Tibetan Nationality: 
Tourism, Commodification, and Souvenirs

During the height of the tourist season in Tibet, masses of Chinese tourists course through the crowded streets of Lhasa; many with new professional-grade cameras slung around their necks ready to take high-quality shots of the scene playing out before them. Brightly colored prayer flags hang from roof tops and across streets, the buildings seem old and tattered most with white faded paint and red trim, a Tibetan style of architecture most prominently seen in monasteries (Figure 1). Tibetans wearing traditional garb representative of their region within the Tibetan cultural realm (Figure 2) stand out as the “other” in this place. Chinese tourist gaze from the sidelines amidst the busy markets and tourist sites in Lhasa. Pilgrims from all parts of the plateau (as well as some international) walk the Kora (a path circumambulating a monastery) with their prayer beads (mala) in hand or prayer wheels swinging as they speak a mantra, continually gaining positive karma. Monks wearing iconic red robes make their way to a shop to buy offering cups or butter candles to be used as a religious tool at one of the nearby

Figure 1. The Barkhor scene in Lhasa. Jokhang temple upper right. Photo by Author (2014).
monasteries. Increasingly, this is the scene of major tourist areas in Tibet; locals pursuing their religious traditions while spectators view as if they were looking on at a recently discovered culture.

Westerners, Tibetan, Han, minorities from South Asia, and the Muslim population occupy the Barkhor market in Lhasa each with their own agendas. Westerners are relatively unseen amongst the tourists in Tibet. Tibetans either on pilgrimage, living among the tourists, or visiting religious sites as a part of their everyday routine are what one might expect to see in the capital of Tibet — Tibetans acting “Tibetan”. The diversity of the modern capital is not what one might think. Han Chinese tourists are now a semi-permanent part of the culture as they come and go with the season. Some Chinese have moved from the lowlands to the plateau seeking prosperity in this growing economic region. Populating Lhasa with these migrant workers, the government attempts to assimilate Tibet with China. Other ethnic groups from southeast Asia have also come to Tibet heeding the call from the People’s Republic of China’s (PRC) (Halper 2014). The Muslim population can be seen in Lhasa as the prominent traders of Yartsa Gunbu (caterpillar

Figure 2. Map of China showing the Tibet cultural realm and the provinces it encompasses (Arron Sales 2011).
fungus), a traditional medicine traded and sold in Tibet to China for around ten US dollars per fungi. This diverse group of people occupying the same space and following a set of unwritten social rules, converge in markets surrounding or penetrating tourist areas. In these spaces any and all of the aforementioned peoples can be seen interacting and perpetuating local identities.

Specifically, I am looking at the implications of this scene in Lhasa as well as other areas of the Tibetan cultural realm (research area defined in Methods section). Vendors of malas and other religious tools have changed from serving monks and religious pilgrims to serving tourists. The souvenir as the material culture of tourism can be read as a text. As Geerts claimed, “cultural forms can be treated as texts because they are means to ‘say something,’ to enlighten the ‘reader’ about culture” (Geerts 1973). When a tourist buys a mala or an offering cup it can become a souvenir instead of a religious tool. In this case the object is directly related to the Tibetan Buddhist religion which is a fundamental representation of the Tibetan culture. In this way, souvenirs in Tibet represent Tibetans as a unique “other” that is separate from not only the world, but most significantly China.

Previous research on tourism in Tibet has covered the myth of Shangri-La, media effects on the image of Tibet, and the politicization of tourism in Tibet. Thus far there has not been a study on the souvenirs as a commodified representation of place in Tibet. This paper will show how souvenirs, as one part of the tourist industry, represent not only tourism and identity but larger subjects like political economics and the “Tibet issue” as a whole. Souvenirs are an integral part of the tourism industry all over the world and because of this, the geography of tourism is able to take the case in Tibet, and other regions or destinations, and compare the effects on the cultural landscape. Tibet offers a idiosyncratic case study given the relatively recent exposure to tourism and the conflict with the occupying government of China.

