
Layers of Home: Dharamsala and the Changing Home of Tibetans

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Abstract

McLeod Ganj, a major suburb of Dharamsala, has been the home of His Holiness the 14th Dalai Lama and the Tibetan government-in-exile for the past 54 years. The arrival of His Holiness caused a surge of development in McLeod Ganj. My independent study project studies the resulting changes in the physical infrastructure, the way people use space in McLeod Ganj and whether Tibetans perceive McLeod Ganj as their home. I hope to further understand the complexity and fluidity of the idea of home, specifically for Tibetan refugees, through the examination of physical changes in McLeod Ganj.

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Introduction

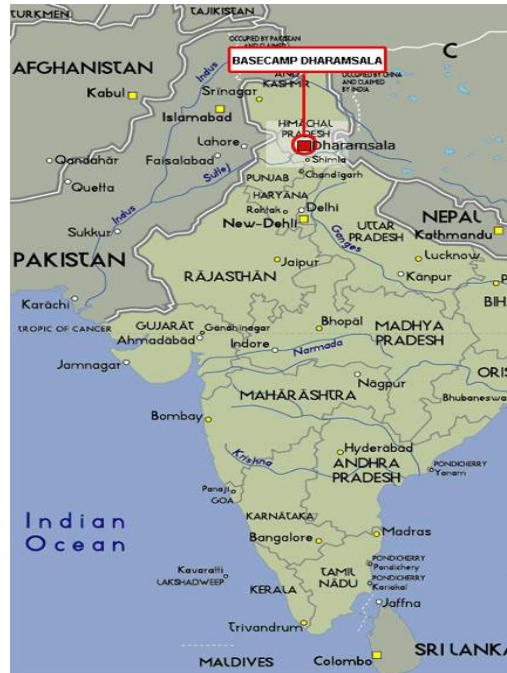
McLeod Ganj became a ghost town overnight following the devastating earthquake of 1905. Nearly 20,000 were killed, only a few shops survived and most of the remaining population moved away. Rebuilding was slow and deliberate until the arrival of His Holiness the Dalai Lama in 1960. His presence made Dharamsala the center for Tibetan exile in India. Since the 1960's there has been a dramatic increase in shops, restaurants, homes, and government buildings. McLeod Ganj has dramatically changed, and today is now one of the top tourist destinations in India.

I investigated how Dharamsala has become a highly livable, thriving town for Tibetan and foreigners alike by examining how the physical space has changed from 1960 to present day. My project also focuses on the idea of home and whether or not Tibetans feel a sense of permanence while living in McLeod Ganj. Through examination of Tibetans' use of public and private spaces, I hope to learn more about the perception of home.

The idea of physical changes and the perception of home has been an interesting subject for me as my own idea of home has changed throughout the years. For many years I believed that I would only think of home as the place I grew up, Minneapolis, Minnesota. But traveling to different places and going to school outside of Minnesota allowed me to understand that in my life I will have more than one home. I realize it is somewhat cliché, but I have found that home is where the heart is. Living in Nepal and India for just three months, I have discovered another home for myself. By studying the changing physical space of McLeod Ganj, this study will investigate the idea of the home for Tibetans and to further understand the layers of home one can have.

History and Geography of Dharamsala

“*Dharamsala*: a building devoted to religious or charitable purposes, especially a rest house for travellers” –Oxford Dictionary



Dharamsala is located across the lower ridges of the Dhaulader Range and looks over the Kangra Valley. “Dharamsala” is the name of different communities- Lower Dharamsala, Gangkyi, and McLeod Ganj- stacked on the same mountainside (Diehl 2002, 36). Lower Dharamsala is a medium sized commercial center that rests at the bottom of the steep hill. It mainly consists of Indians, with a few Tibetan families living near the Lower Tibetan Children’s Village School. Upper Dharamsala, about 9 kilometers or a 10-20 minute drive up the mountain (depending on the traffic) is commonly referred to by its British name, McLeod Ganj.

The British founded Dharamsala in 1846. It provided an ideal location because it looked over the Kangra Valley, giving the army a secure vantage point. Villas were built in Dharamsala to house military officers, as well as people who served the army such as cooks and cleaners (Russell 2000, 21). At that time, Dharamsala was already home to abundant wildlife, including leopards, panthers, porcupines, foxes, jackals, hyenas, black and brown bears, vultures, and hawks.

