The Flag of Tibet: A Vexillological Reading

Smitha. M
Government Victoria College, Palakkad, Kerala
Email: smi4pearl@gmail.com

Abstract

This paper undertakes a vexillological reading of the Tibetan national flag, examining its historical evolution, symbolic imagery, and significance in articulating Tibetan identity and resistance. While much scholarly attention has been devoted to Tibetan Buddhist prayer flags, the national flag-popularly known as the Snow Lion Flag-remains under-explored within vexillological discourse. Drawing on semiotics, cultural history, and political theory, the paper analyses the flag's imagery, including the snow lion, mountain, sun, and the debated yin-yang motif, to uncover its embedded narratives of sovereignty, spirituality, and collective memory. It traces the flag's transformation from a military standard under the Thirteenth Dalai Lama to its role as a banned yet potent symbol of resistance in contemporary Tibet and exile communities. Ultimately, the paper argues that the Tibetan flag functions not merely as a political emblem, but as a dynamic, transhistorical artefact embodying national aspiration, cultural continuity, and decolonial identity in the face of occupation.

Keywords: Tibet, vexillology, national flag, symbolism, snow lion, exile, identity, resistance, semiotics, decoloniality.

Introduction

"*Ev'ry nation can brag 'bout some kind of a flag, why can't we get an emblem of our own?*" ("Every Race Has a Flag but the Coon")

To possess a national flag is not merely to engage in power negotiations or territorial demarcations between states; it reflects a deeper, pragmatic engagement with identity politics itself. A flag serves as a marker of identity - an emblem used to assert, reinforce, or reclaim a people's territory, ethos, and collective selfhood. It unites people bound by shared historical, political, socio-cultural, linguistic, ideological, or religious affiliations - although the very idea of essentialism in identity construction remains a point of contention in contemporary discourse.
A sense of belongingness towards one's land is fostered through performative enactments of patriotism like unfurling, planting, brandishing or hoisting a flag, even though its primary disposition is tethered to power negotiations. Besides, a flag of a nation signifies resistance to foreign conquests. History is replete with instances where flags play the role of identity-markers in military expeditions, maritime activities, and political movements in many such significant events. It has the capacity to evoke collective memories, aspirations, and beliefs that a community holds on to.

Arguably, the concept of possessing a national flag (or a nation) is a modern one, the origins of which can be traced back to the American revolution, the French revolution and the widespread European nation-building projects of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Though Benedict Anderson conceptualises nations as "imagined political communities" (Imagined Communities) mobilised for a common political movement, it is Partha Chatterjee's discursive approach to nationhood - which he terms "anti-colonial nationalisms" ("Whose Imagined Community?") - that more aptly frames the decolonial nation-building undertaken in Asia and Africa. It can be discerned that Chatterjee was referring to the

colonized countries which had diverse ethnographies and identities. Unlike European nationalism, which tends to pursue cultural or ideological uniformity, nationalism in the East often serves as a dominant expression of identity, difference, and self-assertion.

As a consequence, constructing or perpetuating a common socio-cultural identity through a discursive approach becomes essential for initiating mass mobilisation and driving freedom movements. In such contexts, the flag assumes its role as a potent symbol of resistance against repressive regimes. Within freedom movements, its semiotic value becomes a compelling reminder of the oppressed community's right to sovereignty and self-determination. For example, the Swaraj flag was widely used as a decolonising symbol of the Indian independence movement led by Gandhiji. Moreover, defiant acts such as burning or desecrating the coloniser's flag function as strategic performances in anti-establishment protests - acts that are non-violent yet deeply intimidating.

