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Beyond Ramaluk: Towards a more Inclusive view of Identity in the Tibetan Diaspora

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BEYOND RAMALUK:

Towards a more inclusive view of identity in the Tibetan diaspora

Insights from the oral histories and narratives of Tibetan youth in Delhi



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Abstract.

This paper is an investigation of identity in the Tibetan diaspora in India, informed by the oral histories and narratives of Tibetan diasporic youth living in the capital city of Delhi. By documenting, comparing, and analyzing the experiences of Tibetan youth growing up in India (both Indian-born and Tibetan-born), and attempting to understand their varying notions of Tibetan identity, as well as perspectives on its role in their community, it seeks to answer the following: Why and how do dominant notions of Tibetan identity and/or “Tibetanness” become dominant? What are the unintended consequences of affirming these notions of Tibetan identity in the Tibetan diasporic community—especially in a pluralistic, urban context like Delhi? What voices are we excluding or silencing by focusing on the dominant ones? By exploring these questions through a mixture of narrative and analysis based on interviews, observations, and existing literature, I hope to contribute to a more flexible, fluid, and inclusive view of identity in the Tibetan diaspora—one that regards “Tibetanness” not as a static, fixed standard, but as an ever-changing, ever-expanding spectrum of experiences and perspectives.

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I. Introduction: A note on identity and the Tibetan Diaspora.

"Identity is always mobile and processual, partly self-construction, partly categorization by others, partly a condition, a status, a label, a weapon, a shield, a fund of memories, et cetera. It is a creolized aggregate composed through bricolage." - Liisa Malkki, Citizens of Humanity

The word *diaspora* is used to refer to populations that have been dispersed from an original geographic center or from within political borders by another group of people, and are subsequently characterized by: a strong [and often romanticized] collective memory of and idea of return to a homeland that is no longer accessible, a shared belief in the normative commitment of its members to the interests of the community and homeland, consciousness of shared culture and ethnic background, and active preservation of culture, and political and social alienation from the society of the host country. They are further marked by continuous and intentional construction and reassessment of identity(ies) in the context of the new environment, on the individual and collective levels.¹ While international migration and transnational movement is at one of its peak moments in history, examples of diaspora, with its very specific definition, are few, with some contemporary examples including the Palestinian diaspora, the Armenia diaspora, the African diasporas, the Afghan diaspora, the North African diasporas of Morocco, Tunisia, and Algeria, and the Tibetan diaspora. It is the Tibetan diaspora, in the particular context of India, with which I will engage in this paper, with the aim of gaining a more intimate, nuanced understanding of the contemporary life and challenges of those within its cultural and ethnic borders.

Diaspora, much like 'migrant', or 'refugee', or 'exile,' rests in a semantic and conceptual space heavily imbued with a certain feeling; it carries firmly images of exile, loss, longing, and powerlessness,² and, with such great poetic value, the word tastes almost sweet on the tongue. This presents a problem when we study *identity* (cultural, national, ethnic) in diasporas; I find that, given the romance of the diaspora, our discussions of identity and the Tibetan diaspora within popular discourse, political activism, and artistic expression, speaks of identity in a way that flattens it into a one-dimensional form—so as to have it serve our purposes, whether it be human rights, justice, or some other political aim.

Academia has indeed critically probed into this subject and identified the shortcomings and problems of a simplistic view of the Tibetan diaspora's situation, and pointed out the contradictions within the Tibetan diaspora's construction of national and cultural identity in exile. Scholars such as Donald Lopez, Tsering Shakya, and others have discussed the idea that Tibetans have both internalized and consciously embraced the highly romanticized, idealized, Orientalist view of the West, about Tibet/Tibetans, and the greater conceptual domain of the 'East', and demonstrated, through analysis of Tibetan works, that Tibetan self-representation and identity construction often works to mystify and idealize their origins to promote nationalism and unity in exile, often ignoring and/or erasing Tibet's 'complex and competing histories' in the process.³

¹ Safran via Dibyesh Anand, "Traveling concepts and Tibetan version of Diaspora," 217.

² Khachig Tololyan, "The Nation-State and its Others: In Lieu of a Preface," *Diaspora* 1, 1 (1991), 4.

³ Donald Lopez, *Prisoners of Shangri-la*, 10.

Much of the scholarship in support of these two views draws its insight from historical accounts and from literary criticism, of readings of Western depictions of Tibet in the academy, media, and literature, and of self-representation by Tibetans within literature, political campaigns, and official government sources (Central Tibetan Administration)—i.e. they are readings on the discourse on Tibetan identity in the global arena, as well as the dominant identity discourse in the larger Tibetan community itself. I feel, however, that the understanding that one can glean about actual notions of identity as felt by individual Tibetans and/or Tibetan contemporary life in the diaspora from this perspective is necessarily limited. As it would be with any people, there is a real gap between the lives that Tibetans actually lead, and the discursive and/or visual representations of their lives⁴; analyses of discourse alone speak inevitably from a detached standpoint, because they neglect to investigate identity as the product (as well as the mainspring) of the set of lived, personal, deeply felt experiences of individuals. After all, isn't it the whole of our memories and experiences that tells us who we are and who we want to be? Isn't it during these lived experiences within the realities of daily life that identities are continually forged, negotiated, affirmed, and/or contradicted?

As such, what is needed for a more wholesome understanding of Tibetan diasporic identity, is a look into the personal narratives and experiences of Tibetans who have grown up in the diasporic context—stories that follow individuals from childhood into adolescence into adult life, within various geographic locations and social environments. Only after drawing insight from these narratives and experiences, and seeing how these experiences impact their negotiations of cultural and national identities from day to day and from year to year, can we really speak fairly and truthfully about the 'Tibetan diasporic identity'.

It is my aim to do exactly that with this paper; I hope to promote a more nuanced understanding of the Tibetan diasporic identity in India, by means of a profile of the Tibetan youth living in the capital city of Delhi, India and an analysis of their experience and perspectives, which highlights select personal narratives and stories and uses an account of my own experiences and observations as support. It is collectively a product of a one-month long period of field research in Delhi conducted in November of 2013, and it will be a combination of narrative writing and analysis, as I feel it is the best and most honest way I can convey the information I have gathered. The subjects of my study include various demographics of youth: youth born in Tibet, India, Nepal, and youth who lived and received their primary schooling (KG-12) in different school systems across India. My field research consists of interviews and informal conversations, and personal observation in five main sites in Delhi: Majnu-ka-tilla (New Aruna Nagar or Samyeling Colony) in North Delhi, the S.O.S. Tibetan Youth Hostel in Rohini, Northwest Delhi, the campus of Jawaharlal Nehru University in South Delhi, and the South Delhi neighborhoods of Lajpat Nagar and Katwaria Sarai (see Appendix C). Through my account, I hope to show that though there is a dominant notion of Tibetan identity, or 'Tibetanness' (that is, the one most promoted by Tibetan education system, government, and civil society forces, and the one most prominent in global imaginary) with which many Tibetans do indeed identify and promote, it is not the only one—and by failing to

⁴ Susan Chen, "When 'exile' becomes sedentary: on the quotidian experiences of 'India-born' Tibetans in Dharamsala, north India." *Asian Ethnicity* 13, no. 3 (2012): 263–286.

recognize this, we might be unconsciously perpetuating or encouraging certain social problems, as well as silencing and/or marginalizing voices in the Tibetan diasporic community.

My aim is not to speak for anyone or represent the Tibetan diasporic community Delhi or India fully or perfectly; I only hope to, by sharing stories and thoughts I have heard, contribute to a more well-rounded picture and perspective on the Tibetan diasporic identity in India—not as a static, fixed, thing, but as a spectrum, one that is always changing, expanding, evolving, and moving towards something bigger, stronger, and more inclusive.⁵

Why youth in Delhi?

Delhi, the sprawling, densely populated capital city of India, conceived as the most globally-connected place, bustling with bicycles, rickshaws, markets, eateries, and movie theatres, ancient monuments, and the biggest players in business, government, and education. It has long stood as the country's political center and witnessed the biggest moments of the country's political history, prominently evidenced, for example, by the Muslim and British architecture neatly divided between Old and New Delhi. It remains a pluralistic society consisting of a myriad of ethno-religious groups and minority communities. In a cursory tour around the streets of Delhi one will encounter different ethnic communities, as well Christian churches, Sikh, Hindu, and Jain temples, Buddhist monasteries and dharma centers, Tao institutes, Muslim mosques, and Zoroastrian temples.

For many young Tibetans, Delhi is *the* Indian city; it is known as a flourishing place of educational opportunity and possibility, and enjoys a status as the globalized political center of India.⁶ It is characterized by a greater expanse of physical space, and a degree of removal from the center of Tibetan society in Dharamsala—which, for some, brings a certain sense of freedom and independence. Further, there are the added factors of Delhi being the site of the largest Tibetan protest in India in the history of Tibetans in India, with individuals pouring in Himachal Pradesh and all over South India to join in the uprising, and location of Majnu-ka-tilla, the Tibetan colony akin to Grand Central Station of Tibetans in India. Many have come, and many will come, to Delhi, to make the most of its resources.

As a result, you will find in Delhi an intriguing gathering of Tibetans of different backgrounds; the older generation consists mainly of business owners and workers in various trades, as well as employees of Tibetan research and governmental organizations. Youth come to Delhi after their primary schooling for bachelor's, graduate, and post-graduate education, for work, in art, in blue collar and white collar jobs, and for participation in Tibetan activism and politics: Delhi is the location of the Chinese

⁵ I do not want to speak on this topic only in terms of 'nationalism', or 'modernity' vs. 'tradition'; I feel that these terms, while very important, are too limited and hinder our ability to imagine and understand the situation at hand, whose complexity cannot be adequately explored through the lens of 'nationalism' or a dualistic set-up like modernity vs. tradition.

⁶ K. Wangmo, Personal correspondence, October 28th, 2013. Kathmandu, Nepal; R. Wangyal, Personal correspondence, November 1st, 2013. Kathmandu, Nepal.

Embassy in India, as well as His Holiness the Dalai Lama's Bureau in Delhi, Students for a Free Tibet Delhi, and other political organizations and research centers.

I chose to look at youth specifically, between the ages of 18-30, firstly, because this encompasses the main demographics of Tibetans in the diaspora—Tibetans who were born in the diaspora, and Tibetans who were born in Tibet, and came either at an early age, or in their childhood. Secondly, this period is the time of transition from adolescence into adulthood. It is marked by great internal change and transformation—and much of it is observed and reflected upon, if not intentional in the first place; it is the time in which individuals look within their histories and experiences in order to understand the challenges they face in their current situation, and to assess and decide on priorities, goals, and aims in life. Further, in a multicultural, pluralistic urban setting like Delhi, one finds him/herself most conscious of his/her notions of identity and perceived sources of security, most open to assessing oneself and the community one is used to. The diasporic condition is a factor as well, as it inevitably puts one in a position of awareness of how similar or different ones looks, ones culture, ones habits and beliefs are from the majority, and forces one to be continuously aware of ones identit(ies) as s/he negotiates daily life.⁷

Coming from all across India and Nepal, you will find in the Tibetan youth of Delhi a range of experiences and perspective, born from great movements in space and great movements of the mind, from transformations of thought, belief, aspirations, goals for the future and for their careers, of ideas of self and the world around them. Thus, looking into this demographic in this location allows for an understanding of the current structure of Tibetan diasporic society in India, the forces helping to shape that structure, and the direction in which society is going.

What's more—whereas in Dharamsala, the designated capital of the Tibetan exile community, the institutions and community are felt by some to cater their demeanor and their stories heavily to the interests and the appetites of the constant stream of foreigners who visit,⁸ contemporary Tibetan life in Delhi seems a bit less scrutinized by foreign eyes, and a little bit more candid.

⁷ Dibyesh Anand, "(Re)imagining nationalism: identity and representation in the Tibetan diaspora of South Asia," *Contemporary South Asia* 9, no. 3 (2000): 271–287.

⁸ Interview, T. Namgyal, November 11th, 2013.

II. A brief history of Tibetans in India.

It is important to be familiar with the history and development of the Tibetan diaspora in India; without it, one cannot understand the context in which Tibetan youth exist, grow, and develop, and the construct notions of identity.

Prior to the declaration of the “peace liberation” of Tibet by China in 1951, Tibet and India enjoyed centuries of cultural, religious, and economic exchange across fluid and changing borders. The very first mass-migration of Tibetans into India that started the Tibetan diaspora took place in March 1959, after the failed Tibetan popular uprising against the Chinese state—thousands of Tibetans followed the 14th Dalai Lama’s flight into India, compelled by the violent and forceful response of the government.

In response to the great influx of refugees, the Government of India (GoI) first set up transit camps to provide basic assistance to incoming refugees in 1959, and the CTA soon worked to relocate refugees to agricultural settlements and other lands newly set aside for them by the government. Today, there are numerous small Tibetan communities as well as 54 formal settlements (agricultural, agro-industrial, and handi-craft based) scattered around India (including Northeast states such as Assam, Arunachal Pradesh, and Sikkim), all with access to health centers and Tibetan schools, with the biggest and most prominent settlements in areas such as Karnataka State (South India), greater Dehradun and Himachal Pradesh (Northern India).⁹ Tibetan settlements and communities now include three generations (the very first arrivals from Tibet, their children, and their children’s children), are largely in good socio-economic condition, and have commonly attempted and attained self-sufficiency.

In 1960, the Dalai Lama and the Tibetan Government in Exile (now known as the CTA)¹⁰ relocated from Mussoorie to the hill-station of Dharamsala, also in Northern India. As an evolving democratic entity, the CTA has come to consist of a legislature (Tibetan Parliament-in-Exile), executive cabinet (Kashag) lead by the Sikyong (prime minister), a judiciary, and seven governmental departments that manage all affairs that concern Tibetans inside or outside of Tibet. It has, over the years, led negotiations with the Chinese government and negotiations with the international community on behalf of the Tibetan people, and in addition to that, performed state-like governance functions for the diaspora. Further, its extensive influence within diasporic communities in India must be emphasized; since the beginning of the diaspora in India, it has played a vital role in the supporting the life and well being of the diasporic communities, with its position as the staple and unifying figure/institution between groups so geographically dispersed; its setting up and provision of material and management support to the first settlements; its establishing a system of health care institutions that serve Tibetans in India under its public health care program; its oversight of all Tibetan schools in India.

⁹ Central Tibetan Administration, “List of Tibetan Settlements”, CTA. <http://tibet.net/home/about-us/settlements-in-india/> (Accessed Nov. 22, 2013)

¹⁰ The Tibetan Government-in-Exile is the Tibetan national government that governed Tibet before China’s occupation of Tibet, and it went by this name since its re-establishment in India. The name “Central Tibetan Administration” was adopted in tandem with the Dalai Lama’s devolvement of political power to the elected Tibetan leadership in May 2011. For the sake of simplicity, I will refer to the exile government as the CTA, regardless of the time period I am speaking about.

