

Just Behind the Mountain; Refugee Children Imagine Tibet

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Introduction

Since the Tibetan diaspora began in 1959, when His Holiness the 14th Dalai Lama fled Tibet for India, many Tibetans have settled and started families in exile. Today, a large percentage of Tibetan refugees have been born in exile, and have therefore never seen their country. Within Tibetan exile communities, however, the importance of Tibetan identity is strongly emphasized and people are still very much invested in the plight of Tibet. As a result, there exist strong ideas about the reality of life in Tibet within the exile community. According to Jamyang Norbu, “Though the Shangri-la stereotype is a Western creation, Tibetans, especially Tibetan refugees, are gradually succumbing to a similarly fantastic idea of their lost country.”¹

Many of the ideas about Tibet among refugees appear to be stipulated—or at least influenced—by the dominant discourse of the exile community. In fact, ideas about Tibet among refugees are often so uniform, that they could be considered cultural truths—that is, truths that depend more on a given culture or community’s acceptance of a piece of information or idea than on the factual truth of the idea. These truths—while of course not universally accepted in the exile community—are nonetheless reiterated throughout a person’s life in the exile community, and by the time someone is a young man or woman, he or she is able to discuss them with ease, and often with passion. And yet, for the vast majority of young exiles, Tibet is a place that exists entirely within their imaginations. Trinlay Dorjee, a 25-year old Tibetan born in India, explained that when people from the older generations take part in traditional rituals, it helps them to remember their country. “They feel like they are in Tibet,” he said. “But we don’t have anything to remember.”

¹ Imagining Tibet, p. 377.

This study focuses first, on the way that very young refugee children imagine Tibet and, second, on the roots of their ideas about the homeland they've never seen. Focusing on young children is a way to avoid—as much as possible—the rhetoric about Tibet that is so prevalent among older refugees. More importantly, for very young Tibetan exiles, who have spent only a short time as members of the exile community, many personal truths override the cultural truths. These personal truths represent the child's fears, fantasies, misconceptions and gaps in their very short education. This study examines how effected young children are by the cultural truths of their community, and attempts to unearth their personal truths about Tibet while they're still vivid.

Site

The research for this project was conducted in Ravangla, a small town in South Sikkim. The town is very diverse and is home to Indians, Nepalese, Lebchas, Bhutia, Bhutanese and Tibetans. The town, which is surrounded by mountains on almost all sides, is in clear view of Mt. Kenchenjunga, the world's third largest mountain.

A short walk up the hill from the town of Ravangla is the Kunphenling Tibetan Settlement. Tibetans first settled in Ravangla in 1964, when they came to work in the tea fields. In 1975, His Holiness visited Darjeeling, where he was met by a delegation from Ravangla, who informed him of their unofficial settlement. In 1982, Kunphenling Tibetan Settlement was officially recognized by the Dharamsala government in exile.

Today, there are approximately 1,500 Tibetans living in the settlement. They are divided into seven camps, with twenty to thirty houses in each. The majority of families in the settlement are originally from U-tsang, the central province in Tibet, with the next highest concentration from Kham, and the smallest number from Amdo, the provinces of

Eastern Tibet. As the tea plantations in Ravangla are no longer running, the settlement's main source of income is the military base located just across the road. The base houses one of the Indian Army's all-Tibetan regiments and not surprisingly, many of Ravangla's young people join the military. The rest of the settlement's income is from sweater selling, hawking other goods, (both of which require leaving the settlement for several months during the year), traditional carpet weaving and manual labor.

Ravangla proved to be a fascinating place for this study, due to its close physical proximity to Tibet. When asked where Tibet was in relation to their home, most children answered that Tibet was just behind or just on the other side of the mountain, referring either to Kenchenjunga, or to Mt. Menam, the tree-covered, 2,000 foot peak within Ravangla its self. Most children believed that if you were to stand on either mountain, Tibet was visible from the top.

Several camps of Kunphenling Settlement.

Methodology

Part I

Because traditional interviews with young children don't function in the same way that they do with adults, it was important to utilize some alternative methods of research for this project. Therefore, the majority of research represented here comes from drawings done by refugee children, and their explanation of those drawings. Most of the drawings were collected in the upper and lower kindergarten classes of the Central School for Tibetans, Ravangla. These two classes include children ages four to seven. A smaller number of drawings were collected from boys, ages five through thirteen, at a daily "tutorial" before school. Lastly, some drawings were collected at the children's homes.

Because small children do not always create entirely coherent images—and because it's important to incorporate the child's voice into the research—the children were also asked to explain or describe the drawing, whenever possible. Often, this consisted of pointing to a specific part of the drawing and asking "what is this?" Sometimes, however, the child already had a clear story in his or her head, and it was just a matter of listening to the story. It's important to acknowledge that occasionally, the child's drawing probably didn't have anything—or much—to do with Tibet, but through the question and answer process, new ideas emerged.

It's also important to mention that although attempts were made to collect equal amounts of drawings from both boys and girls, the kindergarten classes lean heavily in the direction of boys, and the tutorial class was only for boys. Therefore, there is a higher representation of boys than girls in this research.

Part II and III

The research for parts II and III was collected through interviews with teachers, community members and parents of kindergarten children, and also classroom observation. It was important to speak with as many adults that the children have contact with as possible, as all of these people contribute to the children's upbringing and education.

View of the kindergarten from the main building of the Central School for Tibetans.

Part I: Ways of Imagining

Having worked with the same groups of children over the course of this research, it's important to recognize that their drawings (and their ideas about Tibet) developed and changed over time. The following are the major themes that emerged from the children's artwork and story telling, in the approximate order that they emerged.