By 1900, Dharamsala (McLeod Ganj more specifically) supported a flourishing society under the Raj (British sovereignty). On April 4th, 1905 a devastating earthquake hit Dharamsala, ruining Dharamsala’s future as a thriving community. Eyewitness accounts of the earthquake tell that the majority of the buildings in Kangra and

Dharamsala were completely destroyed or uninhabitable (Russell 2000, 22). The only buildings that remained in upper Dharamsala were an old church and Nowrojee General Shop. Nowrojee General Shop still remains in the main square of McLeod Ganj and sells small goods such candies, newspapers, and some produce. Following the earthquake, entire residential areas had to be rebuilt. With reconstruction, the British re-established their buildings and the local officials moved to Lower Dharamsala, leaving McLeod Ganj, causing Upper Dharamsala to become a very much an abandoned British hill station.

Only one man remained in McLeod Ganj. Mr. N.N. Nowrojee tried unsuccessfully to bring this ghost town back to life. For twelve years he offered buildings free of charge to schools and to the state government, but no one took him up on the offer (Avedon 1994, 83, 84). His shop had supplied the British community from 1860-1947 (Russell 2000, 24). When he heard they were in search for a permanent residence for the Dalai Lama, Mr. Nowrojee approached the Indian government directly and offered the space of McLeod Ganj as an ideal location for the Tibetan settlement. After inspection both the Indian Government in New Delhi and the Tibetan officials agreed the location would be ideal.

“From our viewpoint, though, it had good as well as bad sides. Delhi is the nerve center. The nearer to Delhi, the better the communication. Dharamsala’s disadvantages, then, were clear. But we also saw potential. It was open and there was more room to expand. Thus, after complaining at first that we were reluctant to move, once our officials visited and formed a good opinion, we decided to shift.” –His Holiness the 14th Dalai Lama (Avedon 1994, 84)



Nowrojee General Shop in the 1980’s
(Mcleodganj.com)



Nowrojee General Shop in 2014
(Photograph taken by author)

Arrival of His Holiness the 14th Dalai Lama

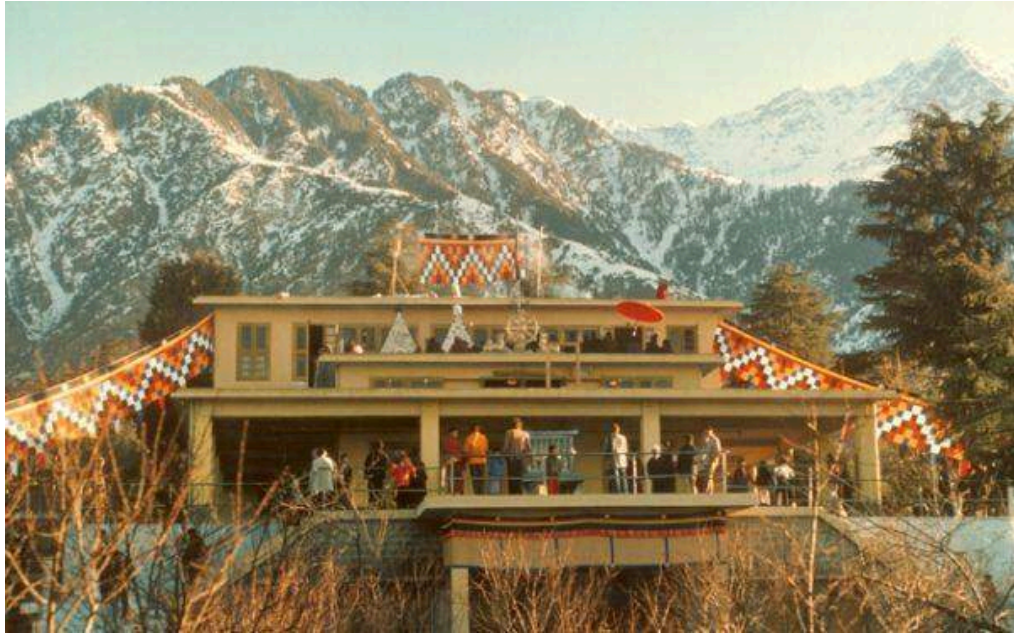


His Holiness the 14th Dalai Lama arrives in McLeod Ganj in 1960
(Photograph taken by Nowrojee and Sons)

On April 30th, 1960 the Dalai Lama arrived in Dharamsala and was greeted by Mr. Nowrojee and 250 Tibetan refugees. The Dalai Lama's described his first view of McLeod Ganj as "a quiet and sleepy backwater of the Punjab, not the bustling Himachali town that it is today" (Russell 2000, Forward). He was taken to his new home, named Swarg Ashram or "The Heavenly Abode", located about one mile above McLeod Ganj on the western edge of the mountainside. "The view was astounding, the entire enclosure seemingly anchored on a buttress of rock flung into space, yet the house itself was almost windowless, a thirty-two-room behemoth, one-storied with cavernous chambers lit by trap-like dormers and heated in winter by only a few diminutive fireplaces" (Avedon 1994, 86).

