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**Regimes of Temporality: China, Tibet and the Politics of Time in  
the Post-2008 Era**

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## Regimes of Temporality: China, Tibet and the Politics of Time in the Post-2008 Era

Journal:	<i>Media Culture and Society</i>
Manuscript ID	MCS-2019-409.R2
Manuscript Type:	Main Article
Keyword:	China, Tibet, Temporality, Media, Discourse, Ideology
Abstract:	<p>Following major protests across Tibet in 2008, Chinese state media published dozens of news stories that attempted to discredit protesters and reaffirm Chinese rule over Tibet. The relationship between Tibet's past, present and future was a central focus across these stories and has since become an increasingly prominent part of state media reportage about Tibet. While the politics of time are an important dimension of official discourse about Tibet, it remains insufficiently explored in theoretical and practical terms. This article examines the written and visual discourses that characterize Tibetan temporality across Chinese state media in the post 2008 era. Following Poell's (2018) work, I analyse how these media discourses attempt to construct a 'regime of temporality' in order to manage public opinion about Tibet and consolidate Chinese rule over the region. However, while the expansion of online technologies has allowed the state to reinforce its discourses about Tibet's place within the PRC, they have also provided Tibetans a limited but valuable space to challenge official representations. In doing so, this article contributes to discussions about official media strategies and ideological practices in contemporary China, and considers the disruptive potential of social media as spaces for Tibetan counter discourses.</p>

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3 In January 2009, the People's Congress of the Tibet Autonomous Region (TAR) voted  
4 to establish Serf Emancipation Day as a new public holiday to commemorate the end  
5 of Tibet's 'feudal serfdom system' and 'the start of Tibetan democracy' in 1959 (*China*  
6 *Daily*, 2018). The new holiday would be observed on March 28<sup>th</sup>, also marking the 50<sup>th</sup>  
7 anniversary of China's defeat of the Lhasa Uprising, which led to the dissolution of the  
8 Tibetan government and the Dalai Lama's flight into exile. Introduced just months after  
9 largescale protests erupted across Tibet<sup>1</sup> in 2008, the decision was criticised by  
10 activists and scholars as a distortion of history and a provocative move that could  
11 aggravate tensions at a time of already heightened Tibetan sensitivity (Graham-  
12 Harrison, 2009). Now a decade on, Serf Emancipation Day is held annually and  
13 receives considerable attention from Chinese state media.  
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29 This new holiday represents just one part of the Chinese state's intensified  
30 efforts to reaffirm its territorial claims over Tibet in the post 2008 era through a  
31 tightened grip on the narration of the region's past, present and future. Although stories  
32 of Tibet's transformation from 'hell on earth' to 'socialist paradise' under Chinese  
33 Communist Party (CCP) rule have featured across state media since 1959 (Powers,  
34 2004; Warner, 2011), this politics of time has become an increasingly prominent  
35 dimension of official representations of Tibet since 2008. The expansion of online  
36 technologies has been significant in this, providing the state new ways to consolidate  
37 its narratives about Tibetan temporality. However, online technologies have also  
38 provided Tibetans a limited but valuable space to challenge official representations.  
39 Given the emergence of online spaces as a new discursive battleground in the  
40 representation of Tibet, how has the state harnessed new media platforms to construct  
41 and promote discourses of Tibetan temporality, and how have Tibetans engaged these  
42 platforms to promote counter discourses?  
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3 This article examines written and visual discourses of Tibetan temporality  
4 across online media in post 2008 China. Using multimodal discourse analysis, I  
5 analyse the various ways in which Chinese state media mobilize time to reinforce  
6 Tibet's place within the PRC. Using Poell's (2018) term 'regime of temporality' to  
7 describe the convergence of power, ideology and media in the production and ordering  
8 of time, I argue that discourses of temporality are an important state media strategy  
9 that attempt to manage public opinion about Tibet while also contributing to broader  
10 efforts to reinforce Chinese rule over the region. I also examine how Tibetans use  
11 online platforms to contest official representations and create new spaces to re-  
12 imagine Tibet's past, present and future. In doing so, this article contributes new  
13 insights on the production of state power over Tibet, online media practices in China,  
14 and the disruptive potential of Tibetan counter discourses.  
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### 37 **Regimes of Temporality**

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43 If time describes particular moments or 'instants of now', then temporality is the  
44 passage of time, or the ways in which 'now' moments 'connect and relate to other  
45 periods in a backward (past) and forward (future) direction' (Dawson, 2014: 286). Ideas  
46 about time and temporality are shaped by political, economic, social, and cultural  
47 values and practices (Assman, 2013: 42), and have 'the power to control movements,  
48 to decide about beginnings and endings, [and] to set the pace' (Jordheim, 2014, 510).  
49 Time, then, can be deeply political, creating a temporal 'order of things' that regulates  
50 actions across space and bodies (Foucault, 1970: 320).  
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Scholars working across a range of socio-political contexts have theorised the significance of time for the state. Anderson (1983: 26), for example, analysed how nations are built around a shared sense of ‘a solid community moving steadily down (or up) history’. Similarly, Mitchell (1991: 95) argues that states can be understood as a process of ‘temporal arrangement’, deploying selective representations of past, present and future for political ends. Particularly relevant to contexts like Tibet, scholars in colonial and postcolonial studies describe time and temporality as key facets of colonial governmentality. The imposition of one time, posits Mignolo (2002: 67), functions ‘as a principle of order that increasingly subordinates places, relegating them to before or below from the perspective of the ‘holders (of the doors) of time’. Here, temporality produces hierarchy, structuring relations between the colonizer and the colonized by characterizing the colonized as ‘waiting’, ‘lagging behind’ or ‘catching up’ (Chakrabarty, 2000). Through the construction and management of chronological narratives, time represents a powerful political resource that reduces heterogeneous temporal experiences to a single, shared trajectory of unilinear progress in order to consolidate order and control.