Floating Tibet

The children's drawings of Tibet—particularly the initial drawings—often showed a lack of a defined, pre-conceived image. Initially, the children appeared slightly lost when asked to draw Tibet, and their drawings reflect this. The lack of a solid, mental image is evident in several ways: The first is the high occurrence of copying. When asked to draw Tibet, children freely copied from the classroom walls, books, and each other. The kindergarten classrooms are covered in posters, and initially the children—particularly those in the lower kindergarten—copied these posters. Therefore, the drawings they completed were often simply a page of random objects, such as “tree,” “flower,” and “dog,” usually done in the same style as the illustration on the poster. Children often drew watches, which was clearly inspired by the large poster of a watch in a prominent location on the lower kindergarten classroom wall. When a child did draw something from his or her own imagination, it was not uncommon for the child he or she was sharing a desk with to draw the same thing.

The children's drawings were also quite obviously influenced by television and other media. Many of the kindergarten students drew characters that resembled popular cartoons, while the older students—particularly the boys—drew people that looked like

super heroes. One boy 10-year old boy, Tenzing Tashi, drew Chinese people that strongly resembled comic book characters, complete with tights, helmets and swords.

When children did draw Tibet from their own imagination (as opposed to copying it from somewhere else), the drawings often lacked foreground and background, and were generally not to scale. Some of this is simply because of the way that young children draw, but when compared with their drawings of Ravangla, the drawings of Tibet had a floating quality to them—a lack of grounding. The children’s drawings of Ravangla showed an understanding of place and often depicted houses (or other buildings), solidly attached to the ground, with mountains behind them and a sky above. The initial drawings of Tibet lacked the same understanding of place, with objects such as trees and people and mountains all appearing to be the same size.

Tenzin Tsekyi is a 7-year girl old attending class 1 at an English-medium school in Ravangla. Her drawings of Ravangla and Tibet are quintessential examples of an understanding of place in the Ravangla drawing, (see figure 1) and a lack thereof in the Tibet drawing, (see figure 2).

The initial confusion and lack of grounding reflected in the early drawings (and some of the later ones as well) is not at all surprising. While the children are exposed to images of Tibet (which will be more thoroughly examined in Part II), the vast majority of them have lived their entire life in Ravangla (or have come from other refugee communities to Ravangla) and therefore have no concept of Tibet as an actual, physical place. Despite the emphasis placed on educating refugee children about Tibetans culture and identity, it’s impossible to instill in a child a sense of place for somewhere he or she has never been.

Ravangla, Sikkim

Tenzing Tsekyi (left), 7, and her sister, Tenzing Kyisom, 9.

Figure 1. Tenzin Tsekyi's drawing of Ravangla, November 21, 2004.

Figure 2. Tenzin Tsekyi's drawing of Tibet, November 21, 2004.

Sonam Dolma (lower kindergarten) draws Tibet while her classmate looks on.

Norbu (upper kindergarten) draws Tibet.

Political Symbols and Figures

As a general trend, the children's drawings contained a surprisingly low occurrence of political symbols and figures. Considering the visibility of His Holiness the Dalai Lama within the exile community, he was largely absent in the children's drawings. Even when the children were specifically asked to draw him, it was rare that they actually did, (especially for the very young students). When specifically solicited from lower kindergarten students, only one out of fifteen students drew a figure that was described as the Dalai Lama. When the tutorial students were asked to do the same drawing, more than half drew Mahatma Gandhi instead. Mao Ze Dong was entirely absent from the drawings, as were all other Chinese political figures. The closest thing the children drew to a political figure from China, was a generic, PLA soldier.

The Tibetan flag—another common sight in refugee communities—appeared frequently in the drawings, in the sense that children often described a piece of their drawing as the Tibetan flag, but—among kindergarten students--rarely was it drawn as such. More often, it was simply an object in the shape of a flag, drawn in any colors of the child's choosing. Older students, however, drew the flag just as frequently and depicted it in a way that more closely resembled the actual thing.

Chinese political symbols were almost entirely absent from the kindergarten drawings. Some of the older students represented Chinese soldiers with green uniforms or hats, but not once did a child of any age draw a Chinese flag or use the color red to symbolize Chinese people or China. When compared with the drawings from Tibet and the World through the Eyes of a Child, which were done by teenaged refugees, the contrast is stark. The teenagers' drawings are full of political symbols—both Chinese and

Tibetan. The political symbolism is so prevalent that in one drawing, the two national flags become the sky its self, which is split down the middle.² In another drawing, a PLA soldier is portrayed with a missile in his hand, which bears the color and design of the Chinese flag.³

The Indian flag appeared less frequently in the drawings than the Tibetan flag, but with a greater level of accuracy, particularly among older students. When asked to draw a map of Ravangla in relation to Tibet, older students were clearly more comfortable drawing the shape of India than that of Tibet. A map by 12-year old Jinpa Gyatso, is a good example of the children's lack of confidence in drawing Tibet. In his case, he left Tibet out entirely and opted to fly both the Indian and Tibetans flags off the top of India instead. (It should be noted that the place-names written onto the maps, however, were equally inaccurate for both India and Tibet). (See figure 3).

It was not uncommon for a child to express an inability to draw a Chinese person. Most lower kindergarten students drew people as stick figures or blobs, and it's therefore important to question why another stick figure or blob couldn't represent a Chinese person. Occasionally Tibetans were drawn in one color while Chinese were drawn in another, but more often, Chinese were simply left out because the children said they didn't know how to draw them.

In general, the children had a much easier time drawing generic--rather than specific--people or even specific kinds of people. In the same way that they struggled to draw His Holiness the Dalai Lama and Chinese people, when asked to draw themselves or their family in Tibet, they also showed a great deal of hesitation. It was much more

² Drawing by Tsering Gyatso, p. 21.

³ Drawing by Kalsang Dorjee, p. 33.

common for a child to describe the individual in his or her picture simply as “man.”
When asked to draw themselves in Tibet, the majority of them described the figure in
their drawing as “me” with tremendous shyness or neglected to draw themselves at all.

Namgyal Norbu’s (6 yrs. old) drawing of His Holiness, 11/20/2004, (left). Tenzing
Tseley’s (5 yrs. old) drawing of Ghandi, 11/30/2004.

Figure 3. Jinpa Gyatso's "Map of India and Tibet," December 4, 2004.