In 1968, Tsuglagkhang (the main temple in McLeod Ganj) was built as the new home of the Dalai Lama. The Dalai Lama made it clear he did not want a lavish temple like the one in Lhasa, Tibet. Instead the goal was to build "a simple, functional building in which people would gather to observe their religious ceremonies and practices" (Russell 2000, 27). The home is in fact modest, with a kitchen, office, security and secretarial quarters (Avedon 1994, 103).

It was built in Thekchen Choling or "Island of the Mahayana Teaching" which encloses a vast area of forest and hillside where the Dalai Lama is able to walk, tend to his flowers and look after wild birds. Around Thekchen Choling, Tibetans would circumambulate each day on the Lingkhor (also known as Holy Walk) that was similar to the Lingkhor in Lhasa.



Tsulagkhang Temple in the 1980's
(Mcleodganj.com)

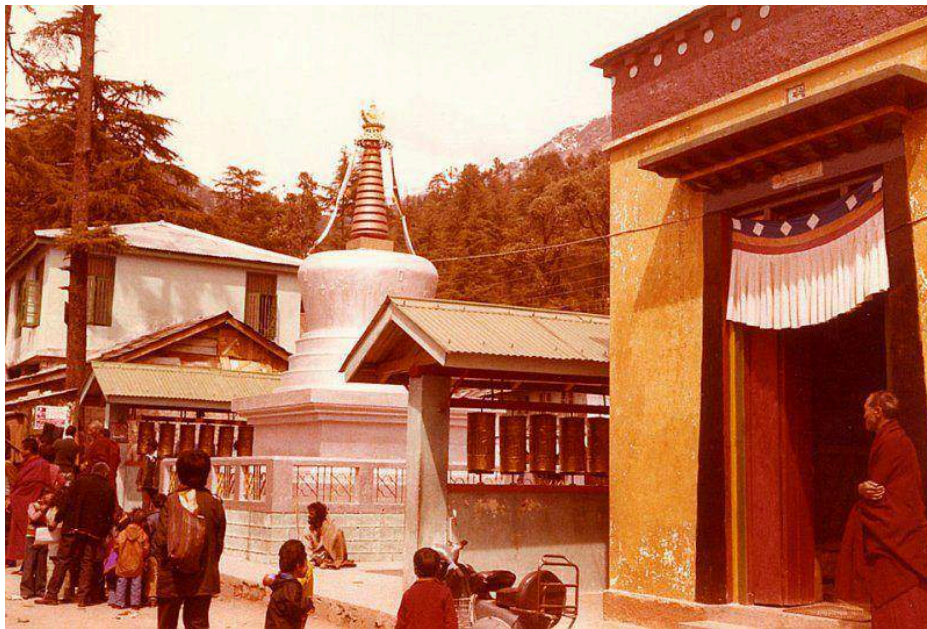


Prayer flags at the Lingkhori
(Photograph taken by author)

Implications of the Dalai Lama's Presence

The presence of the Dalai Lama in Upper Dharamsala changed the previously deserted British hill station into a sacred site. It immediately became a destination for pilgrims, and a temporary spiritual and political home for his followers. Arnold van Gennep described this 'sacralizing' effect of the Dalai Lama through the concept of "pivoting of the sacred, in which the sacred is variable, rather than absolute, and is brought into play by the nature of particular situations" (Gennep 1908, 12).

The arrival of the Dalai Lama also caused a surge of development in McLeod Ganj; he immediately took on preserving the Tibetan culture through building the Tibetan Hospital, Tibetan Library, and Tibetan school (Avedon 1994, 92). By 1970, McLeod Ganj had a permanent population of 4,000 people. In addition, hundreds of pilgrims, traders, government officials and foreign visitors added to the population (Avedon 1994, 103). The serene colonial park in the center of McLeod Ganj was taken over by Tibetans and was replaced by three rows of shops, restaurants and hotels. At the center, a tall gold-crowned Buddhist shrine, known as a stupa, was built that was dedicated to those who were suffering under the Chinese occupation (Avedon 1994, 103).



Namgyalma stupa in the late 1970's
(Mcleodganj.com)



Namgyalma stupa in 2014
(Photograph taken by author)

Through the construction of key institutions, Tibetans have been able to preserve their own culture and identity as well as share it with others. One example is the construction of the Tibetan government-in-exile compound, also known as the Central Tibetan Administration, which was built down the hill from McLeod Ganj. Named Gangchen Kyishong or “Abode of Snow-Happy Valley”, it was built out of necessity to “replace the cramped, perennially leaking quarters of the old British bungalows” (Avedon 1994, 104). Some other institutions include: schools, the Tibetan Institute for Performing Arts, the Library of Tibetan Works and Archives, the Tibetan Medical and Astrological Institute, and the Norbulingka Institute. Norbulingka was the summer residence of the Dalai Lama in Lhasa, Tibet. According to the official Norbulingka website, the Norbulingka Institute is dedicated to handing down tradition of Tibetan arts and literature through training, education, and employment for Tibetans.