Such national temporalities require constant reproduction. Bhabha (1994: 232) argues that any singular national temporality is founded on ‘disjunctive’ narratives, destabilized by the contradictions between those who write them and those who live them. States must constantly work to reproduce themselves through repetitious and recursive performances. This may be enacted through regular ‘national’ rituals such as education, public monuments, museums or commemoration days like Serf Emancipation Day.

As a powerful vehicle for shaping social, cultural and political practices, media is crucial to the production of discourses about temporality. Scholarship on the

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3 relationship between media and temporality has largely focused on how the expansion  
4 of media technologies has collapsed time-space distanciations and precipitated the  
5 'timeless time' of a global digitally networked and interconnected world (Harvey, 1989;  
6 Castells, 1996: 464). However, media is also a powerful site for generating and  
7 disseminating messages *about* temporality. In his work on political communication,  
8 Poell (2019: 2) argues that when specific media institutions, infrastructures, and  
9 practices come to dominate the media landscape, particular kinds of temporality are  
10 produced and become significant in shaping 'societal sense-making processes during  
11 particular periods.' As such, 'regime of temporality' describes how media, power and  
12 ideology intersect to shape 'temporal orientations' towards present, past, and future  
13 (Poell, 2019: 7).

### 34 35 **China, Temporality and State Media**

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41 Chinese state media provides a fitting case study on the convergence of media, power  
42 and temporality. Since the establishment of the PRC in 1949, discourses of temporality  
43 have been an important tool for promoting national cohesion. The new Communist  
44 state quickly dispensed with the five official time zones that had existed under the  
45 Nationalist government and introduced 'Beijing time' as the new standardized time  
46 regime, a political move designed to assert power and enhance control (Hassid and  
47 Watson, 2014). While a minor inconvenience for most, alignment to Beijing time in  
48 China's far western regions has been much more complicated, leading to the  
49 emergence of informal temporal arrangements, such as 'Urumqi time' (two hours  
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3 behind Beijing time). Time was also used to cultivate a national historical  
4 consciousness that celebrated China's linear progression from national humiliation to  
5 national salvation under the leadership of the CCP (Callaghan, 2004). These official  
6 narratives of Chinese history rested upon selected figures, images and dates,  
7 organised retrospectively 'with the self-professed purpose to prove the inevitability and  
8 legitimacy of Communist rule' (Wu, 2005: 134). However, while the Mao era centred  
9 on 'schemes of accelerated socialist transformation' and modernist certainties of linear  
10 development (Anagnost, 1997: 7), the new modes of production, consumption and  
11 socio-cultural norms that followed the economic and social reforms from the late 1970s  
12 onwards generated various forms of temporal dissonance and fragmentation,  
13 unsettling narratives of a homogenous national time (Dirlik and Zhang, 2001).

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New strategies were required to negotiate these conflicting narratives of  
temporality and consolidate a new national vision for the post-socialist era. While  
during the Mao era media was a key arena where the state could manipulate 'the  
spatial and temporal dimensions of news to suit the state agenda on certain issues,'  
media marketization during the reform era meant official discourses would now  
compete with monthly magazines, weekend supplements and tabloid papers (Sun,  
2001: 26). Online technologies have further challenged the state's attempts to  
maintain a monopoly over media narratives. As part of efforts to adapt to the country's  
fast-changing media landscape, China's propagandists have increasingly stressed the  
importance of official media going online and digitalizing content (Brady, 2009: 441).

Reconfigurations of power and ideology since the Hu-Wen era have renewed  
emphasis on ideology, propaganda and political discourse to enhance domestic  
stability and strengthen one-party rule (Klimeš and Marinelli, 2018). Online media  
management and content production are important elements of this, used to ensure

