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Know Your Enemy: Tibetan Perceptions of and Approaches to Chinese Studies in Exile

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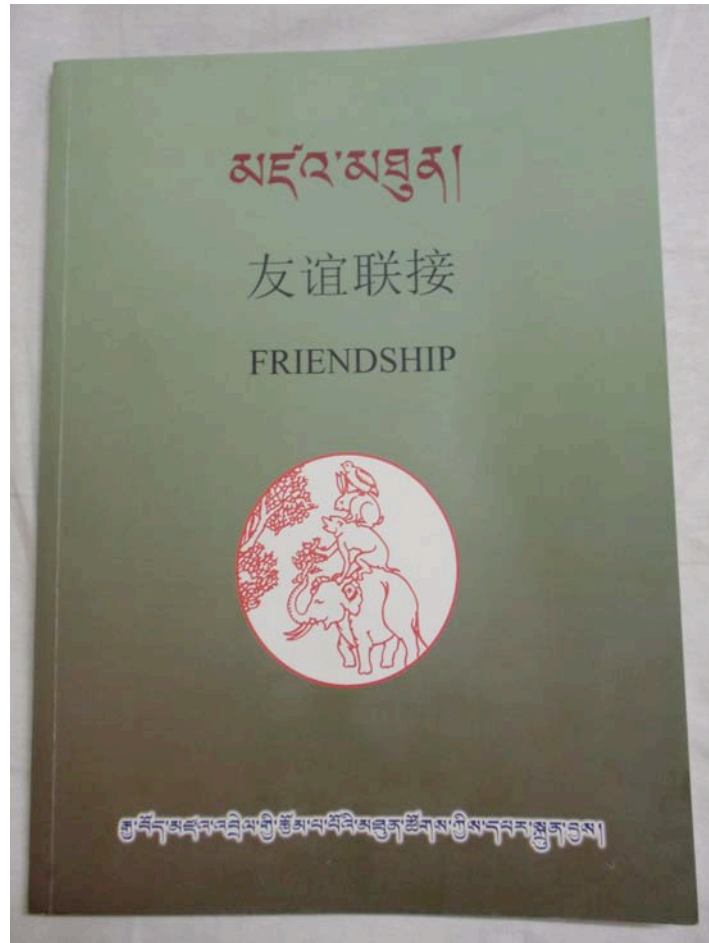
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KNOW YOUR ENEMY

TIBETAN PERCEPTIONS OF AND APPROACHES TO CHINESE STUDIES
IN EXILE



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ABSTRACT

Achieving peaceful dialogue between Chinese and Tibetans is the crux of the Tibetan community in exile's strategy to regain its homeland. Yet despite the recognized importance of cross-cultural communication the Tibetans, ideologically unwilling to separate "China the Oppressor" from "China the Neighbor" or even, potentially, "China the Co-Collaborator," have largely avoided studying their adversary. Although increased literacy in Chinese language, knowledge of Chinese history and understanding of Chinese culture would enable the Tibetans to engage with China more effectively and productively, few initiatives exist in exile that facilitate the spread of such information. Receiving only a basic overview of Chinese history and culture under the education system in exile, those individuals seeking to learn more must often look past formal education and embrace less-conventional learning tools such as discussion groups, extracurricular language acquisition, and the arts.

In addition to analyzing how China has been characterized, perceived, and approached in exile, both formally and extramurally, this paper contains a practical exploration of the extent to which artistic expression, specifically film, can serve as a valuable tool for disseminating information about China and encouraging Sino-Tibetan friendship. Using prominent Chinese films as a platform for discussion among young, intellectual Tibetans, I investigated the Tibetan conceptualization of China in exile. After analyzing the product of these discussions, I contend that film serves as an extremely effective and largely underutilized means of educating Tibetans about China. It would be in the Tibetan community's best interest to take advantage of the opportunities this method provides and continue to employ the arts as an educational tool.

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INTRODUCTION

On the eve of the new millennium, the People's Republic of China found itself perched at the edge of an unforeseen chasm. On one side stood firm the tower of material accomplishment that, until mere moments before, had been China's to claim: renewing relations with the United States had bolstered China's international image and Deng Xiaoping's policies of economic liberalization were raking in extraordinary amounts of capital. Yet on the other side, clinging to the precipice, waited the thousands of students who had participated in the 1989 Tiananmen Square protests, the pro-democracy students whose massacre at the hands of the military sent a grim reminder to the world that China was not as stable as it would project. Rapid modernization had perhaps not succeeded in placating the citizenry who had suffered so long under the revolution-crazed hands of Chairman Mao Zedong. Western authorities and intellectuals observed the situation from afar with candid skepticism, confident that the red giant was going to fall; in the eyes of the west, China stood with "one foot in power and one foot on a banana peel."¹

Hundreds of miles from Beijing in the small Indian hill station of Dharamsala, the Dalai Lama had already marked his thirtieth year in exile from Tibet. The exile community, too, seemed at the edge of something critical; in addition to the protests in Beijing, 1989 saw colossal riots arise in the streets of Lhasa and the Dalai Lama accept the Nobel Peace Prize for his nonviolent efforts to unfetter his country from Chinese oppression. And so the world waited as China walked the tenuous tightrope of its post-Tiananmen existence, cautiously speculating when it would fall.

¹ John Pomfret, "After Tiananmen, China Wedded Force with Freedom," *Washington Post*, 7 June 2009, <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wpdyn/content/article/2009/06/05/AR2009060501970.html>.

It never did. Through tremendous effort, the Party managed to pull enough strings to haul itself to its feet and sew itself back together again, Tibet firmly stitched into its red and gold seams. The conundrum of this resurrection lies not in how China recovered its staggering loss of face, a subject that has been extensively debated by Eastern and Western scholars alike, but rather in how and why the Tibetans in exile failed to investigate and benefit from China's missteps. After three decades in exile, Dharamsala had not created a China think-tank to analyze its opponent. Very few people were fluent in Chinese language. And, despite the apparently growing impetus on the mainland for justice and freedom, so similar to the demands of those in exile, no network existed through which Tibetans could get in contact with like-minded Chinese people to discuss, educate, and collaborate. In 1991, the Tibetan scholar Jamyang Norbu addressed this issue in his article "Imperial Twilight," lamenting:

"Since the end of the imperial age Tibetans have remained singularly ignorant about China and unconcerned about Chinese studies. ...Although there are individual Tibetans these days well educated in Chinese language and culture, on a national and official level, this disturbing indifference to studying China is very much the norm."²

Though gradually beginning to soften, this indifference has, for the most part, persisted stubbornly into the twenty-first century. Today in Dharamsala, popular engagement in Chinese Studies remains alarmingly low. The Government's China Desk, lacking its own office, exists as a component of the Department of International Relations and is staffed by a mere five employees.³ Although there has been some discussion of this problem, currently no concrete plans are in progress to erect a China think-tank in

² Jamyang Norbu, "Imperial Twilight," in *Shadow Tibet*, Jamyang Norbu (New Delhi: Bluejay Books, 2004), 28.

³ Sanjay Kep, interview by the author, 26 November, 2009, Department of Information and International Relations Building, Dharamsala.

Dharamsala.⁴ Tibetan students in exile receive no formal education in Chinese language or history and seldom have the opportunity to meet Chinese people. Ironically, it was the Chinese scholar Sun Tzu who famously wrote: “If you know the enemy and know yourself, you need not fear the result of a hundred battles. If you know yourself but not the enemy, for every victory gained you will also suffer a defeat.”⁵ Unfortunately, it seems the Tibetans in exile have not devoted enough time to the study of their enemy to heed this advice.

Since the publication of Jamyang Norbu’s article, China has arguably recovered from its misstep and has charged even farther forward on the golden path to material enlightenment; the Beijing Olympic Games in 2008 marked China’s formidable entrance on the modern world stage. Yet at the same time, wrinkles are once again beginning to emerge at the edges of the smooth party line of “national unity and reunification:” the widespread protests in Tibet preceding the Olympics in early 2008 and the gruesome riots in the neighboring minority province of Xinjiang in July, 2009, have alerted the world that once again, not all is harmonious in the great People’s Republic.⁶ As Norbu recognized, China conceptualizes its history as cyclical: empires rise only to inevitably fall under the “twin blows of ‘inside disorder’ and ‘outside aggression.’”⁷ Following this pattern, the ever-rising, ever-producing, ever-strengthening People’s Republic of China could be poised to once again teeter towards the edge of the cliff. Such an opportunity would be invaluable to the Tibetan cause, if only they were equipped to respond to it.

⁴ Wen Yan King, interview by the author, 22 November, 2009, Department of Information and International Relations Building, Dharamsala.

⁵ Sun Tzu, *The Art of War by Sun Tzu - Special Edition*, ed. Lionel Giles (New York: El Paso Norte, 2005), 13.

⁶ “Chinese Wish for National Unity, Reunification in Festive parade,” *People’s Daily Online*, 1 October, 2009, <http://english.people.com.cn/90001/90776/90785/6774672.html>

⁷ Norbu, “Imperial Twilight,” 29.

Now, perhaps more than ever, it is crucial that the Tibetan community in exile devote time, energy, and resources to thoroughly studying China. The Tibetans must internalize Sun Tzu's ancient mantra that has proven so useful to the Chinese in the past and come to better know their enemy before the two next meet on the political battlefield.