One important institution built after the arrival of the Dalai Lama was the Department of Information and International Relations. In 1985, Kazuhiro Nakahara, a Japanese architect, was personally asked by the Dalai Lama to help design this building and located it in lower Dharamsala in the Central Tibetan Administration. I had the honor of meeting Mr. Nakahara multiple times at the Japanese restaurant, Lung Ta, in McLeod Ganj. Mr. Nakahara explained in our interview that he moved to McLeod Ganj at the request of the Dalai Lama to help with the design and construction in Dharamsala. In addition to designing the building for the Tibetan Department of Information and International Relations, Mr. Nakahara has assisted with the building of Norbulingka Institute, many Tibetan Children Village schools and temples around Dharamsala.

Mr. Nakahara was born in Japan and studied traditional architecture and urban design at Waseda University in Shinjuku, Japan. As a result of his extensive research in Japan, Mr. Nakahara is extremely knowledgeable in the development of cities and towns. Mr. Nakahara expressed that development is natural. Many places in the world are

changing and growing every day. In Mr. Nakahara's opinion, the changes in the McLeod Ganj are intensified by the presence of His Holiness. "Everywhere in the world there is change, but especially in McLeod Ganj because of the tourists coming to see the Dalai Lama" (Nakahara 2014, Personal Interview). At first it was mainly Tibetans traveling to Dharamsala for pilgrimages, but now there are many more tourists, particularly Indian tourists.

There are visible signs that McLeod Ganj has changed throughout the years, which can be seen through the construction of many homes, hotels, and restaurants and the dramatic increase in the number of cars. According to Mr. Nakahara, as recently as 1985 people did not have cars; he recalls that there were only five or six total cars in McLeod Ganj and these few cars mainly belonged to the staff of His Holiness. Today, there are alone 150 taxicabs in McLeod Ganj, and this does not include private cars (Sarin 2014, Personal Interview).

Naturally with the increase of people visiting and living in McLeod Ganj, more buildings have been constructed. However, the safety standard for construction in Dharamsala is not well regulated. By Japanese standards, the construction of the buildings in Dharamsala and McLeod Ganj are very dangerous (Nakahara 2014, Personal Interview). However Nakahara must make due with the resources that he has in Dharamsala. Cement and steel are very expensive materials, but they are also the most sturdy and stable for building. Therefore, Nakahara balances the use of cement and steel with less sturdy materials such as mud. Keila Diehl, an Asian Studies professor at University of California Berkeley, agrees with Nakahara's sentiment, writing that, "little attention has been successfully paid to developing Dharamsala's infrastructure to keep up with the town's current building boom" (Diehl 2002, 42).



Kazuhiro Nakahara at Lung Ta restaurant in McLeod Ganj
(Photograph taken by author)

In the early 1960's there were only four shops in the entire town. This is a dramatic difference from the hundreds of shops, restaurants and hotels one now finds in the bustling town of McLeod Ganj. According to a 32-year-old shop owner, Tenzin, the surge of development in McLeod Ganj has occurred in the last 10 to 15 years. Growing up, Tenzin recalls that there were only 10 or 12 shops around McLeod Ganj, but now he estimates that there are more than 150 shops, and that only includes the registered shops.

While tourism and development in McLeod Ganj has resulted in many positive changes for the economy, Tenzin does not believe all of the changes in McLeod Ganj have been positive. Tenzin recalls the strong community bond in McLeod Ganj when he was a young boy growing up. Yet, the more commercial the town has become, the lonelier people have become. In Tenzin's words, "everyone use to have time for everyone. But now I see my neighbor and we hardly speak. It is not that we are busy; we just spend time on our phones or alone in our shops. It has become a very individual world" (Tenzin 2014, Personal Interview).

McLeod Ganj itself is physically not a large town; it takes no longer than 30 minutes to walk from one side of the city to the other. However, with a population at around 10,000 people and hundreds of tourists visiting McLeod Ganj every day, the streets are commonly packed with people. Even though I was visiting at the end of the primary tourist season, the streets were fairly crowded with locals and tourists alike. I found myself overwhelmed by the constant honking and taxis pushing me to the side of the road as they drove past.