The remainder of this article will cover the subject of tourism in Tibet by first looking at the tourism industry on a broad scale and how it can effect a place. Second, I will describe how Tibet and Tibetans are commodified and represented through souvenirs. Third, I will analyze the types of souvenirs in popular tourist areas within the Tibet Autonomous Region (TAR) in relation to those in border areas. Fourth, the methods and study area will be explained. Last, a discussion on the significants of Tourism and the role the souvenir plays in this industry will be explained.

**Tourism Effects on Place**

Traditionally Tibet is the sparsely populated home to nomadic herders and high elevation farmers. Today tourism has become one of the main economic forces in the Tibet Autonomous Region (TAR) as well as some parts of the cultural realm that make up the rest of the Tibetan Plateau. The most popular tourist destination in Tibet is the city of Lhasa, the Potala Palace, the Barkhor, and the local culture that persists there.
This capitol city and the tourism industry operate under the strict management by the government in Beijing. Nearly as many government buildings line the streets as do hotels and hostels. The government building’s architecture is standardized gray cement and armed guards stand on either side of the entrance gate signaling that this is an official building. The tourist areas are inundated by evenly spaced police officers stemming from the several branches of the police force, including the Chinese version of SWAT (Special Weapons and Tactics), a grade of security that marks the level of protection Beijing feels necessary.

“Initially China permitted only a few thousand travelers a year to visit the Tibet Autonomous Region, and then only under careful supervision and at a great expense to the tourists”(Klieger 1990). Then in 1984, China opened the TAR to independent travelers in hopes that the potential profits of “tourism could replace decades of governmental subsidization of the Tibetan economy.” By 1987 the number reached “approximately 44,000 tourists per year” (Klieger 1990). Now tourism in Tibet is dominated by Chinese tourists vacationing from China. For 2014 the Lhasa Tourism Bureau estimated that 9.2 million visitors would visit Tibet, most of which will travel via the Beijing highway, the Sichuan-Tibet Highway, or the Tibet Railway. In fact, some 15 million tourists traveled to Tibet, of which, over 9 million stayed in Lhasa (CCTV 2014).

Historically tourism in Lhasa was largely comprised of religious pilgrims on a journey to the political and religious center of Tibet, as well as the home of the Dalai Lama. Author Klieger wrote, “pilgrimage for Tibetans was an opportunity for trade, recreation, family reunions, and making karmic and political merit”. As well as a type of social network the historic tourist routes “became conduits and nodes in a an emergent state infrastructure” (1992). Pilgrimage, if viewed as a form of tourism, shows that the economy of Tibet has long been reliant on people touring cultural significant sites bringing with them capitol that stimulated the local economy and trade. Outside of economics tourism and pilgrimage have other similarities.

Studies of the geography of tourism started in the 1920s but research in China did not begin until the 1970s when the travel industry took on a national scale (He Zi-qiang 1990). Tibet was closed to tourism until 1978 with the end of Mao Zedong and the cultural revolution (Klieger 1990). Tourism studies performed through the discipline of human geography are used to study the effects of tourism on a place. Human geography, particularly person/ place relationships, identity, politics, changing cultural landscape, and representation, in this case how tourism is representing the place, can be used to study effects on a place by a tourism industry. The tourism boom in Tibet has fundamentally changed the cultural landscape. This does not mean the change is negative, as is the popular belief when discussing the introduction of tourism to a place (Cole 2007). In this article the tourism scene in Tibet is analyzed as a agent providing a service for Tibetans throughout the cultural realm to preserve nationality, a “soft power”.