In the present day, 54 years after the uprising, the number of ethnic Tibetans in India is currently at about 94,000, with approximately 130,000 Tibetans in the diaspora worldwide.¹¹ Under the 1946 Foreigners Act, Tibetans in India are legally considered ‘foreigners’—though they are accorded basic rights of most citizens,¹² they are not allowed to vote, hold Indian passports, or eligible for government or public jobs. Furthermore, Tibetan youth, due to their foreign status, face more difficulties in admissions to institutions of higher learning, which has seats for two categories, Indian nationals and foreigners; their foreign status places them in the “foreign” category, which has far less seats and thus lesser chance of admission.¹³

Tibetans are regarded by the GoI as refugees in the legal and political sense, however, this does not necessarily translate into definitive refugee rights or permanent governmental support programs and/or resources; while India has played host to many refugee and displaced communities since gaining independence in 1941, it has never codified national law regarding refugees. Further, it is not a signatory to the 1951 United Nations Convention on the Status of Refugees, nor the 1967 Protocol, and is thus not obligated to follow the prevailing international re- what results is arbitrary and inconsistent treatment between different refugee groups, as well as across time in regards to the same refugee group¹⁴.

What is definite is that, aside from receiving citizenship from the CTA in the form of the “Green Book,”¹⁵ all Tibetans living outside of Tibet, both those born in India and those arriving from Tibet via Nepal, must undergo an Indian documentation regime in order to have a legal status in the country as foreigners.¹⁶ They must obtain a Registration Certificate for Tibetans (RC), issued by the Ministry of Home Affairs, in order to be granted freedom of movement within India, the right to reside in the area of registration, the eligibility for bank accounts, business ownership, and renting accommodation. The GoI has designated three categories of Tibetans who can receive RCs: Tibetans who arrived in India from 1959-1979, Tibetans born in India, and Tibetans who arrived in India after 2003 and carry a Special Entry Permit issued by the Indian Embassy in Kathmandu, Nepal. Tibetans who have obtained an RC are then able to apply for an Identity Certificate (IC) on which travel visas can be issued, known as the “Yellow Book,” permits travel abroad. These are not formal passports, and must be renewed every 2-10 years.¹⁷ Furthermore, a special perk exists for Tibetans born in India between 1950 and 1987—the Indian Citizenship Act of 1986 grants citizenship rights to any Tibetan in this category.¹⁸

¹¹ Central Tibetan Administration, “Tibet in Exile”, CTA. <http://tibet.net/about-cta/tibet-in-exile/> (Accessed Nov. 22, 2013)

¹² This includes rights such as: freedom to practice their own religion, access to Indian health and education facilities, right to work, and freedom of movement within the country.

¹³ T. Dorjee, Interview, November 4th 2013; T. Tharchin, Interview, November 6th 2013.

¹⁴ Fiona McConnell, “Citizens and Refugees: Constructing and Negotiating Tibetan Identities in Exile,” *Annals of the Association of American Geographers* 103, no. 4 (2013), 5.

¹⁵ The Green Book Tibetan citizenship-in-exile documentation system was implemented in 1991 after being enshrined in the Charter of Tibetans in Exile.

¹⁶ McConnell, 7-8.

¹⁷ Ibid, 6; Dhondup Sangpo, Director of the Tibetan Refugee Receptor Center in Delhi, Interview, November 4th 2013.

¹⁸ Tenzin Younten. "Indian Citizenship: A Dilemma for Tibetans." *Contact Magazine* (Dharamsala), September 18, 2013.

With regards to education, there are a total of 61 primary schools across India, which teach all or some classes between KG and class 12, within four separate Tibetan school systems: Tibetan Children's Village (TCV) schools, Tibetan Homes Schools, Central Tibetan Schools (CST), and Sambhota Tibetan Schools. TCV and CST are the largest schools, which approximately 16,600 and 5,000 students in each system, respectively. The former has historically enrolled mostly students who were born in Tibet, while the latter enrolls mostly students born in India. They were all created with the shared intent of providing quality standard primary academic education in addition to cultural education to Tibetan children in exile,¹⁹ in fully (or almost fully) Tibetan environments. Students often enroll in schools close in proximity to their homes, however, in the case of TCV, a student's acceptance into a school is dependent on more strictly-regulated openings (as well as parent connections to TCV staff or the CTA)—therefore, students born in India able to attend TCV will likely move long distances for schooling. In 2013, an estimated total of 32,800 students in India are enrolled across these four school systems.²⁰ Less children are coming from Tibetan in present times, and thus, more Indian-born students as well as Indian and foreign students from Europe and East Asia are enrolling in TCV schools.²¹ Increasing numbers of Tibetan students each year leave their homes to attend college and university in India and abroad after primary schooling, many with the help of CTA, and foreign scholarships and sponsorships.

¹⁹ Language of the CTA.

²⁰ I arrived at the number of total students by totaling enrollment numbers of each school system found on public webpages of CTA Department of Education (Sherig), TCV, CST, Tibetan Homes Schools, and STS. Please refer to bibliography for URLs and citations.

²¹ Kirti, Interview, November 16th 2013.

III. Majnu-ka-tilla

I arrived in Delhi after the sun had set. My first glimpse of the city, through foreign eyes and the windows of a taxi, was an engrossing sort of chaos, its wide and busy roads sitting under what felt like a settled layer of haze and dust, and quadruple-lane streams of cars, buses, motorbikes, and auto-rickshaws, tinted yellow by the street lamp lights and moving fluidly together like metallic schools of fish. We were headed for Majnu-ka-tilla, the center of Tibetan society in the city of Delhi, passing glossy high-rises and stately office buildings, past parks, temples lit-up with golden lights, bustling roadside shantytowns and heaps of trash.

After forty-five minutes, a pedestrian bridge stretched across the expressway and wreathed in prayer flags came into view, and with a sharp U-turn we pulled up at the main gate of Majnu-ka-tilla. Groups of youth stood around smoked chicken and meat kabob stands by the road, in front the cluttered shops lined the exterior of the colony. The gate read:

Tibetan Refugee Colony
New Aruna Nagar, Delhi 110054

The Tibetan colony of Majnu-ka-tilla—named after the nearby Gurudwara Sikh temple of the same name commemorating a Persian Sufi mystic named Majnu²²—is known as M.T. to most Tibetans. It sits between National Highway 9 and the banks of the Yamuna river, up in North Delhi, and is known as the commercial center of the Tibetan diasporic community in India and utilized as the Tibetan transit hub of India. It has around 3,000 permanent residents, and with dozens of guesthouses, restaurants, and travel agencies, M.T. is regularly filled with single and group travelers passing through to Dharamsala, to cities in Himachal, to Darjeeling, Sikkim, to South²³, for work, for vacation, for home. It is complete with its own TCV Day School, health clinic, astro institute, and two monasteries, the Drepung Ngakpa Monastery and the Jangchupling Lhakang Monastery—all fit snugly within the tiny parameters of 69,627 sq. meters, or 0.2 sq. miles, and connected by a single speaker system that delivers important notices to the community, including announcements of candelight vigils and protests. M.T. acquired the additional name of 'Samyeling' when His Holiness the Dalai Lama blessed the colony in 2004, and yet another, "New Aruna Nagar", when the government of Delhi granted M.T. notification of regularized colony certification, which leads to full ownership of the colony's property. M.T. had its beginnings in 1960, when Jawaharlal Nehru granted asylum to Tibetan refugees in the immediate aftermath of the uprising in 1959; it began as a settlement camp inhabited by this first wave of refugees, and has since expanded and grown into a flourishing business community.²⁴

M.T. was my port of entry in Delhi. After pulling my luggage out from the taxi on the busy highway, I walked through the gate and entered into another world; a small, cramped one, with just one main footpath running through the entire colony. The colony's shops, stands, and establishments lined up shoulder-to-shoulder along the path, and

²² <http://www.indianexpress.com/news/majnu-ka-tila-and-the-romance-of-sepak-takraw/823358/0>

²³ South India is commonly referred to as 'South' by Tibetans living in India.

²⁴ Samyeling New Aruna Nagar Colony Resident Welfare Association. "Brief History of Samyeling, New Arunanagar Colony." New Delhi; Karten Tsering, Interview, November 22nd, 2013.

countless winding alleyways branching off to hidden guesthouses, residential flats and rented rooms. I passed from Old Camp, where M.T. first started, and observed residents sitting at outdoor food stands chatting and enjoying tea, monks sitting in front of the two monasteries, into New Camp, which was built and developed after 1981, where I passed a flurry of guesthouses, restaurants, and travel agencies, and boys with tattoos squatting in front of shuttered shops—closed for the night—quietly blowing smoke into the narrow street.



Figure (1) Main gate of M.T., New Aruna Nagar Tibetan Refugee Colony in Delhi.

At one point I met Tashi, a 25-year-old youth born in Delhi who has lived with his family in Majnu-ka-tilla his whole life, when not away at school. We were at his house, which sits deep into the maze of alleyways in Old Camp, and he recounted bits of his childhood in M.T. for me:

"[M.T.] used to be very poor, compared to now, everyone [sold] chang,²⁵ even my mother did, when we were younger. We don't have proper electricity, no water running. So, during summer, when I was little, maybe around three or four years old—it's very blurry—I remember we had no power at home, and we had to go outside to sleep, it was too hot in the house maybe. So I remember sleeping by the road, by the footpath, and these trucks and buses moving [past] us at night. It was very relieving, when these big big trucks and buses move past—they bring a breeze, you know? A lot of people did the same [thing] in those days...

"And it changed. Later people went more and more into business, into the garment business, sweater business, and they went to Ludhiana, in Punjab. That's where all the textile industries is; they would buy textiles there and sell them to Indians. Indians felt good buying from us, you know."²⁶

M.T. is quite large in the minds of the Tibetan community in India; for many, its transformation from an impoverished community living underneath a 'pile of plastic roofs' to a self-sustaining community within the span of a few decades serves a symbol

²⁵ Tibetan alcoholic beverage.

²⁶ Tashi Namgyal. Interview. November 11th, 2013.

of the strength of the Tibetan diasporic community.²⁷ It is the universal gathering place for Tibetans living around Delhi, whether they be students in the colleges and universities, working youth in the city—the most natural place to start a search for a way into the world of Tibetan youth in Delhi.

I had docked in M.T. with minimal prior knowledge of the place, hardly any connections with the people; I was a feeling a bit directionless going back and forth from Old Camp to New Camp after entering the gate, when my first friend in Delhi, Taming, approached me with a slight look of amusement on his face:

“Excuse me miss, are you lost?”

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²⁷ Seventh Tibetan College Student’s Conference program, “What Tibetan Youth Can Do” by Tenzin Dolma; Tashi Namgyal, Interview. Konchok Tsering, Personal Correspondence, November 7th, 2013.

IV. The S.O.S. Tibetan Youth Hostel at Rohini East.

Tamding was one trip to Dharamsala away from leaving to Europe—he had finalize some other paperwork, get some documents stamped, and if all went well, he would be off to the West within two weeks. “I will go, and find work,” he’d said. My surprised face prompted his next words. “Don’t worry, I’ve been there two times already... I know how it is. But...I don’t have anything to do before then. So I wanna help you.”

I got settled in a guesthouse there in M.T. that night, and the next day, I called Tamding and we took an auto²⁸ to Ladakh Budh Vihar, the location of Delhi’s Ladakhi Buddhist Monastery, the Tibetan Market, and the Delhi branch of the Tibetan Refugee Reception Center, where new arrivals from Tibet come after their first stop in Kathmandu.

Tamding was 23 years old, though his speech carried a certain air of authority and confidence, and he didn’t seem so young. He was born in Tibet and came to India on his own at age 10. He had recently received his master’s degree in geography from Delhi University (DU), after leaving the TCV Gopalpur and obtaining his bachelor’s. He was giving me a brief tour of the Tibetan Market, whose shops are run by Tibetan families living in Budh Vihar itself as well as MT, and targets customers are local Indians, when he mentioned how he had stayed in a TCV Youth Hostel for some of his time at DU, which housed a large number of Tibetan students.

“So do you know any students at DU who I can talk to?” I asked him.

“Yeah...,” he thought for a few seconds, “I’ll call my friend who’s still at hostel.”

“And how do I get there?” I inquired. “To the hostel, I mean?”

“What?? By yourself?” he raised his eyebrows in disbelief, as if I had just asked the most absurd question, and scowled jokingly, “I’ll take you... c’mon.”

The youth hostel was a bit like a desert oasis, especially after my first experience with the Delhi metro, the mass transit system supporting a city of 16 million. We were in Northwest Delhi, in the neighborhood of Rohini, and the hostel complex was a clean, calm, and quiet haven with green grass, gardens, and palm trees in the middle of the megacity (Fig. 2)—which, I had observed on the half-hour metro ride, hardly ever sees a clear sky this time of year and sits underneath a thick, perpetual layer of haze, even during the beautiful weather of fall.

We headed straight for the canteen, where students eat when they feel bored with the mess hall, and met Tamding’s third-year friend Yungdung, who after a quick word on the phone had already arranged three interviews for me. They had planned it already; they’d take me to the green park across the street, where I would interview two first years born in Nepal and India, Choedon and Jangchup, and Nyima, a third year from Tibet.

²⁸ Auto, used by those in Delhi to refer to auto-rickshaws.

They came after a few minutes, and I introduced myself and my project, and shook their hands; we ate some chowmein, drank some chai, and started walking from the canteen towards the main gate to the park. Choedon caught me admiring the architecture of the hostel buildings on the way.

“It’s really nice, isn’t it?” she said with a smile. “We say it looks like a monastery.” With its square building structure, window design, and blue, yellow, red, and white decorative trims, it did, quite a bit.



Figure 2: the S.O.S. Tibetan Youth Hostel in Rohini.

And thus started my week at the youth hostel talking to Delhi University students from TCV. Aside from Tamding, I would get to know Choedon and Jangchup, Nyima, and five others, including Tharchin, a 26-year-old youth who came from Tibet at age 14 and was president of the Regional Tibetan Youth Congress (RTYC) Rohini from 2011 to 2012, and Sangay, a filmmaker and recent graduate of DU who was brought to India as a baby.²⁹

From TCV to Delhi, the big city: oral histories at the Youth Hostel.

The youth hostel was inaugurated back in 1991 by the Dalai Lama—it houses a total of 230 Tibetan students attending the various colleges of Delhi University, and serves as a center for an active RTYC-Rohini chapter and for SFT-Delhi chapter members, with RTYC put in charge of organizing annual Tibetan student conferences, as well as constantly organizing campaigns, protests, and hunger strikes.³⁰ The youth hostel is owned and operated by TCV and pulls the top performing youth from the three plus two TCV schools (class 11 and 12): TCV Bylakuppe, Gopalpur, and Upper TCV, with each focusing on a certain ‘stream’: arts, commerce, and science, in that order. The three +2 schools are fed by eight TCV schools across India: Upper Dharamsala, Lower Dharamsala, Bylakuppe, Selakui, Gopalpur, Suja, and Chauntra.³¹ Talking to the hostel

²⁹ Full list of interviewees: *Tamding, Tharchin, Kelsang, Yangtsang, Nyima, Choedon, Jangchup, Sangay, Choewang*

³⁰ Seventh Tibetan College Students Conference program & March 2011-2012, Annual Magazine of RTYC (see Appendix E).

³¹ Multiple interviews; Sonam Choedon, Personal correspondence, November 20th 2013.

youth coming from the three +2 schools, having them tell me their stories of growing up in India, it was possible to imagine the world in which virtually half the children in the Tibetan diaspora in India are brought up.