The Occupation Represented Through Non-Human Forms

A common theme—particularly among kindergarten students—was to represent the occupation of Tibet through the destruction or imprisonment of non-human forms. These included animals, plants and other parts of nature, and also non-living objects, such as buildings. These drawings allowed the children to show the occupation of Tibet without having to draw people inflicting violence on other people. The drawings also reflect the children's sense that the occupation is not just of Tibetan people, but of Tibet its self.

Children often used yaks—an animal that instantly conjures images of Tibet—to represent the occupation. Tenzin Choyang, a 6-year old upper kindergarten student, drew what he described as Chinese people taking yaks to jail. (Tenzin Choyang, Nov. 30, 2004). Tenzin Gesar, a 7-year old from the same class, drew a graphic image of a Chinese person shooting a Tibetan (at the top of the picture), and a yak below. He explained that after the Chinese killed the Tibetan, he was going to kill the yak. (See figure 4). In yet another drawing, 7-year old Tenzin Chosang, also of the upper kindergarten, depicted a giant yak in the sky, which he said was killing a Chinese person. (See figure 5).

As mentioned earlier, children also used nature images to represent the occupation. A prime example of one such image was done by Sonam Dolma, a 4-year old girl in the lower kindergarten. She described her drawing as a Chinese man, shooting the sun with a gun. On the right hand side of the page is a flower, which she described as a Tibetan flower. (See figure 6). In another of Sonam's drawings, she depicts the sun in the colors

of the Tibetan flag, thus embodying the country's identity in the earth. (Sonam Dolma, 11/22/2004).

Lastly, children represented the occupation through the destruction of buildings, and often monasteries specifically. When asked to draw "a Chinese person and a Tibetan person together," Jinpa Gyatso drew a Chinese soldier shooting a temple with a gun. (See below).

Jinpa Gyatso's "China and Tibet," November 23, 2004.

Figure 4. Tenzin Gesar's yak drawing. November 22, 2004.

Figure 5. Tenzin Chosang's yak drawing. November 30, 2004.

Figure 6. Sonam Dolma's drawing, November 23, 2004.

A Violent Struggle in Tibet

Perhaps the most surprising aspect of the children's drawings was their violent nature. Violence itself is not entirely surprising, but often, especially in the drawings by the younger students, the violence was depicted as mutual—committed by both Chinese and Tibetans—and, in some cases, initiated by the Tibetans. Considering the firm stance of non-violence by the Tibetan government in exile, this was entirely unexpected. One must also keep in mind, however, that Ravangla is a military town, and the majority of these children have at least one family member in the army. Their understanding of and attitude towards violence is therefore somewhat different than that of refugee youth living elsewhere.

Kindergarten children often drew what they described as a helicopter or a jet. Frequently, there was someone jumping out of the helicopter, which is a common military practice for Tibetans from Ravangla who join the army. Children often described their picture as a violent encounter between Chinese and Tibetans, or Chinese and the Tibetan army, in which both sides were carrying weapons and killing each other. Tenzin Chosang's illustration, in which the giant yak is killing the Chinese person, (figure 5), is a prime example of one such drawing. In the top left-hand corner is a Tibetan soldier jumping out of a jet. He is planning to kill a Chinese person, who is the pink figure in the air next to him. Below, a group of Tibetans are waiting around a Tibetan monastery. They feel happy because the monastery has not been destroyed by the Chinese. The pink character at the bottom is also Chinese, and he has plans to destroy the temple, but the Tibetans are going to kill him first.

Namgyal Norbu drew a similar scene when asked to draw a Chinese and a Tibetan person together. The figure at the top of his drawing is a member of the Tibetans army jumping out of a helicopter while below him, a Chinese person (pink) is shooting a Tibetan person. At the bottom of the page, a lama is reading the scriptures. (See figure 7).

Figure 7. Namgyal Norbu's drawing, November 22, 2004.

Tashi Dorjee, a boy in the lower kindergarten, drew what he described as his father (center), in the army. He says his father is in the army in real life, as well. On the left is a Chinese man, who is killing the Tibetan on his father's right. He explained that he was drawing a picture of a story that his father told him while he was home on vacation from the military. (See figure 8).

Figure 8. Tashi Dorjee's father, November 29, 2004.

The kindergarten students' drawings of the military reflect a lack of understanding about Tibetans' role in the Indian army. Quite often, the Tibetan army is shown fighting the Chinese or fighting for Tibetan freedom when in actuality, the army is only fighting on behalf of the Indian government. When asked if the Tibetan army would in fact be willing to fight for Tibet, most kindergarten children answered whole-heartedly, yes.

Drawings done by older students, however, were somewhat different. When asked to draw a Chinese and a Tibetan person together, the violence depicted was primarily inflicted by the Chinese onto the Tibetans. The closest the older children came to drawing the Tibetans as violent was to portray them as triumphantly non-violent, with flags raised, and smiles on their faces. Another drawing done by Jinpa Gyatso is a perfect example of this warrior-like non-violence. (See figure 9). But in the majority of drawings by older children, Tibetans are portrayed as entirely nonviolent. In one drawing by 12-year old Pema Wongchen, a Tibetan is shown watering the flowers, which a Chinese soldier hits her in the back. (Pema Wonchen, 11/23/2004).

Figure 9. Jinpa Gyatso's Chinese and Tibetan in battle. November 23, 2004.

Chinese are People Too

Despite the high occurrence of violence in the images (committed both by and against the Chinese), other drawings, particularly those by lower kindergarten students, portrayed Chinese people as regular human beings, leading regular lives. Children often drew two figures playing a game together—usually soccer or cricket—and described one figure as Chinese and one as Tibetan. It was not unusual for kindergarten students to describe the Chinese and Tibetan people in their drawings as friends. Images like this, however, were always very separate from images of Chinese as the enemy. It was highly unusual for a child to depict a Chinese person as a friend in one part of the drawing and an enemy in another.