These crowded streets of McLeod Ganj today are drastically different from the peaceful environment that many people remember from the 1960's. Tsultrim, an 82-year-old man who arrived in McLeod Ganj in 1960, explained that "the presence and fame of the Dalai Lama and the desire to hear the teachings has drawn tourists from around the world to McLeod Ganj. In the early 1960's, McLeod Ganj was very peaceful. Now there has been a huge influx of tourists to Upper Dharamsala, however the increase in tourism has caused harm to McLeod Ganj. The peaceful life of McLeod Ganj is now gone" (Tsultrim 2014, Personal Interview). Other Tibetans I spoke with, including Tenzin, echoed this sentiment, expressing their dismay with the extensive number of tourists in McLeod Ganj. Tenzin told me when he was a young boy Bhagsu Road, the road where his home and shop are located, was mostly jungle with a few shops and homes. Today it is hard to walk down the road without being bombarded by the numerous shops, restaurants, tourists, and taxis honking their way through the narrow roads.



Bhagsu Road in 1965
(Mcleodganj.com)



Bhagsu Road in 2014
(Photograph taken by author)

As seen by the photographs above, the roads of Bhagsu have drastically changed over the past 50 years. The photo taken in 2014 portrays the infrastructure of the buildings surrounding the road are clearly not designed for more than one car to pass through the street. The constant presence of cars and taxis driving back and forth on Bhagsu Road create traffic jams making it difficult to walk interrupted through the road.

Layers of Home

“Most people are principally aware of one culture, one setting, one home; exiles are aware of at least two, and this plurality of vision gives rise to an awareness of simultaneous dimensions, an awareness that—to borrow a phrase from music—is *contrapuntal*” (Edward Said 1984)

Dharamsala is a place of refuge for many Tibetans as well as a place to path through for Tibetans and tourists alike. Although Dharamsala has become the center of the Tibetan government-in-exile and is currently the home of the Dalai Lama, some Tibetans do not consider Dharamsala home. “In many ways Dharamsala is physically and psychologically constructed by them as a liminal space, a temporary resting place in which many Tibetans refuse or are unable to make material or emotional investments” (Diehl 2002, 33). The way people use their space and belongings is a good indication as to how people adjust to an area. For people who were born in India and more specifically Dharamsala, it is the only home they know. The presence of the Dalai Lama and the home of the Tibetan government-in-exile, make McLeod Ganj as close to Tibet as they have experienced. For others who have lived in Tibet and experienced life before living in exile, the hope and desire to return to Tibet is strong. “It is important to keep in mind that the first Tibetan refugees, like many who have followed, believed their stay in India would be brief, with most expecting to return to their homes in Tibet after one or two years at most” (Diehl 2002, 39).

When Mr. Nakahara arrived in McLeod Ganj in 1985, he recalls how the majority of people lived in barracks. According to him, the Tibetans were satisfied with the small barracks and homes because they felt they would soon be returning to Tibet therefore it was not necessary to have bigger or fancier homes. As many Tibetans believed they would soon return to Tibet, they were confused about why Mr. Nakahara was designing big buildings in Dharamsala. For many, big buildings can indicate a sense of permanence in a place. Initially there was not a lot of focus on the infrastructure of buildings in McLeod Ganj “due to the persistent optimism of local Tibetans that extensive planning was not needed, since they would not be staying there for long” (Diehl, 42). Mr. Nakahara explained to me that by the 1990’s more people realized they could be living in Dharamsala for a significant amount of time.

Three generations of Tibetans living in McLeod Ganj: Tenzin’s family

I spoke with Tenzin, a 32-year-old shopkeeper born and raised in McLeod Ganj. I met Tenzin at his shop located on Bhagsu Road on his father’s land, close to the Main Square in McLeod Ganj. Tenzin’s shop is a small store that is ideally situated on the bustling road of Bhagsu, with a constant flow of tourists walking up and down the road. When asked whether he considers Dharamsala home, he responded, “This is the only

home I know, because this is where I was born. I was born in the same home I live now. I have never been to Tibet. The only thing connects me to Tibet are stories from my grandfather. My father does not have a good memory of Tibet because he was a child. So this is my home. I don't feel like I am a refugee. I am like an Indian. I was born here" (Tenzin 2014, Personal Interview). As a teenager he had the desire to move away from Upper Dharamsala, but he explained that, "when I got older I realized I had to balance out everything—time with family, friends, and a little bit of money. I have many friends who were excited to move to America, but once they got there they realized it is a hard life. I am content here. This is my home" (Tenzin 2014, Personal Interview).

Unlike Tenzin, his grandfather constantly held on to the hope that he would one day return to Tibet. His grandfather would always have six big black boxes filled with thick traditional Tibetan clothing all packed. Tenzin would ask him why his grandfather would keep these big boxes packed, especially since they took up a significant amount of space in their home. His grandfather would continually respond that he believed he would go back to Tibet, so he was always packed and ready to leave.