Most of today's hostel students, former-TCV students in the current age group of 18-30, were born in Tibet; from the early 90's to mid 2000's, large numbers of Tibetans were still passing through the Tibet-Nepal border,³² and many came to India at a young age without their parents, and many without any family in India. With TCV being the existing and established support structure for children in this kind of situation, they were enrolled into a TCV school upon being processed as newly arrived refugees by the Tibetan offices in Dharamsala, and remained in the TCV system until graduation in class twelve. In the same time period, seats in TCV schools were offered to a considerable number of Indian-born students, usually through a family connection in the CTA or in TCV staff.

In this long stretch of time, TCV takes on a very special and important role in the lives of the children—children within a class become very close and regard one another brothers and sisters while they learn to cope with life in a new setting, without parents or family beside them. Teachers, and to some extent home mothers (in some TCV schools there were systems of separately run homes, in which 20-30 students would live in a home under the care of a 'home mother'), become immediate parental figures, providing an absolutely vital source of not just educational instruction or knowledge, but also of love, care, and discipline.³³ Those I spoke with also remembered teachers as moral guides who sought to really "develop their hearts", and instill in them a deep sense of Tibetan and Buddhist values.³⁴

"TCV is like our home, and the teachers are like our guardians," Choedon, who came to Lower TCV at age five from the Tibetan settlement in Jawalakhel, Nepal, told me. TCV is just as impactful on those born in India and Nepal. "The moments spent in TCV are very precious kind of thing, for all the TCV children."³⁵

Children would spend a very large percentage of their childhood and adolescence under the tutelage of the TCV system; there were only a couple month's time of breaks each year, and children were not allowed to leave the school premise during winter breaks until class six or seven.³⁶ Over the course of all their time in TCV, children were given all the pieces of knowledge and insight that would come together to help form their worldview, and, in the context of both the homes system and hostels, they were also given many practical skills and the opportunity to exercise them regularly.

On this, Nyima, who came to India in 1998, said: "When I first came from Tibet, I was uneducated. I didn't know anything, I didn't know what was going on in this world... I only saw the surrounding areas, I didn't know whether this was life or death. When I came to India, I came to know many things. I came to know that Tibet is not a part of China, but there are other countries suffering under occupation. [Not only] that,

³² Fiona McConnell, "Citizens and Refugees: Constructing and Negotiating Tibetan Identities in Exile."

³³ Nyima, Interview, November 8th 2013; Gyurmey, Interview, November 19th 2013.

³⁴ Kirti, Interview, November 16th 2013.

³⁵ Choedon, Interview, November 8th, 2013.

³⁶ Chimee, Gyurmey, Interview, November 18th, 2013.

within my twelve years of education, ...I learned many life skills, you know, how to cook, clean, and take care of myself.”³⁷

There are of course, as with children in any school anywhere, social challenges that children face in TCV, ranging from more universal ones such as fighting and bullying, to more unique ones such as unsympathetic home mothers, or language barriers between newly arrived students from different areas of Tibet³⁸—this type of situation was described to me by youth like Tharchin, whose memories are very clear as he left Tibet when he was around 13 or 14, and could recall moments of frustration and sadness because of a lack of ability to communicate with others. These difficulties are never permanent hindrances to TCV’s impact on life, however; they are always solved over time.³⁹ On the whole, TCV was recounted to me as a place that took children in, gave them everything they needed to grow up and develop. It is looked back upon and felt deeply as a place of great joy and happiness, where they could grow up and transition from childhood to adolescence in a place of love and comfort—something especially meaningful and vital for students who come from Tibet, who were enrolled into TCV without having to pay even one rupee. Many of the students I talked to, for these reasons, expressed sincere gratefulness to the Dalai Lama, the CTA, and the foreign sponsors who enabled their experience.

“TCV makes me a person who...can do something in the future,” Nyima had said fondly while we were sitting in the park. “So I am very grateful to TCV and His Holiness, and the exile government. And we have also sponsor, you know—when we first came to India, they used to find us sponsors...[I’m] very grateful to them as well.”⁴⁰

“R” is for refugee, and it’s on your forehead: TCV and Tibetan identity

TCV is home, and home is a deeply *Tibetan* space. The schools were described to me as an entirely “Tibetan environment,” where the Tibetan language is spoken ubiquitously, Tibetan traditional culture, dance, and music is taught in classes and celebrated regularly, and Tibetan history is taught formally and informally inside and outside of the classroom.⁴¹ Learning about Tibetan culture and history was particularly impactful for those coming from Tibet at an older age like Tamding and Tharchin; they described it as learning things they never knew about themselves, and having entire worlds opened up for them.

“Everything is totally hidden [in Chinese schools]. In India, I got the opportunity to really learn the truth,” Tamding had said.⁴²

Being educated with Tibetan culture history by TCV seemed, in essence, to allow them to reclaim their own identity and roots after having them suppressed and hidden by Chinese education policies in Tibet; it is sort of a reconstruction his/her knowledge of self in exile.

³⁷ Nyima, Interview, November 8th, 2013.

³⁸ Nyima, Interview, November 8th 2013; Gyurmey, Interview, November 19th 2013.

³⁹ Tharchin, Interview, November 6th, 2013.

⁴⁰ Nyima, Interview, November 8th 2013.

⁴¹ Jangchup, Interview, November 8th, 2013.

⁴² Tamding, Interview, November 4th 2013.

For those I spoke to who were born in India or Nepal, TCV education was perceived to *teach* them a ‘Tibetanness’ that they did not fully have; it gave them the tools they need claim and express Tibetanness and its cultural and political components.

Born in the Tibetan settlement of Bir in Himachal Pradesh, Jangchup explained her experience with Tibetan identity in TCV to me as well. It had gotten too dark at the park that first day of interviews, so we had our chat in the seating area behind the canteen later that week: “I was in CST until class 5, but my parents felt that I did not have that ‘Tibetanness’ in me. So from class 6 onwards, I stayed in TCV Gopalpur until class 12. After coming to TCV, I came to know what is Tibetan.”

“Everything I am today, is thanks to TCV.”

To that end, many students also described to me how they attribute much of their sense and understanding of Tibetanness outside of cultural identity, i.e. more political aspects of Tibetanness, to TCV education; it soon surfaced that another prominent element of Tibetanness as taught by teachers—albeit one passed through informal means outside of formal curriculum—was refugee identity. Sangay and I were having a conversation over dinner back in MT, about his time in TCV Suja, and he said:

“TCV is very important for me. When I came first in school, I didn’t know nothing about Tibet, I don’t even know who is the Dalai Lama... When I came in school, I got the knowledge. We don’t have freedom. We don’t have country... We all have ‘R’ on our heads. There is ‘R’ on my head.”

We all have “R” on our heads. This would come up repeatedly in my conversations with Tharchin, Nyima, Choedon, and Jangchup, as well as other interviewees. Teachers across the schools in the TCV system consistently and frequently reinforced feelings of loss and injustice of the country of Tibet, and reminded students of their legal status as refugees and their identity as a person in exile.

Jangchup explained it to me as well: “When we did not study well, especially students who were born in India, they didn’t face or see any hardships in their life. Teachers used to say everyday when we did not study: ‘You have R on your forehead. If not for yourself, then for Tibet. You have to study.’ It’s like an idiom sort of thing. We are refugees, we always have to depend on others. It’s a pathetic life without a nation.”⁴³ Though, despite the powerlessness connected to the refugee identity, it would also seem that the youth from the hostel would largely like to hold on to the refugee identity; the TCV experience seemed to reinforce the idea that to hold onto the refugee identity is to remain loyal and faithful to the Tibetan national identity, and to remain steadfast in your Tibetan identity what is perceived as an unfriendly foreign environment. None of the students I spoke with would take Indian citizenship if they had the chance.

Additionally, along with the reiteration of refugee identity by teachers, students were also required to participate together in protests and political activities related to the cause of Tibet, with the biggest event being the annual March 10 commemoration of the Tibetan National uprising.

⁴³ Jangchup, Interview, November 8th 2013.

The DU students from TCV I got to know expressed clear and defined ideas of Tibetanness, i.e. what a Tibetan should do to claim and/or fully express his/her identity. That is: they should speak and preserve the language, practice and preserve the traditional music and dance forms, take part in cultural activities and political protests, accept and/or relate to refugee identity and all that it entails, and contribute to the Tibetan community. They left TCV with a great sense of duty to Tibetan identity and to the people within their community. As such, they all have aims and career aspirations directly tied to the cause of Tibet, by either impact or intention. For Jangchup, the goal is to be a Tibetan wedding counselor; for Choedon, a CTA worker or the director of a children's rights NGO; for Nyima, it's to be a writer; for Kelsang Tsering (a DU student I met in M.T.), it's to be a journalist with Radio Free Asia—whatever their aim may be, they believe that it is their duty as Tibetans to serve and to elevate their community with their talents and interests, whatever they may be. For students who came from Tibet, some of their intention is clearly rooted in their direct relationship with the land of Tibet through their parents and their families whom are still there. But it is clear that, for all of the students, both Indian and Tibetan-born alike, much of their drive and intention is rooted in the instruction and encouragement of the education they received in TCV, to embrace their Tibetan identity and serve and empower the Tibetan people.

Life after TCV, in Delhi, in India.

The narrative of growing up in India includes the present, for the youth hostel students. Many are still adjusting to life in Delhi, and I asked them to tell me about what this adjustment entails, and their thoughts on it all.

Moving out of the strictly Tibetan space of TCV and into Delhi has come with a set of interesting trends. First, some positive ones: I observed, that while use of English and Western influence in clothing styles and music tastes is seen as normal and largely unproblematic within the diasporic community in India, Indian cultural influence is regarded as more of a threat to Tibetan youth's Tibetan identity. Over-consumption Hindi-language media and entertainment, and speaking Hindi in Tandem with Tibetan seems to be regarded as dangerous. Nonetheless, the youth regard *knowing* and being able to use Hindi in everyday life, on top of Tibetan, as a mark of positive cultural hybridity and flexibility. Impressing or shocking Indians with language ability is something that many feel proud of. Especially for Tibetans who came from Tibetan and can remember the journey, becoming proficient in Hindi as time went on was an empowering thing; it is a tangible accomplishment after the painful physical and emotional trouble of leaving Tibet for India, and evidence of the ability to completely adapt to a new setting and environment.

"I feel good about knowing Hindi and English," Tamding had said, "*Because of that hardship which I met...*"

The general sentiment is that, Tibetans through their multilingual skills are marked by a certain adaptability and strength—"The Tibetan tongue is quite flexible... it is easy for us to catch any language," was Nyima's remark. Coming to India itself has been narrated to me as an act of political and mental liberation of sorts, with the arrival in

India leading directly to the expansion of knowledge and worldview, and the transformation from being ‘backward’ and ‘uneducated’ to becoming educated.⁴⁴

However, actual relations with Indian society in the context of post TCV-life is not nearly as positive, and difficulties adjusting to the environment in Delhi was a heavy trend in the narratives of the hostel youth:

Hostel students have found it hard to adjust to Delhi; many find it the Indian classroom/campus to be an uncomfortable space, and feel unused to the atmosphere of Indian society and Indian people. The DU youth with whom I spoke attributed this discomfort to an incompatibility of Tibetan culture with Indian culture, which was commonly described to me as juxtaposed against Tibetan culture, and depicted in terms of selfishness vs. compassion, kindness vs. aggression. Indians as a whole are perceived to be “harsh” in character, as too aggressive, too insincere, too focused on their own studies.⁴⁵ As Tharchin, who speaks with much respect for India and Indians and has spent much time in his studies learning about Indian history and culture, put it:

“For Tibetans, it is always ‘others before self.’ When I came to college, I could see that in Indian culture, it is more of ‘self before others’. I feel uncomfortable with it sometimes.”

Choedon elaborated on this as well: “There are many difficulties with being with Indians... their characteristics, or their sense and style are very different from us. They are very harsh, they want everything, and...sometimes don’t have manners.”

Broadly, this perception of Indian society seems to have created an atmosphere of tension and distrust that many of the Tibetan students collectively inhabit, in which some come to believe that pure friendships cannot possibly be formed with their Indian classmates and are not worth pursuing.⁴⁶

Additionally, Tibetan students feel othered and discriminated against by the Indian community as well. They often hear Indians calling them “chinky” or “chinkies” (referring to appearance) during school time and in public places, in an annoying or condescending way—a phenomenon mentioned to me by almost every student I spoke with at the Youth Hostel.

What is interesting to note is that, the hostel students always referenced friendships with Northeastern students while speaking of relations with Indians. They told me they’ve formed numerous relations with Northeast students, whom they find more easy to approach and talk to because simply because of more similar physical appearances.

“They look similar to us, so it’s easier to make friends with them. I have a lot of Northeast friends. But they are more culturally like Indians,” Choedon had said.

A sense of isolation on the part of the Northeast student as encouraged these links between Northeast students and Tibetan students—it has resulted in not only friendships

⁴⁴ Tamding, Interview, November 4th 2013; Nyima, Interview, November 8th 2013.

⁴⁵ Choedon, Interview, November 8th 2013.

⁴⁶ Ibid, Jangchup, Interview, November 8th 2013.

and romantic relationships between Tibetans and Northeast students, but also attempted political relations. Two Northeast PhD students involved in certain Northeast independence movements had approached Tharchin in hopes of collaboration and/or joint campaigns for the freedom of both Tibet and Northeast states, but Tharchin turned them down because this would potentially risk Tibetans' relations with the Indian government.

In any case, it appears that, in experience of many students, Indian youth and greater Indian society are an unfamiliar people separated from their own community by a barrier that renders meaningful interactions rare, if not impossible. What this has led to is a retreat of a majority of youth hostel students into the youth hostel outside of the classroom—many do not use D.U. academic facilities (such as the library), participate in D.U.'s extra-curricular activities, or take part in D.U. student life. Most stay within the youth hostel after school hours, where it is safe and comfortable.

And, indeed, hostel life seemed good. I had come in during the study period for final exams, a time of stress and tension, but a strong sense of community and feeling of comfort was still very evident in the hostel grounds.

A word from Tashi.

Tashi of M.T. had come out of the CST school system, which he explained was the school system populated by Tibetan children born in India whose families did not have the money nor connections to enroll in TCV, and was co-administered by the CTA and the government of India. His father, now a practitioner at the Jangchupling Lakhang in MT, was a former Chushi Gangdruk⁴⁷ fighter and a veteran of the Tibetan battalion in the Indian army, and so he and his brother both stayed in the army-run hostel of CST Herburtpur near Dehradun. Tashi had never felt completely in tune with the notions of Tibetanness and Tibetan identity as taught by CST, in a fashion quite similar to TCV; after dropping out of Herburtpur and the monastery school he had joined thereafter, he has spent much time nurturing his own personal interests in the Dharma and building relationships with foreigners, as a way of opening himself to different perspectives and experiences—in addition to participating in the Tibet freedom movement. We had been discussing his life and his experiences, as well as my research, and he gave me some sudden advice:

“Don’t get sucked in to youth hostel...It is just one perspective.”

Remembering this, I decided to talk to just one more youth from the hostel, and then find my way to the Tibetan youth attending Jawaharlal Nehru University down in South Delhi. And with that, I bid farewell to my new friends at the hostel, and also to Tamding, who had already gone to Dharamsala and come back to Delhi, and was all set to go to Europe. I waved a bittersweet goodbye to him as he rode off to the airport in an auto by the green bridge to Punjab Basti (Figure 3).