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The commodification of culture through tourism is a phenomenon that can change the way a landscape is perceived by tourists as well as the way the native culture perceives itself. A culture comprised of “This ‘becoming other’, a direct outcome of the objectification and commodification of both culture and ethnicity, is said to explain the contemporary mass consumption of identity merchandise by both touristic outsiders and local insiders, whose view of themselves is thereby distorted by the tourist gaze” (Linnekin, 1997). In an article on the commodification of Natives in Indonesia Stroma Cole states, “The commodification of culture may be a dis-empowering experience, in others, marginal cultures have appropriated tourism as a political instrument in the construction of their identity” (2007). Commodification of culture is a subject shrouded in negativity. There is another side to the story however. Some areas affected by tourism and commodification can benefit from the industry. “As difference and “Otherness” become consumable tourism commodities, one response to and consequence of this is the awareness and affirmation of local identity and the (re)creation of ethnicity” (Cole 2007; Adams 1997; MacCannell 1984; Wood 1997). This recreation of ethnicity and culture play out in areas of Tibet where religion was suppressed in recent history. Tourism provides a mechanism for these suppressed culture to be seen and practiced once more.

Figure 3. In Jakuendo, a new statue shows the commodification of the Tibetan people as religious. Notice the prayer beads, prayer wheel and Khata (ceremonial scarf). Photo by author, 2014.
Tibet has been perceived as a place hidden from the outside world, though there is some truth to this, the tourist’s perception of Tibet is romanticized. In 2002 Julien Mercille performed a study in Lhasa asking 600 tourist where they gained their perceptions of Tibet before visiting. In regards to media representations, the film “Seven Years in Tibet” was consulted by 43% of the respondents, a movie in which “the depiction of Tibetans as friendly and religious is central”. Mercille concludes, “most tourists imagine Tibet to be a beautiful mountainous, cold, harsh and dry environment where friendly and religious people live” (1045). This concise description captures the preconceived images tourists have made for Tibet. Souvenirs related to religions and postcards depicting the harsh mountainous environment lend support to these findings.

The souvenir has roots in trade and religious pilgrimages. Some of the first noted souvenirs appeared “thousands of years ago [when] ancient Egyptians, Romans and other explorer-travelers brought mementos home from their journeys abroad” (Timothy and Swanson 2012; Horner, 1993; Stanley, 2000). Another popular belief is that the “modern-day souvenir has its true origins in Christian pilgrimages, wherein religious travelers would collect relics connected to saints (e.g. icons, cures and talismans) and sacred sites in Rome, Constantinople, and the Holy Land” (Timothy and Swanson 2012; Houlihan, 2000; Shackley, 2006; Teague, 2000; Tythacott, 2000). The souvenir then represents a long history of religious visitation and economic stimuli. The tradition of this legacy continues today in Tibet with the sale of souvenirs that have yet to be kitschified.

Souvenirs have been a subject of serious study since the early benchmark papers written by Gordon in 1986 and Littrell in 1990, which focused on the meaning attached to objects. The representation of place and the culture of the people who live in that place may be commodified into an object designed for tourist consumption. These objects are manufactured, distributed and sold by vendors operating in the economic machine built around the tourist site. In Tibet these souvenirs take on a unique role for the culture that has been quickly (over the past fifty years) forced to exist under the governance and economic system of China, the parent state. Souvenirs are representative of the place commodified. In Tibet the place and people are represented by Tibetan Buddhism, this is then commodified and packaged as a souvenir.

The modern tourist perception of Tibet is largely drawn from movies, books, and magazines. Tourism advertisements are also a key representation of a destination visitors may build a perception with. James Hilton’s novel “Lost Horizon” was perhaps the first and most romanticized source for western audiences to gain a perception of Tibet. This book created an image of Tibet as a singular mythical and holy place. However, Tibetans themselves, are not innocent of creating a romantic if not mystical representation of themselves. Lhasa the capitol of the TAR for example means “place of the gods” and the Buddhist word Shambhala means pure
land or paradise. The theoretical framework for this paper hinges on the idea of commodification of place and the representation of that place through consumable objects such as souvenirs.

When I asked a Chinese tourist riding a bike to Lhasa why he wanted to go to Tibet, he told me, “it is most beautiful land in China”. He then went on to describe his perception of Tibet as a place called “Shambhala”, gesturing with his arms as a big or grand place. This recent high school graduate was like many naive tourists, western or Chinese, that perceive Tibet not as a marginalized society but as a place of mythology and legend. As research writer Bishop wrote, “No more descriptive appellation exists for this area than Shangri-La: the utopian realm of pious noble savages and god-kings” (1989).