PERCEIVED BENEFITS AND RISKS OF CHINESE STUDIES IN EXILE

The mounting importance of better understanding China has not gone unnoticed by the Tibetan authorities in exile. Through the cultivation of his “Middle Way Approach,” His Holiness the Fourteenth Dalai Lama has endeavored to acknowledge and honor the cultural differences between the Chinese and Tibetan people. Recognizing the futility of arguing for complete independence, the Middle Way instead seeks genuine autonomy for Tibet within the institutional framework of the People’s Republic of China. Because a fundamental component of this policy entails Tibetans retaining their Chinese citizenship, His Holiness has specified that “the unity and co-existence between Tibetan and Chinese people is more important than the political requirements of the Tibetan people,”⁸ thereby formally encouraging his followers not only to learn to live beside their “Chinese brothers and sisters,” but also to communicate and connect with them at a personal level.⁹ To the Tibetan authorities, genuine understanding of and friendship with the Chinese people is vital to securing the future of Tibet. As head of the government Samdhong Rinpoche asserted at a conference on Sino-Tibetan friendship in August, 2009:

“In this crucial and critical period, if the Chinese and Tibetan peoples remain mired in perennial suspicion and do not engage with each other to create better understanding between themselves, then this will not only be a great loss to both Chinese and Tibetans but will also help in fulfilling the objective of those who are bent on separating the two peoples.”¹⁰

⁸ The Fourteenth Dalai Lama, "His Holiness' Middle Way Approach for Resolving the Issue of Tibet," Message, <http://www.dalailama.com/page.225.htm>.

⁹ The Fourteenth Dalai Lama, "Address by His Holiness the Dalai Lama to the Tibetan-Chinese Conference in Geneva on August 6, 2009," Inaugural Address, Finding Common Ground: International Sino-Tibetan Conference, Geneva, 6 August, 2009, <http://www.tibet-china-conference.org/content/speeches.htm#1>.

¹⁰ Samdhong Rinpoche, "Kalon Tripa Professor Samdhong Rinpoche's Address to the Inaugural Session of the Sino-Tibetan Conference," Address, Finding Common Ground: International Sino-Tibetan Conference, Geneva, 6 August, 2009, <http://www.tibet-china-conference.org/content/speeches.htm#2>

The majority of Tibetans in exile, as a result of their respect, honor, and profound adoration for His Holiness, have accepted his mandate of Sino-Tibetan solidarity. In Dharamsala, the community has come to recognize an enemy in the Chinese government but a friend in the Chinese people, pleased to acknowledge and appreciate China's long, distinguished history.¹¹ The Chinese scholar Jianglin Li, who has traveled to fourteen exile settlements conducting research for her forthcoming book on Tibetan history, expressed that during her travels: "No one was ever rude to me, no one rejected my interview...it was a very heartwarming experience."¹² According to Tashi N. Rikha, Head of Academic Research and Planning at the Department of Education, "we encourage as much interaction with the Chinese [as possible.] We have nothing against the Chinese people, or their history, or their culture."¹³ Primarily, it appears that Tibetans in exile are willing to open their minds to the Chinese people, to embrace them as their brothers and sisters as the Dalai Lama has urged.

. However, eagerness to honor His Holiness has not yet succeeded in completely overpowering the latent, bitter defiance of a people who have been exiled from their homeland and made to wait, helplessly, for news of family and friends to trickle past China's ironclad censors. Though many individuals have expressed interest in learning more about China, the fact remains that few have taken the necessary steps to do so. The number of Han Chinese people who visit Tibetan communities in exile each year is miniscule, in large part due to the unwelcoming atmosphere of settlements like

¹¹ Tashi N. Rikha, interview by the author, 23 November, 2009, Department of Education Office Building, Dharamsala.

¹² Jianglin Li, interview by the author, 26 November, 2009, Department of Information and International Relations Building, Dharamsala.

Dharamsala. In illustration of this occasionally hostile atmosphere, Wen Yan King, the director of an institution offering Chinese language courses, cited the plight of her Chinese teacher: although married to a Tibetan, this woman from mainland China constantly faces an air of suspicion and distrust in Dharamsala.¹⁴ In some cases, this atmosphere of restrained antagonism has actively harmed attempts at initiating peaceful dialogue; in June, 2009 for example, a Tibetan interrupted a public speech by Chinese writer and intellectual Wang Lixiong, on holiday in Dharamsala to learn more about the Tibetan situation, by throwing a cup at Wang, calling him a spy and demanding that he be chased from town.¹⁵ There still exists a small but vocal minority in exile who cannot mentally divorce the people from the People's Republic and whose animosity discourages others' efforts to do so.

Ignorance is more often than not the source of such antagonism. Sanjay Kep, Director of the China Desk at the Department of Information and International Relations, attributed such ignorance to a lack of formal education: "Some uneducated people don't have the concept of the government...they just use the one term 'Chinese' to refer to everyone. Educated people have a more clear idea of these concepts."¹⁶ Many college-educated Tibetans have echoed this opinion; one young man described the songs he and his friends used to sing on the playground denouncing China as the "enemy of religion" and cheerfully suggesting that "we should drag them away."¹⁷ Another individual explained that before college, he was very active in politics and "against the Chinese flag" but, upon enrolling in a university and furthering his study of Buddhism and the

¹³ Tashi N. Rikha interview, 23 November, 2009.

¹⁴ Wen Yan King interview, 22 November, 2009.

¹⁵ "Shaky Common Ground," *Tibet Info Net*, July 31, 2009, <http://www.tibetinfonet.net/content/update/147>.

¹⁶ Sanjay Kep interview, 26 November 2009.

Dalai Lama's teachings, he has since "changed [his] mind."¹⁸ Formal education empowers individuals to seek further information, think critically and analyze arguments from multiple perspectives, tools that are invaluable if cross-cultural understanding and dialogue is to succeed.

¹⁷ Dorje Tseten, interview by the author, 18 November, 2009, Dharamsala.

¹⁸ Kunkyab Pasang interview, 18 November, 2009.

CHINA AS PORTRAYED IN TIBETAN EDUCATION

Despite the crucial role formal education plays in nurturing cross-cultural dialogue as well as the prevalent opinion that further study of China would be beneficial to the Tibetan cause, currently no institutional framework exists in exile to facilitate such study. The official curricula propagated by such institutions as the exiled government's Department of Education and the Tibetan Children's Village do not incorporate units on Chinese history beyond what is included in the standardized World History syllabus. According to Mr. Rikha, this absence is not intentional, but rather logistical; the Tibetan Government in Exile, operating within the Republic of India, must adhere to the academic requirements enacted by the Indian Central Board for Secondary Education.¹⁹ Consequently, Tibetan students studying within India are required to take the same course load - Mathematics, Science, Hindi, Communicative English, English Language and Literature, Work Education, Art Education, Physical and Health Education, et cetera - as all other Indian citizens irrespective of their unique needs as refugees.²⁰ Due to this demanding schedule, it would be "extraordinary for a student to find time" to supplement his core curriculum with additional courses in Chinese history or language. Furthermore, to offer accredited courses on China necessitates hiring well-qualified Chinese teachers, an extremely scarce population in India much less in Tibetan exile communities. With neither time nor appropriate resources, Tibetan students must "learn about China as they learn about any other country in the world."²¹

¹⁹ Tashi Rikha interview, 23 November, 2009.

²⁰ Indian Central Board of Secondary Education, "Secondary School Curriculum 2010: Main Subjects." (Delhi: Central Board of Secondary Education, 2010).

²¹ Tashi N. Rikha interview, 23 November, 2009.

Even with the constraints, Tibetan officials recognize that China is more significant to Tibetans than most other countries and have accordingly endeavored to pay greater attention to China in the Tibetan curriculum through the introduction of Chinese language courses. However, these efforts have for the most part run aground; previously, the Department of Education established a Chinese language course in a small number of schools but was forced to abandon the program due to low student enrollment. Mr. Rikha lamented the project's failure, explaining that although "we would definitely be very happy if students were interested...if there are no students attending the course we have no option but to close the course."²² Tenzin Sangpo, the Education Director of the Tibetan Children's Village, recalled a similar roadblock when seeking to implement Chinese language at his institution. When discussing whether to endorse Hindi or Chinese as the third language of the TCV system, officials selected Hindi as the more immediately useful of the two languages. Many Tibetan students graduate to enroll in Indian universities, the majority of which require an advanced level of Hindi language.²³ Mr. Rikha further attributed this issue of practicality as the cause of students' disinterest in Chinese: in order to prepare for lucrative professions in medicine, engineering, or business, students must have a firm command of Hindi and, ever-increasingly, English. Introducing Chinese language into the curriculum would necessitate decreasing the focus on either English, the world's connecting language, Hindi, the language of the host country, or Tibetan, the precious language that the community in exile has fought so ardently to preserve. "[Chinese] does not impact their everyday life here," Rikha noted.

²² Ibid.

²³ Tenzin Sangpo, Interview by the author, 24 November, 2009, Tibetan Children's Village, Dharamsala.