⁴⁷ Tibetan guerilla resistance force in the 1970's which fought against the PLA.



Figure 3. The Green Bridge

#

V. Jawaharlal Nehru University

Choewang: a preface

21-year-old Choewang, a second-year economics and commerce student at DU, was the last youth hostel student to meet me before I left for my interviews at JNU. He had attended TCV Chauntra and then Bylakoppe for +2, and had set out to study commerce at DU in hopes of becoming something in the realm of an investigative journalist, who could understand the operations and expose the corruption of multinational corporations operating in India and elsewhere in developing countries. He was a bit different from the others I had met so far; he had a sweet and unassuming demeanor, and a sharp mind, and while it felt like he sometimes had a hard time getting the right words out, one is compelled to listen with full attentiveness whenever he spoke. Aside from sharing Tamding's love of traveling alone for the sake of learning, he diverged sharply from the particular group of students I had met, in terms of outlook. He had a different experience with the notions of Tibetan identity as taught to children within the TCV school system—unlike those who I spoke to in the hostel, who by and large found comfort in them, those notions of Tibetan identity have frustrated him and isolated him, and have made him feel regret.

As usual, I was coming out from MT, and he was coming from class, and so he proposed we meet halfway, at Rajiv Chowk. We met on the metro platform and stepped out into the hustle and bustle of Connaught Place, which at eight in the evening was lively and full of activity; traffic moved along non-stop through the Inner Circle, the clothing and gadget stands outside the entrance to the famous underground Palika Bazaar were buzzing with people, as were the restaurants and shops lining the outer circle. And, filled with Georgian-style columned buildings, it certainly carried an interesting vibe.

We headed to the Indian Coffee House around the outer circle, where we had coffee and dosas, and Choewang told me scattered stories from his childhood in TCV Palitkuhl and Chauntra, both fond memories and not-so-fond memories. He told me about how, at one point, he was bullied and forced to give another student his pocket money every Friday, and how he and his friends woke up in the early morning once a week to steal apples from nearby. We began to talk a little about his thoughts on his experience with TCV education when they started to close up shop, and we had to move outside.

We headed down the stairs and out into the circle, and he said: “You know, I wish I went to Indian public school.”

“You wish? Why?” I respond, with a slight tone of surprise in my voice.

“You open up more early. You're exposed to different things earlier...you feel very much backwards, you know. Late. We've been so late. Only when you get out of [high school], you get exposed to everything. That's why ...when I got out of school, I went and roamed around Delhi, went around to different places to learn.” Of course, by ‘you’, he meant, ‘I’.

I asked him how TCV had made him ‘backwards’, and he explained first the limiting nature of TCV's often austere boarding school environment, with its strict rules regulating behavior, dress, and hygiene, and access to the outside world, and its harsh

enforcement mechanisms—which had, in his past, included public denigrations and/or corporal punishment, i.e., flogging.⁴⁸ He alluded, humorously, to Orwell’s 1984, after describing this to me, and then explained a bit of the narrow view that he felt TCV had imposed on him, a Tibetan born in India:

“I think it’s kind of restrictive, you know...they try to make [us] feel a lot like we’re refugees... you shouldn’t talk to students about these things... I hate this. I really hate this. ... Everybody says, ‘You have an R on your forehead.’”

We cross the street, which is full of movement at 9:30 pm.

“Fuck that, man,” he says fervently as we dodge some motorcycles. “It discourages you... You feel small. You know, good teachers inspire, mediocre teachers dramatize. They dramatize everything. They try to make you feel small, by saying you are a refugee, that you don’t have your own country... They want to make you feel like you’ve lost something.”

He told me about, aside from reading, watching news and listening to radio shows, coming to Delhi during his last break after plus two on his own, to enhance his understanding of the society and country around him, as well as his general worldview.

“I used to wake up early [on Sundays]. On Sundays, you know, if you go to Old Delhi, then you can see everyone shaving in a line, in the same place. Most of them are migrants... they are in the streets. Then you make some conversation with them, and you...learn a lot of interesting things. I just talk about everything [with them]. Indian politics, travel issues. It’s very easy, you know, to talk to them. Migrant workers, you know. I used to talk with them a lot of times. Laborers. Travelers. They’ll tell you their stories.”

Choewang still lives in the youth hostel, and regards the youth there, and the TCV friends from his primary schooling, as his dearest friends. However, he doesn’t stay exclusively within the gates in his free time, because he feels they serve to limit him rather than offer him security. As such, he hasn’t stopped venturing out into the city since he’s gotten to Delhi—he takes every chance he can to attend various seminars and conferences in the city on Tibetan politics, as well as Indian geopolitics, border disputes and security issues. When he is able, he goes to Jawaharlal Nehru University (JNU), where he enjoys the atmosphere of political and philosophical debate and discussion. Naturally, he was happy to hear that I was headed to JNU next, and off I went, the next day, with a couple of names and numbers of Tibetan students at JNU I had obtained from some friends in my pocket.

To JNU

Jawaharlal Nehru University is one of India’s most prestigious research universities, and was described to me as India’s premiere Marxist institution. At first, I was a bit unsure of what it could possibly mean to say a university was Marxist; things began to make more sense to me after I stepped foot on campus. The school’s founding figures and tuition and admission policies were explained to me, and I marveled at the

⁴⁸ Choewang, Interview, November 17th 2013.

never-ending series of anti-imperialism, anti-colonialism, anti-sexism, anti-violence against women, anti-casteism, anti-American imperialism, anti-Zionism murals covering every would-be blank wall on campus (Figure 4), as well as the frantic poster for the two biggest student political parties on campus—two Marxist parties. Coming from a 21st century American context, this place was completely new, and highly intriguing.

The Tibetan youth I met at JNU were, too, very new and interesting. There were about 41 students in total, in a larger total foreign student population of around 600 foreign students around the globe, with the biggest groups from Nepal, China, and South Korea, and some from Europe. Within the 41 students, some were Indian born and some were Tibetan born, some from TCV school system and CST school system. Together, the students form and run a student organization called Tibet Forum, through which they host academic discussions or forums related to Tibet or the Sino-Tibetan conflict, as well as annual cultural events. I was able to meet a good number of these 41 students, though I only had a chance to have in-depth conversations with a few, as JNU students, too, were in the middle of exams.

The first youth I met was Gendun, a 25-year-old political science masters student. I had sent him a text message, introducing myself and asking to meet, and after a short correspondence he invited me to campus. And so, I made the long journey over from MT. It was my very first visit to JNU, and wasn't quite sure where to go, I had auto-rickshaw drop me at an arbitrary location by Ring Road and waited for further instruction from Gendun. I eventually found my way to 24/7, JNU's most popular place to hang out, meet a friend, and grab a cup of late-night chai, and he came promptly to meet me.

"OK, I'm coming now," he'd said on the phone. Five minutes later, he appeared five minutes later on the road in front of 24/7, which led back to a cluster of hostels. Though I wasn't sure if it was him, I took a chance and walked toward him.

"Are you Gendun?"

Sure enough, it was him. He let me know first he had a women's rights class to attend in an hour or so, and I asked if we should slowly make our way to his class. Sure, he nodded, and said he'd take me for a tour along the way, and let me see the university's department halls and major academic buildings. We stepped back onto the dusty Ring Road, which was buzzing with auto-rickshaws and students in groups of two, three, and ten, and headed toward the academic center of campus.

Gendun was born in Tibet. He left Tibet and settled in Nepal at an early age, and was enrolled in TCV in India. Though he feels much loyalty to the Tibetan community, and though TCV has been done much for him, as it has for all of its students, he has become their biggest critic. His story with the dominant notions of Tibetan identity ended a little later than Choewang's; he began to find ways to expand his way of living and experiencing life as a Tibetan in India during his undergraduate years at DU, when he began to do heavy reading on his own time.

We were chatting along Ring Road and he began to explain how he felt about TCV and his time there. Very much like Choewang, at a point, he too struggled to stay

within the zone of comfort he had been living within coming from TCV, and decided to challenge himself in Delhi for his own good.



Figure 4: Zero Tolerance Against Women mural, touring JNU campus with Gendun.

“I realized that, oh, our view is very myopic. We need to realize that we need to broaden our horizons so that we can understand reality. Then, I started interacting with other people.” He made Indian friends, and made sure to leave the youth hostel often to spend time with them—in addition to his Tibetan friends.

“I think the TCV education system is not very good... In TCV, most of us are from Tibet..., our teachers used to always say that... without TCV, we cannot do anything. And then, naturally, psychologically, they will feel that ‘Without TCV, I won’t be able to do anything’. Because of that, even coming out of TCV, we still have an emotional link with [it]; we think that TCV is everything. Most of the student came from Tibet, and most of them don’t have any relations with their parents, that’s why they think that without TCV, our country, they can’t do anything. They are losing their confidence. They are losing their creativity...

“It is very difficult to develop that kind of confidence. So I think, it’s better for me to walk out of the Tibetan community, make friends with Indian people, learn more about India.”⁴⁹

He doesn’t attend political protests and rallies much either, he told me, despite the expectations within the community to do so. Rather, he thinks it is better to expend his time and energy on something different that might also help the Tibetan cause—he aims to become a scholar, and be a constructive and influential Tibetan voice in the world of academia, which in his view is currently lacking in Tibetan perspectives.

Class had been cancelled, it turned out—a classmate we passed by while passing by the library had notified him of this, and we were able to sit for some tea and chat for another couple of hours, about life and academics at JNU, his recent projects and papers,

⁴⁹ Gendun, Interview, November 14th 2013.

about his childhood, his taste in movies and music. To my surprise, he listens to Hendrix and Rage Against the Machine, and also dismisses bands like Simple Plan, popular during my years in middle school, as “music for kids.”

A couple days later I returned to JNU and met Kirti, a 23-year-old bachelor’s student majoring in Chinese Language. We met at 24/7 for our interview, and chatted for a couple of hours before he had to run off to a meeting.

Kirti had come to India from Tibet 10 years ago at the age of 14, and enrolled in TCV shortly afterwards. I came because I wanted to, he started off telling me. He didn’t come out of a need to escape persecution, or bad conditions, but a conscious desire to gain more knowledge and see the Dalai Lama.

TCV Suja was better than the education he would have received in the Chinese school systems in Tibet; he could feel that he was hearing a ‘new’ and ‘different’ side of history. But looking deeper, he expressed that he felt some imbalances in the narratives and ideas of history and identity he was receiving.

“There is a Chinese version of truth, and Tibetan version of truth. And school system, is the major tools that both sides have, you know? Education is sometimes manipulated by the government—this happens in Tibetan society as well.” It has become clear, and he had been questioning in his time during TCV Suja—the Chinese Communist Party and the CTA alike were “teaching their own propaganda and their own version of truth.”⁵⁰ He indicated that he has seen how TCV uses its education system to directly encourage what he termed ‘patriotism’ and unity in exile, to “be in the movement, to lead the movement, or have a big role in the movement”:

“TCV gives us more universal values, like how to be compassionate, how to be a helpful person in society, or how to use your education to help people, whoever it may be. That’s the type of value system we receive from TCV, which is very, very meaningful. But they do try to raise emotional attachment, to this abstract, imagined land. They want to use this ‘refugee’ term to reinforce Tibetan identity, to make people feel more attached to land... To make us feel like we are in country that is not ours, and so we need to be more passionate about Tibet. Which is so abstract to many of [the students], who have never been there or seen the land. I feel like this is another way to tell the Tibetan version of truth, and it encourages anti-Chinese sentiments. Which is in a way, hypocritical, and counterproductive, just dividing people.”

We stopped to order some lunch from the canteen, and after some fried rice and chowmein he brought the conversation to a more hopeful place, explaining how he has confronted any limiting effects of his lifestyle within TCV, what he had learned about Tibet, or being Tibetan in India. Traveling alone to the big cities of Bangalore, Mumbai, and Goa during his breaks, he would experience what he could of his surroundings.

“I traveled to all parts of India, and learned about Indian culture and Indian people.”

This is not to say he has cast Tibet far from his mind; his goal is to, after achieving a certain level of mastery of the Chinese language, return to Tibet and his

⁵⁰ Kirti, Interview, November 16th 2013.

family, and contribute to the movement through research and academia. He feels a sense of duty and responsibility to the issue, but he has resolved that it “doesn’t always have to be so personal.” He explained this to me as well:

“You see how the Dalai Lama approaches this conflict, he is always light about it. I can be the same way. [The cause] can be important to me, but it doesn’t have to be *all* of me.”



Tibet at JNU: We burn/We resist/We fight/for Freedom in Tibet.

After speaking with Kirti, I met Thinley, a 26-year-old master’s student studying history who had come to India from Tibet when he was 13 years old. Taking a break from studying for final exams to chat with me, we walked a bit through campus, now covered in the darkness of night but still as bustling as ever, grabbed a couple cups of chai from a snack stand, and went to chat in his hostel. He started off by telling me the story of his journey to India back in 2000 in vivid detail—the first complete narrative of exile I had heard—about how, after a few years studying lightly at a monastery school/retreat place, he crossed over the mountains into Nepal with his elder brother and fifty other young men from the town of Khartse, most aiming to go to South India to become monks.

“It was almost six days to Lhasa, from my hometown to Lhasa, by truck,” he recounted. “And actually, Chinese buses are faster than Indian buses. But it takes six days. In Lhasa we stayed only ten days...and then, you know, [we went to] something like Tingri... We hid in Tingri for a whole day, and then there were the Himalaya ranges.

“So we crossed this Mount Choyu. It’s so risky that even Chinese soldiers don’t stay there... but we crossed that, and we made it, in four days,” he pauses and laughs. “Funny.” He then narrated his two-day trip from Mount Choyu to the border of Nepal, and his twelve-day trip, by foot, to the Kathmandu reception center, made six days longer due to an inconvenient run-in with the Nepalese police.

“Before we reached Kathmandu, you know, the Nepal police caught us, and kept us for six days in prison.” There was look of concern on my face, and he continued, in good humor: “It was prison, but it was nice. Yeah, it was nice because after long journey we had good rest; they gave us two times food in a day.” He continued, and described how he chose to, at the Kathmandu reception center, against the wishes and expectations of his brother, be enrolled in school rather than become a monk.

“When we reached Nepal, they will ask you whether you want to join monastery, to be monk, want to be a soldier, want to go to school... Actually my home wanted me to become monk. But I know, when I was young and reciting all these texts and vomiting all of it out. Don’t know any of the meaning, like a parrot, you know? I was so bored...

“I heard there are schools where we [can get] good education. So we were standing in line, I didn’t come with my brother, because I knew he would take me to monastery. So I stood few people before him, and told the one lady there I want school. My brother got shocked.

‘What? Where are you going?’ I said, school. ‘Are you mad?! Our parents sent us to become monks!’ My brother was angry, but I said, No no no, I want to go to school. So they sent me to TCV Suja.”

After sharing his experience and history, he was able to share a bit about his thoughts on Tibetan identity in a fully contextualized manner.