Mixed Methodology

The subjective nature of tourism studies, especially dealing with souvenirs, authenticity, and commodification, represents a difficult field of study. The use of empirical observation and participant observation were the primary methods used. Interviews with two people whom will remain anonymous, were used as primary sources for the current state of tourism in Tibet. These two experts in the field have seen first hand as well as participated in the tourism industry throughout Tibet. Their knowledge about tourism in Tibet as well as the social relations between local people to tourism areas and recent migrants was used to understand the current Tibetan situation, including the current state of tourism on the plateau.

Semi-structured interviews held with tourist and local or visiting Tibetans were conducted when possible. Souvenir vendors were questioned on their business’ financial situation as well as opinions on working in the tourism industry. Many vendors were asked where there products were purchased and what materials were used in the construction. These interviews created a picture of how locals and migrant workers were making a living as well as how they felt about one another.

Textual analysis of souvenirs conducted throughout the study area (Figure 4) qualified the representations of the place and people. This method uses Shenhav-Keller and Ricoeur's example, “Treating the souvenir as a “text” requires one to “follow [its] movement from sense to reference, from what it says to what it [actually] talks about”” (1993,1971). They go on to say, “The souvenir is important not only as a cultural artifact, but also as an analytical tool for understanding complex social processes; by reading the souvenirs as a social and political text, its horizons are enlarged” (Shenhav-Keler 1993; Ricoeur 1971). In this case souvenirs were categorized as related to religion or not in order to find a relationship between tourism and the cultural identity of the area. Observations of popular souvenirs were noted throughout tourist areas then later categorized (Table 1).
The study area (Figure 4) comprises both heavily visited tourist areas like the Barkhor and Potala Palace in Lhasa as well as far off the tourist route towns like Serchul and Palpung. These monasteries provide a contrast to tourist areas revealing a more authentic monastery compared to one that has become a commodified and restricted tourist site. Tsurpu, Ganden and Samye are more frequently trafficked monasteries. The Sichuan Tibet highway connecting Chengdu to Lhasa is a popular route for overland tourists from China to Tibet. Dartsendo, Lithang, and Batang are the first stops along the highway to Tibet. North of Batang the tourist path ends as well as the souvenirs, seen in Figure 4 the number of souvenir shops decrease along the north south route.

**What Souvenirs Say:**

In order to understand the commodification of Tibet and what the souvenirs represent, it is important to understand what it means to be a Tibetan. Georges Dreyfus defines the national identity of Tibetans. His definition is one that I will use to support my claim that religious souvenirs represent Tibet and Tibetans as one identity. This definition of a national identity

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Figure 4. Map showing the research cities and the number of souvenir shops in each tourist area. Map by author, 2014.
presented by Dreyfus is based on the Tibetan uprising against the occupying Chinese in March of 1959:

The nationalism that emerged during this period is characterized by its use of traditional religious themes to define the nation. Instead of using the secular discourse usually associated with modern nationalism, this brand of nationalism defines the Tibetan nation by using traditional Buddhist values such as compassion, karma, and the bond between Tibetans and Avalokiteśvara. The nation thus defined is not, however, traditional Tibet with its diversity of local cultural, social, and political communities, but a modern country united by its opposition to Chinese oppression. Such a country is conceived as a horizontal community determined by boundaries, a reified entity to which all its members owe equal allegiance irrespective of their local affiliations. Hence, it is a nation-state and the loyalty toward such an entity is a form of modern nationalism, with all the potential dangers that this implies. (2005)

The implications of this national identity reach into every aspect of Tibet, socio-political relations, economics, as well as all aspects of human geography. This shared nationalism affects the way Tibetans use space, generate income, create self perceptions, change cultural traditions, and the way local groups create a sense of place. In this landscape of economic change, political control, and marginalized people the commodification of place is key to understanding the adapting culture. Tourism, commodification, and souvenirs are growing areas of scholarship that can be used to understand this immensely complicated region.