However, Tenzin's father does not hold onto the same hope of returning to Tibet that Tenzin's grandfather did. Tenzin's father was a young boy, around six or seven, when he left Tibet and has few memories of Tibet. Tenzin's father owns quite a bit of land around Bhagsu road, but Tenzin's grandfather told him he should sell the land because he did not think they would be staying in McLeod Ganj for a long time. Yet, Tenzin's father did not listen, and kept the land. He is grateful that he kept the land given that he is still living in McLeod Ganj to this day.

Life in McLeod Ganj since 1960: Tsultrim's sense of home

Tsultrim came to McLeod Ganj in 1960, the same year the Dalai Lama moved to his home in Dharamsala. Tsultrim first lived Gangtok and then to Menali where many people went to work on road construction. Finally in 1960 he arrived in McLeod Ganj. At this time, the Dalai Lama was living where Tushita Meditation Center is currently located.

Tsultrim told me how there were only four shops in McLeod including the most famous shop, Nowrojee. When the Dalai Lama moved to Tsulakong, the current temple, people began living close to the temple. Initially people were living in tents. The Indian government did not sanction Tibetans to have tin rooftops. Instead, Tibetans would use wood sticks for the base of the house and use thick tents on top of the wood. Slowly this changed to more permanent houses made out of stones. The stones were used as the foundation of the houses and Tibetans would use clay and water to plaster the stones together.

The 1960's were a difficult time for Tibetan refugees, including Tsultrim and his family. It was hard for Tibetans to make permanent homes when they first arrived in McLeod Ganj. Even now, the forest department in Dharamsala does not allow some

houses to be built. Currently there are cases under review the where Tibetans want to build more permanent buildings and houses, but are unable to because of the government.

“If a bird comes to a branch that is full of thorns, then that bird cannot really sit there very well. It is an uncomfortable life. That is like the situation we are in. Dharamsala is not really home. We do not have a base that we can actually call home. I do not feel like this is actually my home where I can claim something for my generation and for the next generation. Here I cannot pass things on to my next generation because there are barriers between us and the local Indians. Even if we have something nice, then the Indians are jealous. Tibetans are more generous than Indians. If I have some money, I would share it with others. But the Indians choose to hold on to their money and save it. I do not feel this is home. I definitely want to go home to Tibet. In a way I could go back to Tibet, but I do not want to leave His Holiness” (Tsultrim 2014, Personal Interview).

Life as a Refugee

“From its inception the experience of a refugee puts trust on trial. The refugee mistrusts and is mistrusted” (Daniel and Knudsen 1995).

“In exile, home colonizes the mind” (Naficy 1991, 111).

Relationship Between Tibetans and Indians

There are few personal relationships between Indians and Tibetans in McLeod Ganj. The majority of interaction and relations between the two groups are primarily seen in the economic sphere, through customer and selling relationship at the shops and restaurants in McLeod Ganj (Diehl 2002, 118). There seems to be a common distrust between Tibetans and Indians, which is mainly expressed through gossip. Many Tibetans are weary of Indian shop owners because they believe they are purposely overcharged for goods and are taken advantage of because of their lack of knowledge of Hindi language. On the other side, Indians resent the suspiciousness of Tibetans. Many Indians are also jealous over the relatively high standard of living of the Tibetans and the obvious Western obsession with Tibetans and Tibetan culture (Diehl 2002, 118).

The tension between Indians and Tibetans in Dharamsala escalated on April 22, 1994 when a Tibetan was accused of killing an Indian boy. The *Sydney Morning Herald* reported that an Indian youth was stabbed to death by a Tibetan in a fight over a cricket match on television. After the funeral of the Indian boy “the mourners went berserk... the mob stormed the compound of the Tibetan government-in-exile, smashed windows, set fires and destroyed furniture. Then they looted Tibetan shops and beat up refugees” (Penny-Dimri 1994, 281). The violent outburst from the Indians confirmed the Tibetans worst fears and sadly confirmed some of their negative stereotypes. To this day, Tibetans are extremely proud of the fact that they never fought back against the Indians. They stayed committed to their non-violent approach to life and mainly remained locked inside their homes throughout the violence (Diehl 2002, 121). Sithar Dolma was one of the Tibetans who stayed in her home out of fear. She explained that the Tibetans never retaliated against the Indians; instead Tibetans would lock themselves in their home and hope that Indians would not break in (Sithar 2014, Personal Interview).