“They do not know when they will need it.”²⁴

Additionally, many have raised the legitimate concern that incorporating the Chinese language into the curriculum could counteract the government’s fervent efforts to safeguard Tibetan culture in exile. Convincing Tibetan parents of the practicalities of learning Chinese can be ineffective when inside the Tibet Autonomous Region, their relatives’ children are gradually forgetting their Tibetan as they study in Party-operated, Chinese-medium schools.²⁵ Moreover, many are concerned about the ideological implications of introducing Chinese in exile; according to the prominent socio-linguistic scholar Benjamin Lee Whorf, “all [people] are not led by the same physical evidence to the same picture of the universe, unless their linguistic backgrounds are similar.”²⁶ Consequently, reducing an individual’s access to education in his mother tongue effectively strips him of his basic understanding of the world around him. Thus attempts to insert Chinese into the Tibetan curriculum, perceived as a threat to the preservation of the Tibetan language, are naturally met with opposition.²⁷

The Tibetan Government in Exile has done little to convince these students that the practicalities of learning Chinese outweigh the negative symbolism associated with studying the language of the oppressor. The government’s Basic Education Policy, established in 2005, requires all Tibetan students to take three languages, the second of which “may be chosen from among the four languages of Hindi, Chinese, English and Spanish.” However, logistical constraints have largely minimized the impact of Chinese

²⁴ Tashi N. Rikha interview, 23 November, 2009.

²⁵ Gerard Postiglione, Ben Jiao, and Manlaji, "Language in Tibetan Education: The Case of the Neidiban," in *Bilingual education in China: practices, policies, and concepts*, ed. Anwei Feng (Clevedon: Multilingual Matters, 2007), 52.

²⁶ Benjamin Lee Whorf, *Language, Thought, and Reality: Selected Writings of Benjamin Lee Whorf*, ed. John B. Carroll. (Cambridge: The M.I.T. Press, 1956), 214.

²⁷ Sanjay Kep interview, 26 November 2009.

in favor of English and Hindi:

“Until such time when the medium of instruction is fully converted to the mother tongue, English will remain by necessity the second language. Hence the...choice of the second language cannot be implemented immediately, but such a long-term aim should be established now. The third language will be the language of the region where the school is located. If the regional language is Tibetan or the second language, any other essential language may be chosen in their place.”²⁸

Thus while theoretically providing the opportunity to study Chinese in schools, circumstances compel the vast majority of students to bypass Chinese language as it is not a regional language of any Tibetan exile settlement. In fact, the Department of Education’s Model school, inaugurated as part of the Basic Education Policy in 2005, is one of the only schools in exile that offers Chinese as a possible third language.²⁹

To compensate for this policy, individual schools have begun to offer Chinese language on an extracurricular basis, a task each has pursued with varying degrees of vigor and success. While the Department of Education’s foray into supplementary Chinese was fruitless, the TCV has successfully established a series of after-school Chinese language clubs. Mr. Sangpo attributed this success to the composition of his student body; while nearly eighty percent of students at the TCV were born in Tibet, over ninety percent of students matriculating to schools under the Department of Education’s jurisdiction were born in India.³⁰ Thus whereas many students at the TCV already possess Chinese language skills that merely require cultivation, Indian-born students “emotionally and physically have nothing to do with the Chinese language” and, as a

²⁸ Tibetan Government in Exile Department of Education, *Basic Education Policy For Tibetans in Exile*, Section C, 8.3. (Dharamsala, 2005), 8.

²⁹ Tashi N. Rikha interview, 23 November, 2009.

³⁰ Tenzin Sangpo interview, 24 November, 2009.

result, are little motivated to learn.³¹

In recent years, the debate about whether and how to insert further study of China into the Tibetan curriculum has become more widespread. However, the fact remains that Tibetans in exile do not anticipate the Chinese language playing a significant role in their immediate future. Although many are certain that one day Tibetans and Chinese will live side by side in a peaceful Tibet, that day, it seems, is too distant to necessitate current study of Chinese in preparation. Mr. Sangpo recalled a former pupil who spent the majority of his childhood in a Chinese-run school in Tibet and, consequently, arrived in exile with exceptional skill in both Chinese and English. Mr. Sangpo encouraged him to take up Chinese Studies at Jawaharlal Nehru University in New Delhi, certain that his masterful command of both languages would earn him a teaching position upon graduation. Unfortunately, Mr. Sangpo disclosed, “people don’t dream like that.”³² Tibetans do not envision the Chinese language as a force that can be harnessed and exploited for personal and community gain.

Similarly although Mr. Kep has expressed interest in expanding his department by hiring additional Chinese-speaking staff, his vision is not to implement a Chinese language program to cultivate such staff but rather to “make good use” of Tibetans arriving in exile who already speak Chinese as a “more practical” option.³³ The consensus among Dharamsala’s educational institutions seems to be that, as Rikha articulated, “Tibetans should be interested to learn Chinese because it is important that [they] know the people with whom [they] have to live.”³⁴ However, in a subtle nod to the

³¹ Ibid.

³² Ibid.

³³ Sanjay Kep interview, 26 November, 2009.

³⁴ Tashi N. Rikha interview, 23 November, 2009.

complexity and near futility of finding a solution to the Tibet conflict, knowledge of Chinese is not conceptualized within the collective consciousness of the Tibetan population in exile as beneficial for the foreseeable future. That bright day on which the Dalai Lama returns to a newly autonomous Tibet is, unfortunately, so distant that for the time being, Chinese instruction is a greater nuisance than an asset.

Thus, with few official opportunities available, Tibetans interested in studying China must step off the path of formal education and educate themselves through less conventional methods. Fortunately in Dharamsala, opportunities for such self-education are increasing. Respecting the value of Chinese studies as well as the restrictions of the Indian education system, government offices and non-governmental organizations alike have begun to organize extramural programs in the form of lectures, weekly conversation groups, and private tutoring sessions. In November, 2009, the Department of International Relations hosted a four-part lecture series by Australian Professor Gabriel Lafitte entitled “China’s Rise and the Rise of Tibetan Nationalism” in an effort to raise awareness on the state of contemporary Chinese chauvinism. Similarly, the NGO “Lha Charitable Trust,” an organization best known for offering English language classes to local Tibetans, has added Mandarin Chinese instruction to its arsenal of volunteer-provided services. These efforts, while admirable, are far from earth-shattering; no more than twenty people attended Professor Lafitte’s lecture series and very few individuals have seriously taken up Chinese language in Dharamsala.³⁵ Thus with the dawning realization that well-cited experts will not succeed in luring a crowd that has no initial interest in the subject, those seeking to educate the masses about China have slowly begun to turn towards creative methods, emphasizing personal interaction and the

universality of human emotion, to stimulate discussion and spread awareness.

³⁵ Wen Yan King interview, 22 November, 2009.

FILM AS AN EDUCATIONAL TOOL

Using film to stimulate discussion is a tactic well-utilized in the Tibetan exile community. Innumerable colored posters detailing movie screenings dot the oscillating hills of Dharamsala, so many that one could conceivably attend a film session every day of the week. By screening such works as Martin Scorsese's *Kudun* and Jean-Jacques Annaud's *Seven Years in Tibet*, many institutions have invited discussion on the Tibet issue in large part to educate the burgeoning swarm of western tourists who ascend the hills each year. Yet taking the west out of the equation, rarely has cinema been employed as an educational medium targeting Tibetans themselves. Could not the same elements that attract a western audience to learn more about Tibet - stunning cinematography, poignant storylines, striking music - be redeployed to attract a Tibetan audience to learn more about China?

This proposal is not novel to the Tibetan community in exile; through the efforts of various NGOs Dharamsala residents have had the opportunity to view such documentaries as the CBC series "China Rises."³⁶ However a documentary lacks the humanizing capacity of a fictional motion picture. Through multifaceted characters and relatable storylines, fiction has the power to emotionally divorce the individual Chinese citizen from the Chinese government in an affecting, tangible way.

THE FIFTH GENERATION OF CHINESE FILMMAKERS

In 1982, the newly reopened Beijing Film Academy celebrated the graduation of its first class since its closure during the Cultural Revolution.³⁷ Nicknamed the “Fifth Generation” of Chinese filmmakers, this group of artists was the first in the Chinese cinematic history with access to the international film scene. Able to employ the popular cinematic techniques of such directors as Akira Kurosawa and Michelangelo Antonioni, the Fifth Generation plunged into the spotlight in the mid-1980s with a slew of films that broke free of the stoic propaganda films of Chairman Mao’s era.³⁸ Following Mao’s death in 1976, China entered a period of liberalization and modernization under Deng Xiaoping that saw the collapse of the Cultural Revolution, reestablishment of foreign relations between China and the United States and greater opportunities for criticism of the Chinese government.³⁹

The Fifth Generation, comprising such directors as Zhang Yimou, Chen Kaige, and Tian Zhuangzhuang, became famous for exploiting these opportunities, expertly wielding allegory to disguise their disapproval. With overt criticism still prohibited, especially after the events of the Tiananmen Square massacre, these filmmakers resorted to using spectacular feats of cinematography and storytelling to buttress their critiques and attract an international audience. Though the Party was displeased with the anti-PRC tone in many of the films, their burgeoning international acclaim - Zhang Yimou’s *Red Sorghum* won the Golden Bear in Berlin in 1988 - fostered an image of a powerful,

³⁶ Tenzin Choeying, interview by the author, 15 November, 2009, Jimmy’s Italian Kitchen, McLeod Ganj.

³⁷ Vincent Brook, "To live and dye in China: The personal and political in Zhang Yimou's *Judou*," *CineAction* (Winter 2003): 22.