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3 that information reaching the public does not ‘inspire people to challenge party rule’  
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5 (Shirk, 2011: 3). These practices increasingly entail sophisticated methods of ‘digital  
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7 persuasion’, which aim ‘to sway public opinion in favour of the party’ (Repnikova, 2017:  
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9 147). As such, while the pluralisation of news media outlets has challenged the state’s  
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11 traditional stronghold over information production and dissemination, state media has  
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13 quickly adapted to secure their base through new forms of public opinion management.  
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18 While China’s propaganda system has largely moved towards banning fewer  
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20 reports and guiding more of them (Tai, 2014: 186), areas with high *shaoshu minzu*  
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22 (broadly translated as ‘ethnic minority’) populations remain disproportionately targeted  
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24 by censorship. Bamman, O’Connor and Smith (2012: 2) claim that Weibo messages  
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26 originating in Tibet, Qinghai and other areas in western China are subject to much  
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28 higher deletion rates (53%) than those in eastern provinces (ca. 12%). In March 2018,  
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30 government authorities instructed media platforms to ‘pay attention to online  
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32 information related to Tibet’ and advised that any ‘harmful information’ be promptly  
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34 reported to avoid stirring up ‘negative public sentiment regarding Tibet’ (China Digital  
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36 Times, 2018). This combination of heavy censorship, ideology and propaganda has  
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38 serious implications for media discourses about Tibet. As this article demonstrates,  
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40 state media’s online production of a regime of temporality is one notable example,  
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42 illustrating the intersection of media, power and ideology to guide public opinion and  
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44 consolidate state power over Tibet.  
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## 56 **Tibet and Discourses of Temporality**

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3 Of the more than one billion people that make up the population of the PRC today, 92  
4 per cent are Han, while the remaining 8 per cent are officially recognised as *shaoshu*  
5 *minzu*. Scholars have noted how *shaoshu minzu* are normatively ordered within an  
6 ideological system where the Han are represented as the advanced, modern *minzu*  
7 (broadly translated as 'ethnic group' or 'nationality'), and *shaoshu minzu* as the  
8 backward, child-like and even exotic ethnic other (Schein, 1997; Harrell, 1996;  
9 Gladney, 1991;). Ethnic difference, then, is deeply temporal, with *shaoshu minzu*  
10 positioned at different evolutionary stages on the path to national socialist  
11 modernisation and in need of guidance from the 'elder' Han to progress.  
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25 Perhaps nowhere in the PRC are the politics of *minzu* and time quite so  
26 prominent as in the case of Tibet. While Tibetans are subject to the same temporal  
27 hierarchy as other *shaoshu minzu*, they contend with additional issues surrounding  
28 Tibet's historical relationship with China. Although the Chinese state continues to hold  
29 steadfastly to its claims that Tibet has been an inalienable part of China since the Yuan  
30 Dynasty, this has been variously challenged (Shakya 1999; Powers, 2004; Sperling,  
31 2009a). Further intensified by public calls for independence, the Tibetan government  
32 in exile, and the international reputation of the Dalai Lama, the issue of history has  
33 become a point of particular sensitivity in China's campaign to assert its rule over Tibet  
34 (Sperling, 2009a: 25).  
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48 Time has not always been such a prominent component of Chinese  
49 propaganda about Tibet. After the CCP asserted control over the region in 1951  
50 through 'peaceful liberation', it was decided that Tibet would be gradually incorporated  
51 into the newly established state (Chen 2006: 63). The 1951-1959 period was  
52 characterised by moderation where a new socialist Tibet was to be built under the  
53 combined leadership of the CCP, the State Council, the Dalai Lama, Panchen Lama,  
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3 and CCP Tibet Working Committee (Zhang, 1957). While 'feudal serfdom' is  
4 occasionally mentioned in media pieces about Tibet during this time, much greater  
5 emphasis is placed upon the need to "raise revolutionary consciousness and  
6 resolutely oppose imperialism" (People's Daily, 1952). This changed in 1959 following  
7 the Lhasa Uprising, which marked a decisive challenge to Chinese rule in Tibet, and  
8 'elicited clearer and more forceful formulations of the PRC's position on Tibet's  
9 historical status' (Sperling, 2009: 28).

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12 Since 1959, state media has been an important element in reinforcing Chinese  
13 rule over Tibet. In the immediate aftermath of the Lhasa Uprising, state media  
14 produced a wave of articles that variously proclaimed 'backward, dark and brutal old  
15 Tibet' had 'already become the past' (*People's Daily*, 1959). The same year *Millions*  
16 *of Serfs Arise* (*Baiwan nongnu zhanqilai*, 1959), a documentary about democratic  
17 reform, was released. This was followed by *The Serf* (*Nongnu*, 1963), a film depicting  
18 a mute Tibetan serf who regains his voice following the abolishment of 'feudal serfdom'.  
19 Such references to transformation in post 1959 Tibet continued throughout the Mao  
20 era across literature and the arts (Dondhup, 2017: 106). The story of Princess  
21 Wencheng, one of the Chinese consorts sent to the Tibetan emperor Songtsen Gambo  
22 in the 7<sup>th</sup> century to pacify relations along China's borders, became especially  
23 prominent at this point, and has since been variously adapted in folk songs, operas,  
24 books, film, and television to emphasise 'ethnic unity' (*minzu tuanjie*) and Tibet's  
25 historic dependency on China (Warner 2011; Bulag, 2002). Such historical instances  
26 of contact between China and Tibet are presented as 'evidence of Chinese  
27 overlordship' and used to reinforce ideological claims that Tibet has belonged to China  
28 for centuries (2004: 35). Between 1987 and 1989, responding to protests in Lhasa  
29 commemorating the 30<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Lhasa Uprising, state media again