In Lhasa, the Barkhor (a one kilometer path circling the Jokhang temple) is one such market with no fewer than 250 shops selling religious paraphernalia amongst other objects (listed on page 15). The path, roughly 50 feet wide at parts, is able to accommodate crowds of people. On either side of the path store fronts create a nearly impervious wall of commerce. Several types of vendors can be found each with a specific clientele in mind. The tourist, pilgrim, or local resident can find what they are looking for here. At one stop a tourists may be able to buy a cheap hat and then at the shop next door pick up a handmade Buddha statue. Most shops are very similar in size and inventory. Souvenir shops could be limited to shops that sell small trinkets such as jewelry and art, but in the case of this study stores selling Buddhist-related consumables and of a reasonable size for tourist consumption are included as “tourist shops”. In regards to the souvenir, Healy states, “a more appropriate synonymous term is ‘tourist merchandise’, referring to objects intended to be purchased on site and carried home” (1994). Though there are more shops now than in pre-tourist Lhasa (<1978) the practice of buying souvenirs is not a new
addition to the marketplace here. Historic sites such as monasteries have long been places of trade and commerce.

As recently as 2012, vendors would use the road area as a place to sell goods just as the shops on the side of the road do now. Due to regulations imposed by the government making it illegal to have a business on the road the vendors have been relocated to a brand new mall built from large blocks of granite. Here rows of small shops no larger than 15 square feet operate everyday, all selling nearly the same goods. One such item is the mala, a string of beads 108 in total used as a prayer aid by Buddhists. These prayer beads are the most popular and prolific object sold in this mall as well as most tourist sites. Nearly every shop including convenience stores will have a small display with malas for sale. The mala then, an object specific to Tibetan Buddhism, has become a symbol for Tibet as a souvenir.

Governmental influence over what can be sold in souvenir shops becomes apparent as one wanders the various shops in a given tourist area. The absence of kitsch style souvenirs is plain to see as well as the similarity of goods sold by shops with different owners. In the Barkhor Supermarket in Lhasa, the same skull design bead bracelet (Figure 5) can be found at nearly every shop selling jewelry. Of the many small shops in this market only two sold refrigerator magnets with images of Tibetan landscapes, most sold jewelry or clothing. The majority, however sold very similar products including beads which most vendors said came from either Nepal or Tibet. One vendor, a Tibetan, had beads from her hometown in Tibet to sell for 500 RMB or roughly 83 USD. This was however, not the norm in the marketplace or the Barkhor. Most vendors sold what appeared to be authentic beads and antiques but in truth were just cheaply manufactured replicas.

Souvenir shops in Lhasa and surrounding monasteries have a specific and very similar retail scene. Monasteries will typically have a shop for food and beverages as well as a shop for souvenirs. Outside of Lhasa the Samye Monastery had one souvenir shop located within the monastery itself and a small amount of souvenirs sold alongside the snacks in the snack shop. The small souvenir shop located within the monastery (Figure 6) is a representation of what most tourist oriented shops look like throughout the study area.

In towns that lie on the border with cultural Tibet and China the souvenirs show increased kitsch. Unlike the monastery shops and stores in Lhasa the tourist shops in these border areas sell cheaply produced Thang ka paintings, malas, beads, and even mini cartoon like figurines of Tibetan monks (Figure 7). Stuffed animal Yaks also begin to appear as well as small home decor...
Figure 6. Souvenir shop inside Samye Monastery. Photo by author, 2014.