³⁸ “Generation Five; Chinese Cinema,” review of *Reinventing China: A Generation and its Films*, by Paul Clark, *The Economist*, Vol. 375 (June 18, 2005): 89.

³⁹ David Curtis Wright, *The History of China* (New York: Greenwood, 2001) 173.

culturally significant China that the Party could not afford to condemn.⁴⁰ Although Zhang Yimou's *Raise the Red Lantern* was initially outlawed in China when it premiered in 1991, its subsequent Oscar nomination for Best Foreign Film in 1992 influenced the authorities to reverse the decision. The film has since been lauded by Chinese and Western critics alike as one of the nation's masterpieces.

Thus within this brief window in modern Chinese history, the Fifth Generation produced some of the most widespread, poignant and explicit criticisms of China ever dared by mainland Chinese citizens. However, with the arrival of the twenty-first century and the rise of the so-called "Sixth Generation," Chinese cinema shifted focus from challenging authority to attracting an international audience. This change has resulted in the resurgence of Hollywood-esque martial arts blockbusters, even among Fifth Generation directors like Zhang Yimou, whose *Hero* (2004) earned US\$132.53 million worldwide.⁴¹ Thus the films of the late 1980s and early 1990s - *Yellow Earth* (Chen Kaige, 1984), *The Horse Thief* (Tian Zhuangzhuang, 1986), *Red Sorghum* (Zhang Yimou, 1987), *Ju Dou* (Zhang Yimou, 1990), *Raise the Red Lantern* (Zhang Yimou, 1992), *The Story of Qiu Ju* (Zhang Yimou, 1992), *Farewell My Concubine* (Chen Kaige, 1993), *The Blue Kite* (Tian Zhuangzhuang, 1993) *To Live* (Zhang Yimou, 1994), *The Road Home* (Zhang Yimou, 1999), *Not One Less* (Zhang Yimou, 1999), to name a few - are exceptional. They paint a unique picture of China, a thoughtful and genuine critique by Chinese citizens of recent events in Chinese history and the current state of the Chinese nation.

⁴⁰ Yingjin Zhang, "Industry and Ideology: A Centennial review of Chinese Cinema," *World Literature Today* 77, no. ¾ (Oct. - Dec. 2003): 12.

⁴¹ Yingjin Zhang, "Chinese cinema in the new century: prospects and problems," *World Literature Today* 81.4 (2007): 37.

As such, these provocative films provide a near-unparalleled platform for discussion about China. Aspiring to entertain rather than preach, evaluate rather than condemn, these films construct a multifaceted picture of contemporary China that simultaneously enables the viewer to empathize with the individuals portrayed and encourages her to formulate her own assessment of the events depicted. Some Tibetans in exile have recognized the tremendous educational potential of these films. Students for a Free Tibet India Chapter's Director Tenzin Choeying, for instance, has successfully organized a screening of Zhang Yimou's *To Live*.⁴² However for the most part, despite the easily accessible resources, this tactic of facilitating Chinese studies through film is only just beginning to blossom and has been largely overlooked.

⁴² Tenzin Choeying interview, 15 November, 2009.

USING CHINESE FILM TO ENCOURAGE DISCUSSION: A CASE STUDY

Intrigued by the educational potential of Fifth Generation films, I temporarily established a small Chinese Movie Club in Dharamsala in November, 2009, as an experiment in using film as a medium to both educate Tibetans about China and investigate modern China and the Chinese identity as they are conceptualized by Tibetans in exile. Together with a group of four government employees, all in their mid twenties and with excellent command of either English or Chinese, I organized four sessions over the course of two weeks. Following the screening of each film - *The Blue Kite*, an unromanticized portrayal of daily life in Communist China from the Anti-Rightist campaign through the Cultural Revolution; *Raise the Red Lantern*, the story of a young, educated woman who becomes the fourth wife of a wealthy man in 1920s feudal China; *The Road Home*, the story of two peasants in the 1960s countryside who marry by love rather than family arrangement; and *Not One Less*, a quasi-documentary that tackles the problems facing rural education in contemporary China - I directed a guided discussion investigating such topics as the extent to which the Tibetan community in exile has studied China, the characteristics by which the Tibetans define their Chinese neighbors and the possible benefits of further encouraging Chinese Studies in exile. Latching onto the passionate, controversial plotlines as a foundation, the discussions that arose were equally emotive, spreading swiftly from the initial topics - themes, morals and characterizations - to such subjects as the greatest challenges facing modern China today and the fundamental differences between the Chinese and Tibetan peoples.

CONVERSATIONS RAISED AND LESSONS LEARNED:
AN ANALYSIS OF THE RESULTS

While exhibiting universal emotions and themes, the masterpieces of the Fifth Generation filmmakers are unmistakably, unreservedly Chinese. With each silken gown, red banner, chaotic drumbeat, and slow pan across the mountainous countryside these films sing of China, of a realm both distinct from and yet, sometimes, hauntingly familiar to the Land of Snows it now occupies. While viewing each film, my audience clung immediately to the similarities and differences between what they saw on screen and dredged up from childhood memories and relatives' recollections. Similarities were noted with mild interest; the village scene in *The Road Home* resembled a Tibetan village with an added well⁴³ and the steamed dumplings enjoyed by Tietou's family on New Year's in *The Blue Kite* were cheerfully identified as momos.⁴⁴

The accumulating disparities, on the other hand, seemed never-ending: in Tibet, the village teacher would never be a child, always an elder;⁴⁵ in Tibet, our opera is very different;⁴⁶ in Tibet, we do not celebrate with fireworks.⁴⁷ For my benefit, as a westerner with firsthand knowledge of neither culture, my Tibetan participants collected and explicated numerous superficial differences between the two and in so doing, helped to define and distinguish "Tibetan" from "Chinese." For instance, when asked to locate the source of *Raise the Red Lantern's* "Chineseness," one participant replied that the lanterns themselves indicate that the movie is Chinese because "Tibetan people don't use

⁴³ Kunkyab Pasang, interview by the author, 25 November, 2009, Dharamsala.

⁴⁴ Dorje Tseten interview, 18 November, 2009.

⁴⁵ Kunkyab Pasang interview, 25 November, 2009.

⁴⁶ Kunkyab Pasang, interview by the author, 20 November, 2009, Dharamsala.

⁴⁷ Dorje Tseten interview, 18 November, 2009.

lanterns.”⁴⁸ The Chinese identity thus is defined in relation the familiar backdrop of the Tibetan identity, one always juxtaposed against the other. Of course, not all Tibetans self-identify in reaction to Chinese culture. However, such responses do indicate that Tibetans have a clear conception of what is Chinese and what is not and, accordingly, that to be Chinese is to speak, eat, dress, and live differently than Tibetans do. In the eyes of the Tibetans, these are not merely surface distinctions, but divisive characteristics separating the two identities.

Although the majority of distinctions were noted without judgment, occasionally cultural differences emerged that necessitated further commentary. Halfway through *Raise the Red Lantern*, the viewers paused to examine the subject of polygamy in Tibetan and Chinese cultures. Having observed nearly thirty minutes of cruel, supercilious exchange between four Chinese concubines, one participant explained that in Tibetan society, “it is very normal to have three brothers and one wife,” especially in nomadic families. He went on to carefully differentiate nomadic Tibetan polyandry from the polygamy depicted in the film: since in the Tibetan case all the husbands are brothers, their mutual understanding and sense of family obligation enables them to avoid the type of jealous destruction wrought by the film’s heroine and her fellow concubines.⁴⁹ This distinction plainly elevates Tibetan polyandry, in which “men and women have equal status”⁵⁰ over Chinese polygamy, in which the “life of a woman is very pitiful.”⁵¹

However, their disapproval was not confined to Chinese polygamy. The viewers were also very quick to identify other cultures that have historically mistreated women,

⁴⁸ Kunkyab Pasang interview, 20 November, 2009.

⁴⁹ Dorje Tseten, interview by the author, 20 November, 2009, Dharamsala.

⁵⁰ Sogshod Dhargye, interview by the author, 20 November, 2009, Dharamsala.

⁵¹ Kunkyab Pasang interview, 20 November, 2009.

citing the antiquated Hindu tradition of forcing a widow into her late husband's funeral pyre and the strict dress codes for females in Muslim societies.⁵² The distinction between Tibetan polyandry and Chinese polygamy was not intended to deride the Chinese as the oppressors, but rather to point out a discrepancy between Tibetan and many other cultures, including China.

Furthermore, the group did not identify the difference in an attempt to propagate the conventional nationalist rhetoric of "they are different from us, they are lesser than us." On the contrary, their remarks demonstrate a phenomenon Professor Gabriel Lafitte refers to as "doing difference" in which group members recognize that acknowledging differences does not necessitate labeling those differences as right and wrong. "Different is simply different;" there is no incentive or desire to assign a moral hierarchy placing themselves above "the other."⁵³ Although the tone of their commentary on global women's rights was pro-Tibet in the sense that it denounced the film's misogyny and distanced that behavior from Tibetan culture, it was neither self-congratulatory nor accusatory. One contributor disclosed that he felt "fortunate" to have been born into a culture where "maybe there was some inequality for monks and nuns during this time [early 1900s in Tibet], but nothing like what we see here [in the film]."⁵⁴ Moreover, the Tibetans were not reticent in mentioning aspects of Chinese culture, history, and even contemporary politics that they respected and agreed with; in addition to complementing the stunning precision of Chinese calligraphy and architecture,⁵⁵ one individual praised the Party leadership for its management of the Sichuan Earthquake in May, 2008. He

⁵² Dorje Tseten interview, 20 November, 2009.