Notably, academic interest in flags is a relatively recent phenomenon, emerging in the mid-twentieth century with the publication of The Flag Bulletin (1961) by American scholar Whitney Smith. This marked the birth of vexillology - a new stream of scientific inquiry concerned with the history, symbolism, design, manufacture, and other aspects of flags (or vexilla, as they are termed). However, within vexillological discourse, a comprehensive exegesis of the Tibetan national flag remains largely under-explored, although Tibetan Buddhist prayer flags have attracted some scholarly attention. While the prayer flags are largely representative of the Tibetan Buddhist culture and spirituality, the national flag of Tibet, first and foremost, represents Tibetan politics, but not without incorporating its mytho-cultural underpinnings.
This paper aims to fill the research gap that exists in the vexillological domain of Tibetan studies by investigating the evolution of the Tibetan flag in the larger context of political and socio-cultural upheavals, both inside and outside Tibet. Furthermore, the paper cuts across culture studies, psychology, and semiotics to define the role and function of the flag of Tibet under the shifting paradigms of historical and political changes.

A Vexillological Reading of the Flag of Tibet

Having traced the theoretical underpinnings and broader significance of flags, it becomes essential to situate the Tibetan national flag within its unique historical and cultural context. The following section explores the origins and evolution of the Tibetan flag, revealing its deep-rooted ties to Tibetan identity and political resistance.

Origin and development

The origin of the Tibetan flag - also known as the "Snow Lion Flag" - can be traced to Tibet's royal lineages and ancient historical traditions, which span several millennia. During the seventh century, Tibetan king Song-tsan Gampo ruled over the extensive land of Tibet which was then one of the mightiest empires of Central Asia with an army comprising 28,60,000 men. Tibet was divided into large and small districts known as Goe-kyi tong-de and Yun-g'mi-de. From these large and small districts, a vast army was conscripted and stationed along Tibet's borders, ensuring the safety and stability of its subjects.

Historical records indicate that each military regiment bore a distinct flag, Yoe-ru Toe displayed a pair of snow lions facing each other; Yae-ru Ma featured a snow lion with a bright upper border; Tsang Ru-lao

bore a snow lion standing upright, leaping skyward; and Ue-ru Toe carried a white flame against a red background , all of which are documented in “A Unified Flag.” An illustration of a seventh-century Tibetan military flag is given in figure 1.

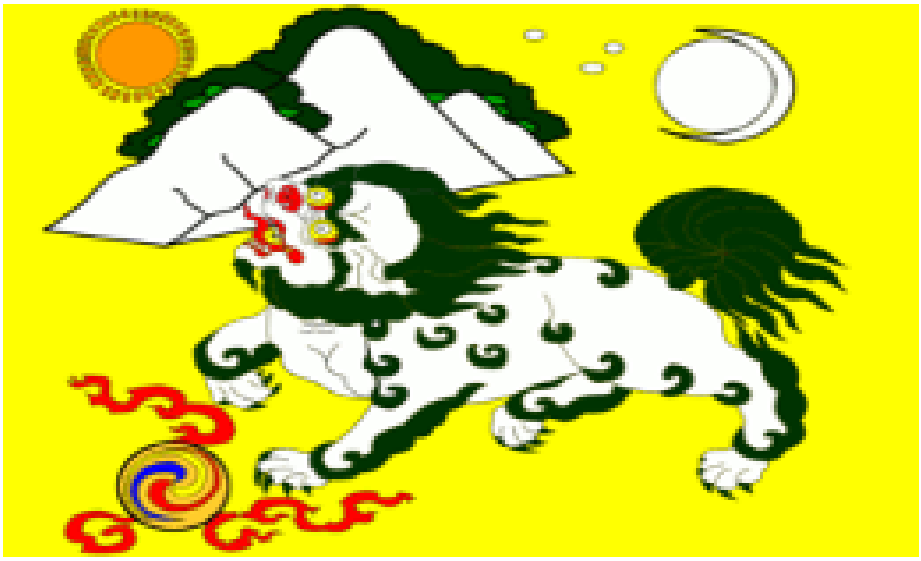

Fig.1.Chamboredon, Corentin.10 April 2020, CRW Flags, crwflags.com/fotw/flags/xt-1920.html.