The Dalai Lama offered to move the Tibetan government-in-exile to Southern India immediately following the violence in 1994. However, local Indian businessmen feared Dharamsala would become a ghost town overnight if the Dalai Lama left McLeod Ganj and so they plead with the Dalai Lama to stay (Diehl 2002, 121). Although the Dalai Lama and Tibetans agreed to stay in Dharamsala, there remains an underlying tension between Tibetans and Indians in McLeod Ganj.

Life as a Tibetan refugee: Sithar Dolma's story

I met with Sithar Dolma at her home in McLeod Ganj. I was welcomed by Sithar at the top of the stairs to her home with a kind smile. Her home is located at the top of an apartment complex and has a beautiful view of the mountains. She prefaced our talk by telling me that her English is not good, however I soon realized this was extremely humble of her to say given that she has amazing English.

Sithar was born in India and moved to McLeod Ganj in 1964 as a young girl when her father was offered a job as a photographer. Sithar remembers that when she first arrived in McLeod Ganj all of the homes were tents. After a few years the houses were built from bamboo and waterproof tarps. However, these had to be replaced every two to three weeks because the material would not be able to last for a long time. After the bamboo houses, people began to use wood to build the house and tin for the roofs. Some people who could not afford to buy tin for their roofs would use the tin from old oil cans. More recently, people began to use concrete to build their homes. This progression from living in very temporary homes made from bamboo and wood, to more permanent homes vividly portrays for Sithar and many others the feeling that McLeod Ganj has become a long-term home for many Tibetan refugees. Sithar remembers her parents would not allow her or her siblings to do anything involving building a more permanent home because they were convinced they would be going back to their home in Tibet.

Unlike her parents, Sithar has always felt as though McLeod Ganj is home. She explained that since she never experienced life in Tibet she never had the longing her parents and grandparents had to return to Tibet. However, Sithar told me that although she considers McLeod Ganj to be 'home', it is a different than the traditional idea of 'home'. Sithar was born in India and has lived in India her entire life, but has not experienced having the same rights as Indians. "Indians remind us that we are not from here" (Sithar Dolma 2014, Personal Interview). According to Sithar, ten years ago an Indian boy was killed and a Tibetan boy was wrongly accused of the murder. For days, Indians would stone Tibetan shops, restaurants and homes. Sithar was terrified to leave her house. So while Sithar considers McLeod Ganj to be her home, she also realizes that living in Tibet would be a very different experience; in others word, it would be a different kind of home. Sithar Dolma is extremely grateful to the Indians and the Indian government for giving the Tibetans a place of refuge. However, she finds that the underlying distrust and tension between the Indians and Tibetans makes McLeod Ganj a different kind of home than life in Tibet would be.

Sithar and her husband have saved their money and used it to build a permanent home for their family. It is important for Sithar to create a comfortable home for her family in McLeod Ganj because now she feels it is possible they could be living in Dharamsala for a significant amount of time. Other "posh" things like flat screen TV's and nice cars are unimportant to Sithar. A house is where family interacts with one

another and lives together. For Sithar and her husband, creating a comfortable and permanent home is more important than owning expensive material goods.

Immediately following our interview, Sithar asked me to stay for tea and biscuits. I stayed for a while in the comfort of Sithar's home, sitting at the large kitchen table, drinking hot sweet tea and talking and laughing with Sithar and her husband. I felt extremely lucky to experience first hand the intangible feeling of home that Sithar had explained to me earlier that day.

Conclusion

In the last 50 years, McLeod Ganj has gone through a significant amount of change. The presence of the Dalai Lama in Dharamsala changed McLeod Ganj from an empty town into a bustling city, full of Tibetans, Indians, people on pilgrimage, and tourists. Upon the arrival of Tibetans in McLeod Ganj, the houses and buildings were made from very temporary materials, reinforcing the idea that living in India was not permanent. For many Tibetans in the 1960's, the prospect of returning to Tibet felt imminent. However, as the conflict in Tibet continued for many years, Tibetans soon realized that returning to Tibet may not be as soon as they initially hoped. Slowly, the residential infrastructure in Dharamsala became more permanent, which has been seen through the use of materials such as cement and bricks.

Tibetans began to pay more attention to the state of their homes with hopes of creating a comfortable home for their families in Dharamsala. However, the underlying tensions between Tibetans and Indians and the Indian government reinforce the feeling that they are visitors in another country. Hopefully one day Tibetans will be able to return to their own land in Tibet, but for now Tibetan refugees living in McLeod Ganj have created another home for themselves.



