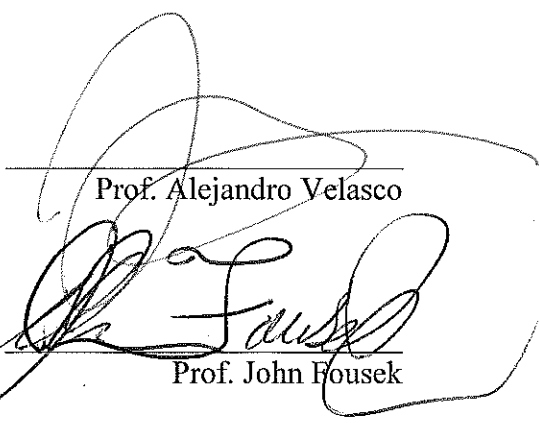


A Modern Tibetan Story:  
The case of the Digital Tibetan Diaspora

by

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## **Dedication**

This Thesis is dedicated to the Tibetan diaspora, to which I belong, that has undergone six decades and more of hardship, suffering and loss yet continues to struggle and fight for a future where the destiny of one's land is in one's own hand. The past generations have sacrificed for the present and the present generation will move on with strength and determination to give meaning to those sacrifices.

For my parents who have stood by me during times when I was not an easy person to deal with, but they remained steadfast in support of all my endeavors and trials.

And finally, to His Holiness the 14<sup>th</sup> Dalai Lama, Tenzin Gyatso, who has been the pillar of our community and cause and whose guidance has kept us together. Without him our community and our vision for our futures would not have come to pass.

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## **Abstract**

The Tibetan diaspora is now 60 years old, with its inception being marked by the escape of its leadership into exile in 1959, following the invasion of the Mao led People's Liberation Army in 1950. Over the course of these six decades, the Tibetan Government-in-exile has attempted to construct a nation state narrative within the diaspora, one that builds upon images of "Tibet" constructed by the West in the 19<sup>th</sup> Century as well as a reaction and counter to the nation building project of the Chinese State in Tibet.

As the Tibetan diaspora moves away, physically and ideologically, from the exilic centers of discourse, and enters an increasingly globalized world, challenges to the homogenized nation state narrative of the exile leadership have emerged, challenges that are pluralistic and decentralized. The advent of the digital media landscape has had a fundamental effect, providing a space for the construction of virtual imagined communities within the diaspora that are connected through the expression of these alternative narratives of home, histories, identities and belongingness.

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## Introduction

In 1997, Pema<sup>1</sup> took an oath to become a citizen of the United States of America. She had migrated to the United States as part of the United States' Tibetan Rehabilitation Program, a product of the 1990 Immigration Act that brought it 1000 Tibetans from India and Nepal and resettled them in the United States. Today, Pema is a senior staff at the Voice of America and has been a former Member of Parliament of the Tibetan Government-in-exile. When asked whether she felt a transfer of loyalty to the United States Government from the Tibetan Government-in-exile, she replied *"I will always be grateful to the US Government for all it has done for me and for the Tibetan people. But foremost of all I am a Tibetan and the Tibetan Government - in - exile is my government and Tibet is my home"*.

Tenzin Chemey<sup>2</sup> is a 24-year-old graduate student at New York University, born in Nepal but lived in the United States for the past twenty years. Cross legged on the floors of Bobst library, New York University , replying to our conversations on identity and history as well as belonging to a Tibetan notion of identity, she answered *"When you see a picture of Chungba [her ancestral village in Tibet] for example, my feelings would be the same as seeing a picture of people in Africa. I feel more like an outsider looking in. So that why when I hear about Tibetans in Tibet facing difficulty giving their exams in Chinese, I don't understand since we being in America give our exams in English. We don't complain saying it's not our language. We work*

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<sup>1</sup> Pema was born in Tibet and lived a significant part of her adult life in India, where she served as a Member of Parliament of the Tibetan Government-in-exile. She is the mother -in-law of my cousin. Due to her deep involvement with the Tibetan diaspora, whether it be in Government or VOA, I requested an interview with her, which was conducted over three separate sessions at her home.

<sup>2</sup> Tenzin Chemey and I have known each other for two years, having met at a Youth Forum for Tibetans in New York and collaborated together in various other events.