⁵³ Gabriel Lafitte, "What is the nature of contemporary Tibetan nationalism?" Lecture, Department of Information and International Relations, Dharamsala, 19 November, 2009.

⁵⁴ Kunkyab Pasang interview, 20 November, 2009.

noted, “The positive points are also there...if we accept the positive points and then move on to the negative points, only then can we move forward.”⁵⁶ The image of China painted through discussion with these young men is not that of an archenemy, a foe to be indiscriminately abhorred and opposed, but rather that of a multifaceted oppositional force to be approached and discussed rationally.

Beyond pinpointing superficial disparities, the group also delved beneath the surface to discuss some of the fundamental ideological barriers separating Chinese and Tibetan culture. During *The Road Home*, one individual called attention to the main character’s prolonged mourning and burial process: “When the Chinese die, they put a big picture of the dead in the house somewhere, or something like that, to remember. But when we die, we remove all pictures...to not hurt the people left behind.”⁵⁷ This practice, another added, is Buddhist in nature: “[keeping pictures] shows attachment...[if] we are not attached to him, he is not attached to us and he will have no problems in the next life.”⁵⁸ The omnipresence of Buddhism in Tibetan communities, more than a demographic, is indicative of a deep, elemental divide between Tibetan and other cultures, a fundamental ideological departure that distinguishes between the way members of these cultures perceive and interact with their surroundings. Significantly, while the Tibetan viewers were able to pinpoint the difference between Tibetan and Chinese reactions to death and describe the Tibetan standpoint, they were unable to similarly explicate the Chinese attachment to the deceased. They made the distinction - Tibetans are Buddhist, Chinese are not - but could not analyze that distinction from both

⁵⁵ Ibid.

⁵⁶ Dorje Tseten interview, 20 November, 2009.

⁵⁷ Kunkyab Pasang interview, 25 November, 2009.

⁵⁸ Dorje Tseten, interview by the author, 25 November, 2009, Dharamsala.

perspectives. Their explanation, then, did not encompass a dual understanding of the difference between two cultures - “Tibetans think this, Chinese think that” - but rather a straightforward acknowledgement that difference exists: “Tibetans think this way, Chinese *do not*.” In addition to the ability to locate differences, an understanding of the reasons behind these differences would benefit the Tibetans in exile seeking to initiate cross-cultural understanding.

This gap in understanding was further illuminated during a discussion of Chinese censorship. Because of their shrewdly critical storylines, each of the four films battled with Chinese censorship at one point or another, emerging from the fray with varied levels of success. The viewers reacted to this news with bewilderment; they were amazed to learn that *The Blue Kite*, commonly understood to be the “most outspoken critique ever attempted on screen of the political and social upheavals in China during the 1950s and 1960s,”⁵⁹ is still banned in China.⁶⁰ Similarly, they could not comprehend why *Raise the Red Lantern* was initially prohibited from public screening: “this type of thing [polygamy] happened in many other cultures and... this story did not take place during the Communist era, so why did they ban it?”⁶¹

This innocent confusion sheds light on a deeper misunderstanding of the modern Chinese mentality, a fundamental underestimation of the Chinese government’s paranoia and compulsive need to project an image of stability to the world. *Raise the Red Lantern*, more than a sensual tale of the twisted lies jealous women weave, can be understood as an allegory for the Chinese government’s power: Songlian (representing the individual Chinese citizen) is drawn into the complex, highly regulated world of the master’s house

⁵⁹ “Chinese film directors: Black-balled,” *The Economist*, vol. 328 (November 20, 1993): 108.

⁶⁰ Dorje Tseten interview, 18 November, 2009.

(the communist Party's bureaucracy). She swiftly succumbs to the manipulation and suspicion of the house, relinquishing her individuality to the stringent, dehumanizing rules that eventually drive her to madness.⁶² The symbolism of the film is far from subtle with the stunning red lanterns, intentionally painted the color of the Communist Party, framing every scene. Even director Zhang Yimou consented that the film is "more directly political" than his other works.⁶³ The Chinese Central Broadcasting, Film, and Television Ministry's decision to ban *Raise the Red Lantern* was not an attempt to deny history, but rather to conceal current instability, no matter how subtly or artistically portrayed. Post-Tiananmen China, frantically seeking to avoid the sort of uprisings that have signaled the demise of dynasties past, is so profoundly sensitive to criticism that it believes it cannot afford to release one lone image of discontent. Even a single film about concubines is a potential political threat.

As Professor Lafitte argues, one of Mao's greatest achievements was to teach the Chinese people the "narrative of turning victim-hood into triumph."⁶⁴ Consequently, even today when setbacks arise, the Party retreats into the familiar role of victim, defending itself against outside forces that continuously seek to humiliate the great Chinese nation and bring the dragon to its knees. Extensive censorship is simply a manifestation of this practice; films that are critical of Chinese history, culture, and politics, even films produced by Chinese citizens, are understood as external efforts to shatter the foundation of the newly modern, prosperous society that the Chinese populace has bled for. This

⁶¹ Sogshod Dhargye interview, 20 November, 2009.

⁶² Harry H. Kuoshu, *Celluloid China: cinematic encounters with culture and society* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois UP, 2002), 284.

⁶³ Zhang Yimou, "Of Gender, State Censorship, and Overseas Capital: An Interview with Chinese Director Zhang Yimou," Interview by Mayfair Mei-hui Yang, *Public Culture* 1993 5(2): 304.

⁶⁴ Gabriel Lafitte, "China's New Elite Mindset," Lecture, Department of Information and International Relations, Dharamsala, 18 November, 2009.

intensely defensive response to criticism is not limited to the government alone; many Chinese citizens under the influence of Party propaganda have come to associate critique with assault. This pattern of association helps to explain the Chinese reaction to the Beijing Olympics Protests in 2008: feeling attacked on the eve of their long-deserved moment under the spotlight, the nation instinctively curled into a defensive position and refused to listen to outside complaints.⁶⁵

In order to progress towards the eventual resolution of the Sino-Tibet conflict, it is imperative that Tibetans come to understand the nuances of the Chinese position. Recognizing the scope of state-sponsored censorship is important, but only with a true understanding of the complex ideology behind this censorship can progress continue. The film series, inconsequential though it was in the grand scheme of conflict resolution, helped to identify and chip away at the edges of a substantial roadblock in Sino-Tibetan relations. Although college-educated Tibetans are well versed in the basic tenets of Chinese history - able to speak confidently about steel production during the Great Leap Forward and the fall of the Manchu Dynasty in 1911⁶⁶ - their comprehension of Chinese ideology, mentality, and spirit could benefit from expansion.

⁶⁵ Ibid.

⁶⁶ Tenzin Wangchuk interview, 18 November, 2009.

FURTHER EXTRAMURAL INITIATIVES IN CHINESE STUDIES

As relations continue to harden between the People's Republic of China and His Holiness' Government in Exile, the benefits of educating young Tibetans on China are more pertinent than ever. Official dialogue between the two governments has been stagnant since the collapse of negotiations in 2008.⁶⁷ However, attempts to initiate dialogue between Chinese and Tibetans persist, not all unsuccessfully; by shifting the audience from government bodies to individual citizens, a new stage for conversation has been created that relies upon individual opinions and personal testimonies. The primary responsibility of the China Desk, in addition to distributing information about events inside Tibet, is to build up relations between the exiled Tibetans and the Chinese-speaking population living outside of mainland China.⁶⁸ The government thus encourages personal connections not as a postscript but as a core foreign policy directive in the quest for Tibetan independence.

In August, 2009, the first meeting of a Sino-Tibetan Conference called "Finding Common Ground" was held in Geneva, Switzerland and attended by over one hundred intellectuals, writers, human rights advocates and educators of both Tibetan and Chinese descent.⁶⁹ Aiming to "inform the Chinese people and the international community that the Tibetan culture and way of life are gravely endangered and that the fundamental human rights of the Tibetan people are seriously being violated by the Chinese regime" and "outline effective measures to support the Tibetan people in their struggle to regain

⁶⁷ International Campaign for Tibet, *No progress in eighth round of dialogue as Chinese reject autonomy Proposal*, 10 November, 2008, <http://www.savetibet.org/print/1843>

⁶⁸ Sanjay Kep interview, 26 November, 2009.

⁶⁹ "Expect No Miracle, But Strengthen Sino-Tibetan Friendship": His Holiness," *Phayul.com*, 7 August,

their freedom and to sustain and promote its unique culture,” the conference was inaugurated by His Holiness the Dalai Lama and marked the first major gathering of prominent intellectuals from both sides of the conflict.⁷⁰ Perhaps most significantly, the conference was attended by Chinese holding wide variety of political views, a strategy intended to spark debate and widen the conversation to a greater audience.⁷¹

The document drafted at the conference’s conclusion on August 8, recognizing the fundamental human rights of the Tibetan people and dangers of Han chauvinism, is non-binding and thus incapable of initiating official dialogue between the two parties. Nevertheless, the conference measured its success through the transformed opinions and insights of individual participants; one Chinese attendee, for example, stated at the final meeting: “I have worked with the People’s Daily for more than 20 years. Then I had no knowledge of Tibetan culture. ... Now it is our collective responsibility to understand and disseminate the values of Tibetan culture to people in China.”⁷² Additionally, the members of the conference pledged to “establish Sino-Tibetan friendship associations, Sino-Tibetan forums and civil society organizations across the world in order to promote cultural exchange and emotional ties between the two peoples,” an undertaking that would enable the dissemination of this type of dialogue to local communities worldwide.⁷³

The concept of a Sino-Tibetan friendship association is surprisingly new to the

2009, <http://www.phayul.com/news/article.aspx?id=25295>.