Chogyal Tsawang is a 4-year old in the lower kindergarten. While his drawings were fairly impossible to decipher, he usually told complicated, thorough stories about each picture. He described one of his drawings as a Chinese man at work. When asked what kind of work the man was doing, Choegyal answered that the man was making chairs. (Later, Choegyal's mother explained that he probably drew a Chinese man making chairs because he had seen a play put on by the older students, where a Chinese person tortured a Tibetan person in a chair. Choegyal, however, didn't explain his reasoning for the drawing). (Choegyal Tsawang, 11/22/2004).

The Issue of Freedom

It's important to question if refugee children imagine Tibet as “free” or “occupied.” Based on the drawings collected for this study, the answer is not nearly as simple as the question. As discussed earlier, the Tibetan flag was often present in the

drawings. To an informed, adult mind, this would imply that the Tibet depicted in the drawings is free. But often, the children drew the Tibetan flag next to an image of Chinese oppressing Tibetans, thereby implying that Tibet is not free. It seems likely, then, that the children are unaware that the Tibetan flag is outlawed in Tibet.

In the same way, the children seem to think—or at least hope—that there is some kind of violent resistance going on in Tibet. The need for any kind of resistance movement would imply that Tibet is not free, but at the same time, the ability of Tibetans to act on their anger through violence, implies a kind of freedom that Tibetans in Tibet do not actually enjoy (unless they are willing to face serious consequences).

It's also important to remember that the children's early images of Tibet were mostly free of Chinese people and Chinese oppression. The drawings portrayed happy Tibetan people, yaks, mountains, Tibetan flags, monasteries, etc. From these kind of images, it would appear that the children imagine Tibet as free. It was not until later, when the children were asked questions about Chinese in Tibet, that Chinese began appearing in many of the drawings at all. It's therefore very difficult to say whether the children imagine Tibet as free or occupied. It seems more likely that their images of Tibet are not as black and white as "free" and "occupied," and more, that they are a conglomerate of the two extremes.

Lastly, it's important to consider that these children have lived their whole lives as refugees, have never been to Tibet and have only ever known Tibet as occupied. They therefore don't necessarily understand the concept of a free Tibet. Tenzin Chosang's illustration of Tibet on "the day that it is free," is a testimony to these facts. He explained that the Tibetans he drew are happy because the lunch bell is ringing and its time to eat.

Thus, freedom for a kindergartener is understood on a different level—or at least expressed in different ways—than it is for an adult.

Kindergarten students at tea break.

Part II—Roots of Imagination

Formal Education

Formal early-education in Ravangla is, for the most part, non-political. This, however, is not always the case with early education in exile. The annual culture show of Dharamsala's Yong Ling Kindergarten, performed by the students in the Fall of 2004, contained some overtly political messages. But in Ravangla, where only a small percentage of students complete high school, the kindergarten curriculum is more focused on basic academic skills that are necessary for continuing on in school.

Crèche

For some children in Ravangla, education begins when they are toddlers, at the settlement nursery, or "crèche," as it is commonly known.⁴ The crèche is primarily for those children whose parents work at the settlement's handicraft center, but other busy parents are able to bring their children there as well. The crèche, which is free of charge, is under the administration of the settlement office, and is therefore separate from the Central School for Tibetans. Currently, there are approximately 25 students in the crèche, ages 2-4.

The crèche is run by three women, one of whom, Dechen, is the teacher while the other two, Kyipa and Tsering Choden, are the care-takers. Dechen, who was born in India, says she teaches the students the Tibetan and English alphabets. She says she also teaches them songs, but not traditional songs. She teaches them one song that goes, father, father,

⁴ The French word is a result of the fact that the vast majority of the settlement's funding comes from France, both from French aid organizations and individual donors.

please buy me a motor bike. She says she never teaches them about Tibet because they are too young to understand. When they are six, seven or eight, she says, then they can begin learn the story of Tibet. When they are twelve or thirteen, they can learn the entire story, including the history of torture by the Chinese. For now, she's not even sure the very smallest children understand that they are Tibetan.⁵

Kyipa and Tsering Choden, the two care-takers in the crèche, were both born in Tibet and came to India in 1959. They were among the original Tibetans in Ravangla who worked in the tea fields before the plantations failed. Kyipa and Tsering Choden also believe that the children under their care are too young to understand the story of Tibet. They say the children never ask questions about Tibet. Some, they say, don't even speak Tibetan yet, because they are too young. Joking, they add that at this age, the kids only know how to cry because they are very naughty. They believe that once the children are around eight years old, they'll be able to begin to learn the story of Tibet, because then the children can ask questions to their parents about Tibetan identity. But even at the age of eight, they believe that the children are still too young to learn about the torture in Tibet.⁶

⁵ 12/2/2004, Translator: Trinlay Dorjee.

⁶ 12/2/2004, Translator: Trinlay Dorjee.

Kyipa (left) and Tsering Choden with children at the crèche.

Chime Dolkar (left) and Dawa Tenzing at kindergarten.

Kindergarten

Most children in Ravangla begin kindergarten at the age of four. The kindergarten is part of the Central School for Tibetans (which will be discussed in greater detail later), and is broken down into two separate classes, upper and lower, and requires the passing of a year-end exam to move between the two. Some students, therefore, spend more than two years in kindergarten.

Currently, Chime Dolkar, known by her students as Madam Chime, is the sole teacher of both classes—as the other teacher is on maternity leave. This means that she moves between the two classrooms throughout the day. She herself was educated through class 10, when she left school to join the army in Dehradun. After five years in the military, she came to Ravangla where she got married and began teaching kindergarten. That was eleven years ago.

The officially taught subjects in the kindergarten are Tibetan and English languages, and mathematics. There is no textbook for any subject and therefore, Madam Chime writes the lesson plans. Students create their own textbooks, in a sense, by copying information from the black board into blank notebooks. There are no music, dance, or art classes for kindergarten students (as there are for students of class 1-8), but occasionally, Chime will ask the students to practice a traditional Tibetan dance during school. While the students have never had a formal education in these dances, they still know how to do them. They've learned from copying their older brothers and sisters, according to Madam Chime.