*hard and assimilate. For me, it's like why that doesn't happen. Some people might say that I shouldn't feel this way but for me that is what it is. We should accept it. I always feel like a third person. I think I am so withdrawn from the true community in Tibet that I can relate in some ways to it but that would be my feeling with anything else. For me I truly see myself as a global citizen. I don't differentiate and the way I feel about Bodpa [translation: Tibetan] would be the same I feel about other people".*

These two widely differing conversations offer an appropriate view of the primary thesis of this project i.e. with the advent of a wide access to digital landscapes and the subsequent distancing of the Tibetan diasporic population, physically and ideologically, from the exilic centers of discourse, Tibetans have invoked their own agency through their expressions of alternative views on regional diversity, identities, history, culture and belongingness to the conceptual notion of 'Tibet as home', which has long been marginalized under the nation building project of the Tibetan Government - in - exile and within the western construction of Tibet as the imaginative 'Other'.

Pema's sense of loyalty that extended to a political entity not recognized by any world governments yet cementing in her the belief that the Tibetan Government -in- exile represents the aspirations of 'home' and a nation state while Chemey distancing of herself from the exilic narratives of belonging to a Tibetan community and history are two divergent perspectives that find expression in the present day tension between the attempts of the Tibetan Government -in- exile in maintaining the nation state narrative and thus its legitimacy alive among an increasingly globalized Tibetan diaspora and the alternative voices of the latter that is critically distancing themselves from such grand narrative and seeking their own sense of belongingness.

The Tibetan diaspora entered its 60<sup>th</sup> year this year and through out this period, the exilic leadership have constructed images of its aspirations to create a nation state in exile, one that places itself in opposition to the Chinese modern state project in Tibet as well as seeking its legitimacy from its diaspora population and the Western nations by aligning its conception of modern Tibetan nation state to those of a Westphalian order. McGranahan writes,

“Historical truths are always social truths. The making of history is a social and political process, not a neutral rendering of what happened in the past ... certain past are converted into histories while others are not ... belonging or alignment with and acceptance by a community is a process subject to constant negotiation and change” (McGranahan 3)

These historical “truths” have played their way into the construction of grand narratives by the exilic elites, marginalizing regional and sectarian affiliations to the nation state project. The “collective imaginings” (Barnett) of the elites are useful to analyze in the context of understanding current depictions of Tibetan nationhood in exile, one that is symbolic of the exile population’s need to present the diaspora as “a ‘modern’ desire to project a sense of continuity with past while distancing from oppressive elements of history” (Anand, A guide to Little Lhasa 20). These images or depictions are not a phenomenon exclusively stemming from the exile polity but rather has precedents in past 250 years of Western fascination with Tibet, both as an object of almost a voyeuristic desire as well as part of its imperial and colonial project. The Tibetan exile polity have reacted against and also appropriated these images for their benefit as they attempt to construct a grand narrative of an “historically valid” independent and unified Tibetan nation state.

## *Research Framework: Arguments and Structure*

The Thesis will deal with two primary arguments:

Firstly, I argue that the nation state building project of the Tibetan Government-in-exile can be seen as not just a reflection of aspirations for self-determination but as a reaction to the state building project of the Chinese Communist state itself, by constructing a ‘Tibetan’ nation state in exile, one that is drawn from dominant western representations of a modern nation state.

Second, I put forward the argument that as Tibetans gradually move away from these exilic narratives and exilic centers of discourse that propagate these narratives, both ideologically and spatially, fault lines in identification with such narratives emerge, which then can be seen as potential spaces of dissent and alternative notions of identity, history and ‘belongingness’. As McGranahan notes, “Belonging, or alignment with and acceptance by a community, is a process that is subject to constant change and negotiation” (McGranahan, *Arrested Histories : Tibet, the CIA and memories of a Forgotten War* 3) and there lies the most fundamental argument of this Thesis that is, during the process of such negotiation and change, the digital realm of network building and expression allows for the positing of an alternative vision of such a community, one that is autonomous, pluralistic, undefined and individualistic in nature in contrast to the Tibetan Government-in-exile’s imagination of a nation state that is state centric, ‘homogenous’ and privileges certain notions of history and identity over others.

## *Research Methodology*

The difficulty with attempting to write such a thesis, in terms of literature, is that there has not been any significant amount of work done of Tibetan digital diasporas. The one notable book on such a topic has been Orville Schell's "Virtual Tibet", which deals with the communication of 'Tibet' and its representations with the virtual institutions of the "globalized society" such as movies, music videos yet I am hesitant to draw much insight from it since it was written in 2000, far apart from the world of Facebook, YouTube and Instant Messaging that we live in today and which my Thesis primarily deals with. Therefore, I have had to lean much on academic work done on other diasporas such as Victoria Bernal's excellent work on the Eritrean diaspora's relationship to the digital community vis-à-vis the Eritrean State, Alinejad's work on the formation of identity and diasporic 'consciousness' among the Iranian diaspora in the United States and Robert Cohen's seminal work "*Global Diasporas : An Introduction*".