⁷⁰ “Final Document of the 2009 Sino-Tibetan Conference ‘Finding Common Ground’ in Geneva,” *Finding Common Ground Conference*, Geneva, 8 August, 2009, <http://www.tibet-china-conference.org/content/news.htm#3>.

⁷¹ Sanjay Kep interview, 26 November, 2009.

⁷² “Resolve the Issue of Tibet and Half a Million Careers Go Up in Smoke,” *Phayul.com*, 9 August, 2009, <http://www.phayul.com/news/article.aspx?id=25305&t=1&c=1>.

⁷³ “Final Document of the 2009 Sino-Tibetan Conference ‘Finding Common Ground’ in Geneva,” *Finding Common Ground Conference*, Geneva, 8 August, 2009, <http://www.tibet-china->

field of Sino-Tibetan relations. Until quite recently, such associations were unfeasible in Dharamsala due to the aforementioned harsh treatment of Chinese people by exiled Tibetans. Yet with the gradual relaxation of this tension, some individuals have seized upon the growing opportunities for cross-cultural dialogue. In July, 2009, the Taiwan-born Wen Yan-King established the “Common Ground Café” in McLeod Ganj as a neutral, comfortable space in which Chinese and Tibetan people can connect with one another to respectfully discuss their backgrounds, opinions, and hopes for the future.⁷⁴ A non-profit, the café’s revenue allows for the organization to organize weekly discussions about China and offer beginning and intermediate Chinese language courses. The organization is also currently working to establish a social networking website to encourage cyber Sino-Tibetan connections. Ms. King’s proposal calls for a simple, user-friendly website in which individual Chinese and Tibetans can create their own profiles, upload pictures and personal information and then share this data with other users as a means of humanizing the other and fostering personal connections between individuals on both sides of the issue.

In addition to its online networking initiative, the Common Ground Café is currently planning to recruit young Chinese students studying in western countries to travel to Dharamsala on a scholarship for a one-month intensive photography class. Working in pairs with local Tibetans, the students will at the end of the month produce a portfolio and display their finished products at a community showcase event. In this setting, the public will have the opportunity to see firsthand the product of genuine Sino-Tibetan collaboration, a substantial indication that a common ground exists within reach.

conference.org/content/news.htm#3.

⁷⁴ Wen Yan King interview, 22 November, 2009.

Ms. King described the project as “proactive and symbolic...using a creative medium to introduce a very difficult idea” in a proposal that targets fewer people than internet-based outreach but does so with far greater emotional impact.⁷⁵

Sogshod Dhargye has similarly sought to foster connections between individual Chinese and Tibetans through the establishment of a China-Tibet Friendship Magazine (mDza’a maThun). Mr. Dhargye released the first issue in July, 2009 in both Mandarin and Tibetan and physically circulated it among a small but enthusiastic readership in India. Primarily targeting overseas Chinese, the magazine collects articles contending that the friendship between people of Chinese and Tibetan nationalities is the key to peace between the two nations. “Hopefully,” Dhargye expressed, “through sharing opinions or ideas...we can reach the final solution. [I initiated this project] not only for the friendship between Chinese and Tibetans, but also because the whole of humanity needs friendship. It is important to build mature respect and friendship among humanity in general.”⁷⁶

Furthermore the development and maintenance of these connections from a grassroots level, in addition to solidifying a network of people interested in the Tibetan cause and promoting rational discussion, may well be one of the only options remaining to the government in exile. With dialogue with China at a standstill, even the Dalai Lama has “given up” on official negotiations, explaining that although he has been “sincerely pursuing the middle way approach in dealing with China for a long time...there hasn’t been any positive response from the Chinese side.”⁷⁷ Although unable to make headway at the state level, the Tibetan community in exile is still empowered to and must continue

⁷⁵ Wen Yan King interview, 22 November, 2009.

⁷⁶ Sogshod Dhargye, interview by the author, 25 November, 2009, Dharamsala.

⁷⁷ Richard Spencer, “Dalai Lama has ‘given up hope of negotiations with China’ over Tibet,” *The Telegraph*, 26 October, 2008.

to encourage connections between individuals, connections that will be invaluable should the opportunity for official dialogue ever reemerge.

CONCLUSION

In March, 2009, Beijing celebrated as Dharamsala mourned the sixtieth anniversary of Chinese occupation in Tibet. The Tibetan people have survived in exile for more than half a century and regrettably, if the collapse of organized dialogue between the two governments is any indication, will continue to do so for the foreseeable future. At this time, with the possibility of further talks between the two countries rapidly degenerating, the process of fostering individual connections, conversations and friendships between members of both parties is critical to the Tibetan cause. On the political front, discussion has reached an impasse at which neither side is willing to concede; yet rather than sink into the quagmire that is Tibet's political status, Tibet supporters ought to and have slowly begun to recognize the value of interpersonal relationships and have started to cultivate spaces in which Chinese and Tibetan people can connect independent of their political affiliations.

Of course there are limits to the efficacy of personal connections in conflict resolution; as Ms. King lamented, “if you have five million Tibetan people and find them five million Chinese friends, that won't change a thing.”⁷⁸ The utility of such friendships in enacting long-term, concrete change is certainly debatable. However, as Ms. King continued:

“What we are trying to do is not concrete. ... When you are trying to change the mentality of the movements to influence the largest country in the world, the only concrete thing you'll see is individuals who have opened up. No matter what happens, it is inevitable that Chinese and Tibetans learn to talk to each other.”⁷⁹

⁷⁸ Wen Yan King interview, 22 November, 2009.

⁷⁹ Wen Yan King interview, 22 November, 2009.

Cultivating personal relationships and mutual understanding among individuals on both sides of the issue is a long-term strategy aimed not at toppling the Chinese authorities in Lhasa but rather at nurturing a safe space for dialogue without which the Tibetans in exile have little hope of returning to their homeland. According to Mr. Kep, the “significance of that kind of dialogue is to spread information inside China, to make [the people] think that...what is happening in Tibet may not be what the Chinese government says it is.”⁸⁰ Conversations spark debates which in turn fuel the desire to learn more, thus widening the circle of people involved in the Tibet issue through facts instead of propaganda, testimony instead of hearsay and personal friendships instead of a government-promulgated “One China” policy.

Art, due to its astounding ability to communicate emotion across all language barriers, is one of the simplest and most visceral ways of provoking cross-cultural dialogue. Yet despite a mounting emphasis on the importance of such dialogue, the arts as an educational tool has been largely underutilized in exile. Mrs. King’s photography initiative is novel for Dharamsala, a town whose populace has so long had to shout to the West that it seems too hoarse to speak with the East. True, the task of bringing Chinese people to Dharamsala is far from straightforward; regardless of Dharamsala’s occasionally unwelcoming atmosphere, many Chinese visitors to Dharamsala speak neither Tibetan nor English, thwarting basic attempts at conversation.⁸¹ Yet although the benefits to realizing authentic, face-to-face interaction between Chinese and Tibetan people are innumerable, progress can be made towards developing understanding on the Tibetan side as a start with relatively minimal effort. Utilizing film as a medium for

⁸⁰ Sanjay Kep interview, 26 November, 2009.

extramural Chinese studies allows for the spread of valuable information without encumbering an already-hectic school curriculum, distancing Tibetan children from their cultural heritage, or financing the physical movement of Chinese people to Tibetan settlements. Furthermore, this strategy does not necessitate the involvement of actual Chinese citizens; if need be, a Tibetan born inside Tibet, widely recognized as possessing more knowledge on China than Tibetans born in exile, could lead the subsequent discussion. Requiring only the film itself, a television, and a group of individuals willing to devote a few hours to watching a movie, Chinese films provide an effortless, innocuous means of initiating these vital conversations in exile.

The participants in my informal movie club were very enthusiastic about the project's value. When asked to detail any new information they learned from the films, they compiled quite a list: *The Blue Kite* teaches the devastating effects of Cultural Revolution policies on individual families;⁸² *Raise the Red Lantern* reveals the historic inequality between men and women in pre-communist China;⁸³ and *Not One Less* depicts the harrowing poverty of the rural Chinese countryside.⁸⁴ Yet more importantly, the movies present Chinese characters and storylines that, through the universal medium of film, the Tibetans were able to connect with on a new, raw, personal level. After watching *The Blue Kite*, one individual admitted that although he had read some books about the Cultural Revolution, "this [watching the film] was the first time I ever experienced it."⁸⁵ Similarly, one participant expressed:

"As a Tibetan, when I see these films...these kinds of things make me feel

⁸¹ Sanjay Kep interview, 26 November, 2009.

⁸² Tsering Wangchuk interview, 18 November, 2009.

