The Culture of Tibet

Tibet is a land of monks and mystery, of high adventure - and high controversy.

Nomads herd their yaks, pilgrims make their way around sacred Mount Kailash, and monks chant in prayer halls lit by yak-butter lamps, but Chinese incursions threaten the survival of Tibetan civilisation.

So writes Michael Buckley, an adventure traveller who specialises in the Himalayan Region. Here is an extract from Buckley's book: Tibet - the Bradt Travel Guide:

Literature

Tibetan culture is closely linked to Tibetan Buddhist beliefs - in former times the majority of literature, music, dance and drama, painting, sculpture and architecture was inspired by those beliefs. The bulk of Tibetan literature is based on its religion, as texts were printed with inked woodblocks at certain monasteries.
Two massive works of religious literature are the Kanjur (Canon of Buddhist Law, 108 volumes) and the Tenjur (commentaries on the Kanjur, in 228 volumes). These are mostly translated from Sanskrit. An exception to religious literature is the epic of Gesar of Ling, the legendary king - this was a staple of Tibet's former wandering story-tellers, who committed the long tale to memory. The thousand year old tale runs to milions of words, and is Asia's equivalent to Homers Odyssey.
Artwork

Unlike Theravadan Buddhist traditions, monks at Tibetan Buddhist monasteries are actively involved in the creation of artwork, using formulaic methods. Inspiration is the goal of the artwork - assisting the viewer with meditation and in attaining spiritual realisation - and thus the creation becomes far more important than the creator: as a result, most Tibetan art is anonymous.
Assisting with meditation are mandela murals and mandala tankas - the mandala is a mystic cirlce design or cosmogram. A unique Tibetan monastic art-form is the creation of sand mandalas - circular sand paitings made by monks from coloured sand over a period of several weeks. Elaborate ceremonies take place at the monastery during and after completion of the sand mandala: it is then destroyed, to indicate the impermanence of all things.
Ceremonies

Monasteries in Tibet used to stage an annual ceremony called Cham, with masked dances and accompanying long-horn music performed by the monks. In these rituals, the monks wore masks representing demons, spirits and mythical animals. Cham dance is still occasionally seen within Tibet, but authorities are highly suspicious of any large gathering of Tibetans, so the chances of witnessing one are rare.
Because of their close link with Tibetan Buddhism, many of the Tibetan arts are proscribed or no longer practiced within Tibet itself. That means you have to go to the exile community for the real culture.
Saving Tibetan Culture

The ancient Tibetan culture has developed along very different lines from others in high Asia. Saving this unique culture essentially comes down to the issue of religious freedom, because Tibet's cultural identity is tied in with its religion, and the Chinese do not respect that religion. Ultimately it's a question of human rights.
What human rights to the Tibetans want? The basic ones: the right to freedom of speech, freedom of thought, and freedom to follow Tibetan Buddhist beliefs. The right to a proper education, the right to use the Tibetan language. The rights of the child. Even the most fundamental human rights are denied to Tibetans. These include the rights to clean water, sufficient food, a home, health care, proper education, employment, protection from violence, equality of opportunity, and a say in their future.
The Dalai Lama puts it this way, "The Chinese are entitled to their happiness, but not at the expense of another nation or people."

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