The school day begins at 9:30 each morning with approximately ten minutes of Buddhist prayer, during which the upper and lower kindergarten students stand together

in rows, with Madam Chime at the front. Between prayers, Chime calls “Attention!” and students assume different positions. At the conclusion of prayer, students march in place until Madam Chime signals their particular row to march into the classrooms.

Officially, the school day is divided into eight periods, each of which is devoted to one of the three subjects mentioned above. The schedule, however, appears to be slightly less formal in reality.⁷ Once a week, the students are taught about Tibetan history. This is mostly limited to the history of the early kings of Tibet. Madam Chime says she also tells the students about the Chinese coming to Tibet, but not the entire history. According to Chime, the students learn that Chinese are the enemies, and that India is not their country--Tibet is. Chime, too, believes that the students are too young to know the entire story of the Chinese occupation of Tibet. They’ll learn the whole history, she explained, in class 4 and 5. But despite the lack of a formal education on these topics, Chime believes the students know Tibet’s story anyway. They are always pretending to be the Tibetan army, she explained, and shooting the Chinese.

The kindergarten students don’t formally learn about The Dalai Lama in school, though their classroom walls are adorned with pictures of him. Surprisingly, there are no pictures in the classroom of Tibet its self, though Chime says the students occasionally watch videos in school about Tibetan animals and culture. The students don’t learn about non-violence in kindergarten either, nor do they learn Indian history. They will learn these things in older classes, according to Chime.

Despite the lack of much formal education about Tibet during kindergarten, Chime says the students do ask questions about their country. In fact, she says she sees an

⁷ It’s important to acknowledge that my presence in the kindergarten could very well have had an effect on the daily routine. It’s possible that when I’m not there, Madam Chime adheres to a stricter schedule.

increase in the students' interest in Tibet and Tibetan culture from years passed. Chime says they ask questions such as, where is our land? To which she answers, in Tibet, far from here. They also ask, why did the Chinese capture our country? To which she explains that China has a large population and needed Tibet's land for Chinese people to live on. Also, the Chinese wanted to mine for gold in Tibet. Lastly, the students ask, did our grandparents fight with the Chinese? To which Chime tells them, Tibetans never hurt anybody. She also tells the students that when the Chinese came to Tibet, Tibetans were very innocent because they thought mostly of religion, and that Tibet had less contact with the outside world at that time.

Madam Chime believes that the students are angry about the situation in Tibet. Tenzin Dedon, a Tibetan language teacher of class 1-5 at the Central School for Tibetans, added that the children's drawings are so violent because they are angry. She explained that the children say things like "When I grow up, I will shoot Chinese."⁸

When it comes to the family responsibility to educate their children, Madam Chime believes there isn't any, because some parents are uneducated themselves. She believes that the parents are responsible for disciplining the child, making sure he or she is clean, and sending him or her to school regularly. She also believes that those family members who came from Tibet should tell kids the story of their country, and added that most of the kindergarten students live with a grandparent who left Tibet.

Some students from Kunphenling settlement attend non-Tibetan schools in town. This is a positive thing, according to Chime, but only if the students are successful. If they do badly in a non-Tibetan school then they are at a serious disadvantage because the

⁸ 12/2/2004, Tenzin Dedon.

child will not be an expert in any language—Tibetan or the language of their particular school.⁹

Students at the Central School for Tibetans during morning prayer.

Post-Kindergarten Education¹⁰

The Central School for Tibetans (CST) in Ravangla (which encompasses the upper and lower kindergartens as well), was founded in 1984, two years after the official founding of the settlement. (Before 1984, there was a school in Ravangla for Tibetans which was run by the Sikkim government. The administration in Dharamsala sent one teacher to work at this school). Today, CST is under the Indian government, with 25% of its funding coming from Dharamsala. The teachers are both Indian and Tibetan.

⁹ 12/2/2004. Chime Dolkar. Translator: Tenzin Dedon.

¹⁰ It needs to be mentioned that post-kindergarten education was by no means the central focus of this study. The following section leaves much to be desired.

The school encompasses kindergarten through class 8. Kindergarten through class 5, are officially Tibetan language medium which is the policy of the exile government. Students in class 1-5 receive forty-five minutes per day of English language class. Classes 6, 7 and 8 are English medium. In class 6, Hindi is also introduced into the curriculum.

After class 8, students usually attend secondary school in Darjeeling or Kalimpong. In order to get accepted to one of these schools, students apply through Dharamsala and are placed wherever there is vacancy (though they are allowed to indicate a preference). The majority of students from Ravangla leave school before completing class 12, and often during class 9. Most people in Ravangla seem to feel that this is because their children have very little English language experience and therefore can't compete with students from other schools. Many boys who leave school join the army, while girls often get married within a short time.¹¹

Informal Education

Family

The vast majority of children's informal education comes, of course, from the child's family. In Tibetan communities, families living together in one house usually include grandparents and sometimes aunts, uncles and cousins as well. Young children learn about Tibet from their families, of whom there is usually one member who left Tibet. These family members are able to tell stories about Tibet and, if they came into exile recently enough, show pictures of family members still living in Tibet. But (as Part

¹¹ 12/6/2004. Jampa Noling.

III will illustrate), knowing stories about Tibet doesn't always mean that family members choose to tell them to their children. It is a common belief in Ravangla that small children are too young to understand Tibet's history. And considering the complex and often disturbing nature of the Chinese occupation, this isn't surprising.

Beyond family photos from Tibet, children are also exposed to other Tibet images at home. Most houses in Ravangla have pictures of Tibet on their walls, often of the Potala or of nomads and yaks. Almost every home has a picture of His Holiness the Dalai Lama, and many also have a Tibetan flag. Films of Tibetan landscapes and traditional dances are also popular, and many children watch these with their families.

Cultural Education for Kindergarten Students

As mentioned earlier, there is no formal music or dance education for kindergarten students, but they know how to do traditional dances anyway. Madam Chime suggested they learn these dances from watching older children. In Ravangla—as in other refugee communities—there is a great deal of emphasis placed on cultural preservation. In October of 2004, students from CST Ravangla performed a show of traditional dance, both at home and at the community hall in Gangtok, the capital of Sikkim. Older students also performed a play about the history of Tibet during which some students acted as Chinese and some acted as Tibetans. Kindergarten students, while not a part of these performances, were often the audience for the cultural performances put on by older students.