My personal sense of duty as a Tibetan does not come from TCV or CTA, nor any dominant sense of Tibetanness, he explained to me, it is a *personal, moral* responsibility for me to help the people whom I left behind in Tibet. He was able to break out of a system that is continuing to limit people back home, and so he has a moral obligation to help those who were not as fortunate as he was.⁵¹

Refugee identity, he would share with me, is extremely important to his identity as a Tibetan in India. Being a refugee is extraordinarily disempowering and discouraging in the face of the realities of existing within the context of the sovereign nation-state system; though, it would seem, that this reality does not make his relation with refugee identity so cut and dry. He explained what the status means to him:

“To international community we are foreigners, foreigner whose homeland is unknown. Because you are a foreigner, and you are from somewhere else. If you’re a foreigner, you can be an American, or a Japanese, or a Chinese... Somewhere else, right? For us, we are foreigners, but the place we are coming from is unknown. My country is not a nation... I feel like the man who has no identity. If I am a refugee from Tibet, then that is my identity... I am proud of myself as being Tibetan, and I want to die this way. If tomorrow the Indian government gives me citizenship, I won’t take... In my generation, I may not see my home again, I may not see my parents, I will maybe die in a land where I don’t belong, maybe I’ll die in India, or somewhere else, where I can’t see my parents after such a long departure, but I am proud to be myself.”

“Because in history,” he continued calmly, with a certain kindness in his voice and demeanor, “this is not a big deal. It’s not a big deal, it’s happened. China, is a famous country, but occupied by a small island Japan. And India, it is a growing country in Asia, two hundred years occupied by British. Everywhere this is happening. So, I don’t feel that we have *lost* country, and that we are weak. This is happening in humanity, in human history. So I do accept it, I don’t feel ashamed.”

⁵¹ Thinley, Interview, November 16th 2013.

Speaking further to girls like Tsechoe, who came to TCV from Nepal, and Dadron, who came from Lhasa, about their experiences with Tibetan identity—they expressed further questioning and insight into TCV’s educational structure, what Tibetan identity as promoted by TCV is, and how to expand it through, for example, claiming an international identity in addition to a national or cultural one.

“We have to embrace a sense of being a global citizen,” Tsechoe had said.⁵²

For the Tibetan youth I met at JNU, as with the youth I met at the hostel, diasporic life is a tragic and often harsh reality, for reasons such as a continual separation from parents, a deeply felt connection with the land and people of Tibet, as well as its collective memory and pain. But, it would seem, the JNU students I met navigate and negotiate the refugee and exile identity in a way that nulls, or at least dulls, the powerlessness and estrangement many youth in the diaphora are compelled to feel as legal refugees—they understand it to be a the harsh reality of capitalist, warring nation-state system, and their position within it doesn’t hurt their sense of self. For students like Gendun, Kirti, and Thinley, they reject refugee identity as handed down by TCV teachers; they do not believe idea that being a ‘refugee’ must mean something to their existence as human beings; just because the rigid world of nation-states/sovereign states tends to equate humanity or humanness with *citizenship* and *sovereignty*, does not mean they must adopt the same view.

“I don’t think I’m a refugee,” Gendun had said to me earnestly, while we were chatting together back in Chandrabhaga Hostel with Thinley a couple days later.

“The term refugee is so pathetic, you know, so denigrating, [saying] that I don’t have anything in this world. I believe that this world is my world, that I am here, and that I can have everything that some people have ... even if some of my rights are curtailed. We are not refugees... Rather I think that I’m [in] the world that everybody shares, you know. If my life is impoverished, it’s not because I *am* a refugee, but because I am [treated as one].”

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⁵² Tsechoe, Interview, November 17th 2013.

VI. Lands Down Under: Lajpat Nagar and Katwaria Sarai

The Delhi metro system is massive and sometimes impressively built up, with transfer points like Kashmere Gate and Rajiv Chowk similar in character to mini-malls and shopping center food courts, or even to the Port Authority of New York and New Jersey, except, maybe, much cleaner—an admirable feat for a facility of its size, and a patron pool of such epic proportions (around 2 million daily⁵³). At rush hour, the system transforms into a nervous, pulsing, but clean kind of mayhem, at some points illuminated by a soul-piercing kind of electric light, with each corner of each station becoming flooded with the homebound masses. At this point, a journey through the metro involved running forward against currents of people flowing in the opposite direction, pushing my way onto escalators jammed full of people moving up and down like lazy snakes, and often times leaving the metro station only after fighting my way through incoming streams of passengers trying to board the train before anyone could get off—streams so forceful that I would sometimes get sideswiped or knocked backwards. Perhaps, enough movement to fill a Bollywood action movie.

I met up with Choewang one evening at Kashmere Gate—I had come up from JNU and he from class at DU. He was taking me to meet his friend Thupten at his place of work, a 26-year-old Tibetan youth working as a gallery assistant at a contemporary Indian photography gallery in Jhandewalan, Central Delhi. Thupten lived in the neighborhood of Katwaria Sarai, also in South Delhi but outside of areas with high Tibetan concentration. It took a few moments for Choewang and I to locate each other on the platform, and we proceeded to squeeze our way a couple stops down the blue line, from the hopelessly congested rush-hour platform of Kashmere Gate to the slightly less hopelessly congested one at Jhandewalan, and out onto the streets. It was already dark; I followed Choewang through taxi corridors on the crowded unpaved road, slightly obscured stairwells, down the side of a freeway lit up with the square facades of roadside storefronts, and we reached Photoink, a gallery on the ground floor of the large, grandly lit modern building of a Hyundai showroom (Figure 5).

It was only a short while before we started to chat; it was around closing time and the gallery had cleared out, so we sat at a table and chatted about my research while Choewang studied some books nearby.

“My grandparents came here from Tibet, and my parents were really young when they came,” he began, after I had finished describing my project ideas regarding Tibetan identity. “Our grandparents really struggled—I mean, they broke their backs, they worked on the roads and stuff like that—so that our parents would get education... So now, I think our [generation], the second generation, we have the most amount of access to resources and everything. [But] you will find that it’s us living in limbo. It’s very bizarre. Because even though they have enabled to get better resources, better education, better whatever—they’ve...romanticized and passed on this guilt of not being in Tibet.

⁵³ NDTV . “Delhi Metro Sets Record with 22 Lakh Ridership.” *NDTV News*. July 15, 2013. <http://www.ndtv.com/article/cities/delhi-metro-ridership-second-largest-in-southeast-asia-392613?pfrom=home-cities> (accessed November 28, 2013).

It's nostalgia for something we've never ever had."⁵⁴ He paused—"You want some tea?"—I nod, and he alerts his colleague, who brings over some chai.

He continued: "What happens when you romanticize yourself, and when you think that you have something so good and you lost it...you feel victimized.

"Our entire generation is brought up to be activists, but they're only—I hate to say it—foot soldiers. They don't want to think. I don't feel it's very empowering...it's a victim mentality." After a while, we're just about finished with our tea. "Come on, let's go get some dinner."

Thupten, Choewang, and I crossed Jhandewalan Road, whose 2nd phase rush-hour traffic is heavy but moving along steadily, and locate an auto-rickshaw. We drove off to the next neighborhood over, Paharganj, to a Korean restaurant hidden away on the top floor of a building in a back alley, leading away from main market road bustling with people, auto-rickshaws, street signs, and bright neon lights.

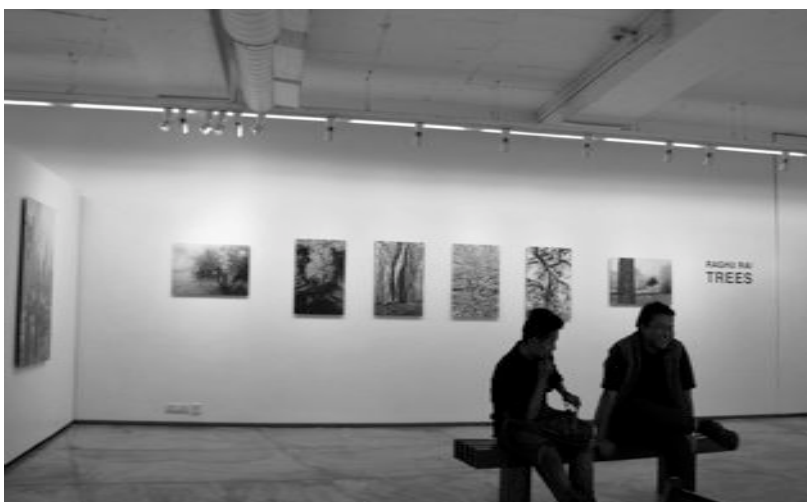


Figure (5). Choewang and Thupten at Photoink, during its exhibition of Ragu Rai's enchanting photo series "Trees".

Thupten.

Thupten was my bridge over to the lands down under, to more voices that outsiders seem to be redirected away from, or led to simply skip over, in their search for contemporary voices in the Tibetan diaspora—Tibetans, who according to their personal experiences and understanding, hold views on the Tibetan community and Tibetan identity that are divergent from the dominant views to which we are accustomed. At the Korean restaurant, he told me about his experiences growing up in India—he was born and raised in Uttar Pradesh, in the Indian holy city of Varanasi, and while the Tibetan Refugee Lhasa Market makes a yearly appearance in the city with the onset of the winter season, he has never fully lived within the Tibetan diasporic community or Tibetan areas, or attended Tibetan school (aside from one uncomfortable year in TCV). Hindi and English feel more natural on his tongue than Tibetan does, though nowadays he speaks it

⁵⁴ Thupten, Interview, November 12th 2013.

quite commonly among his friends in Lajpat Nagar and Katwaria Sarai, two neighborhoods in South Delhi to which he would soon introduce me.

His parents were children of India as well, having grown up in Mundgod and Chhattisgarh, and were well-educated. Thupten attended St. John's in Varanasi, an Indian Catholic school, and aside from roughing it around with gangs like any good adolescent boy would, he described it as place that inspired intellectual exploration, and encouraged him to read, read, and read, and to be inquisitive about the world outside.⁵⁵

Thupten admitted, however, while childhood and adolescence was a fun time, it was also often a confusing and frustrating place where he could never feel completely at home with himself in his surroundings. Varanasi could never fully accept him no matter how hard he tried; despite the fact that he spoke Hindi completely fluently, his English was tinged with an Indian accent, and he was proficient with local dialects, his distinct physical features hindered him from blending in with local landscape.

"I always wanted to belong," he had said on this, honestly, and quite roughly, "I did *everything* in Varanasi, I spoke the local dialect, I was like them, I was chewing tobacco and everything... then I said, what the fuck is this, I've done everything I can. But they still can't accept me."

The other part of him, Tibetanness, always felt far as well, existing on another world, perhaps dimension, though his father, an administrator in the Central Institute for Tibetan Studies at Varanasi University, was quite well-versed in Tibetan studies. He tried to seek it out, Tibetanness, in his college years at the National Institute of Technology, he searched for the meanings within "mainstream Tibetan society", and tried to train his knowledge of Tibetan history. He combed through and constantly posted on phayul.com message boards, and understand Tibetanness, the dominant notions of Tibetan identity, and locate it somewhere within himself. During his following years at JNU, he attempted to make connections with the Tibetan students there, but felt a "massive disconnect." And throughout his continual attempts to interact and connect with Tibetans in Delhi, some responded discouragingly and disparagingly.

Unlike many other Tibetan youth growing up in India, dominant Tibetan culture has never been a place of comfort or inspiration; Tibetanness as commonly regarded and accepted by the Tibetan community for Thupten has brought more pressure, baggage, and alienation than security, and it has been something he's had to struggle to relate to, to claim, to locate within himself. His inability to relate to the images of Tibetanness put forth by and for Tibetans filled him with a deep sense of alienation and lack of belongingness. How does one feel comfortable speaking a language and wearing the traditions of a culture so far away from everyday realities of life? How can one relate to a community's conception of Tibetanness, to its shared memories and collective longing for Tibet, when that community has been far away, and now seems hesitant, and sometimes hostile, towards those who don't share its world?

"I really wanted to be Tibetan. Like to be culturally sound," Thupten said. "But, the way that people talk to me—like, I've read a lot of books on Tibet, and I'm proud to say that all of...people who take Tibetan identity for granted... I never do that. I make an

⁵⁵ Thupten, Interview, November 12th 2013.

effort to look into it, research. Still, they'll say that I'm not Tibetan. I get more angry. How dare they?"

At some point, it seems that he realized that he couldn't, and didn't *have* to adopt these notions of identity and define himself by them—that he could dissect the story of what he refers to as 'mainstream' Tibetan society, understand and pick out the parts that were contradictory and arbitrary, the parts that were the most problematic for individuals in everyday life and for the long-term direction of the community. And most importantly, that he could add his own perspective to the story as a means of doing so. At the same time, he would make the most of his experience in India, which he regards as his home, and accept the realities of the challenge living in a diverse society with a multiplicity of majority-minority dynamics.

Thupten started the Tibetan Art Collective (TAC) in 2011, a forward-thinking project born from a mind that had been entangled and intrigued by this dilemma of diasporic life and identity, and formed around it a community of Tibetan photographers, artists, poets, and writers, especially second/third generation Tibetans, many of whom have grappled with it as well and were excited to make art about it, discuss it, talk about it—for the purpose of developing their individual identities as artists, thinkers, and creators, and also to positively impact the Tibetan community by bringing such issues of Tibetan identity to the forefront.

I asked him why he chose to live out in Katwaria Sarai, which he had described to me as an area without any Tibetans, as opposed to Lajpat Nagar, where there are many.

"Living outside of Tibetan society is the *only thing I know*. I never dealt with them," he responded, over a table now full of side-dish banchan plates, bowls of marinated chicken and rice, doenjang jjigae, and bottles of soju. American music from the 80's played loudly in the background. "I found different clusters, like two brothers in D.C., ...they do dubstep, they're a group named 'Strangers'—the younger guy plays piano and the older guy's an animator for NBC. We just talked for the first time on Skype... It was like, *I thought I was the only one!* They all feel very marginalized. This is what I want to do, bring together all the Tibetans [who feel this way], create a community." He chuckles, and utters something to Choewang in Tibetan.

Thupten is highly comfortable with diverse friends and professional networks, and has reached out to people from all over the world for himself and for his endeavors with TAC. Though, nowadays he has found his own Tibetan niche in Delhi, a small circle of friends who feel they can understand each other; some of them share backgrounds in Indian society, others have similar ideas about Tibetan politics, the Tibetan diasporic community in India, and Tibetan identity, and together they find a comfortable, almost natural connection in their shared occupation of space that by nature challenges the built up boundaries and borders that have challenged them in the past. He would introduce me to some of them, he said heartily, and paid for our meal. A few days later, I received a text from him:

"Can you come out to lajpat now? I'm in the area."

Gyurmey.

Lajpat Nagar is a bit far from MT, but it's another Tibetan hub in Delhi—the main residential area for working and unemployed Tibetan youth; there are at least a few hundred living spread out across the relatively nice neighborhood in clusters, working as nurses, in various call centers and companies, hotels and restaurants, to support themselves and to help their families. Some are enrolled in college and certification programs, and some also work in the media and art scenes, many are unemployed. Three small Tibetan food joints around the neighborhood service the young population.