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3 produced dozens of pieces reiterating that Tibetans were 'part of the Chinese nation'  
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5 (Zhu, 1989) and emphasising that 'only through following the path to socialism can  
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7 Tibet have a bright future' (Lu, 1989). More recently, monuments (Harris, 2012) and  
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9 museums (Dodge and Keränen, 2018) have also become core sites in shaping public  
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11 memory and making temporality-based claims about the legitimacy of Chinese rule in  
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13 Tibet.  
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18 While not completely new, representations of Tibetan temporalities across  
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20 Chinese state media have increased sharply since Spring 2008 when protests again  
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22 erupted across Tibet. These protests were a response to frustrations, inequalities and  
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24 broken promises arising from the 'Open the West' (Xibu da kaifa) campaign, which  
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26 began in 2000 and seeks to advance economic development across China's western  
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28 regions, and were also an expression of longstanding issues surrounding the  
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30 legitimacy of Chinese rule in Tibet (Hillman, 2014; Shakya, 2012). The unrest  
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32 continued across Tibet for months with demonstrations by monks and students,  
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34 clashes between Tibetans and the police, and dozens of self-immolations since 2009  
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36 (Hillman, 2014: 54). These events attracted considerable international attention,  
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38 challenging official claims of ethnic unity and state legitimacy, and resulting in an  
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40 increasingly hard-line position on Tibet's historical status (Sperling, 2009a). Since then,  
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42 state media has played a key role in reaffirming and galvanizing Han support for  
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44 Chinese rule across the region. As this article shows, online spaces have become an  
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46 important new avenue for the dissemination of these discourses, with visual images  
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48 playing a central part in the production of the state's regime of temporality for Tibet.  
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## Methodology

This article analyses online publications from China's major state media such as *People's Daily*, *Xinhua*, and *CCTV (Zhongguo zhongyang dianshi-tai)* and other influential official media platforms. Articles were collected through *China National Knowledge Infrastructure's (CNKI) China Core Newspapers Full-text Database*, which covers China's main official news agencies. For texts produced by Tibetans, I used Tibetcul, one of the most popular and longest running Sinophone Tibetan websites in China and covering a wide range of topics, including literature, current events and religion. Tibetcul is particularly useful for this study because it is dedicated to promoting dialogue about Tibet across China. I also use Weibo, one of China's main social media platforms, focusing again on Tibetan participation in broader Sinophone discourses about Tibetan temporality. As such, this study is not a comprehensive overview of all Tibetan discourses of temporality, focusing instead on Tibetan efforts across online spaces to advance counter discourses to Chinese audiences.

Seeking to examine how the state has intensified its temporal claims over Tibet in the wake of the 2008 unrest and how it is increasingly using new online media forms to achieve this, this paper focuses on texts produced between March 2008 and March 2019. Texts were searched by headlines that included democratic reforms, old Tibet, new Tibet, and other terms relating to Tibet's temporal development. Searching by headline helped to downsize search results and build a corpus of texts that engaged most substantially with the topic (Sriwimon and Zilli, 2017: 140). The CNKI database produced 671 state media pieces, from which a sample of 30 were randomly selected

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3 for analysis. For texts produced by Tibetans, a total of 183 were found, of which 30  
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5 were again randomly selected for analysis.  
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9         Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) and Critical Multimodal Discourse Analysis  
10 (CMDA) were used to analyse written and visual texts. Both approaches examine  
11 ideological practices across political speeches, news items and other forms of media  
12 texts in order to demystify systems of power. While CDA focuses on written and verbal  
13 practices of language (Wodak, 1995), CMDA investigates the role of visual semiotics  
14 in media texts such as images and videos (Van Leeuwen and Jewit, 2014). Given the  
15 centrality of visual images across official and Tibetan online discourses of temporality,  
16 combining CDA and CMDA provides a suitable approach for examining how different  
17 forms of media texts work together to create and reproduce different kinds of  
18 ideological and political power. Following Wang's (2014) adaption of Fairclough's  
19 three-dimensional discursive analysis approach of description, interpretation and  
20 explanation, texts were then analysed for references to agents, time and tense,  
21 modality, and syntax, as well as visual composition and corporeal elements such as  
22 subjects, objects, instruments, and activities.  
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### 47 **Chinese State Media Discourses**