⁸³ Kunkyab Pasang interview, 20 November, 2009.

⁸⁴ Kunkyab Pasang interview, 3 December, 2009.

⁸⁵ Tsering Wanchuk interview, 18 November, 2009.

closer to the Chinese people who suffer as a whole, the same as we did, whereas if we are not aware of these things we see the Chinese as our enemy.”⁸⁶

Film, they emphasized, has the extraordinary capacity to humanize the other, to bridge connections between peoples more effectively than any textbook. Moreover, film as a form of entertainment is often able to spark interest in a subject where previously none existed. Watching the films, my audience insisted, was both entertaining and informative; when asked whether it would be beneficial to implement the project on a broader scale, they unanimously agreed. As one participant added: “Tibetans should know more Chinese culture because if you want to keep good relations with the Chinese people, this is done through culture. This is a very important thing.”⁸⁷

Today, the great People’s Republic of China has found itself once again at the edge of a precipice, precariously tiptoeing the line between further affluence and the nightmare of dissolution. The government’s recent brutal suppression of riots in Tibet and Xinjiang and renewed infatuation with internet censorship reveal that behind its bold, confident exterior lurks an increasingly nervous Communist Party, shaken by the sudden upsurge of discontent. Ever so faintly the winds are changing and despite efforts to ignore it, Beijing can feel a slight chill begin to set in. In Dharamsala, the Tibetan community in exile is watching, eagerly waiting for the perfect opportunity to wedge open the tiny hole that has pierced through China’s armor. However, this opportunity has long been available: by further educating the Tibetan population in Chinese history, language, culture, and politics, the Tibetan community in exile may come to better understand its adversary and develop more effective strategies, policies, and initiatives to combat it. If

⁸⁶ Dorje Tseten interview, 18 November, 2009.

⁸⁷ Dorje Tseten interview, 20 November, 2009.

the compulsory Indian curriculum is too demanding to make room for Chinese language instruction, it must be offered extramurally. If children are uninterested in signing up for Chinese, the elder generations must toil to foster enthusiasm in the subject and convince students of its personal and professional value.

Moreover, the community must continue to promote and cultivate personal relationships between Chinese and Tibetan individuals; although incapable of forcing Hu Jintao to acquiesce and negotiate with the Dalai Lama, these connections wield tremendous power in the long-term scope of this conflict. Only with a true, comprehensive understanding of the Chinese position can the Tibetans hope to effectively and peacefully engage their neighbors in dialogue and continue to chisel away at the foundation of the increasingly insecure Chinese empire. Although art, in particular film, provides an inexpensive, relatively effortless means of facilitating this awareness, the possibilities for spreading awareness are endless. If the community in Dharamsala continues to advance these opportunities, perhaps one day it will successfully come to know the enemy as it knows itself and finally be able to stride onto the battlefield, armed with genuine compassion and understanding, and change the course of the war.

SUGGESTIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

Chinese studies is a fresh, burgeoning field in the Tibetan exile community. As such, the possibilities for further investigation into the Tibetan conceptualization and study of China among these populations are numerous. To begin with, the primary initiatives discussed within this paper are still in infancy; both the Common Ground Conference and the similarly-named Café were inaugurated in 2009. It would certainly be worthwhile to revisit this subject at a later date, once these institutions have had sufficient time to gather their bearings. In particular, further analysis of the Common Ground Café's photography project would be beneficial in pursuit of a more thorough analysis of art's influence in conflict-resolution. Additionally, further research on this subject would benefit greatly from interviews with ordinary citizens, both those who have pursued extracurricular Chinese studies and those who have not, to paint a broader picture of general tendencies in exile.

Nevertheless, the aspect of this project with the greatest potential is the movie project itself. A four-part movie and discussion series involving four individuals, though informative in its own right, cannot hope to identify broad trends in Tibetan perceptions of and reactions towards the Chinese people. In order to fully and more accurately explore this issue using this research method, one would need to conduct many additional sessions, preferably making use of a wider range of films. For a future project, if possible one uninhibited by the time limits that constrained my work, I would suggest the researcher screen many additional films including Chen Kaige's *Farewell My Concubine*, a masterful epic combining the tragedy of traditional Chinese opera with the tragedy of daily life during the Cultural Revolution, and Tian Zhuangzhuang's *The Horse Thief*, a

film about the life of a Tibetan nomad that sheds tremendous light on the ways in which Han Chinese in mainland China perceive their Tibetan neighbors. Because my audience responded more passionately to realistic, near documentary-style films, I would suggest an emphasis on works that do not require too great a stretch of the imagination to relate to everyday life in modern China. Yet at the same time, I would encourage the future researcher to continue to screen fictional films as they provide valuable insight into Chinese artistic culture. Additionally, I would encourage the researcher to step beyond the Fifth Generation and explore other eras of Chinese film. Specifically, I believe it would be beneficial to watch more modern films that provide viewers with a realistic image of contemporary China. I would even advocate for the viewing of China's popular Kung-fu films - for example Zhang Yimou's *Hero* (2002) and *House of Flying Daggers* (2004) - as I believe they could spark insightful discussion about China's recent consumer craze and emergence in the global market.

Furthermore, the topics of discussion could also benefit from expansion. This paper focuses on the broad extent to which Tibetans in exile have studied China and are able to use film to further increase their understanding. However, this path is merely one of many that my research provided me. Future researchers could use these film sessions to more thoroughly investigate the Tibetan conceptualization of the Chinese identity: according to Tibetans in exile, what are the fundamental characteristics of a Chinese citizen? What makes a Chinese person inherently different from a Tibetan person? Another topic awaiting exploration is the nuances and contradictions of modern China as expressed through film: *The Road Home* can be discussed as exemplifying the conflict between honoring tradition and accepting modernization and *Not One Less*, the conflict between urban affluence and rural poverty. The future researcher could also reconsider

her audience, perhaps gathering a group equally divided between Tibet and India-born Tibetans in order to examine the differences between these groups' understandings of China. Finally, it would be extremely beneficial not just to the researcher but also to the community as a whole to further investigate and publicize the most effective options available in Dharamsala to educate the public about China. A practical guide detailing the best practices for using film as an educational tool could be extremely useful to those hoping to implement such projects in the future.

APPENDIX A: METHODOLOGY

Over the course of two weeks, I organized four movie sessions, each followed by an hour long guided discussion. I selected younger Tibetans with intellectual backgrounds as my target audience, both to avoid any xenophobia that might result from a lack of education and to work with a group whose youth would enable them to one day put what they learn through the films to good use. Somewhat unfortunately, due to scheduling conflicts, I was unable to enlist any women to participate; in future permutations of this project, I would advise recruiting men and women in equal numbers.

Before starting the first film, I outlined the basic objectives of my research and gave each participant a handout detailing the main topics I was seeking to explore. During the films themselves I maintained an informal environment, encouraging discussion as it arose and writing down all comments. At the end of each film I began discussion in the same method, inviting the viewers to explore the themes, morals, and characters in the film. Although I prepared specific discussion points for each film beforehand, I was careful to allow conversation to progress naturally, devoting the most time to subjects the participants brought up and wished to discuss. My intention was never for these sessions to feel like school, but rather that they would serve as a jumping off point for captivating, informed discussion, a goal I found more easily achieved if the participants were allowed to devour a topic of their choosing rather than adhere precisely to my list.

In addition to organizing the informal movie club, I also conducted interviews with the directors of various government and non-governmental organizations and supplemented these interviews with web and library-based research.

APPENDIX B: INTERVIEWEES

PARTICIPANTS IN THE MOVIE SESSIONS

Dorje Tseten – *rDo rJe Tshe brTan*

Employee at the Tibetan Center for Conflict Resolution. Born in India, attended college in India.

Kunkyab Pasang – *Kun Khyab dPal bZang*

Writer for the newspaper The Tibet Express. Born in Tibet, attended college in India.

Sogshod Dhargye – *Sog Shod Dar rGyas*

Writer for the newspaper The Tibet Express. Editor of mDza'a maThun, the Sino Tibetan Friendship Magazine. Born in Tibet.

Tsering Wangchuk – *Tshe Ring dBang Phyug*

Employee at the Central Tibetan Administration's Department of Security. Born in India.

OTHER INTERVIEWEES

Jianglin Li

Chinese author.

Sanjay Kep – *Sangs rGyas sKyabs*

Director of the China Desk of the Department of Information and International Relations.

Tashi N. Rikha – *bKra Shis Re Kha*

Head of Academic Research and Planning at the Department of Education.

Tenzin Choeying – *bsTan 'aDzin Chos dByings*

Director of the Students for a Free Tibet India Chapter.

Tenzin Sangpo – *bsTan 'aDzin bZang Po*

Director of Education at the Tibetan Children's Village in Dharamsala.

Wen Yan King

Taiwanese founder of the Common Ground Café in McLeod Ganj.

ADDITIONAL TIBETAN NAMES AND TERMS

Momo – *Mog Mog*

Tibetan traditional steamed dumplings.

Sino-Tibetan Friendship Magazine - *mDza 'a maThun*

NOTE: ALL TIBETAN NAMES ARE WRITTEN OUT IN ACCORDANCE WITH THE WYLIE TRANSLITERATION SYSTEM.

APPENDIX C: MOVIE SYNOPSES



Figure 1. Tietou (Wenyao Zhang) in *The Blue Kite*.