Methodologically, this Thesis is built on my interviews with 16 young Tibetans, ranging from the age of 21 – 30 [two exceptions who were in their late 50s], all of them living in the United States, mostly as American citizens except for three who are employed here but retain their 'Stateless' legal status. Interviews in political sciences are seen as sources of data collection yet my approach gears towards an anthropological framework of oral history. Particularly I see the interviews as spaces of negotiation between myself and my respondents, a space that is personal yet allows for exploration of social and political norms through a process of self-reflection on both sides, which almost is a reflection of the unsettledness of diasporic experiences, digital narratives and 'post-modern' individuals. My respondents share a commonality of experience, along with myself, in that they are all Tibetans, and they navigate

through their exilic identities, albeit in varied pluralistic ways. Therefore, I do not claim any grounds of ‘scientific objectivity’ but rather have attempted to lay out my subjectivities as well relationship to each of the respondents, most of whom I have known for an extended amount of time. Alessandro Portelli writes ““when the researcher’s voice is cut out, then the narrator’s voice is distorted” (Portelli, 55), so there lies the reason for my attempt to “ draw deeper connections between one’s personal experience and the subject under study...an attempt to write vulnerably” (Behar, 13). The questions that I have asked my respondents are primarily those that I have struggled with myself over the years due to increasing detachment from exilic discourses and constant renegotiation of my sense of belongingness to my community as I move away from it. Therefore, the commonality of experience with my respondents extend far beyond our circumstantial existence as Tibetans but also in our own personal battles and moments of frustration, doubts and reaffirmation of ourselves as members of a diaspora that is itself subjected to changes, negotiation and challenges.

The respondents were drawn from various backgrounds, from whether they were born in exile or in Tibet, to their economic and social standings and so a diversity in background being a primary requisite behind my selection process. Throughout this essay, I have attempted to describe the physical layout of my interviews, ranging from coffee shops, to Bobst library to the personal space of one’s home. A primary reason behind this is to illustrate the spread-out nature of the Tibetan diaspora as well as illustrate the rootlessness and changing nature of the same. Additionally, I have attempted to conduct multiple ethnographic observations in the cities of New York, Washington D.C., Boston, Pennsylvania and San Francisco. For example, observing as well as speaking to the Tibetan community during protests at frequented sites such as Harvard Square or United Nations, social gatherings such as the birthday of the Dalai Lama and the

March 10 Uprising Commemoration and Jackson Heights in Queens where most Tibetans reside as well as conduct business through managing restaurants, stores, etc.

The limitations of my selection of interviewees are quite apparent. The Tibetan community in the United States is a small minority within the larger Tibetan exile community and more importantly a very recent community<sup>3</sup>. My selection was based [or limited] on two grounds: Firstly, logistically, it would have been impossible for me to go to India and conduct the research there and for an extended amount of time. Secondly, Tibetans in the United States differ from those in India, in the fundamental sense that they are spatially and, in many cases, ideologically away from the exilic centers of discourse that influence much of the lives of Tibetans in India. Therefore, their voices and opinions would be qualitatively different from those who live in proximity [physical and ideological] to such exilic centers of discourse.

Quantitatively, there is almost no data on how many Tibetans in the U.S actually use digital media platforms and in what capacity<sup>4</sup>, which is also an important reason why I decided to draw from qualitative sources. Therefore, my findings need to be taken in this context and so therefore, needs to be seen as not definite ‘evidence’ of such a digital diaspora but rather as an indicator of the emergence of one.

In addition to such ethnographic methods, I have also attempted to conduct archival research in the National Archives at Maryland, the primary purpose being to seek out primary government documents of the United States State Department during 1959 – 1970, in order to trace the formation and construction of the Tibetan exile community and its political and social ideologies, through the lens of the United States, which was and remains the primary political

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<sup>3</sup> The first large group of 1000 Tibetans entered the United States in 1990 as part of the “Tibetan U.S Resettlement Project”

<sup>4</sup> Although, there is a team in Columbia that have started some work in this direction, but it remains preliminary.

‘ally’<sup>5</sup>. Access to records of the CIA and internal classified materials was unable at this moment, so my archival research needs to be similarly taken in view of this limitation, along with the fact that it was not feasible to conduct an extremely thorough research due to time and schedule constraints.