In Lajpat I met some friends of Thupten who take life slow and humorously; Tashi, a 23-year-old youth attending school at the Delhi College of Art who left the Youth Hostel to come live out in Lajpat for a year, Chimee, an unemployed 28-year-old who studied Honors History at Punjab University in Chandigarh and worked formerly in a call center KPO company that services American healthcare institutions in finding health insurance claims. And Gyurmey, a 27-year-old artist making his way up in the contemporary Tibetan art scene, one of Thupten's best friends and a member of the Art Collective—another youth with an interesting story with Tibetan identity.

I spent some time in Gyurmey's home and studio, also in Lajpat, learning about his life and experiences, his artwork, and his thoughts about certain trends and attitudes within the Tibetan community. Born in India like Tashi and Chimee, he has never identified or related well to the dominant Tibetan identity. As a more reserved and individualistic personality, he has always been more interested in developing and expressing personal, individual identity rather than Tibetan cultural and national identities, and defining himself by them seems irrelevant to his business in this world as a human being—something that goes all the way back to his days in Lower TCV, when, he recalls hating being forced to join the protests and the annual uprising commemoration date. I just wanted to draw, he said. He attended and graduated from the Delhi College of Art, where he consciously spent more time alone and with Indian friends, than in Tibetan student groups or Tibetan society.

His artwork ranges from large abstract, impressionist, and cubist pieces, to tiny detailed pencil illustrations, and while some of it does outwardly reference or explore Tibetan themes or make use of Tibetan aesthetics or styles, a majority does not. He remains very excited about where his career is headed, but it seems this area has given him some frustration—he has seen that within Tibetan contemporary art there are, at this time, seemingly rigid boundaries defining what artwork is *Tibetan* and possesses 'Tibetanness' and what is not or does not. Tibetan art is often narrowly defined and received by its audience, and people, including his friends, seem most interested in or supportive of Tibetan contemporary art when it includes overt elements of Tibetan traditional culture art, i.e. Tibetan script and religious imagery, or overt political messages.

"If I am Tibetan, then whatever I do is Tibetan art! It's as simple as that."

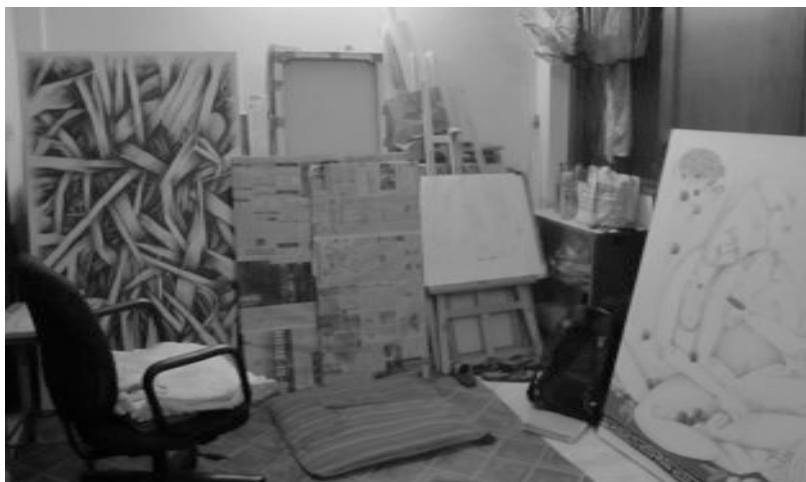
But as contemporary art, as with any other type of art, to be 'successful' it must cater to the tastes and the preferences of its consumers, which consists namely of the Tibetan community itself and a Western audience. The Tibetan community tends to be

more appreciative of artwork that props up Tibetan nationalism, the Tibet cause, and dominant notions of Tibetanness, and the Western audience tends to be attracted to art which is more overtly 'ethnic' or political. In his view, this is because, in their good will, they want to support artists and artwork that further the cause of Tibet. Alex Rotas describes this issue in his piece, "Is Refugee Art Possible?":

We may presume, if we are predisposed to thinking empathetically, that the refugee feels a sense of alienation, lack of agency, loss and loneliness and that these emotional factors are key to his or her identity; we might expect a refugee to talk about homesickness, yearnings and displacement...The refugee artist or the asylum seeker artist, as someone creatively endowed with the ability to express and represent human experience, now has the awesome responsibility of representing the displacement of someone in a community to which he/she does not belong. But this responsibility is equally the limited responsibility of representing that displacement and *nothing else*. For if she or he does represent anything else, say, for example, flowers (unless they are graveyard flowers, or exotic flowers, or 'my lost little sister's favourite flowers'), she/he becomes simply 'an artist', and that designate is reserved for practitioners from the dominant host culture alone. (52)

In Gyurmey's view, the art he makes should not be confined to strictly defined conceptions of Tibetan identity that people place onto him; it should be about, as he put it, creatively expressing new ideas about normal life, perceptions and interpretations of the present, the now, informed by the wisdom and knowledge of the past. But, this view sometimes isolates him.

"They never want to see normal things, you know?"



Gyurmey's room in Lajpat Nagar, filled with canvases.

Dakpa.

I soon met Dakpa, Thupten's other best friend and another artist in the Art Collective with a thought provoking journey with Tibetan diasporic identity. He lived in the same apartment building as Thupten, just two floors up; he had joined Thupten after Thupten had been there about a year, and while they live quite independently, they reminded me of a couple of close friends separated by housing assignments in a college

hostel, hanging out in other's rooms whenever there's a chance to. Thupten, after bringing me to Katwaria Sarai after my first exposure to Lajpat, took me up to meet him. We opened the unlocked door, and I was greeted with the stinging smell of cigarette smoke and the vibrant sounds of wedding season from the neighborhood below.

Dakpa's grandparents were the ones who came from Tibet; they were Khampas, and his parents were raised in Sikkim. He, too, grew up in Sikkim, in the capital city of Gangtok, which he and Thupten described as "much more homogenized than other societies", with around 1500 Tibetan families mixed in with Nepalese and Lepchas, "who all look similar." It was, as a result, "much easier to feel at home." Nepali was the local language of Gangtok, making Nepali and English his main languages growing up. Despite studying Tibetan as a second language in public school from KG to Class 10, his knowledge of the language was limited, and he never had very much experience using it, aside from a few words here and there with his parents.⁵⁶

Dakpa never had to confront the idea of Tibetanness in his childhood—distinct national or cultural identity was never inherent nor essential to his being, as life in Sikkim hadn't really ever called attention to it. It wasn't until 2003 when he came to Delhi for college did he run into Tibetan youth and a Tibetan community (M.T.) whose identity and whose cultural boundaries and standards seemed defined and distinct.

"I never thought about my lack of exposure to [Tibetan culture]. After I moved to Delhi then I did...because then the only languages I was speaking was English and Hindi, and I would meet friends who were Tibetan and couldn't speak [with them] well."

He recounted, with a look of amusement on his face, "When I was college, I met another Tenzing Dakpa. First time I ever met another Tenzing Dakpa. He started with, 'If you're Tibetan, how come you don't speak Tibetan properly?' It's like, just because I didn't have the access and don't speak Tibetan, you can judge me?"

It was bewildering, challenging, and alienating to confront constant questioning of his membership in the Tibetan community and his Tibetanness after he came to Delhi. He couldn't seem to get used to spending time with those his age in the community, and they couldn't seem to get used to him, either. Though, Dakpa's individualistic, private nature helped him feel less bothered by the encounters. Nevertheless, this time of adjustment to life in Delhi was still somewhat of a transformative experience for him, and compelled him to reflect on identity and dig into the idea of 'Tibetanness', to try to understand it and his relation to it. As an artist, he was also moved to tell the story of his experience with Tibetan identity through his main medium of expression: photography.

He did one photo project in Dharamsala, the place in India that in many ways encapsulates Tibetan identity and is widely considered as the place to go for all things Tibetan, where he "[went] in as an outsider and seeing how [Tibetans are] looking at things." The series is entitled "Transit"; it's a series of solo portraits of Tibetans living in the area. The artist's statement on his website reads:

"Transit" - Being born in Sikkim to Tibetan parents, one could say I was for the most part insulated from things 'Tibetan'. After the initial confusing yet intimate encounters

⁵⁶ Dakpa, Interview, November 18th, 2013.

with Tibetans during my college years in Delhi, I have often wondered about the circumstances and reasons of alienation from my ethnic peers. So as an empathetic response, this is an attempt to reach out and belong to a community that I have never known and to understand a generation in conflict.

<http://www.tenzingdakpa.com/index.php/personal/transit/>

Tibetanness is not something that he understands, he had explained, and that while the ‘mainstream’ Tibetan community and notions of Tibetanness remains something he lives outside of, it has become quite painless for him. “I go there, and I try to engage with it. And say I have a good time. But if I think about it—do I really need it? At the end of the day, do I want to go back again? Probably not... So it doesn’t bother me, but I like to play with it... And probably, after years and I look back, it’ll be sort of a journey and transition through it.

Dakpa has been quite modestly doing so, documenting his journey and his navigation and experiences this seemingly in-between, undefined, intriguing and inspiring space. Because, very much in alignment with Gyurmey’s ideas, Dakpa’s idea is that art, media, film produced by the Tibetan diaspora need not only focus politics, on celebrating and finding creative ways to talk about defined elements or aesthetics of Tibetan culture or religion, or exploring the “qualification(s) of being Tibetan”, or on the answering “questions of who am I?”—it should also acknowledge and speak more directly on experiences of life where they are, or in his words, “identify the ground reality, of what environment they are living in currently.”

Art being produced by the diaspora tends to focus solely on the defined elements of Tibetanness and the experience of being in exile.

“It’s b-shit kind of stuff..”—we laugh at his creative fashioning of a common swearword—“there’s no sense of looking into yourself. Find your own subject and do it, why use [Tibetan identity]?”

In his view, this trend in Tibetan diasporic art limits not only personal creativity of the artists, but also the range of experiences and voices accepted by the Tibetan community and its foreign supporters as valid expressions of Tibetan identity or Tibetanness—a trend that unknowingly or unthinkingly marginalizes or puts individuals like himself in a difficult position. Thus, his project is not only a personal one of self-realization and self-expression, but also one that aims to simultaneously, and very consciously, push and challenge the boundaries of identity of that are prominent Tibetan diaporic community.

“The idea is just to document it all...having a girlfriend who was from Nagaland, who’s not Tibetan at all, and then you move on to living with people from all communities, in rented houses,⁵⁷ and then again, sort of traveling, taking photos. That in itself is Tibetan, in a way—living in exile and what you’re doing.”

⁵⁷ This refers to another photo project he did in Delhi, “On Rent”, of young people from the Northeast of India, exploring a sense of commonality and community he felt with them - not only on the basis of being from the Northeast, but also in being newcomers to the urban life of Delhi, in troubled identities and feelings of marginalization, in similarity in physical appearance.

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With that, I concluded my month in Delhi. I had the warmest and the most engaging time getting to know Tibetan youth around the city, youth just about my age willing to sit with me, talk with me, a complete stranger, and share their narratives of growing up and living in India. I had met a group of very different individuals; I heard stories of leaving behind friends, entire families, and home in Chinese-occupied Tibet; narratives of migration and exile; stories of being born and raised in small settlements across India as well as Nepal; stories of playful mischief with friends during schooldays; stories of insecurity as Tibetans in India, as Tibetans in the Tibetan diasporic community; stories of wildly different futures, hopes, and dreams. Along with that, I heard a spectrum of thoughts and perspectives on contemporary issues in Tibetan and world politics, on the Tibetan diasporic community, and most relevant to my topic of inquiry, ‘Tibetanness’ and Tibetan identity.

Each and every youth I spoke with had their own unique story to tell, and their thoughts and perspectives varied greatly. Their worldviews, as with any human being on this Earth, were shaped by their own individual character and tendencies, where and how they were brought up and received their education, and their intimate, lived experiences of social, political, and economic life as Tibetans in this world—and I have seen, that, no one perspective is more valuable or important than the other.

And so, I left the way I came in, through the main M.T. gate by the great green bridge to Punjab Basti, with a couple bags and a mess of thoughts swirling in my head – this time, with the added hope that what I was about to produce could do all the stories that I’d been given so generously and honestly the justice they deserved.

VII. Comparisons and conclusions.

Following me throughout my entire experience with Tibetan youth in Delhi was a certain notion of Tibetan identity and/or a fixed view of “Tibetanness”. According to the narratives and accounts I have heard and my own observations spending time within the Tibetan community, these ideas of Tibetanness are taught by Tibetan school systems (most notably TCV), affirmed by a majority of political and creative expression publicized in the community, and as propagated by the loudest political voices and players in the Tibetan exile community with the biggest international audience, i.e. the Central Tibetan Administration, the Tibetan Youth Congress, Students for a Free Tibet, so on and so forth.

This dominant notion of Tibetan identity or “Tibetanness” defines being Tibetan in a specific way: Within this notion, an ethnic Tibetan, with ancestral roots in one of the three regions of historical Tibet (Kham, Amdo, and U-Tsang),⁵⁸ is proficient with the traditional elements of Tibetan culture, i.e. language, song, dance, dress. They have a particular political mindset; they have a deep sense of *statelessness*, of *exile*, of *displacement*, of sorrow, longing, desire for the physical land of Tibet and for its political freedom, and an intention for an ultimate return, if or when it is possible. Tibetanness is also connected with a nonnegotiable *duty* to support cultural preservation, political activism, and/or any efforts started on behalf of the Tibetan nation, which is defined by all of the above elements. And crucially, all of this is seen through what many scholars have termed an ‘essentialist’ lens; i.e. Tibetanness is often seen and approached as a quality that is or becomes inherent to a person’s being as someone of Tibetan ethnic origin, rather than something that is socially and politically constructed. In the Tibetan diasporic context, and other diasporic contexts as well, there emerges “affirmations of essential subjectivity, genuine national desire, and demonstrable ethnic integrity”, in which “stable, genuine, historical identity are deeply felt characteristics of an essential individual, society, and spiritual purpose.”⁵⁹

At the base of the emergence of this dominant, essentialist notion of Tibetan identity is the goal of *preservation* of the Tibetan diasporic community, of the Tibetan nation in exile that has come into existence because of the invasion and occupation of Tibet by the Chinese state. And at the very foundation of the project of any national preservation is the idea that the people within the nation can be defined by a specific culture and set of qualities, and that this ‘culture’ can be identified, mapped out, and subsequently preserved.⁶⁰ Thus arises a fixed, necessarily narrow view of the collective identity of individual people within that group.

Each group of youth I spent time with perceived and engaged with this identity differently; each individual confronted it depending on their individual personalities, as well as their experiences and histories, which are all intimately lived and remembered. Some accept and pursue the identities, others reject them, some derive security from

⁵⁸ Anand, “(Re)imagining Nationalism, 274.

⁵⁹ Venturino, Steven, and Frank Korom. "Reading Negotiations in the Tibetan Diaspora." In *Constructing Tibetan Culture: Contemporary Perspectives*. 98-121.

⁶⁰ Anand, *Diasporic Subjectivity as an Ethical Position*, 109.

them, others feel marginalized by them—and individuals express this in their everyday lives differently.

From all I have seen, heard, and experienced with Tibetan youth in Delhi and understood from their narratives and thoughts, there are a few distinct, observable trends that arise from the affirmation of a strictly and *publicly* defined idea of what it means to be Tibetan in the diasporic society, i.e. what one should do, be, or feel, as someone with ancestral roots in Tibet—and I will try to articulate them here.