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53 During and immediately after the Tibet protests in March 2008, Chinese state media  
54 focused on the number of non-Tibetan casualties and damage to property, blaming  
55 'separatists' inside and outside Tibet for the unrest, and commending security forces  
56 for restoring order. The subsequent weeks witnessed dozens of state media pieces  
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3 attempting to deflect western media's accusations of human rights abuses as  
4 explanations for the protests by emphasising the progress Tibet has made under CCP  
5 rule. It is here that written and visual depictions of Tibet's past, present and future  
6 become particularly prominent across state media discourse.  
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13 Most state media reportage about Tibet make at least some passing reference  
14 to the changes that have taken place across Tibet since 1959. Since 2008  
15 considerably more attention has been given to contrasting 'old Tibet' (before 1959)  
16 and 'new Tibet' (after 1959). These articles place significant emphasis on stories of  
17 oppression and suffering in 'old Tibet' to showcase what they claim was the cruelty of  
18 Tibet's political and social order prior to 1959. This can be observed from news story  
19 titles alone:  
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30 Tibetan History: The Tragic Life of Tibetan People under Feudal Serfdom  
31 (*Xinhua*, 2008)  
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34 The Dark, Brutal Serfdom System of Old Tibet (*Xinhua*, 2009)  
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38 Valuable Historical Cases and Evidence: The Feudal Serfdom Was One of  
39 the Darkest Pages in the History of Humankind's Development (*People's*  
40 *Daily*, 2015)  
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45 Bearing striking similarity to pieces used in the aftermath of the Lhasa Uprising, state  
46 media reportage since 2008 uses language such as 'dark', 'cruel' and 'tragic' to  
47 describe Tibet prior to democratic reform. However, these pieces often go much  
48 further than those of 1959 by including detailed accounts of Tibetans 'doing labour in  
49 shackles' (*People's Daily*, 2015), being 'beaten to death' (*People's Daily*, 2013), and  
50 torture practices such as 'gouging out eyeballs, chopping off hands, cutting off feet,  
51 and skinning' (*People's Daily* (2008b)). New discourses also characterise 'old Tibet' as  
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3 an exceptional and unparalleled regime of tyranny, 'even worse than the serfdom of  
4 medieval Europe' (*People's Daily*, 2008a). As a further innovation upon past media  
5 strategies, these pieces generally include several photographs to reinforce 'old Tibet'  
6 as a place of extreme brutality. Images regularly feature whips, amputated limbs, and  
7 people in chains to visualise abuse and suffering under Tibet's 'feudal serfdom' (Fig.  
8 1), along with detailed written accounts of how such tools were used by Tibetan  
9 landowners to torture Tibetan 'serfs' (Fig. 6).  
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41 *Fig. 1 Images of implements used to torture Tibetan 'serf' (Xinhua, 2009)*

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44 Representations of 'old Tibet' often appear alongside glowing depictions of 'new  
45 Tibet'. While 'old Tibet' is represented as a 'hell on earth' full of oppression,  
46 backwardness, and darkness, 'new Tibet' is depicted as democratic, free and reaping  
47 the benefits of socialist transformation. Within this narrative, 1959 is referenced as a  
48 'turning point' (*zhuanzhedian*), when Tibetans 'overturned' (*fanshen*) their fate under  
49 a 'feudal serfdom' and embarked on a new path towards socialist modernisation under  
50 CCP rule. 1959 is described as a pivotal moment in Tibet's 'liberation' from 'feudal  
51 serfdom' through repeated references to 'Tibetan society prior to 1959' (Hu, 2016) and  
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3 'after Tibet's democratic reform in 1959' (*Tibet.cn*, 2016). This constructs a clear  
4 temporal distinction between 'old Tibet' and 'new Tibet', positioning them as 'radically  
5 opposed epochs' (Kolås, 1998: 22).  
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10 The visualisation of Tibetan temporality is especially manifest in state media  
11 juxtapositions of 'old Tibet' and 'new Tibet'. The most well-known example of this is  
12 'Contrasting New and Old Tibet', a series of short videos produced by Tibet TV, the  
13 official television channel of the TAR (Tu, Zhao and Li, 2015). Running from 2012 to  
14 2017, these videos were broadcast daily on Tibet TV and were also posted to CCTV's  
15 website. Centring around the personal testimonies of older Tibetans, the videos begin  
16 by describing experiences of suffering in 'old Tibet', typically focusing on instances of  
17 hard labour, lack of food and lack of land ownership, before shifting to describing the  
18 progress and happiness experienced after democratic reform (Fig. 2). In one episode  
19 (CCTV, 2017), an elderly Tibetan woman recounts her experience to a group of young  
20 Tibetans about the 'hardships of old Tibet' where people did not have enough food or  
21 warm clothes. The story quickly moves on to describing the economic development  
22 brought to her village by the CCP (Fig. 3). The recurrent use of black and white images  
23 for 'old Tibet' and colour images for 'new Tibet' throughout these videos is an important  
24 media strategy that further enhances the sense of temporal rupture between the two  
25 eras, while the use of personal stories and first-hand accounts from those who  
26 experienced Tibet before and after 1959 serves to humanise propaganda work, and  
27 boost overall persuasiveness.  
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Fig. 2 Screenshots from 'Contrasting New Tibet and Old Tibet' (CCTV, 2016)



Fig. 3 Screenshots from 'Contrasting New and Old Tibet' (CCTV, 2017)

These discourses reinforce a temporal order based on a linear story of progress since 1959, but also look to the future. Tibet is characterised as 'thriving on a path of rapid modernization' (*Xinhua*, 2019) and striving towards 'an even brighter future' (*People's Daily*, 2019). Tibet's future and the CCP are closely bound together across these texts. In one *Tibet Daily* (2018) piece, Mingji Cuomu, the vice president of Tibet Medical College, is quoted as saying:

Without the Chinese Communist Party, there could be no new Tibet. Only the Chinese Communist Party can save Tibet and develop Tibet.

