiahe are much higher than those in Xian for comparable pieces, while the supply has been dwindling.

The main causes for Xiahe’s decline as an old curiosity shop, however, arise from the local events in 2008 and the changes brought on by the ongoing developments that have followed the Tibetan turmoil in Xiahe. Xiahe/Labrang was the severest affected location by the riots after Lhasa itself. The immediate consequence was the total closure of the place to all outsiders. The ban was subsequently partially lifted, applying only to foreign nationals thereafter. As far as Han Chinese were concerned, there was a widespread self-imposed ban on travel to Tibetan areas which were regarded as unsafe. Concurrently, the allure of Tibet and things Tibetan in Han eyes underwent a dramatic revision, not unlike what happened to China in 1989 vis-à-vis overseas tourists in the aftermath of Tiananmen.³ This had dire consequences for Xiahe as tourism came to a halt; moreover, Labrang Monastery stopped functioning with its former semblance of normality.

While some outcomes were certainly unintended for, all the disparate things came together to conspire against the earlier complex harmony between the old and the new, Tibetan and Chinese – people and things, cultural preservation and modernisation. Xiahe was effectively closed to foreign tourists from March 2008 until July 2009. In 2010 and 2011 there have been recurrent, more or less predictable, momentary restrictions.

For the antique trade, the absence of visitors put a stop to business. Most dealers carried on from December 2007 to July 2009, but many had closed down by late October 2010. This suggests that other causes were at play – not only the

³ Both China until 1989 and Tibet until 2008 were favoured destinations for overseas and Han Chinese tourists, respectively, but with disturbances, attendant violence and political volatility, both indicated and triggered by the events, China quickly became out of favour, and the same thing now happened to Tibet. (I lived in Beijing 1988–1993, in Xiahe 2007, and in Shanghai most of 2008–2011.)

lack of customers – since Xiahe reopened from July 2009. In the final analysis, some fundamental changes had occurred in tourism patterns.

As the economic situation in Xiahe became untenable in the course of spring 2008 and the place in urgent need to effect at least an impression of normality, the authorities opened Xiahe/Labrang for domestic tourists for day visits only. Tour operators soon responded by a new routine incorporating a visit to Labrang Monastery as part of a tour of Tibetan destinations in the Aba-Gannan 甘南-Qinghai 青海 area between Lanzhou 兰州, Xining, and Chengdu 成都. The tours reached Labrang in mid-morning, either from Lanzhou, Hezuo, Langmusi 郎木寺, or Rebkong 同仁; they stayed in Labrang for few hours, which was enough for a circumspect tour of the monastery with or without a lunch in one of the more out of town hotels or resorts. Meanwhile, individual travellers were actively discouraged from visiting Xiahe. The ban on overnight stays crippled the local tourism industry and in doing so much of the economy. With few individual travellers arriving, a drastic decrease in the number of pilgrims, and organised tours stopping at Labrang Monastery but essentially by-passing the Xiahe town, the antique trade suffered further.

Trade with the previously regular dealers from Xining and those visiting from the first tier cities was also affected. For Xining, there were severe restrictions affecting local travel in and out of Xiahe; the dealers in China proper, in turn, were reassessing their position in the face of the sudden loss of interest in things Tibetan by their predominantly Han Chinese clientele.

In July 2009 several changes were already apparent in Xiahe. The last surviving, largely intact, Mongolian princely palace was demolished that month in Wangfu 王府, Xiahe's old-fashioned Tibetan quarter. At the other end of the town, along the main street in Xiahe several grandiose plans were underway, including several faux Tibetan-style apartment blocks, the rebuilding or extension of several civic offices, and the recently completed extension of the hospital. Tellingly, the bus station still remained in its old form, unchanged since the summer of 1992.

Much of Xiahe/Labrang's charm was due to the presence of old, traditional style architecture in the Tibetan quarter of Wangfu, the monastery itself, and the adjacent monks' quarters. Even the Chinese part of Xiahe had, until quite recently, a peculiarly dated but pleasant look about it, notably in the form of the old shop houses lining sections of the main street and where shopping arcades were newer, the shops spilled out onto the steps and pavements in a colourful, happy abandon, presenting an attractive sight with distinctive character. The antique shops were located here, along the north side of the main street, in the section running from the White Stupa Hotel down to the old Muslim quarter.



Figure 1 On the threshold of changes: old shop houses and a new block along the main street in Xiahe in 2007.