### *Structure of the Thesis*

The Thesis is broadly divided into three chapters. Chapter 1 is the Literature Review. Chapter 2 discusses the historical roots of the various images of Tibet that have sprouted in the Western imagination as well as attempting to foreground the nation state building project of the Tibetan Government - in - exile and its articulation of sovereignty as it pertains to its relationship to the Tibetan diaspora population. Chapter 3 deals with the ruptures of an emerging globalized Tibetan diaspora with the grand narratives of the Tibetan Government-in-exile. I argue that the Tibetan diaspora needs to be understood outside of the methodological nationalism framework of the nation state project in exile and the digital realm allows for the imagination of spaces and alternate communities that allows this to happen. At the end is the Conclusion where I sum up my primary arguments as well as lay out the possibilities of the future for the Tibetan polity relationship to its diasporic population as well as larger implications of the role of digital landscapes in an increasingly changing and globalized world.

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<sup>5</sup> The term ‘ally’ should be contextualized since the United States formally never stated Tibet to be an independent country, yet almost founded its military guerilla movement during the 1960s but dropped its support during the 1970s as its relationship to the PRC grew closer, and once again stepped up its support on the basis of the “human rights” discourse in the late 1980’s as China grew increasingly strong, which has continued almost unchanged until this moment.

### *Tibet: Images and the nation state project*

Tibet has been constantly sensationalized in essentialized notions of ‘mystical’, a *Shangri-La* or a Forbidden Kingdom, the land of the paranormal and mystery while more recent conceptualizations has been around what Cohen calls “victim diaspora” (R. Cohen 2). He deconstructs the Jewish diaspora, showing that the characteristic trait of victimization is just one way of defining the diaspora, one that is pushed forward by the Israeli state itself and which negates and effaces millennia of Jewish history. I argue that a similar process occurs with the Tibetan exile polity and the Tibetan diaspora, along with a number of other images of Tibet constructed by the West but appropriated by the former.

Hess argues that “Tibet is a bricolage of images that have a long history of western imagination” (Hess 3). These images play into the nation building and identity formation process of the Tibetan diaspora that finds expression within the homogenizing portrayal of a linear history of Tibet as well as its culture and identification with the Tibetan diasporic population. Alex McKay’s work “*Truth, Perception and Politics : the British Construction of an image of Tibet*” is highly significant because he underlines the categorizes these images as either ‘historical’, one based on an idea of an “independent Tibet”, or ‘ mythical’ and traces their primary origin to the imperial British presence in Tibet, following it military campaign into the region in 1903 – 1904 (McKay).

Tsering Shakya states that the current nation state project of the Tibetan Government-in-exile, portrays a politically unified concept of Tibet, one that encompasses all three of its major



provinces, as a ideational whole but one which does not resonant with actual history (Shakya, Dragon in the Land of snows : A history of modern Tibet since 1947). McConnell further elucidates this argument in the context of maintaining the legitimacy of the Tibetan Government-in-exile, arguing that such homogenization narratives is vital for the exile polity since it does not have a territorial region to govern nor does it have any legal recognition to do so (McConnell).

### *The Digital Mediascape*

I will be discussing a number of key academicians and their thoughts on the landscape that is digital technology and media and their potential as spaces for alternative expressions of history, culture and identity that are marginalized by the nation state project

Bernal writes,

“Relations of citizenship and sovereignty once rooted in national territory increasingly span borders and the social contracts between citizens and states are being constructed and contested in new political contexts and spaces ... the internet is allowing for the creation of an elastic political space that can serve to extend as well as to expose the limits of territorial sovereignty.” (Bernal 2)

This elasticity of this political space allows for the expression of voices that are usually marginalized by the nation state projects as they critique and exist in between the ruptures between the homogenizing narratives of the nation state with regards to belonging, citizenry, history and identity and the heterogeneity of these digital spaces in the context of the people using and existing in them. As Robert Saunders argues “A national identity project is an ongoing rhetorical achievement ... aimed at distinguishing the ethnic self from the “Other” through linguistic, spatial, cultural bonding practice. In order to win such projects, elites need to craft