Similar discursive techniques are found across official texts. One white paper, widely circulated across state media, declared that democratic reform in Tibet was an

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3 'historical inevitability' and proclaimed that 'the destiny of Tibet has always been  
4 closely connected with the destiny of the great motherland and the Chinese nation'  
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6 (*China Daily*, 2015). Here, the discursive containment of Tibet within the march  
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8 towards Chinese socialist modernity is especially evident. Yet, despite its apparent  
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10 'historical inevitability', Tibet's future requires constant defence from external threats.  
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12 Warnings about what Tibet might become were the 'Dalai lama clique' to regain power  
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14 are a common feature across these media pieces, often centring on a return to 'old  
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16 Tibet' through the re-establishment of 'a theocratic feudal serfdom,' as Zhu Weiqun, a  
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18 former deputy head of the CCP's United Front Work Department, has cautioned  
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20 (*People's Daily*, 2009). These discourses attempt to persuade readers of the necessity  
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22 of rejecting what they argue to be the regressive aspirations of 'separatists' in the  
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24 interest of protecting Tibet from once again becoming a 'hell on earth.' In this way,  
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26 they serve as a powerful discursive tool in constraining, excluding and undermining  
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28 alternative narratives of Tibetan temporalities that contradict those of the state.  
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36 While often echoing discursive strategies from 1959 and 1989, state media is  
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38 increasingly sophisticated and diverse in its discourses about Tibet with new media  
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40 technologies enabling new ways of visualising Tibetan temporalities. Tibetan pop  
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42 music and music videos, for example, have been variously appropriated and co-opted  
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44 by the state to reinforce official discourses (Morcom, 2018). In 2019, to mark Serf  
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46 Emancipation Day, the *People's Daily* realised a music video to the tune of 'Me and  
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48 My Motherland'. Featuring several well-known Tibetan celebrities and 'model workers',  
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50 the video opens with an elderly woman visiting an exhibition depicting life in a Tibetan  
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52 village before and after democratic reform. In the next scene, Tibetans gather on the  
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54 streets to sing together as they wave Chinese flags (fig. 4). The video was widely  
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3 circulated by state media across Weibo and Wechat, and various spinoffs were  
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5 produced for different cities across Tibet.  
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25 *Fig. 4 Images of 'Me and My Motherland' music video (Tibet.cn, 2019)*

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28 With new opportunities afforded by social media platforms, state media official  
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30 accounts have also started to engage with other forms of online technologies in their  
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32 coverage of Serf Emancipation Day. In 2019, alongside livestreaming parades in  
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34 Lhasa and Shigatse, *People's Daily*, *Xinhua* and other official media platforms used  
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36 the hashtag #2019XizangBaiwanNongnuJiefangJinianri# (2019 Anniversary of the  
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38 Liberation of Tibet's One Million Serfs) to increase the visibility of official celebrations  
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40 across social media. State media posts on Weibo and Wechat have also included clips  
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42 from documentaries such as '50 Years of Tibet's Democratic Reforms' (*Xizang minzhu*  
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44 *gaige 50 nian*) (CCTV, 2009) as embedded GIFs (graphic interchange format). In this  
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46 way, Chinese state media are constantly adapting new and diverse media  
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48 technologies to reinforce the state's regime of temporality over Tibet and consolidate  
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50 Chinese rule and legitimacy.  
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## Tibetan Counter Discourses

Like people everywhere, Tibetans have been narrating their own histories for centuries. Shaped by internal and external logics, contradictions, and conflicts across different time and space, these narrations variously centre the reincarnation of eminent lamas (Makley, 2018: 183), monastic moral development and decline (Caple, 2019), nature stories (Yeh, 2009) and so on. Following increased references to Tibet's past, present and future across Chinese state media in the post 2008 era, counter discourses have become another popular form of time-telling among Tibetans in online spaces.

Just as online media provide a space for the state to produce and circulate discourses of temporality in order to consolidate Chinese rule and legitimacy in Tibet, so too does it offer Tibetans a platform to form and disseminate counter discourses to audiences across China. Despite censorship and the threat of arrest for those who cross the line of permissible expression in China's online spaces, creative strategies and coded references have allowed even the most sensitive of topics, such as self-immolation, to be discussed (Robin, 2012: 123). The use of visual images is one such strategy that enables Tibetans to engage state representations of Tibetan temporality.