Where culture is a major attraction, the situation is often wrought with inherent conflicts between cultural preservation and the desire to promote tourism. In contemporary China, there is moreover the official wisdom of modernisation and economic development as means to social and ethnic stability. The most dramatic and in my opinion singularly misguided recent move has been the demolition of a large part of the old Muslim Hui quarter running parallel to the main street along with the old shop houses that lined the street there on its north side. Not only is this an affront to the notion of Labrang as “the crossroads of four civilisations” – Tibetan, Mongolian, Chinese, and Hui – made famous by Paul Nietupski (1999), but also another example of how decisions are made along the monastic/vernacular divide in Xiahe and in so doing privileging a Tibetan past and a Chinese present-day.⁴

⁴ The Chinese/Tibetan divide is so pervasive that boundaries between what is Chinese and what is Western become quite blurred, if not outright overlooked. For example, clothing in Xiahe, as in many other Tibetan areas in China, is usually traditional Tibetan or modern Western – the only Chinese clothing is Mao suits or jackets worn by Muslim Hui or the Han Chinese, usually of older generation or else certain occupation such as manual labourers and peddlers, but also by some merchants. In terms of architecture, one comes across traditional Tibetan style (both religious and vernacular), traditional Chinese forms (there being an old tradition in Amdo of making use of Chinese architectural forms, especially in Tibetan monumental architecture; Chen 1986:

There had been small shops, among them many cobblers and the young Hui man's antique shop, too, one of the best in town. Also his brother, who had had a counter selling antiques in the tourist mall opposite the Overseas Tibetan Hotel, had closed down. Along the main street, half the antique shops run by Hui Muslims had closed. In some cases, as with the young Hui dealer, the ultimate reason had been the loss of premises; although, as in the case of his brother and no doubt several of the Hui merchants on the former antique strip along the main street, the lack of business had proved fatal between autumn 2009 and 2010.

The two best antique shops still remain. The older Hui dealer, who is generally regarded as having the best collection of pieces for sale, has managed to stay afloat through his ability to acquire new pieces in and selling them to Han Chinese dealers from Beijing and Guangzhou 广州 who have continued to purchase in significant quantities. He did complain in November 2010, however, on the rising prices in acquiring new stock, how good pieces are becoming very difficult to acquire and, although he did have many remarkable pieces, his prices had significantly risen. The young Tibetan dealer, in turn, is still open but his business is not good. He had very little new stock and was selling some of his remaining better pieces at discounted prices. Several old items I remembered from July 2009 were still in the shop, unsold.

With less to see and do beyond the monastery, more people may opt for a short en route visit to Labrang, spending a minimum of time in Xiahe, choosing to linger in Langmusi instead, for instance. A real danger in the present development of Xiahe is in it becoming another Hezuo: it is visited solely for the Milarepa Tower at the edge of the town and because Hezuo is a transport hub.

Even the monastery itself is not safe from changes: by November 2010 the last remaining major edifice in dilapidated condition but for its façade had had its courtyard cleared out and a new elaborate main gate had been constructed. The gate was still unpainted (or unvarnished), and the three-storey Jamyang Shepa Palace itself was still waiting to be renovated. The large courtyard is again being used for religious ceremonies: a functional space for monastic use, far more so than part of any consideration for the monastery as a tourist attraction. As it was – newly painted, gated and flagstoned in greys, whites, black and bare pine wood – it gave the precinct a more Jiangnan 江南 than a Tibetan look.

9–10; Gaubatz 1996: 203, 205; Gruschke 2001: 91) and the ubiquitous western style construction of (prefabricated) concrete, metal and glass are all evident. Much that is rather ugly and appears out of place in our eyes as not Tibetan is not truly Chinese either, but of Western or Soviet origin and influence; Lévi-Strauss' *Tristes Tropiques* (1955) is still a reality in much of China given the complexities of the country's ongoing modernisation.

A sad irony is that most Han Chinese tourists do not object any of these changes; it rather seems likely they will be seen as improvements. For local Tibetans, the renovation of any part of the monastery is a meritorious undertaking and if it results in new spaces that can be used for Tibetan Buddhist rituals and ceremonies, then not only it reaffirms the religion and its status (see Makley 2007), but in doing so it further accentuates the perception that Tibetan Buddhism is Tibetan culture.

What both the Tibetans and the Han Chinese choose to overlook or fail to see, is that the appeal of the religious practices and edifices in their new, more renovated than restored look is appreciated by Tibetans because function precedes form in monastic structures and something new in mint condition is preferable to that which is old and weathered.

In the secular part of the town, local people who live their lives there and are visiting only for a brief spell to experience the Tibetan ethnic exotic, may well prefer the new, modern housing and other perceived benefits and improvements redevelopment brings them.

Where then, in all this, are old things and antiques left? Ultimately, the local authorities and inhabitants have both struck a hard bargain, sacrificing the chattel for the deities. Labrang Monastery will be preserved as a working religious establishment and a tourist attraction: perhaps soon the only thing from the past standing in solitary splendour amidst modern expansion. Social stability is set to be pulled off through modernisation and economic development, its main outward signs being the current massive infrastructure, local housing and civic building projects in Xiahe. However complex such a harmony may prove to be, it appears to be the future chosen for Xiahe/Labrang.

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