McLeod Ganj main square in 1970
(Mcleodganj.com)



McLeod Ganj main square in 2014
(Photograph taken by author)

Suggestions for Future Research

One possible area for future research would be to study Tibetan refugee settlements in North America, Europe and other countries in Asia. It would be interesting to examine the ways in which Tibetans make homes for themselves and feel at home in other parts of the world in comparison to the Tibetans in Dharamsala. The comparison between the development in the United States and Europe to the development in McLeod Ganj would be particularly important to investigate, given that McLeod Ganj is the home of the Dalai Lama and has become a huge tourists destination. Unlike McLeod Ganj, Tibetan settlements around the rest of the world do not draw the same amount of attention and internationally publicity. Perhaps the settlements in Europe and America are threatening to the Dharamsala home of Tibetans in exile given that more Tibetans may want to move away from India to other parts of the world. It would be interesting to examine the similarities and differences of physical spaces created by Tibetan refugees in other Tibetan settlements around the world. Another potential area for investigation would be to compare the impact of pilgrimage and tourism on other small towns and how their rates of growth and development compare to Dharamsala over the past 60 years.

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Appendix A: Methodology

The research conducted for this project occurred over three and a half weeks in McLeod Ganj, Dharamsala. All of the interviews took place in Dharamsala at shops, restaurants, apartments, the Lingkhor (the walk around the Dalai Lama's temple), and one interview at the Central Tibetan Administration.

My fieldwork is primarily based on these interviews and observations throughout the three and a half weeks I spent in Dharamsala. I interviewed ten Tibetans between the ages of 32 and 85 years old. I also interviewed one Japanese man and two Indian men between the ages of 40 and 50 years old. I went into depth on a few of the interviews in my paper and the rest of the interviews are used in the overall analysis of my topic.

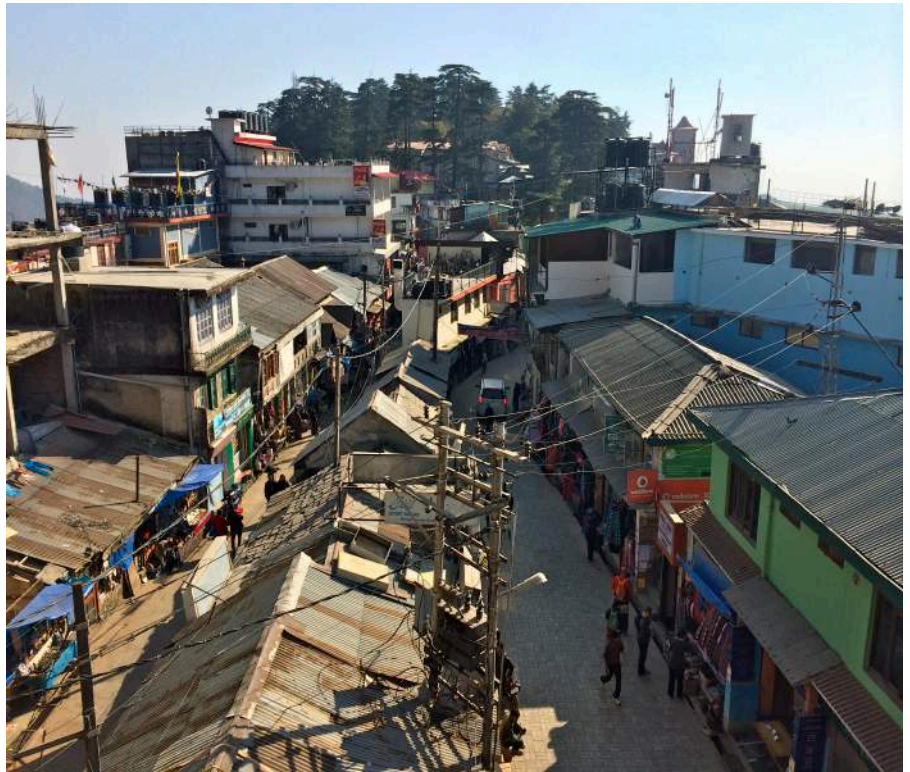
I chose to conduct my interviews informally, and to instead have more of a conversation. It was extremely important to me that the interviewees felt at ease and relaxed while we were talking, so we met in places that were comfortable for the participant such as their house, a café, or at the Lingkhor. I started with interview questions that were important to ask regarding my investigation and I used a lot of open ended questions to make sure the people I spoke with felt comfortable addressing what was most important to them. I began each interview by explaining my research project and making sure they felt okay with the topic and questions.

Throughout the paper I refer to the interviewees by the names they asked to have used. In some cases I use full names of the person, whereas other times I solely use the first name of the participant. All of the interviewees were comfortable with using their actual names.

Appendix B: Additional Fieldwork Photographs



The author and her Amala in McLeod Ganj
(Photograph taken by author)



View of McLeod Ganj
(Photograph taken by author)



Namgyalma Stupa
(Photograph taken by Sithar Dolma)