Sharing photo essays of 'old Tibet' is a common online practice. These essays cover everything from fashion, sports, the Tibetan army, to landscapes and architectural landmarks in early 20<sup>th</sup> Tibet century. Many of the images used in these photo essays appear to have been sourced from *The Tibet Album*, a virtual collection of over 6000 images of early 20<sup>th</sup> century Tibet at Pitt Rivers Museum, University of Oxford. However, the ways in which these photo essays are compiled rarely reflect their original arrangement on *The Tibet Album*. Instead, the essays are often highly

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3 de-contextualised, with little information beyond a location and the year the image was  
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5 taken, and are compiled in such a way to tell a story about one particular issue.  
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9 One of the most influential and active producers of photo essays is Lingka  
10 Luorong Zeren, a Tibetan man from Dartsedo (Ch. Kangding). Since 2007 Zeren's has  
11 posted over 300 essays. Of these, his photo essays are the most popular and attract  
12 thousands of views and shares. His essays portray Tibet as a functional political and  
13 economic system and as a globally integrated and culturally rich society. They feature  
14 marketplaces in Lhasa, soldiers, monks, pilgrims, entertainers, government officials of  
15 the Qing and *Kashag* (the governing council of Tibet under the Qing), and Tibetan  
16 women working in various contexts (Fig. 5) (2013a). In one of his most popular essays,  
17 Zeren (2013b) presents images of Tibetans wearing Chinese and Western clothing,  
18 using microphones and gramophones, and describes such practices as 'modern'  
19 (*xiandai*) (Fig. 6). Through written and visual descriptions, Tibetans are portrayed as  
20 active participants in their history, rather than wholly oppressed and exploited victims.  
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Fig. 5 Images from 'Old Photographs of Lhasa: Fashion in the 1940s (Zeren, 2013a)

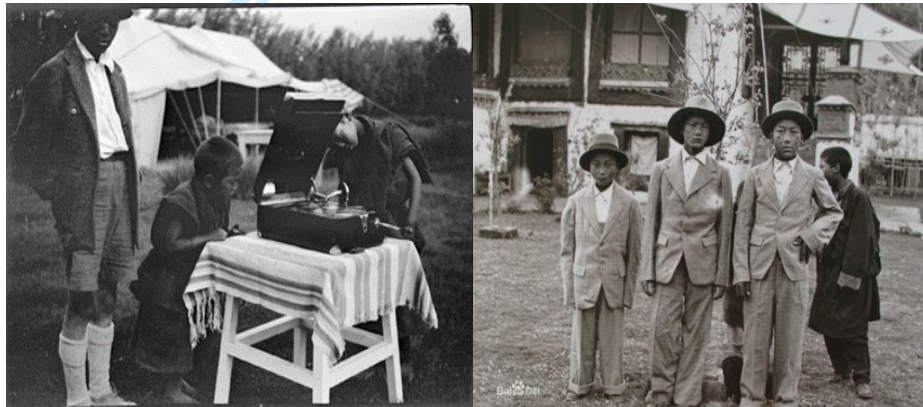


Fig. 6 Images of 'Old Photographs of Lhasa: Fashion in the 1940s (Zeren, 2013b)

These essays omit any mention of 'feudal serfdom', torture or suffering, all of which, as seen above, dominate official representations of 'old Tibet'. Often indicating a wider context within which less factually accurate accounts are produced and circulated, Zeren and his audience present 'old photo' essays as portraying 'real history' (*zhenshi de lishi*) and an alternative to state propaganda. The images are described as a way of 'pulling history and the present closer together' and as 'a bridge that link the past and the present.' In contrast to state media discourses of temporality that focus on clear temporal distinctions between 'old Tibet' and 'new Tibet', Tibetan counter discourses instead articulate desire for connection and continuity across time. Against an official discourse that continually and actively works to discourage positive

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3 associations with 'old Tibet', these discourses allow Tibetans to snatch 'from the  
4 hidden histories another place to stand in, another place to speak from' (Hall 1991:  
5 123). Such photo essays restore elements of Tibet's past that have been erased by  
6 state media. In doing so, they 're-story' the past' and create new spaces to "re-imagine"  
7 the future' (Espinoza and Harris, 1997:1585).  
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15 Visual images are sometimes used to challenge state media representations in  
16 even more direct ways. After state media accounts on Weibo marked Serf  
17 Emancipation Day in 2017 with their usual selection of images of Tibetans being  
18 exploited and punished by landowners in 'old Tibet', a number of Tibetan accounts  
19 contested this narration of Tibet's past by posting images of the Qing Dynasty. Xire  
20 Duoji, a Tibetan scholar and active Weibo user, responded to one *CCTV News* post  
21 by arguing that 'the social order of old Tibet and that of the Qing Dynasty were the  
22 same; they were both feudal serfdoms,' critiquing the state's persistent singling out of  
23 'old Tibet' as uniquely brutal. Nine Flavours of Anshen Tea (*Jiuwei Anshen Cha*), a  
24 popular Tibetan Weibo account dedicated solely to sharing pictures of Tibet prior to  
25 the Chinese invasion, posted several images from the Qing era of people being  
26 tortured (Fig. 7), and wrote that 'these images are also of those things in the Qing  
27 Dynasty, but that is absolutely not the whole story of the Qing Dynasty.' Anshen Tea's  
28 post was shared hundreds of times among Tibetans, variously recaptioned with  
29 phrases such as 'Old China: One billion serfs' and 'Have the Han serfs been liberated  
30 yet?' Here, Tibetans overtly and playfully mimic state media discourses and ridicule  
31 the distortive ways in which 'old Tibet' is represented. In doing so, these written and  
32 visual texts succeed in disrupting the selective approach that characterises state  
33 media discourses and problematize claims about 'old Tibet' as an unparalleled regime  
34 of tyranny.  
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*Fig. 7 Nine Flavours of Anshen Tea's Weibo post on Serf Emancipation Day, 2017*