grand narratives that would win over the masses” (R. Saunders 2). Therefore, the significance of digital spaces or ‘cyberspaces’ lies in its decentralized nature (there are limitations with the nation state exercising different levels of control), the borders of which are not limited to territorial boundaries. Such spaces therefore allow for narratives and individual agencies that are marginalized by the grand narrative of the elites. Both Saunders and Bernal emphasize that unlike the print media and print capitalism, that was highly influential in allowing the burgeoning elites to speak and define the nation and nationalism, digital media allows for the consumers to turn their positionality to this landscape from just a receiver to also a producer of content, therefore investing them with a significant tool of expression of such alternative narratives and modes of identification. Alinejad ethnographic work on the second-generation Iranian diaspora in Los Angeles underscores the potential of such spaces. The author, through his conceptual use of notions of ‘home’ and ‘belonging’, traces the identity formation of these Iranian Americans with regards to their relationship to a conceptual plane that is ‘home’, which is constantly shifting between their homeland, Iran, as well as their lives in America. He argues that the emplaced or embodied experiences of these individuals have constructed social and ideational connections of home that go far beyond the conceptual frameworks of a nation state and the digital media have allowed for the expressions of and connections between these varying understanding of home and citizenry , whether it be culture, politics, religion or history (Alinejad). Bernal work on the Eritrean diaspora and its use of websites such as “Dehai”, is significant since it shows how the digital landscape allows for the nation state to exercise varying levels of ‘governance’ over its overseas population but inversely, how the diaspora itself engages with the nation state expressions through the digital media that are not under the control of the states. Her own thesis summary, as expressed in her book, is illuminating “ some groups use

internet to increase their sense of National Identity while others find that cyberspace weakens ethnic unity and promotes globalism ... by using the internet ... national minorities and diasporans now have the capacity to challenge media monopolies of states in which they live” (Bernal 6). The Tibetan diaspora has long depended on state control media forums such as Voice of America, Radio Free Asia [both either administered or funded by the US Government during and after the Cold War] as well as official news broadcasts of the Tibetan Government-in-exile. The rise of new digital media spaces such as Phayul, TibetSun as well as Facebook and WeChat<sup>6</sup> have allowed the Tibetan diaspora much more agency in choosing their source of information and more importantly, express themselves through such mediascapes that allow for chatrooms, online discussions and expressions, which could be explicitly political or ‘softer’ expressions of identity such as music videos, movies , etc. Through her analysis of Tibetan Digital diaspora, Brinkerhoff argues that through chat forums such as TibetBoard, Tibetans feel a sense of distancing from the exilic centers of discourse, which allows them the space to discuss and criticize core frameworks of the Tibetan exile polity, such as the Dalai Lama, the Central Tibet centric notion Tibetan culture and history and victimhood (Brinkerhoff).

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<sup>6</sup> Phayul and TibetSun are news website, privately owned by Tibetans while WeChat is a Chinese messaging and social media App that is popular with Tibetans inside and outside of Tibet.

The current iteration of the Tibetan diaspora traces its origins to 1959 when the 14<sup>th</sup> Dalai Lama fled into exile from Tibet to India. The years following this event oversaw the establishment of the Tibetan exile community in India, the institutionalization of the Tibetan Government - in - exile ( now known as the Central Tibetan Administration) and of the various religious, cultural and educational institutions that continue to build a collective “diaspora consciousness” (Hess). According to the 2009 survey conducted by the Planning Commission of the Central Tibetan Administration / Tibetan Government-in-exile, the Tibetan exile population stands at approximately 128, 014, with 18,999 living outside of the India ( 94,203 ), Nepal ( 13,154) and Bhutan ( 1,298 ) (Administration, Tibet in Exile).

Anderson notion of a nation as an imagined community builds upon the idea of nationalism that is constructed through a process of mutual sense of belonging to a community or a shared sense of history and identity that is largely mediated through ideological state apparatus such as the media, census, national symbols, etc. (Anderson 1991). In the case of Tibet and its people, particularly in exile, the sense of belonging to nation state and the corresponding sense of nationalism associated with it was constructed in terms of a violent loss of sovereignty and control to an external regime, the subsequent mass exodus of its leadership and people into exile and for the past 60 years, constant exposure to images of violence, uprisings and physical presence of a post-colonial Chinese state that securitizes life inside Tibet. Therefore, in the context of attempting to understand the construction of a nation state in exile, the images that feed this construction needs to be considered, in terms of its historical and present-day formations.

## *Tibet as the 'Other': Imagination of the West*

In Arthur Conan Doyle's classic writings on the adventures of Sherlock Holmes, the story of *The Empty House* is one where Sherlock returns to Baker Street, after disappearing from the public view at the culmination of his epic battle against James Moriarty. When a startled Watson questions him on his whereabouts for the past two years, Sherlock explains that he had been in Tibet disguised as a Norwegian explorer and even met the Dalai Lama. The story was published in 1905 and is a reminder of the fascination that Tibet held in the eye of the western public.