Kindergarten students practicing a traditional dance at the kindergarten.

Military Influence

As mentioned earlier, Ravangla is a military town. The presence of the military is strongly felt in the school, and also in many homes. Most families have at least one member who is currently—or at one point was—in the military. It's quite common for families to display pictures of husbands or sons (and occasionally daughters) in the military, in uniform and often carrying weapons. Individuals in the military receive two months vacation per year, during which they often return to Ravangla. Children therefore hear stories from these family members about life in the military. In recent years, these stories include battles between India and Pakistan, in which Tibetans from Ravangla took part.

Joining the army is commonplace for Tibetans in Ravangla. With a low secondary school graduation rate, and jobs in the Dharamsala government (the most highly coveted

jobs) extremely difficult to attain, often, they are left with little or no other choice. In another light, many families contain generations of soldiers, and there appears to be a good deal of respect for people in the army.

Influence of His Holiness the Dalai Lama and the Dharamsala government in Exile

The opinion of His Holiness the Dalai Lama has a profound effect on the opinions--and also the actions—of Tibetan refugees. It can easily be argued that it is largely due to His Holiness’s commitment to nonviolence that the Tibetan struggle in exile has remained primarily peaceful. It is therefore to be expected that His Holiness has played a large role in the shaping of education in exile, either through direct decision-making or indirectly, through statements to his people.

In a Foucaultian sense, His Holiness—who is the primary holder of power in the refugee community—creates power knowledge statement when he speaks. As Edward Said points out, “...it is sometimes of paramount importance not so much *what* is said, but *who* speaks.”¹² These statements are then circulated throughout the refugee community (or at least among those who have access to the statements) and highly respected by its members. One could argue that in order to be a “proper,” respected citizen of the Tibetan refugee community, one must learn and circulate the ideas of the Dalai Lama. However, very young children have less access to such concepts than their older counterparts, and are therefore less likely to adhere to the words of His Holiness. Further, children aren’t yet vying for positions of power within the exile community—as

¹² Foucault and the Imagination of Power, p. 244.

adults are—and therefore have less need to adhere to the dominant ideology of Tibetan exiles.

According to an article by Dawa Norbu from *The Tibet Journal*, “...from early on, (the government in exile) infused Tibetan nationalism into the school curriculum and the settlement ethos.” From my previous (but very limited) experience in Tibetan refugee schools, this would appear to be the case. In Ravangla, this nationalism—while present—is experienced somewhat difficultly due to some unique factors in the community, (primarily the military presence). In this case, nationalism sometimes manifests in children as a desire to kill Chinese people. According to Edward Said, “Nationalisms are about groups, but in a very acute sense exile is a solitude experience outside the group...How, then, does one surmount the loneliness of exile without falling into the encompassing and thumping language of national pride, collective sentiments, group passions? What is there worth saving and holding on to between the extremes of exile on the one hand, and the often bloody-minded affirmations of nationalism on the other? Do nationalism and exile have any intrinsic attributes?”¹³ These are serious questions for the Tibetan exile community, for whom the reaffirmation of Tibetan identity—in education and elsewhere—has become a common practice.

Part III: Case Studies

In order to more closely examine the informal education of refugee youth, it was important to speak with parents of children. The following are six case studies of kindergarten students that attempt to reveal what specifically the children learn about Tibet at home, and how they learn it.

¹³ Reflections on Exile, p. 176.

Namgyal Norbu

Namgyal Norbu is six years old and in the upper kindergarten. His drawings usually depicted over-views of very large scenes, with many small figures and buildings dispersed evenly throughout. He also gave thorough explanations for most of his drawings, and seemed to enjoy the drawing and story-telling process a great deal.

Namgyal's mother, Nyima Chung, weaves traditional carpets for a living. His father, who is in the military, spend two months a yea at home. During this time he tells stories an shows pictures of the army to his son.¹⁴ Namgyal also lives with his grandmother, Dolma Thackcho, who left Tibet in 1959 when she was twenty-one years old. They still have family members living in Lhasa but, due to the current situation in Tibet, they are unable to contact them.

According to Namgyal's mother, it's important for her son to learn about Tibet now because then he'll know the full history when he's older. Anything that he can learn now, she explained, will help him in the future. She said that sometimes Namgyal asks questions about Tibet, such as, why did Chinese people come to Tibet? Nyima explained that it's usually Namgyal's grandmother who answers this question, and that she tells him Chinese people came for Tibet's great land mass and resources.¹⁵

Namgyal's grandmother explained that Namgyal learns more about Tibet at home than at school, though she thinks it would be good if children learned Tibet's story in school as well. At home, Dolma tells Namgyal about her own experiences in Tibet. He also watches movies and saw the recent culture show performed by the older students.

¹⁴ 12/3/2004, Dolma Thackcho.

¹⁵ 11/22/2004, Nyima Chung.

From movies and plays, she explained, he will learn that Chinese are the enemies. In fact, Dolma believes that Namgyal already understands this. She explained that sometimes he says slogans, such as, China go from Tibet.

Despite the importance of educating young children about Tibet, Dolma doesn't think Namgyal is old enough to know everything about Tibet, particularly about torture. First, she thinks that he is too young to remember everything he is told and second, some of the story is too emotionally difficult for small kids to hear.¹⁶

Nyimcha Chung (left) and Namgyal Norbu, outside their home.

¹⁶ 12/3/2004, Dolma Thackcho.

Dolma Thackcho, outside her home.

Choegyal Tsawang

Choegyal Tsawang is 4-years old and in the lower kindergarten. As mentioned earlier, his drawings are difficult to understand visually, but his explanations are extremely detailed. He lives with his mother, Tsering Dolma, his father, Tenzing Choegyal, and his three year old sister, Tashi Youdon. His father, who is from Amdo, left Tibet in 1990, which makes Choegyal a first generation refugee. Currently, Tenzing Choegyal teaches Tibetan language at CST.