Tibetan counter discourses can at times present problematic readings of Tibet's past. There is, for example, a largely uncritical and even rosy treatment of the British imperial presence in 20<sup>th</sup> century Tibet, which was influential in enabling the PRC to eventually claim Tibet in the way that it did (McGranahan, 2017: 94). Some Tibetans also criticise these online practices for what they see as a tendency to glorify Tibet's past. As Sperling (2009b) noted, most Tibetans would indeed admit that the social structures of Tibet prior to the Chinese invasion were highly inegalitarian but would also stop far short of accepting 'the cartoonish, cruel 'Hell-on-Earth' that Chinese propaganda has portrayed it to be.' Despite some of the historical inaccuracies and idealisations of the past, Tibetan online discourses succeed in unsettling official accounts of 'old Tibet'. They thus present new opportunities for public dialogue about the selective terms of representation upon which China's regime of temporality around Tibet is built, and hold transformative potential to re-imagine Tibet's past, present and future.



## Conclusion

This article has examined written and visual online discourses of Tibetan temporality in post 2008 China. Focusing on the ways in which the Chinese state has intensified its efforts to reaffirm its legitimacy and territorial claims over Tibet in the 2008 era, I identified the convergence of power, ideology and media in representations of Tibet's past, present and future and how they work to secure Tibet within the homogenous national time of the Chinese state. I also demonstrated the ways in which visual images have become an important ideological tool in producing selective and constructed realities to reinforce official narratives about Tibet's 'proper' place within Chinese time. Following Poell's (2019) work, I argue that these discourses produce a regime of temporality that imposes upon Tibet a narrative of steady linear progression from 'hell on earth' towards Chinese socialist modernity, encasing Tibet within a totalizing Chinese national time while also constraining, and discrediting alternative narratives of the region's past, present and future. Exercising tight regulation over the possibilities of imagining Tibetan temporality, these discourses are constantly adapting to new media technologies that enable the production of increasingly sophisticated forms of propaganda to maximise online visibility, attention and audience engagement in order to consolidate state power over Tibet.

As we have seen, online spaces also provide an important site for the production and circulation of Tibetan counter discourses. By appropriating the state's penchant for visualising Tibetan temporality to evidence the 'brutalities' and 'cruelties'

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3 of 'old Tibet' as a feudal serfdom and 'new Tibet' as a haven of democracy, freedom  
4 and socialist modernity, Tibetans use visual images to challenge official  
5 representations, fracturing the constructed certainties of national temporality. These  
6 discourses also create important new spaces to recover and reclaim narratives that  
7 the state has actively sought to erase. Yet, apart from a few mild confrontations with  
8 state media on Weibo, these posts are often ambiguous in their overall purpose,  
9 offering little detail to explain how these images should be read or what they mean for  
10 understanding Tibet's past, present and future. In this sense, like much content across  
11 China's online spaces, 'old photo' sharing occupies 'an in-between space that is  
12 neither benign online entertainment nor overt political activism' (Yang et al, 2015: 212).  
13 Allowing Tibetans to avoid 'the penetrating gaze of the state while simultaneously  
14 delivering a political critique' (Thornton, 2002: 671), the ambiguity of the images also  
15 has the potential to invite viewers to make their own interpretations of the images to  
16 imagine what could have been and indeed what still could be. However, despite these  
17 creative tactics to challenge official discourses of Tibetan temporality, Tibetans  
18 continue to face various issues that diminish their capacity to gain online visibility,  
19 attention and legitimacy. Online spaces are a site of major power asymmetries.  
20 Alongside the difficulties of competing with the online resources, increasingly  
21 sophisticated tactics of digital persuasion, and the reach of the state, even greater  
22 challenges include heavy censorship and rising risks for challenging authority under  
23 President Xi Jinping. What these developments will mean for online spaces as a  
24 discursive battleground over the representation of Tibet's past, present and future  
25 remains to be seen.  
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## Notes

1. While the Chinese state uses 'Tibet' (Xizang) to refer to the TAR, Tibetans' use of 'Tibet' in generally covers Greater Tibet. What constitutes 'Tibet' then is a deeply political issue, with the potential to challenge or consolidate Chinese rule over Tibet and reaffirm or displace traditional Tibetan conceptions of place and nation. This issue has also been the subject of much scholarly debate (see Goldstein and Kapstein, 1998; McGranahan, 2003; Rabgey, 2006) This article uses 'Tibet' to refer to the area that encompasses Ü-Tsang, Kham and Amdo, the names of Tibet's 'three provinces' (*chol kha gsum*), that are now spread across the TAR, Qinghai, Sichuan, Gansu, and Yunnan, while also provided specification where necessary. In doing so, it also aims to capture the current reality of Tibet's colonisation and Tibetan sentiment about what constitutes Tibet.

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