The Western imaginations of Tibet were mired within the imperial and political struggles between the Tibetan elite and the British ambitions. Therefore in an attempt to understand the construction of "Tibet", it would be imperative to discuss the contact of the West, specifically the British, with Tibet particularly during the early 20<sup>th</sup> Century, which was sparked off by the British mission under the command of Lieutenant Colonel Francis Younghusband into Lhasa in 1903 - 1904

### *Imperial British and Tibet*

. The Younghusband campaign was essentially conducted to allay British fears of Russian influence on Lhasa, turning the plateau into the theatre that was known as the 'Great Game'. The campaign resulted in the Lhasa Government losing the short-lived battle and the establishment of a permanent British presence in Tibet through its trade agencies. McKay argues that the Younghusband mission was conducted to 'open' Tibet to the outside world in order to ascertain the flow of information from the trade agencies to British India, creating a British

sphere of influence, which would also secure British interests along the Himalayan borders of Nepal, India and Bhutan (McKay).

In order to maintain its presence in Tibet, primarily with the Lhasa Government, British officials were stationed in Tibet, where, as Younghusband put it, a British officer could “practically run the whole show” (McKay). McKay terms those officers who were influential during the Anglo Tibetans relationships as ‘Tibet cadres’, a number that reached only twenty (McKay). What is significant in his discussion of the British empire interaction with the Lhasa Government is his argument that the cadres were responsible for the construction of two types of images of Tibet, one being a ‘historical’ image and the other being the ‘mystical image’. Both images were highly functional in presenting Tibet as distinct from China. The ‘mystical’ images retained the earlier Western fantasy of Tibet as the land of the paranormal and supernatural. Although these images had existed since the 17<sup>th</sup> century, the cadres used this image which had a wider audience, to maintain Tibet’s distinctiveness while, as McKay argues, “the mystical image was not a political issue in the sense that neither the Chinese nor the Russians sought to profit politically by emphasizing Tibet’s mystical aura. The mystical image was and is indeed a weapon against which the China has had no effective response” (McKay 83).

The ‘historical’ image was a result of the cadres’ belief that an independent Tibet would be beneficial to British interests, but they could not outright oppose their Government’s policies, which had accepted China’s rule over Tibet following the treat signed with the Qing dynasty in 1906. Therefore, they worked towards developing Tibet into an independent state upto the point where its independence would emerge as a *fait accompli* (McKay), such as adopting a National Flag, currency and stamps, developing its military with British assistance and reorganizing its provincial and bureaucratic governmental structure (Bell). The attempts to develop Tibet on the

lines of a modern nation state was problematic since ‘religious’ Tibet until this point did not fit the ‘secular’ Westphalian nation state model. This imagination of Tibet as developing into a nation state along western lines but retaining its religious / Buddhist nature would later reinvent itself in exile, with the exilic leadership developing its discourse on Tibetan modernity as a nation state as a counter to China’s modernization project in Tibet that was built along materialistic, ‘rational’ and Marxist lines (Bridge). Barnett, on this notion of the antithetical nature between Tibet and Communist China, notes that,

“the Dalai Lama’s speeches in the late 1980s focused on the uniqueness and violation of Tibet ... the violation is seen as a result of advancing modernity or commercialization in general ... this violation is identified as acts of violence, desecration or intolerance that have been carried out by the Chinese authorities. In many cases this idea of violation seems to be linked to a perception of the place or the people as previously unimpaired and now desecrated, as if for the first time.” (Barnett 275)

Similar languages can also be found in resolutions debated in various parliaments of the worlds such as Russia, Belgium, Germany, India, the United States and others. Similarly, the British and the West have remained Tibet’s primary source of support, albeit not explicitly on the issue of independence, from the days of the British cadre to the current western support for Tibet on issues of Human Rights and Environment. Barnett argues that the Tibetan exilic leadership, due to this historical nexus as well as realization that the presentation of Tibet as a “violated specialness” was the pragmatic way to garner support due to the decline in support of its claims to an independent Tibet, appealed for support from western countries that had a history of colonization instead of those that had risen out of being colonized (Barnett).