Alienation from Host Society

Heavy construction, promotion, and affirmation of such notions of Tibetan identity in school systems like TCV has had a noticeable impact on the social experience of Tibetan youth in diverse urban settings. Most of my interviewees described a lack of contact with Indian society during TCV years, and growing up with a sense of immovable security exclusively in this notions of Tibetanness, in the comfort of Tibetan society, in Tibetan spaces. It seems that this consistent lack of exposure, coupled with TCV's constant message that Tibetanness is an essential, unique, and defining element of one's personal identity and life goals and aspirations, works to unconsciously separate many Tibetan youth from the environment of their host community and host country, and inhibits their ability to relate and interact with those around them. What has emerged is a sense of isolation, alienation, and separation from the host society, which encourages over-generalized conceptions of and prejudiced attitudes towards the host society, and deters greater participation in the host society, which may often be very beneficial.

Thus, when it comes time Tibetan youth coming from TCV to transition into college in a setting like Delhi, it is frightening, threatening, and uncomfortable, all at once. Many youth are unable to connect with and/or understand with the society they find themselves a minority in, and they subsequently retreat into what gives them pride, comfort, and a sense of shared security—Tibetanness, in the walls of the S.O.S. Tibetan Youth Hostel in Rohini. This has deterred many from participating in or get to know Indian society more intimately, which only exacerbates and perpetuates feelings of isolation and discomfort. Benedict Anderson, in his famous work *Imagined Communities*, described this situation in terms of nationalism and nationalistic identity construction and education: “What revolutionary nationalism does in exile is to provide a name for individual nostalgia and shared exclusion from the host society.”⁶¹

Furthermore, youth are taught by the community and in the TCV and CST schools that the preservation of Tibetan culture, namely the element of language, is key to doing good for the Tibetan people. The very act of choosing to be in or interacting with Indian society over Tibetan society is perceived as neglect of Tibetan identity, and more seriously, of the Tibetan people and the cause of Tibet—this seems to be a very poignant yet unarticulated expectation or standard that is passed onto Tibetan youth in India; it comes latently with prominent notions of Tibetanness in society. There is also the perception that being in and interacting with Indian society threatens Tibetan identity and will, as some students said, ‘Indianize’ them. This further compels many youth to stay within Tibetan spaces, and avoid coming in contact with too many outside people or

⁶¹ Benedict Anderson. *Imagined communities: reflections on the origin and spread of nationalism*,

ideas. As Thupten put it: “[We’re] taught that every action is symbolic, and this severely handicaps [our] thinking.”

While a sense of alienation and distance from Indian society exists across the board, for both youth born in India and youth born in Tibet, it is possible to observe some general differences in how each group engages with Tibetan identity in the context of Delhi. For example, I have observed the fear of ‘Indianization’ to be much more prevalent among Indian-born youth; there is the idea that, by virtue of being born into India, as refugees and Tibetans born in exile, that they are in an inherently more precarious situation in that they are less “Tibetan” than their peers coming from Tibet, and at greater risk of losing the Tibetanness they do have.

Nevertheless, it may not be useful to draw such generalizing conclusions. Ultimately, whether or not youth remain inside of the bubble of Tibetan identity is a function of chance and individual personality; plenty of Tibetan youth I met from the hostel, JNU, and South Delhi, both Indian and Tibetan born, decided to step away from living within the Tibetan community because they had experiences and/or encountered some sort of educational opportunity that led them to believe they would be able to expand or challenge their worldviews or enhance their living by moving away. Walking out tends to come more naturally to those who are individualistic and do not relate well to collective social identities.

Dilemma of the second-generation.

The Tibetan diasporic community has expanded greatly in number and experience since its emergence in the 1960’s. The community now includes not only the first immigrants to India in the aftermath of the invasion, but their children, the first generation, and their children’s children—today’s youth, the second generation.

From what I have gathered, it seems that most Indian-born Tibetans who grow up within Tibetan society can accept and relate to the notions of Tibetanness and Tibetan identity that they receive from TCV from an early age, and adopt and pursue them throughout their youth, into college and beyond. They might express this in many ways, with some I observed personally at the youth hostel being future career goals, opinions on contemporary Tibetan politics, and most interestingly, comparison between themselves and Tibetans born in Tibet. Most Indian-born students I spoke to generally regarded Tibetans from Tibet as respectable, more hardworking, more admirable; Tibetanness is most exemplified and embodied by their character, qualities, and their life stories.

“They’re the most hardworking, they score the highest, even in college. They’re good with leadership and responsibility,” Choedon had explained to me. “They are hardworking, more patriotic, and very kind-hearted... Because they know the struggles. Those of us born in India and Nepal, we are quite different...”

Here we can observe a trend, i.e. a general feelings of dissatisfaction among youth born in the diaspora when comparing themselves to Tibetan-born youth. This, I feel, demonstrates the power of the dominant idea and/or standard of ‘Tibetanness’—an Indian-born Tibetan might feel that a Tibetan from Tibet, who embodies the struggle of Tibet, has full and pure ‘Tibetanness’ in them that they don’t have. This insecurity in their ability to claim the Tibetan identity contributes to increasing feelings of aversion to

the Indian society in which they were born, alienating further sections of Tibetan society from Indian society—a problematic trend that not only hinders improved relations between Indian and Tibetan youth, but seems to cause personal emotional and social distress and discomfort, especially concerned with identity and a secure sense of self, within the Tibetan youth community.

There are also youth born in exile who struggle with the dominant notion of Tibetan identity because they *can't* accept it or relate to it.

For Tibetans who were born in Tibet and came to India in their childhood, especially during an age they can still remember, a lot of what is encompassed by the dominant notions Tibetanness or Tibetan identity is more naturally arising in their perceptions of self. This is to say: their emotional connection to the land of Tibet is presumably already there, established through their childhood experiences in Tibet, and while it may be continually renewed and fortified with external sources, the initial connection does not have to be forged or constructed by an external force. There is actual physical displacement at some point in their lives, and thus there is more of a natural emotional connection to the refugee identity. Additionally, those who have parents, friends, and family within its borders, there is a greater emotional, moral, and personal impetus to returning to them, to improving their situation, to the cause of Tibet in general.

However, for those born in India, the situation is different; a few very hard questions arise: how does one born and raised in India relate to the feelings of suffering, loss, displacement of direct refugees from Tibet, and conform to the ubiquitous expectations of the Tibetan community to do so? Their memories of Tibet are by and large second-hand, and their experiences of exile and displacement are inherited from grandparents/parents and from societal discourse. How does one come to define oneself by these dominant notions of Tibetan identity which includes collective narratives of exile and memories of life that is simply *not theirs*?

There are those who are plagued by these questions and feel isolated and alienated from Tibetan society—the “mainstream society”—because of it. Many like Thupten *want* to relate to this conception of Tibetanness and try their very best to, but are unable to do so, often finding themselves shut out or left out by other Tibetans in their community, especially their peers. The expectations and standards of the Tibetan community and those looking on from the international community to conform and relate to a specific conception of Tibetanness leave certain individuals of them in a frustrating, ambiguous space when it comes to identity and understanding of who they are.

“Dissenters and Non-Ambassadors”

There are those, also, who take the step of completely rejecting the essentialist status quo that seeks to define and pin down the borders of the Tibetan diasporic identities; I met and spoke with quite a few with them during my trip in Delhi.

Dibyesh Anand calls these figures in diasporic societies “dissenters” and “non-ambassadors”—people who by the way of battling with the “boundaries...and limits of

diasporic culture...are in a better position to have a critical understanding of ‘their culture,’ but don’t see themselves to be ambassadors of the community.⁶²

...the figure of the dissenter lends a critical distance. Even if the dissenter is marginalised or outcast, she knows how it feels to bear the burden of culture (non)confirmity, he has felt the culture operate through his body and being in not so pleasant ways. The disciplining, mostly through social and moral sanctions, of dissidents of diaspora reveals the arbitrariness and artificiality of the cultural claims made in the name of diaspora... (109-110)

Youth like Thupten and Dakpa physically and spatially position themselves outside of Tibetan society as a reflection of their cultural disconnect with it. There are those like Gyurmey and Choewang who have chosen to remain physically within Tibetan society—many for practical and financial reasons—but their minds have stepped out of it. After long struggles and frustrations with Tibetan identity, they have come to reject it as it currently exists in the minds of their community.

For those like Thupten and Dakpa, their marginalization and alienation often comes in the direct and overt exclusion of their voices and experiences from spaces made for “Tibetans” and “Tibetan” voices and expression, from within and without the Tibetan community: because they don’t align with the dominant notions of Tibetan identity, those within their community (and from outside) deem their voices and their art not essentially “Tibetan” and therefore to be not worth listening to or appreciating. They are driven to, out of an [often painful] inability to understand or find Tibetanness within themselves, question the very legitimacy and/or realness of national and cultural identity, and end up rejecting cultural norms and dominant cultural identities.

Unfortunately, Thupten and Dakpa’s experiences are not unique; voices that perspectives that don’t fit into the dominant narrative are commonly ignored, trivialized, and or antagonized. But fortunately, Thupten, Dakpa, and Gyurmey, have indeed taken it upon themselves to become ambassadors, and it is their hope that these problems posed by a strictly defined view of identity as currently espoused by the Tibetan diasporic community at large will be addressed widely in the future through the work of the Tibetan Art Collective, which purposefully endeavors to expand and direct the public discourse and dialogue surrounding Tibetan identity in the diaspora through engaging youth and community members with the arts.

Moving Beyond Ramaluk

The title of this paper comes from a conversation I had with Thupten and Dakpa; we were sitting in Dakpa’s room that first day in Katwaria Sarai.

“People are packaging [Tibetan identity] in very stereotypical ways, which is very harsh on people like us, like me and Dakpa,” Thupten had spoken fervently. They use this word, it’s called *ramaluk*. It means mixed breed, it’s the main pejorative they use... ‘Ra’ means goat, ‘luk’ means sheep. Neither goat nor sheep. Even teachers used to say it. It’s really fucked up like that.”

⁶² Anand, *Diasporic Subjectivity as an Ethical Position*, 109.

The *ramaluk* paradigm reflects the larger trend in the Tibetan diasporic community that unconsciously expresses hostility or indifference towards people, voices, and perspectives that lie outside of the dominant identity norm. This is problematic because, while it does respect and elevate the experiences of some segments of the community, it marginalizes and silences other individuals who, because of their specific circumstances, cannot relate with specific experiences and narratives of Tibetan individuals, or larger Tibetan society. This is big part of the reality of diasporic life for second generation Tibetans—especially for those who have grown up outside of Tibetan society. Marginalization and silencing of such individuals is not the only problematic aspect of stringent notion of Tibetan identity; as seen before, it is also part of the larger issue of nationalistic, ethnocentric thinking that encourages alienation from the host societies around them.

It seems that, if the community continues elevate only one idea of Tibetanness, if it continues to focus exclusively on regaining what is lost (the land and freedom of Tibet), and if it tailors its civil society efforts exclusively towards this aim, it is harder for the community to, at the same time, pay more intimate attention and care to what is happening in the present moment in the diaspora, which may lie outside of the realms of politics and culture. Practically, it hinders the community ability to cater more deliberately to the present needs of their community, such as mental/physical health and unemployment among youth.⁶³ It also hinders their ability to as a whole, treat longing and loss of nation not as hopeless conditions, but ones that can be ameliorated with deeper bonds and friendships with the host society and with the global community, to understand that, and to see that while fighting for Tibet is important, it is unnecessary to mobilize through the disempowering language and framework of refugee identity.

There was a striking quote that Choewang had shared with me back in Paharganj, one that he later told me that he'd read in a book by Suketu Mehta:

“Home is where your credit is good at the corner store.”⁶⁴

What Thupten, Dakpa, and Gyurmey (and some of the DU and JNU students, less overtly) are doing separately in each of their personal lives and together with the Art Collective, is living this and promoting this message of this quote, continually shaping and celebrating their lives and their perspectives as an integral dimension of contemporary Tibetan life in the diaspora, pushing the community to move beyond the *ramaluk* paradigm—because it is their belief, in contrast to the message of the dominant notions of Tibetanness as put forth by other players in the community, that their lives, i.e. what is happening inside and around them right here and right now in India, where their credit is good for the most part—is also Tibetanness, Tibetan life, and Tibetan identity.

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⁶³ There are many other factors impacting a lack of attention to certain health needs or social issues, including traditional beliefs about medicine, about sexuality, etc. However, I do think that the community's collective political and cultural priorities do have an impact on the urgency with which it treats social issues outside of the independence movement.

⁶⁴ Suketu Mehta. *Maximum city: Bombay lost and found*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2004.

VIII. Final thoughts, and the way forward.

The current language of international human rights and social justice regimes makes it quite taboo for those in the international community, especially those coming from places of privilege or power, to speak critically about vulnerable or underprivileged peoples. And rightly so; criticizing the victims of political, cultural, or racial/ethnic oppression in a way shows a certain aloofness, disrespect to and disregard of their plights. It does not address the root problem; it does nothing to put a stop to the oppressing force, or end the injustice. It might also feel contemptible and morally twisted to direct criticisms and to place the extra burdens upon such a community that has collectively suffered so.

I largely agree with these perspectives, and hope I can make my intentions clear; I do not in any way wish to undermine the severity or the injustice of the Chinese occupation of Tibet, disrespect the depth of suffering and hardship of the Tibetan people, or play down the importance of the Tibetan independence movement or human rights movement. The situation in Tibet is real. The invasion, occupation, and ongoing human rights violations are real. Political, cultural, economic, and religious freedoms are systematically repressed and restricted, on the structural and institutional levels, through law and policy, in the name of economic development, modernization, law and order. The world had heard of the immense death and destruction that occurred during and after the invasion—now, the world watches as deaths by self-immolation, numbering upwards of 120 as of November 2013, continue to spread through the lands of historical Tibet, and state-inflicted death continues to occur at the borders and in the prisons.⁶⁵ It is time that this is all ended, and human rights, freedom, and democracy are fully realized in Tibet and in China.

What I hope to have done with this paper, without trivializing these truths, is call attention to the realities of the contemporary Tibetan community in the diaspora in India through a discussion of identity and narrative—because there is an observable need to do so, as voiced by individuals within the community. The fact is, the Tibetan diasporic community in India no longer encompasses only refugees and immigrants who have come from Tibet and have direct, personal connections to the land and family still living there; it now also encompasses Tibetans who have been born and raised in all corners of India, including the Northeast states, who have received their educations in different Tibetan and Indian school systems and have never known life in Tibet. They have only *received* memories of Tibet and experiences of exile. As such, despite the need to maintain and grow the movement in support of human rights and freedom in Tibet, it is rather harmful to many Tibetans in the community and the growth of the collective community when a narrow view of Tibetan identity is promoted and taught in the Tibetan schools as a method of doing so. There is a need to bring more support and attention to the project of expanding the Tibetan community dialogue on identity, so as to include the entire range of experiences and perspectives that exists within it.