Figure 7. Image of Tibetan monks figurines and traditionally dressed Tibetans. A conch shell to the far left also for sale, significant as one of the eight sacred symbols. Image taken in Dartsendo. Photo by author, 2014.
items. Dartsendo a small town known as the traditional eastern gateway to Tibet is one such town where tourist shops have merchandise targeting an uninitiated audience with idealized perceptions of Tibet. This border town is the first stop for many overland travelers making their way from lowland China to Tibet using the Sichuan-Tibet Highway, National Highway 318. The kitsch style souvenirs for sale in this town may be due to the close proximity to China and the perceptions of Tibet by the Chinese tourists. In other words the souvenirs in border areas cater to the tourist preconceived idea of Tibet and the souvenirs in the Lhasa area cater to a more authentic representation of what a Tibetan is, not perceived as.

**Discussion and Significance**

The current state of Tibetan nationalism is a valuable area of study given the Tibet situation and constant change of policy in the TAR. The case study presented in this article looks at the tourism industry, specifically the most popular souvenirs in order to explain how Tibet and Tibetans are portrayed by the tourism industry and how that image serves to preserve Tibetan nationality.

Prayer beads are the most prevalent souvenir available in nearly every shop throughout tourist areas and many monasteries. Regardless of the location or popularity the mala is an ever-present and ubiquitous souvenir. A male is comprised of 108 beads, some with decorative beads, and some with additional counting beads used to keep track of the number of times a full 108 prayers have been said. Because of the popularity of jewelry in the souvenir market the mala has morphed into several decorative shapes and forms, even a bracelet which has no religious significance. Other souvenir shops will sell Buddhist related goods (Table 1) largely portraying the most symbolic aspects of Tibetan Buddhism. As seen in Figure 3 the Khata, mala, prayer wheel and traditional garb portray the essence of a Tibetans outward appearance. Though it may be argued that nomadism could also be a defining characteristic of many Tibetans the traditional garb, prayer wheel, and mala can be found with herders and devout monks alike. Tibetan Buddhism penetrates nearly all facets of Tibetan culture.

The physical landscape is also related to Buddhism. Many of the most popular tourist lakes and mountains are named after and symbolize Tibetan gods and hold sacred meaning for Tibetans. Mt. Kailas is one of the most popular tourist destinations as well as the the Tibetan center of the universe. Lake Namtso and Manasarova, two of the most popular destinations for tourist and pilgrims alike hold significant historical and religious meaning. Namtso Lake meaning “heavenly lake” in Tibetan, is considered one of the most holy lakes in Tibet, and is frequented by tourists from Lhasa. Manasarova, meaning “the immortal lake of jade” in Tibetan is the most sacred lake for Tibetans many of whom will make pilgrimage to the lake in order to bathe and wash away sins, among other negative inner conflicts. Many more mountains and
lakes throughout the region hold religious meaning, some on a local scale, others more wide reaching, like Mt. Kailas.

As seen in Table 1, nearly every type of popular souvenir listed is at least partially related to Tibetan Buddhism and therefore associated to the Tibetan people through their shared nationality based on Buddhist values. The only souvenir that didn't fit in the Buddhist category was the knife, though even a knife may be decorated with a mantra or the eight auspicious symbols of Tibetan Buddhism. Finding that souvenirs symbolize Buddhism as a representation of culture is central to the strength Tibetans gain from tourism. China has long suppressed religious groups and others in an attempt to unify the people and create a more cohesive national identity. The strength of Tibet is in their national identity previously described, the souvenir as a representation of the place and people, in the case closely related to, if not exclusively affiliated with Tibetan Buddhism creates a difficult situation for China.

Soft power as a tool used by disempowered or powerless nations is a vital asset. In Tibet the people and place have been absorbed by China but the culture remains. The tourism industry and the perception of Tibet by a western audience creates a soft power that Tibetans may be inadvertently using to preserve nationality. As Stefen Halper states, “Western infatuation with the Tibetan myth has enabled Tibetans to exercise a unique ‘soft power’ — the power of moral condemnation — that Beijing can neither control not ameliorate.” (2014, 1). The idea of a soft power in Tibet as described by Halper is perpetuated in the tourism industry. The economic importance of the tourism industry in Tibet ensures it will remain simultaneously continuing the perceptions of Tibet.