Therefore, the question that needs to be asked at this point is how has the construction of these images of Tibet, built upon the political and cultural influences of West, affected the imagination of Tibetans themselves in the eyes of the West? Barnett argues that notion of Tibet as a “violated specialness” that draws its roots right back to the 17<sup>th</sup> century and continues until this moment “tends to disempower its subjects by implying that they are either victims who are incapable of standing alone ... it carries within it a pervasive implication of Tibetan innocence and victimhood, suggesting that Tibetans are incapable of effective action or decision making” (Barnett 276).

Although there is little doubt that the current and past trend in constructing images of Tibet, its history and culture as well as its people is highly influenced by the Western fascination with the country yet the Tibetans have not been the passive “victims” as most would think but instead have on multiple occasions, appropriated these images on their own terms and for their own benefit. Bishop, in his elucidation of the representation of Tibet in Literature from the 20<sup>th</sup> Century, argues that Tibetans have themselves not only challenged the images from the West of Tibet but have also played a role in their very construction (Bishop). Since 1985, the Tibetan narrative has been constructed on the basis of presenting Tibet as a unique arena, in terms of culture, history and physical territory but in threat of erasure from the Chinese state. This narrative has been the product of the historical images produced in the early 20<sup>th</sup> Century and by the Tibetan in exile leadership along with the Western nations. Barnett notes that the decision to present Tibet as this zone of “violated specialness” (Barnett) stemmed from a series of meetings of the Tibetan leadership in 1985 – 1987 , where they then advised the Dalai Lama to give political speeches abroad based on the such topics and images, reverting to “ a policy of the 1940s, before the Chinese annexation, where a similar appeal had been made to the West”



(Barnett 273). McKay notes that during the negotiations between the British cadres and the Tibetan ruling elite, during the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century, the British recognized that the Tibetans were not mere puppets but rather shrewd diplomats, who, in the classic diplomatic maneuver of a small state between large empires tried to play one power off the other (McKay). The image of Tibet as a zone of spiritual harmony and peaceful people personified by the awarding of the Nobel Prize to the Dalai Lama has allowed the Tibetan exilic leadership to push forward the agenda of Tibet on the basis of Human rights and environmental protection, both of which have been built on notions on protection of the ‘unique’ culture, religion and language of Tibetans as well as the spiritual landscape of the region that is under threat from Chinese modernization projects.. The implications of such appropriation have led to a process of homogenization of narratives within the Tibetan diaspora, which has also been a product of the project of imagining a nation state in exile by the Tibetan leadership

### *Tibet: Geographical divisions and terminology*

In the present age, Tibet is governed under the Chinese State through primarily two rough divisions. Central and Western parts of Tibet are governed as the Tibet Autonomous Region while the eastern parts are part of various ethnic prefectures, primarily Qinghai, Sichuan, Yunnan and Gansu. Another model of division, one pushed forward by the Tibetan exile polity in particular, is the *Chol- kha Sum*[ translation : Three Provinces] concept. In this case, Tibet is depicted as an entity comprising three primary regions : U-Tsang [Central and Western Tibet], Kham and Amdo [Eastern Tibet], one which is also known as ‘Greater Tibet’ or ‘Ethnic Tibet’ in contrast to the much limited entity defined as Tibet Autonomous Region by the Chinese state.

According to McGranahan (McGranahan 2010), on the question of “What is Tibet”, there are primarily two positions , one which sees ‘Tibet’ as a political entity equivalent to today’s Tibet Autonomous Region while the other to a ‘Greater Tibet’ comprising of a much larger territory bounded by shared notions of culture, ethnicity and history (McGranahan 2010). The former corresponds to the geo political reality existent from the 1930s while the latter harks back to the 8<sup>th</sup> and 13<sup>th</sup> Centuries. A discussion on the cultural and historical understanding of these divisions is beyond the scope of this project but what is of significance is that these definitions have had and continue to have deep impacts on the images and construction of narratives by the Tibetan exile polity, the Chinese state, the West and the Tibetan people, both in diaspora and Tibet. The question therefore , in this case, is not about the legitimacy of the claims of either China or the Tibetan exile polity with regards to defining Tibet, but rather how have these claims influenced the nature of the imagination of a nation state in exile by the latter in reaction to the former nation building project.