Choegyal's parents say that sometimes their son asks questions about the Tibet movement. When they watch movies about nomads or films like *Seven Years in Tibet*, he asks many questions, such as, do Chinese people torture Tibetans? To this his parents tell him yes, they do. The Chinese captured out country. Choegyal's parents believe it's

extremely important for their children to know about Tibet, and that it's their responsibility to teach him. As a teacher, Tenzing Choegyal feels a particular need to educate his children. Beyond movies, Choegyal also sees other pictures of Tibet at home, including the large Tibetan calendar on their wall.

There are no members of Choegyal's family currently in the Indian Army. However, Choegyal's grandfather was in the army in Tibet, as part of the guerilla uprising against the Chinese. Currently, Choegyal's grandfather is living in Simla, where the family sometimes visits him. Choegyal's parents explained that his grandfather tells the children stories about Tibet.

Choegyal Tenzing says that right now he doesn't tell his son the specifics about when he left Tibet, because he's too young. When Choegyal is older though, it will be his father's responsibility to tell him.¹⁷

From left: Choegyal Tenzing, Tashi Youdon and Tsering Dolma in their home. (See cover: Choegyal Tsawang (left), Tashi Youdon).

¹⁷ 11/23/2004, Tenzing Choegyal and Tsering Dolma.

Sonam Dolma

Sonam Dolma is 4-years old and in the lower kindergarten. Her drawings of Tibet stand out from her classmates' due their striking appearance and very often, their content as well. Sonam is young but she has powerful and surprising ideas about her country.

Currently, Sonam is staying with her grandparents, Dunchung and Penba, who both left Tibet in 1959. Dunchung says she was eight years old when she left Tibet and Penba says he was twelve. Sonam's family moved to Ravangla only two months ago. Before that, they were living in Bhutan, but not in a refugee settlement. Her grandparents explained that they wanted to leave Bhutan because it was too expensive. Therefore, they applied to the Dharamsala government, and were placed in Ravangla. They say living in Ravangla is better because the settlement can help by finding them sponsors.¹⁸

Sonam's grandparents say that they tell the story of Tibet at home, including about when the Chinese came. They also show her movies about Tibet and books with Tibetan pictures. Dunchung and Penba say that whatever they know about Tibet, they tell to their grandchildren. They say this is important because when they pass away, their grandchildren will still know about their country. They say that they school doesn't tell Tibet's story—instead, they are only teaching the ABC's.

As of now, Dunchung and Penba don't have any specific hopes for Sonam's future.¹⁹

¹⁸ 12/3/2004, Dunchung and Penba

¹⁹ 11/24/2004, Dunchung and Penba

From left: Dunchung, little sister, Sonam Dolma and Penba, outside of their home.

Tenzing Choney

Tenzin Choney is 4-years old and in the lower kindergarten. When I entered Tenzing Choney's house, there was Tibetan music playing and Choney was singing along. On the walls were prayer flags, pictures of His Holiness and the Karmapa, and a large Tibetan flag.

Choney lives with her mother, Keychung, and her grandmother, Kardon. Kardon came from Tibet and both of Choney's parents were born in India. Her father works in Dharamsala as a chauffeur for the Prime Minister of the Tibetan government in exile. She has an older brother and an older sister, both of whom are studying in Mussoorie.

Keychung said that her daughter always asks questions about Tibet but that only recently, she had begun asking her mother to draw Tibet. Choney also copies pictures of monasteries out of books while at home.

Choney's family believes that she learns more about Tibet at home than in school. The school, they say, doesn't tell the story of Tibet and so it's the family's responsibility to tell their children. That way, when the older generations die, the younger generation will still know the stories. Kardon believes that even as the story is passed from generation to generation, it's not changing at all.

Kardon explained that she tells Choney stories about Tibet before the Chinese came. She also tells her about the journey from Tibet to India and about the hardship and suffering she faced along the way. Kardon believes that Choney is old enough to know the entire story of Tibet.

Choney's family brought her to see the play put on by the older students. They said she asked questions about what was happening on the stage, and her family explained to her, these are Chinese and these are Tibetans. Chinese torture our people.

While none of Choney's immediate family is in the military, she does have one uncle in military training. However, when her family asks her what she'd like to be when she grows up, she says, I am going to be in the army. Keychung would like her daughter to be a nun, but Choney says she will not be a nun.

From left: Kardon, Tenzin Choney and Keychung, in their home.

Pema Choden

Pema Choden is 5-years old and in the lower kindergarten. Her drawings of Tibet are very imaginative and often quite fantastical, with elements such as monsters, and monkey riding on top of air planes. (Pema's mother believes she copies these monsters from movies). Pema also has a very distinct artistic style.

Pema Choden lives with her mother, Dolkar, her 2-year old sister, Tenzing Yangzon, and her father, Pema Rinzing, who is a Nyingma lama. Pema's father left Tibet for India ten years ago.

According to her mother, Pema asks many questions about Tibet at home, including, where did my grandfather live in Tibet? Dolkar says that they tell Pema the story of Tibet, including that the Chinese torture Tibetans. She believes that even young children are old enough to know the whole thing, and therefore, she also tells her 2-year old daughter.

Pema's parents show her pictures of Tibet at home, including some family photos of her uncle and grandfather that her father brought from Tibet. One of these pictures is displayed in a frame in their home.

Dolkar believes that her daughter learns more about Tibet at home than in school, because her father is able to tell her stories and teach her Tibetan language. The school, she explained, doesn't tell the story, though it would be good if they did.

Right now, Dolkar doesn't have any specific hopes for Pema's future. First, she explained, Pema must do well in school. However, she did say that Pema is very interested in Buddhism and is always saying pujas in the morning.²⁰

²⁰ 12/2/2004, Dolkar.

From left: Pema Choden, Tenzing Yangzon and Dolkar in their home.