Continuing the tradition of assigning a military standard to each regiment, several Tibetan army units in the twentieth century also carried distinct flags - featuring either a pair of snow lions facing each other or a snow lion leaping skyward, among other symbolic variations (“A Unified Flag”). It was during this period that the Thirteenth Dalai Lama, Thubten Gyatso, initiated the design of a uniform and standardised national flag for Tibet. A visionary leader, he introduced several administrative reforms aligned with international customs - the standardisation of the Tibetan flag in the early twentieth century being one such significant measure.

After returning from a three-year exile in India, the Thirteenth Dalai Lama declared Tibet’s independence from China in early 1913 - shortly after the withdrawal of Qing dynasty troops from the region (Sheel). In 1916, drawing upon earlier Tibetan military flag designs, he refined and formalised the Tibetan national flag in its modern form. As Tibet scholar and historian Nick Gulotta notes in his article, “Recognising the Snow Lion: New Examples of International Awareness of Tibet’s National Flag”, the flag was formally inaugurated during a military parade at the Norbulingka Palace in Lhasa. References to the flag began appearing in newspapers by 1923 (Tibetan Review).

Various articles were written describing the flag after it debuted in an edition of the British Crown’s “Drawings of the Flags in Use at the Present Time by Various Nations” flag book. One example can be seen in an article from the San Francisco Examiner printed on December 16, 1923, titled “Nations Adopt New Emblems”. The Tibetan flag came to be featured in many flag reference books of the time. In each of those books, the Tibetan flag was referred to as the “national flag” (qtd. in Gulotta). The 13th Dalai Lama ordered that the standardised flag of Tibet would be adopted by all Tibetan military defence establishments. Since the time of that proclamation, all Tibetan regiments have likewise adopted this flag as their standard one. In those days, the national flag and the military flags of Tibet were similar in design,

except for their emblem - the national flag had flaming jewels instead of crossed vajras (jewels). Archival photographs reveal that flags were flown permanently at the Army Headquarters and prominently displayed or carried during all official ceremonies. In 1934, the Tibetan national flag made its international debut when it was featured in National Geographic Magazine's 'Flags of the World' issue.

The de facto Tibetan polity in exile, based in Dharamshala and led by the Fourteenth Dalai Lama, formally standardised key national symbols - including the Lhasa dialect of Tibetan, a national anthem, and the Tibetan flag. Despite China's assertion that Tibet has always been a part of its territory, historical records suggest that prior to the Chinese invasion, several countries recognised the Tibetan flag as a symbol of independent statehood. According to the Central Tibetan Administration, the Tibetan flag's first appearance at an international gathering was at the 1947 Asian Relations Conference held in New Delhi, which was organised by India's first Prime Minister, Jawaharlal Nehru (Tibet Net).

Imagery and symbolism in the Tibetan National Flag

The Tibetan flag is a fusion of bright colours and archetypal images representing the cultural and religious fabric of the land and its people. As quoted in a booklet, in the Library of Tibetan Works and Archives, "the colour scheme of the Tibetan national flag gives a clear indication of all aspects of Tibet in its symbolism such as the geographic features of the religious, snowy land of Tibet, the customs and traditions of Tibetan society, the political administration of the Tibetan government and so forth" (The Tibetan National Flag).

Fig. 2. "Flag Of Tibet - Tibetan Snow Lion Flag". Gettysburg Flag Works, www.gettysburgflag.com/flags-banners/tibet-flag-tibetan

The Central Tibetan Administration based in Dharamshala elaborates the symbolic significance of the Tibetan national flag thus:

- In the centre stands a magnificent snow-clad mountain, which represents the great nation of Tibet, widely known as the Land Surrounded by Snow Mountains.
- The six red bands spreading across the dark blue sky represent the six ancestral tribes of the Tibetan people - Se, Mu, Dong, Tong, Dru, and Ra - from whom the twelve subsequent descendants emerged. Together, the six red bands (symbolising the tribes) and six dark blue bands (symbolising the sky) reflect the unceasing protection of both spiritual teachings and secular life by the black and red guardian deities who have safeguarded Tibet since time immemorial.
- At the top of the snowy mountain, the sun radiates brilliantly in all directions, symbolising the equal enjoyment of freedom, spiritual and material happiness, and prosperity by all beings in the land of Tibet.
- On the slopes of the mountain, a pair of snow lions stand proudly, their manes blazing with fearlessness - symbolising the nation's victorious realisation of a unified spiritual and secular life.
- The radiant, three-coloured jewel held aloft symbolises the Tibetan people's enduring reverence for the Three Supreme Jewels - the eternal objects of refuge: the Buddha, the Dharma, and the Sangha.
- The two-coloured swirling jewel held between the snow lions symbolises the Tibetan people's protection and cherishing of self-discipline and ethical conduct - rooted in the ten exalted virtues and the sixteen humane modes of behaviour.
- Lastly, the yellow border symbolises the Buddha's teachings - pure and refined like gold, unbounded by space or time - flourishing and spreading across the world. (Tibet Net)

Why Snow lion?

The snow lion - a mythical creature symbolising the Tibet of the past - has long been an integral part of Tibetan iconography. It was widely featured on currency, state emblems, and flags until 1959, when the Chinese Cultural Revolution imposed a ban on cultural and political symbols representing Tibet's unique identity. Historian and political activist Jamyang Norbu notes that the snow lion was an all-pervasive motif in ancient Tibetan iconoclastic art and an indispensable presence in the collective Tibetan consciousness, even centuries before the arrival of Buddhism. While the lion holds deep significance within Buddhism (as seen in representations of the Buddha seated with lions), the snow lion's mythic prominence in Tibet predates its religious associations. The imposing figures of two snow lions holding the jewel (gakhyil) - as depicted on the Tibetan national flag, the emblems of the Tibetan government-in-exile, and the insignia of India's Special Frontier Force - all reflect an archetypal significance, as reiterated by Jamyang Norbu in his essay, "How Did the Snow Lion Become the Symbol of Tibet?"

The Tibet Museum records describe the iconography behind the snow lion thus:

> *"The Snow Lion is an archetypal thoughtform confluence or personification of the primordial playfulness of "joy" and "bliss" (Sanskrit: ananda; Tibetan: dga), somewhat energetically comparable to the western unicorn, though without a horn…The energetic potency (wisdom or shakti) of the Snow Lion is expressed in the attribute of the gankyil/gakyil ("bliss+whirling" or "wheel of joy") that the Snow Lion keep in eternal play. The gankyil is a vriddhi derivation of the dragon's fiery "pearl of great price". The gakyil is the principal polyvalent symbol and teaching tool of all the doctrinal trinities of Dzogchen and is the energetic signature of the trikaya. The*

> *gankyil is the inner wheel of the Dharmacakra of the Vajrayana Ashtamangala path of Buddhism. ("Lion").*"

From these observations, it can be inferred that the symbol of the mythical snow lion was a religio-cultural motif and an intrinsic element in Tibetan rituals, customs, and artistry.

Why Yin Yang?

Several sources have offered exegetical interpretations of the Tibetan flag's imagery. Among the most debated is the presence of the yin-yang symbol, often perceived as an exclusively Chinese philosophical representation of duality. This association has led to confusion, as the inclusion of yin-yang in the Tibetan national flag appears to challenge the premise of a distinct Tibetan identity - potentially undermining the case for Tibetan nationhood.

However, a deeper examination reveals that the yin-yang motif is not unique to Chinese cosmology alone. It appears, in various forms and under different names, across Eastern philosophical traditions. Despite minor variations in form and interpretation, the underlying dualistic principle shares significant resemblances across cultures - including within Tibetan metaphysical thought.

The varied versions of the yin yang symbol are based on the number of 'swirling blades' (from 2 to 4) in the cycle and each version with multiple meanings. As far as the yin yang symbol on the present national flag of Tibet is concerned, it slightly differs from the gakyil or "the wheel of joy" - a Tibetan Buddhist ritual tool. The difference between the two lies in the number of swirling blades in the cycle. The yin yang symbol comprises only two blades while the gakyil shows three blades within the wheel. The incorporation of the yin-yang symbol into the Tibetan national flag may appear to contradict the foundational claims of Tibetan identity politics, given its strong association with Chinese Confucian philosophy. But a deeper epistemological reading of the Eastern philosophy throws light on the universality of the concept of yin yang in the other ethnic cultures, such as the Japanese, the Korean and the Tibetan. The seventh-century representation of yin yang consists of three swirling blades while the modern version of the same in the standardised flag of Tibet has only two blades.