⁶⁵ Sharling, Dhardon. “Exile- the nursery of nationalism.” Seminar 664 (2013), 41; International Campaign for Tibet, “Self-Immolations by Tibetans.” ICT. <<https://www.savetibet.org/resources/fact-sheets/self-immolations-by-tibetans>>

There is a way forward, which I cannot really define or describe in exact terms. But based what I have seen, I know it involves a genuine and renewed dialogue and conversation about the Tibetan exile community, about diasporic life, and about identity and ethnicity. If a flexible and self-conscious view on Tibetan diasporic identity could be diffused into the popular discourse of the Tibetan diasporic community at large, and worked into the methods and language of cultural education in Tibetan schools, it is my thought that the current challenges faced by Tibetan youth may be mitigated to a certain degree, and that the Tibetan community, especially the rising second-generation, might find itself feeling more politically and socially empowered. Further, this venture might work to produce a more inclusive, unified, diverse Tibetan voice that can more smartly and creatively advocate for the cause of Tibet. For, in the words of Albert Guerard, “the paradoxical effect of pluralism is to restore unity.”⁶⁶

It is a big task for any migrant or diasporic community to accomplish such ends, but those I have met in Delhi believe it can be done in time. The power resides in the youth of the Tibetan diaspora, which may be in great internal conflict and facing some difficult dilemmas, but still have hearts full of kindness and compassion. The future of this project lies in the imaginations, charisma, and creativity of personalities like Thupten, Dakpa, and Gyurmey, the minds of future scholars like Kirti, Gendun, and Thinley, and the passion and intelligence of all the current students of the youth hostel.

This is the way forward.

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⁶⁶ Albert Guerard. "Culture and Territory: The Fallacy of the National State." *The Antioch Review* 1, no. 2 (1941): 203-215.

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Other

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Suggestions for further research.

Firstly: there are a few areas in which I feel my research was lacking. If one wishes to do a more intensive study Tibetan diasporic identity vis-à-vis Tibetan youth in Delhi, it might be useful to consider:

1. Getting to know more youth working industry jobs and medical jobs around Delhi, i.e. working in call centers, hotels and tourist agencies, restaurants, and hospitals—there is a great number of them, and they are bound to have interesting stories and perspectives on Tibetan identity. I was not able to arrange for interviews with them, since their availability is more limited because of their work schedules. I was also unable to find more individuals who attended Indian primary schools, or other individuals who attended university in other areas of India—that is a big limitation of my paper, as it represents a limited portion of the diasporic community. If I had a chance, I would definitely return and reach out to a number of these individuals.
2. Reaching out to more official voices, such as the youth hostel director, consulting CTA Department of Education, the Bureau of His Holiness the Dalai Lama in Delhi, and the Tibetan Parliamentary and Policy Research Centre, also in Delhi. I would have liked to do this, not only for the purpose of gathering statistics and details on Tibetans in Delhi and establishments like the youth hostel firsthand, but also for the perspectives on how a dominant narrative and Tibetan identity is conceived and promoted by Tibetan institutions in positions of influence in the Tibetan community.
3. Locating and using more female voices; I spoke with a good number of young women during my research, however, the proportion of males I spoke to was much larger. I feel it would have been beneficial to have a heavier female perspective.
4. Tying in more a more global perspective on diaspora for a more rounded view; i.e. pulling evidence and examples of identity politics or identity formation from other contemporary diasporas. This involves much heavier use of academic resources, such as books, journals, essays.

Secondly: within my conversations and explorations in Delhi, I ran across many topics [not necessarily directly related to Tibetan identity] piqued my interest, and I think they would make for very interesting studies:

1. A similar study focusing specifically on the situation of Tibetan youth in Nepal (in Nepal). This idea was on my mind often during my research; Nepal is a country in which Tibetans are born and raised within a drastically different social, political, economic situation, with vastly different experiences in school systems and community settings—identity formation must be very different, and very interesting to look at.
2. History of Majnu-ka-tilla as an unauthorized refugee camp, relationship and treatment by Indian government. M.T. has a pretty unstable relationship with the Indian government in the past; its status as an unauthorized colony has led it to be threatened with demolition, and brings many store owners to the courts each year over ownership of land. I think a study of M.T. itself, and how its people have survived and flourished despite these challenges, would be interesting.

3. Detailed study on the social relations between Tibetans and Indians in Delhi.
4. Tibetan identity, through various lenses such as contemporary art. Though most of the well-known and established artists are based in the States and Europe, there is a small community of up-and-coming artists in Delhi, which does maintain personal and professional links with those established artists. Contact Thupten Kelsang Dakpa, founder of the Tibetan Art Collective (www.thetibetanartcollective.org), at thuptenk@gmail.com if you are interested.
5. Relations between Northeast students and Tibetan students.
6. Comparison of Tibetan experience in Northeast settlements in states like Assam or Sikkim, and non-settlement, multicultural settings, such as Gangtok, Sikkim.
7. There is an observable fear of the Tibetan community in India of losing Tibetanness or Tibetan culture due to integration into Indian society, heavy consumption of Indian media and music. However, more and more Tibetans in India, maybe some of the same who have the aforementioned fear, moving out to the U.S. and to Europe—as if there is less of a chance of losing Tibetan culture in a new setting in the West. I think it would be interesting to investigate why this perception of India being more a threat to Tibetan identity than the West.
8. There is a Tibetan battalion in the Indian national army that operates alongside the Indian army, especially in border patrol in certain areas. It has existed since the 1970's and is still recruiting hundreds of young Tibetans from the high schools each year in the present day (I've been told that entry is encouraged for students who receive low marks in school, i.e. less than 40% marks). From my interviews, I've gathered that the Tibetan battalion base is in Dehradun, a 6-hour drive from Delhi, and its premises are off-limits to foreigners, without, I presume, special and rarely-given governmental clearance. I would have loved to investigate the reasons as to why the CTA and the Indian government have been collaborating for so many decades, how common Tibetans think of and are affected by the agreement, and why young Tibetans, both men and women, have continually joined (there are, among others, the reasons of financial compensation, of secure occupation, and of fulfillment/affirmation of political goals and beliefs)—and I think this would be a very interesting topic of research, though it may be challenging to assess any official government sources.

Appendix A: Methodology

The research for this project was conducted over the course of four weeks in Delhi, India, in five main locations around the city: Majnu-Ka-Tilla/New Aruna Nagar Tibetan Colony in North Delhi, the S.O.S. Tibetan Youth Hostel located in Rohini, a district in Northwest Delhi, the campus of Jawaharlal Nehru University in South Delhi, and the neighborhoods of Lajpat Nagar and Katwaria Sarai, both located in South Delhi as well. A couple of the interviews and correspondences took place in other places around the city, such as Paharganj and Connaught Place.

My fieldwork consists primarily of observational research and interviews/guided conversations across these locations. I conducted 25 arranged interviews with Tibetan youth between the ages of 18 and 30, and had a number of personal correspondences with many of the same youth, as well as others whom I did not interview. Aside from the direct quotes pulled from the interviews, I sometimes used the interviews and the statistical/historical evidence participants gave to inform the background information sections I wrote, for example the section on the Youth Hostel. While I only reference select interviews in my writing due to practical reasons, I typically use the whole of my interviews to inform analyses.

My interview methods do not align with the methods used in more formal, structured investigations; I intended for my interviews to play out as casual conversations in which I would get to know the interviewee, their life, history, and background, as a new friend rather than a completely detached/uninvolved researcher. As such, while I did have a number of fixed questions for all of the interviewees centered around the personal narrative of the individual and their thoughts on Tibetan diasporic life, conversations went where the interviewee led them, and I never usually set a time limit (the conversations would range anywhere from 45 minutes to 3 to 4 hours, sometimes split into two sessions.) I was very happy with the way most of my interviews went. It was relatively easy for me to establish personal connections with my interviewees; it seemed like my being around the same age, as well as my being of East Asian (Taiwanese) descent, made communication feel a bit more natural, and a bit more comfortable.

In terms of finding/choosing participants for my study—I relied entirely on the assistance of a few individuals I met by chance upon arrival in Delhi and through my project advisor Ananya Vajpeyi. They connected me with participants and provided me with contacts at the youth hostel, JNU, Lajpat Nagar, and Katwaria Sarai.

In addition to interviews and observation, I drew information and insight from public information of official sources (i.e. web sources) such as the Department of Education of the Central Tibetan Administration, the Tibetan Children's Village school system; I read essays and creative writing pieces written by students of the youth hostel, published in an event program and a Regional Tibetan Youth Congress newsletter, as well as pieces from the "Tibet Burning" issue of the Indian *Seminar* journal; I had couple of correspondences/informal interviews with the president of the Samyeling Resident Welfare Association, as well the director of the Delhi Refugee Reception Center in Budh Vihar. And lastly, I conducted web-based research and used literature on diaspora studies and the Tibetan diaspora.

Finally, I have chosen to write this paper in a hybrid style, meshing together both academic and narrative writing. I feel this is a more honest and effective way of conveying the data and observations I have gathered, and I also believe this kind of presentation is more capable of making the points I intended to make in a careful and intimate fashion. I have also chosen not to include many photographs in the actual body of the paper, keeping with the narrative, story-like feel of the paper. Additionally, I wanted to present my best photos in a more coherent manner, in the form of a photo series (see Appendix).

Appendix B: Interviews

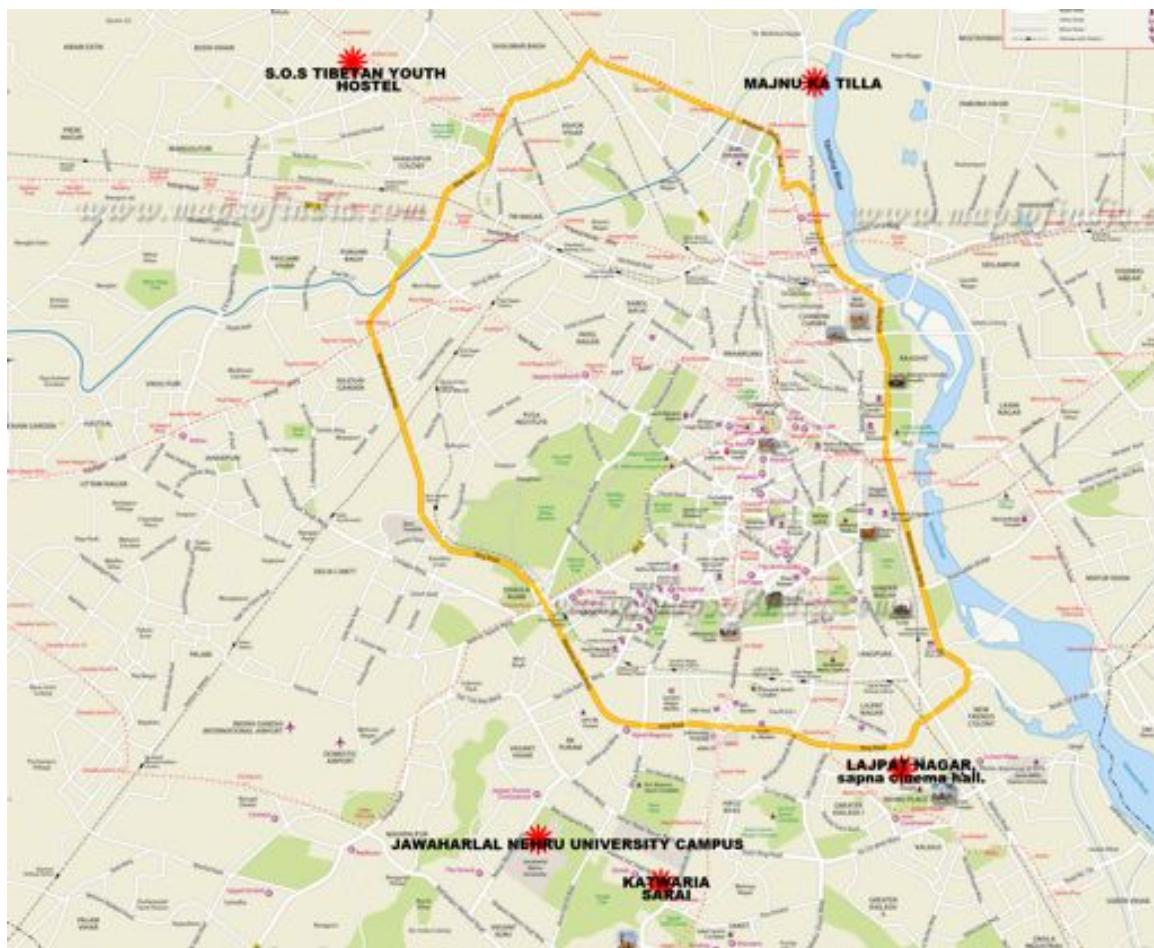
Interviews

Tamdin Dorjee. *Interview, November 4th 2013.*
 Tsering Tharchin. *Interview, November 5th 2013.*
 Tenzin Choedon. *Interview, November 5th 2013.*
 Kelsang Tsering. *Interview, November 7th 2013.*
 Nyima Gyalpo. *Interview, November 8th 2013.*
 Sangay, *Interview, November 8th 2013.*
 Tenzin Jangchup. *Interview, November 8th 2013.*
 Yangtsang. *Interview, November 9th 2013.*
 Tashi. *Interview, November 11th 2013.*
 Thupten Kelsang Dakpa. *Interview, November 12th 2013.*
 Gendun Gyatso. *Interview, November 14th 2013.*
 Tenzin Pasang. *Interview, November 14th 2013.*
 Kirti. *Interview, November 16th 2013.*
 Dadron. *Interview, November 16th 2013.*
 Thinley. *Interview, November 16th 2013.*
 Tenzin Choewang. *Interview, November 17th 2013.*
 Tenzin Sangmo. *Interview, November 17th 2013.*
 Tsechoe Wangmo. *Interview, November 17th 2013.*
 Tenzin Tashi. *Interview, November 18th 2013.*
 Chimee Yungdung. *Interview, November 18th 2013.*
 Tenzing Dakpa. *Interview, November 18th 2013.*
 Tenzin Gyurme Dorjee. *Interview, November 20th 2013.*
 Tenzin Pasang. *Interview, November 21th 2013.*

Personal correspondences

K. Wangmo, October 28th, 2013. Kathmandu, Nepal
 R. Wangyal, November 1st, 2013. Kathmandu, Nepal
 Dhondup Sangpo, Director of the Tibetan Refugee Reception Center-Delhi Branch,
 November 4th, 2013.
 Konchok Tsering, November 7th, 2013.
 Tsering Sonam, November 21st, 2013.
 Tenzin Phenthok, November 11th 2013.
 Karma Tseten, President of the Samyeling New Aruna Nagar Colony Resident
 Welfare Association, November 22nd, 2013.
 Tashi Yangzom, November 24th, 2013.

Appendix C: Map of Delhi



Source: <http://mapsofindia.com>, markings are my own additions.

Appendix D: Fieldwork Photos.



Author's photo: Me looking at Dakpa's photography. Getting a feel of the life and work of a contemporary Tibetan artist in Delhi.

Additional fieldwork photos-



With Yungdung and Nyima at the Youth Hostel.



Chatting with Thupten and Choewang in a Korean restaurant Paharganj.



Hanging in Lajpat.



Tea and friends at 24/7 on my last day at JNU.



JNU: Dadron, Pema, and me in the brightest room in the world.



My friends at Lungta, minus Cho Konchok.