Tashi Phuntsok

Tashi Phuntsok is 7-years old and in the upper kindergarten. He is a very talented artist, and is particularly skilled at copying pictures from photographs or other drawings.

Tashi and his mother, Tsering Youdon, are newly arrived in Ravangla. Before, they were living near Darjeeling, not in a Tibetan settlement. His old school was English medium and his mother wanted to send him to a Tibetan school so he could learn about Tibetan culture as part of his formal education. Since Tashi Phuntsok began attending Tibetan school, his mother says that his Tibetan has improved.

Both of Tashi Phuntsok's parents and his grandmother were born in India. Tsering Youdon explained that because she was also born in India, she can't tell her son the whole story of Tibet, but she tells him what she knows. She believes he is old enough to understand the entire story. Tashi Phuntsok's father is a soldier and sometimes he asks questions such as, why is my father in the army?

Despite her desire to send her son to a Tibetan school, Tsering Youdon feels that Tashi Phuntsok learns more about Tibet at home than at school. The school doesn't tell the story of Tibet, she explained, even though it's important. The children need to know the history so that when they grow up, they can work for the Tibetan cause.

Although there are no pictures of Tibet displayed in their home, Tsering Youdon explained that they have a CD-rom of Tibet that her son likes to watch.²¹

From left: Tsering Youdon, Tashi Phuntsok and Tsering Chokpa (relative), in their home.

Conclusion

Based on the drawings by the children of Ravangla, it's impossible to sum up the one single way that they imagine Tibet. Even more than that, it's impossible to determine,

²¹ 12/1/2004, Tsering Youdon and Tsering Chokpa.

based on the drawings of children from one community, the way that refugee children as a whole imagine their country. Nonetheless, within the drawings themselves and in the community's attitude towards educating their children about Tibet, certain themes prevail from which some conclusions can be drawn.

These drawings—and the children's explanations of them—bring to mind some important questions about identity. These drawings are not the same drawings that Tibetan children in Tibet would make of their country. Nor do the children imagine Tibet in the same way that exile-born, college-educated Tibetans would do. Their ideas about Tibet are also different from those of the older generations, who have actually seen the land that supposedly unites all of these groups—that unites all Tibetans.

For very young children in exile, Tibetan culture is alive and well—even thriving—but Tibet itself is only an idea. The children have heard stories and seen pictures of their country, but they have not known it in the same way they have known India—as an actual, physical, place. Therefore, for Tibetans, Tibet exists on three different levels; in a tangible way, for those who live there; as a memory, for those who left; and lastly as an imaginary land, for those who have never been. It's important to wonder what effect this division has on Tibetan identity and if it has, in fact, created multiple Tibetan identities.

One must wonder about the future of Tibetans in exile. As the older generations begin to die, they feel safe that they have left their stories with their children and grandchildren. And while young people in Ravangla will grow up, start families, and most likely pass these stories of Tibet onto their own children, will they actually be the same stories? How can a person who has never seen or experienced the thing that he or

she is describing, be sure that he or she is transmitting the story accurately—and not just the facts, but the feelings? In essence, how can a person who has never seen Tibet recreate it for someone else?

These questions are impossible to answer, but important to consider as the period of time that Tibetans spend in exile continues to lengthen. In a just world, however, one wouldn't need to ask questions like this, and all Tibetans would know their own country. I can only hope that in the future, Tibet will be more for the children of Ravangla, than a forbidden place behind the mountain.

Suggestions for further research:

Ravangla is a wonderful place to do research (or to visit), and I'd suggest it to anybody (as long as you don't require internet services, or constant access to phones and electricity). Ravangla would be a fascinating place to study attitudes towards violence in the Tibetan community, considering the military presence. It would also be a good place to study gender roles among Tibetans. If you want to work with children specifically, it would be interesting to examine the way that gender roles are created and perpetuated.

Ravangla was an interesting place to study the way that refugee children imagine Tibet because it somewhat resembles Tibet. A similar study in a place that looks nothing like Tibet (South India, for example), would provide an important basis for comparison.

Informants

Lower Kindergarten students: school hours, 11/19/2004-12/6/2004

Tenzin Geypel

Tsetan Tashi

Choegyal Tsawang

Yeshe Dorjee

Sonam Dolma

Samdup

Tenzing Choney

Tenzing Tsetan

Tenzing Dolma

Pema Choden

Tenzin Janchup

Tenzing Chotsok

Tenzing Pema

Karma Tsering

Tenzing Choyang

Upper Kindergarten Students: school hours, 11/19/2004-12/6/2004

Tenzing Younden

Tenzing Wangdak

Tenzing Tsetan

Tenzing Choyang

Youdon

Namgyal Norbu

Tenzing Gesar

Norbu

Tenzing Chosang

Tashi Phuntsok

Tutorial Students: 7-9am, 11/21/2004-12/6/2004

Ngawang Sherab

Karma Tashi

Jinpa Gyatso

Tenzing Namgyal

Tenzing Nyima

Ugen Rinzing

Tenzing Tseley

Tenzing Tsering

Other Students:

Tenzing Tsekyi

Tenzing Kyizom

Settlement Office staff:

Jampa Noling, 12/6/2004

Tsedup Gyaltzen, 11/16/2004

Trinlay Dorjee, many interviews.

Teachers:

Chime Dolkar, 12/2/2004 (and others)

Tenzin Dedon 12/2/2004

Mrs. Wongmo, 11/21/2004

Kyipa, 12/2/2004

Dechen, 12/2/2004

Tsering Choden, 12/2/2004

Family members of kindergarten students:

Nyima Chung, 11/22/2004

Dolma Thackcho, 12/3/2004

11/23/22004

Tenzin Choegyal

Tsering Dolma

Tashi Youdon

11/24/2004

Dunchung

Penba

11/30/2004

Keychung

Kardon

12/1/2004

Tsering Chokpa

Tsering Youdon

12/2/2004

Dolkar

Translator:

Dawa Tenzing

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Upper kindergarten students and me, hanging out between drawings.

Dawa Tenzing with lower kindergarten students.