Maps of World, an online platform, describes the yin yang symbol and the flag thus: "In the Tibet flag, the two lions are taking the wheel of the yin yang. This symbol represents spiritual energy. The flag has a ratio 2:3" ("Flag of Tibet").

Contemporary dynamics of the Tibetan flag:

On the occasion of the Dalai Lama's 87th birthday, the Tibetan national flag and the Buddhist flag were hoisted for the first time on 6 July 2022 at Geneva. In an All-Party Parliamentarian Group meeting held in Japan in 2013, the Dalai Lama defended the Tibetan flag, saying Mao Zedong had given him his approval to keep and fly the flag during a meeting in 1954 (Radio Free Asia). He believes that the flag is a symbol of peaceful coexistence, promoting religious freedom, equality, and respect.

Regardless of Tibet's current political status, Tibetans and their supporters commemorate Independence Day each year on February 13th - marking the 1913 declaration of Tibet's independence by the Thirteenth

Dalai Lama. During such occasions, the flag-raising ceremony is a powerful expression of a people's desire for freedom from the Chinese occupation in Tibet. It stands as a stark reminder of many things: a call to duty, a shared resistance against Chinese authoritarianism, and the enduring struggle for freedom. For Tibetans, the flag is a living reinforcement of their ethnic identity and cultural heritage, which they assert as fundamentally distinct from that of China.

In contemporary times, much of mass mobilisation occurs through social media - and Tibetans in exile are actively engaged in these digital spaces. For over a year, a group of activists has campaigned to create a Tibetan flag emoji, distilling its vibrant design into a thumbnail-sized symbol. They have petitioned the Unicode Consortium - the global standards body that determines which emojis are officially recognised - but the proposal remains stalled (Wired).

Despite the strict prohibition imposed on the Tibetan flag within China, it continues to be revered and displayed - both by Tibetans living in exile and by those within Tibet - as a priceless inheritance passed down through generations and universally regarded as the national flag of Tibet.

Conclusion

The Tibetan national flag-rich in colour, mythic imagery, and political resonance-illuminates how a single emblem can condense centuries of cultural memory and channel contemporary aspirations for sovereignty. A vexillological lens reveals that its iconographic strata-the snow-clad mountain, radiating sun, paired snow lions, and swirling jewel-are not merely decorative but encode foundational narratives of geographic rootedness, Buddhist cosmology, and collective ethical life. Historically, the flag's standardisation under the Thirteenth Dalai Lama transformed disparate military banners into a unifying national symbol just as Tibet declared independence; its subsequent proscription after 1959 only intensified its potency as a banner of resistance.

Today the flag functions simultaneously as a material artefact hoisted at commemorations, a digital icon mobilised in online activism, and an imagined community's connective tissue that transcends state borders. Its contested yin-yang (gakyil) motif underscores Tibet's capacity to appropriate pan-Asian symbolism while asserting a distinct national identity, challenging reductive claims of cultural derivation from China. That complexity-at once syncretic and particular-positions the flag as a paradigmatic example of decolonial vexillology: an emblem whose meaning is continually renegotiated through exile, protest, and global media.

Re-evaluating the flag thus extends beyond cataloguing symbols; it foregrounds the lived stakes of representation for a people navigating displacement and occupation. Future scholarship might trace the flag's evolving semiotic life in digital spaces-or compare it with other stateless nations' banners-to deepen understanding of how visual symbols galvanise transnational movements. Ultimately, the Snow Lion Flag endures as a vivid testament to Tibet's ongoing struggle for cultural continuity, political recognition, and self-determination.

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