THE BLUE KITE
Dir. Tian Zhuangzhuang, 1994
Screened Nov. 18, 2009

A bitterly realistic glimpse into life under Mao's authority, this film chronicles the youth of one Chinese boy, Tietou, as he grows up in the freshly formed People's Republic of China. Born in 1953, a proud, exciting period in the republic's infancy, Tietou slowly comes of age as his country appears to deteriorate around him. Split into three sections according to the three marriages of his mother, the film treads through three of modern China's darkest episodes: the Anti-Rightist Campaign of the 1950s and early 1960s (Dad), the Great Leap Forward of 1958 to 1961 (Uncle), and the Cultural Revolution of 1966 to 1976 (Step-Father). As China sinks further into corruption, cynicism and deprivation, Tietou's family seems unable to pull itself free; his uncle, caught up in the Party's rhetoric, identifies Tietou's father as a rightist and has him sent away to a labor camp where he is eventually killed. His mother, desperate to protect him, gets remarried to a wealthy man on the eve of the Cultural Revolution when almost

overnight, the prosperous became the targets of Mao's Red Guard. The film ends with the family in shambles and Tietou lying bloodied and defeated in the courtyard, staring up at the tattered shreds of the blue kite his father had given him back when the Republic was new. The slow, quiet pace of the film casts an eerily genuine light on the events, so resonant with actual experiences during these decades that the Chinese Government not only banned the film upon its premiere in 1994, but also forbade Tian Zhuangzhuang from making any further films for the subsequent decade.

Topics discussed during the screening of this film included: daily life and personal struggles under Mao's authority; censorship in the contemporary PRC and its implications for the Tibet issue; suspicion and betrayal in communist China; the paradoxical nature of the Cultural Revolution and Mao's intentions for revolutionizing China; the extent to which the depicted historical events were discussed in the Tibetan educational system; and the impact of the Great Leap Forward and Cultural Revolution on Tibet as compared to Mainland China.



Figure 2. The third concubine (Saifei He) in *Raise the Red Lantern*.

RAISE THE RED LANTERN
 Dir. Zhang Yimou, 1992
 Screened Nov. 20, 2009

Set in Manchu-era China, this exquisitely tragic tale begins with the arrival of nineteen-year old Songlian, a former college student, at the colossal mansion where she is to begin her new life as the fourth wife of a wealthy businessman. Each evening the husband, whose face is never revealed, orders his servant to light a flock of tremendous red lanterns in the quarters of the wife with whom he will spend the night. The woman chosen is the beneficiary of numerous luxuries, including a lavish foot massage and the preparation of her own special dish the following morning. Though Songlian feels no love for her new husband, the rewards of his affections in combination with the callous, jealous behavior of his other wives lure her into the dirty household games. She quickly succumbs to the manipulation of the house, even faking pregnancy to receive more attention. However when the third concubine is caught in an extramarital affair and mercilessly killed, Songlian finally awakens to the inhumane treatment of the household

and descends into madness.

Many critics have interpreted this film as a veiled allegory of the dangers of dictatorial authority; the husband, portraying the Chinese state, effectively strips its subjects of their individuality and drives them to suspicion, murder, betrayal and eventual madness. Consequently, rebuking the film for promoting a pessimistic view of socialism, Chinese censors temporarily forbade it from premiering in mainland theatres. This decision was reversed upon its Oscar nomination in 1992 for Best Foreign Language Film.

Topics discussed during the screening of this film included: women's rights in ancient and contemporary China; polygamy in Tibet as compared to other countries; individual freedoms within the infrastructure of the Chinese state; the chronic abuses of power in Modern China; the value of fiction as opposed to documentary films in disseminating information; and the nature and significance of Chinese high art.



Figure 3. Zhao Di (Ziyi Zhang) and Luo Yusheng (Honglei Sun) in *The Road Home*.

THE ROAD HOME
 Dir. Zhang Yimou, 1999
 Screened Nov. 25, 2009

What starts as a bleak, black-and-white account of a son coming home to bury his father quickly melts into the technicolor fairytale of how his parents met and fell in love in an age where all marriages were arranged. Set in the countryside in the 1960s, the story is quaint and charming as its surroundings: Zhao Di, the most beautiful young woman in the village, catches sight of and immediately falls for Luo Yusheng, the village's new schoolteacher. Too shy to speak with him directly, she resorts to swooning from afar until finally circumstances allow them to meet. When Yusheng is called back to the city for questioning, an unexplained nod towards the Cultural Revolution that was plaguing China at this time, Di dedicatedly pines for him until his return. Shifting forward in time to the monochromatic present, Di is determined to bury her husband according to tradition by having the village men carry his casket back to his hometown. With her son's assistance, the funeral proceeds as she wishes with hundreds of Yushen's former students

appearing to carry the casket and honor their beloved teacher.

Although the allusion to the tension of the Cultural Revolution is slight, this film still ran into trouble with official censors. Though never officially banned in China, Zhang Yimou was chastised for presenting an unflattering picture of socialism.

Topics discussed during the screening of this film included: village life in China as compared to Tibet; the sense of camaraderie and community in modern China; the traditional emphasis on idyllic, rural life in China; political education in the PRC; Chinese and Tibetan funerary practices; and the staggering gap between rural and urban standards of living on the mainland.



Figure 4. Teacher Wei (Wei Minzhi) in *Not One Less*.

NOT ONE LESS
 Dir. Zhang Yimou, 1999
 Screened Dec. 3, 2009

This docudrama chronicles the efforts of thirteen-year old Wei Minzhi, hired as a substitute teacher for one month at a local village school, to retrieve one of her pupils from child labor in the city and return him to school. Wei signs up for the job under the condition that if not one single child drops out during her stay, she will receive 50 Yuan compensation for her efforts. Wei, whose timidity indicates that she ought to be behind a desk herself rather than at the front of a classroom, is a dreadful teacher. However when her student, Zhang Huike, takes off for the city, Wei is determined to retrieve him and starts demanding her students to calculate her bus fare to and from the city; through the crisis, Wei's teaching becomes both practical and effective. Unable to afford the bus, she hitchhikes to the city where she searches desperately for Zhang Huike until finally a television station takes pity on her and broadcasts her plea during primetime. With the help of modern media not only does she find her student, but also hundreds of viewers

sympathetic to her cause donate supplies and funds to the village school, enough to completely refurbish the building.

Zhang Yimou wrote the film as a contribution to “Project Hope,” a fundraising initiative that provides assistance to children in poor, rural villages to continue their education. Consequently, the film sheds a positive light on a dire situation, encouraging Chinese citizens to help bring poor village children back to school. The film is a quasi-documentary; although fictional, no professional actors were used. Instead, Wei Minzhi was portrayed by an ordinary peasant aspiring to be a teacher, the television executive by a true television executive and the students by common rural students.

Topics discussed during the screening of this film included: the swelling gap between China’s rich and poor; the discrepancies between urban and rural China; the contradiction between China as a simultaneously modern and traditional culture; rural education in China as well as in Tibet; China’s chronic overpopulation; the Party’s management of poverty; and the role of education in fostering nationalism in Chinese and Tibetan schools.

APPENDIX D: PICTURES



Figure 5. Movie club participants Sogshod Dhargye (left), Kunkyab Pasang (center), and Dorje Tseten (right) after screening Not One Less. Taken in Dharamsala on December 3, 2009.



Figure 6. Participants Sogshod Dhargye (left), Dorje Tseten (right), and the researcher (center). Taken in Dharamsala on December 3, 2009.



Figure 7. Sogshod Dhargye, editor of “mDza’a maThun” the China-Tibet Friendship Magazine, working on the layout of the next issue. Because the magazine is a volunteer effort, Dhargye works on the magazine in-between assignments for his full-time position at the Tibetan Newspaper The Tibet Express. Taken in Dharamsala on November 27, 2009.



Figure 8. The Dalai Lama at the Finding Common Ground Conference in Geneva, Switzerland.

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IMAGES

Cover Image: Tibet-China Friendship Magazine. Photograph by the author, 25 November, 2009.

Figure 1: Tietou (Wenyao Zhang) in *The Blue Kite*. Photograph, <http://www.austinchronicle.com/binary/4f46/bluekite.jpg>

Figure 2: The Third Concubine (Saifei He) in *Raise the Red Lantern*. Photograph, <http://www.austinchronicle.com/binary/6bbc/SS.RaisetheRedLantern.jpg>

Figure 3: Zhao Di (Ziyi Zhang) and Luo Yusheng (Honglei Sun) in *The Road Home*. Photograph, <http://www.offoffoff.com/film/2001/images/roadhome.jpg>

Figure 4: Teacher Wei (Wei Minzhi) in *Not One Less*. Photograph, <http://www.apu.ac.jp/~smano/pix/inspiration/notoneless2.jpg>

Figure 5: Sogshod Dhargye, Kunkyab Pasang, and Dorje Tseten. Photograph by the author, 3 December, 2009.

Figure 6: Sogshod Dhargye, Dorje Tseten, and the author. Photograph by the author, 3 December, 2009.

Figure 7: Sogshod Dhargye. Photograph by the author, 27 November, 2009.

Figure 8: The Dalai Lama at the Finding Common Ground Conference in Geneva, Switzerland. Photograph, http://www.ifor.org/images/photos/_DSC2780.JPG