The strength of Tibetan Buddhism also reaches from Tibet to China. Spatially, Tibetan Buddhism is growing throughout China. Because the original Buddhist text are written in sanskrit Tibetan Buddhism is desirable as there is less lost in translation. Many monasteries such as Serchul Gompa are able to expand or re-build with donations from Chinese contributors. The popularity extends to younger generations as well. One young business graduate explained she was visiting Trogpu monastery outside of Jakuendo as a part of her religious pilgrimage. As Tibetan Buddhism spreads through China and around the world a greater soft power emerges. The growing tourism industry, is then perpetuating the social identity of the people along with the perceptions held in the west of this peaceful land of snows.

**Further Research**

A more direct study of commodification and the tourism industry in Tibet could focus on where souvenirs are made and who makes them. In one interview a souvenir shop owner explained that the raw materials came from Nepal and India and some of the products, including malas and bracelets were made by Tibetans in Dharamsala, India. Finding the true monetary
benefactors of the materials sold in tourism areas would be beneficial to the understanding of the industry. As mentioned previously, media representations of Tibetan culture have been analyzed through the lens of cinema; a study of the growing Chinese and Tibetan music industry would further the study on commodification of the culture. The music videos in particular could be used to confirm some of the perceptions mentioned in this paper. These videos usually involve traditional Tibetan songs with scenes of the Tibetan landscape playing throughout. Chinese artists also make music mimicking that of the Tibetan tradition music, some of which are popular with Tibetans and Chinese alike. These songs may be directly tied to tourism as the Chinese government regulate popular music closely and the songs usually speak of Tibet as a “beautiful land where the sky is always blue” (Interviewee 1, 2014). No doubt an attractive image to those living in major cities where the smog keeps the sky gray for months at a time. This article is merely one side of an easily debatable story, one may argue that tourism destroys cultural traditions and the commodification of a place misrepresents it. This article is shining a light on a few powerful economic and social processes working to preserve a place.

This article could serve as the launching point for a study on governmental influence on the tourism industry and how control and limitation on souvenirs effects perception of place. One interviewee explained that the Lhasa Tourism Bureau under the Chinese government, enforces strict laws over what can be sold as a souvenir. In essence this interviewee explained that the governmental regulations mandate the word “Tibet” could not be used on souvenirs. This explains why kitsch style souvenirs were sparse through the TAR, even in border towns where kitsch style souvenirs were present the word “Tibet” remained absent. For now, the absence of kitsch souvenirs in the tourism areas surrounding Lhasa preserve a feeling of authenticity.

Conclusion

By reading the souvenir as a text, the tourist scene in Tibet is seen as inseparable from Tibetan buddhism. Nearly all aspects of the tourism industry are at least, in part, if not entirely based on the representation of Tibetan Buddhism, an aspect of the culture that is intimately connected to Tibetan nationality. As a representation of the people of Tibet, souvenirs express the nationality of the native population now living in a quickly changing cultural landscape. China’s economic development continue to expand the infrastructure of the plateau creating opportunity for more Chinese settlers. Tibetan Buddhism as represented by the tourism industry, and souvenirs, are agents acting to preserve and reinforce Tibetan identity. Through this seemingly unlikely mechanism Tibetans can use their soft power to keep from fully assimilating with China.
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<tr>
<th>Type of Souvenir</th>
<th>Related to Buddhism</th>
<th>Objectively Buddhist</th>
<th>Not Related to Buddhism</th>
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<td>Buddha Statue</td>
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<td>Prayer Flags</td>
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<td>Prayer beads/ wheels</td>
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<td>Incense and burners</td>
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<td>Khata (Cerimonial Scarf)</td>
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<td>Monastery Charm</td>
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<td>Offering Cup</td>
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<td>Sampa Bowl</td>
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<td>Stuffed Animals/ Toys</td>
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<td>Tibetan Figurines</td>
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<td>Personal Excessories</td>
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Table 1. Popular souvenirs and relationship to religion. Table is not comprehensive but includes souvenirs common throughout all tourist areas.
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