### *The Tibetan Government-in-exile: A Brief Discussion*

On 30<sup>th</sup> March, 1959 , the 14<sup>th</sup> Dalai Lama, accompanied by his two tutors, his immediate family and several members of his Kashag, that was his Cabinet of Ministers, crossed over into Indian territory from Tibet, signaling the start of an exilic circumstance for the Tibetan leadership and its people, one that continues in the present. In April of 1960, the Tibetan Government - in - exile was reestablished in the foothills of Dharamshala, India with the dual objective of advocating for a return to an independent Tibet [which later would shift to genuine autonomy within the Chinese state] and assisting in the rehabilitation of the Tibetan refugees

(McConnell 2009). During this period up to 2011, the Tibetan Government-in-exile continued to function under the leadership of the Dalai Lama. In 2011, the Dalai Lama formally transferred his political powers to the democratically elected Tibetan Parliament and Prime Minister, also known as Sikyong, which has seen two elections take place in the past eight years, an election that encompasses Tibetan voters from Asia, Europe and North America. Functioning under a constitution like “Charter of Tibetans in exile”, the Tibetan Government-in-exile is structured around a Parliamentary Legislature, an Executive or a Cabinet (known as the *Kashag*), a Judiciary and seven different departments of the Government (McConnell 2009).

The Tibetan Government-in-exile claims to be a legitimate Governing body yet does not hold any legal or territorial sovereignty either in the land it claims to represent, nor does it have similar authority over the Tibetan settlements in India that it has a representative claim to. Fiona McConnell puts it in perspective when she writes “the exile community ... has established a state-like polity ... remains internationally unrecognized and lacks jurisdiction in both Tibet and in exile ... characterized by a series of tensions between opposing aspects of statehood and statelessness” (McConnell 346)

Therefore, through its invocations to being the successor to the Dalai Lama regime that governed Tibet since the 17<sup>th</sup> Century and now to being a democratically elected polity that is representative of the larger Tibetan diaspora, the Tibetan Government-in-exile has in the past and continues to do so, construct an imagination of a nation state in exile as well as its legitimacy over the meta-narratives / images that go into building the same.

## *Defining the Tibetan Nation State in exile*

As discussed above, the model of the nation state was introduced to Tibet in the 19<sup>th</sup> Century, as part of the ‘historical’ image of Tibet as constructed by the British and appropriated by the 13<sup>th</sup> Dalai Lama’s regime as a response to the changing conditions of an increasingly ‘Westphalian’ world structure as well as a modernizing China. In reality, ‘pre modern’ Tibet was not characterized by a unity between territory and governance, like a typical definition of a modern state, but rather the three ‘provinces’ were connected by complex layers of religious and cultural affiliations, primarily to the Center that was Central Tibet, as well as shifting allegiances. Geoffrey Samuel, in his seminal work “*Civilized Shamans: Buddhism in Tibetan Societies*”, contends that Tibet was never a centralized political entity but rather a sprawling series of centers / societies with the centralized theocratic regime of the Dalai Lama in Lhasa being the largest of them all (Geoffrey 1993). Other Tibetologists such as Melvyn Goldstein ((Goldstein 1989), Tsering Shakya (Shakya 1999), George Dreyfus (Dreyfus 2002)) have made similar arguments. Dreyfus argues that the reason for a lack of a national self- awareness cannot be based on the fact that Tibet was never colonized before the invasion of the People Liberation Army but rather because of the conscious decision of the ruling elite to isolate Tibet from Asia during the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> Century , which prevented it from “developing the kind of institutions, such as print capitalism, a well-equipped army, a census, and schools that could have led to the development of a modern nationalism and a successful process of nation building” (Dreyfus 2002, 39).

Within the discourse of the Tibetan exile polity, the narratives of Tibetan modern history i.e. pre 1959 Tibet, the nature of Tibet and its national self-awareness has been defined in a different manner. The nation state project of the Tibetan exilic elites was based around the objectives of constructing a narrative that could run against the Chinese state building project inside Tibet, deeming it as illegitimate and repressive, while at the same time appropriating Westphalian models of nations in order to gain acceptance from the West [which remains its primary supporter] as well conform to International norms [which are also defined along Westphalian frameworks of nation states] and constructing a sense of Tibetan self-identity that was shared by all. Anand puts in this argument in perspective, when he writes,

“The study of Tibetan national identity should be placed within the larger theoretical debates over nationalism ... the need to present one’s own community as a nation ... it has been argued that ‘invented traditions’ are used to create imagined communities” (Anand, *Reimagining Nationalism : Identity and representation in the Tibetan diaspora of South Asia* 2000, 273)

This sense of a Tibetan National Identity was, as Tsering Shakya (Shakya 1999) notes based on an imagination of an united and uniform political identity built around an idea of a unified Tibet that was made up of the its three provinces, namely U-Tsang [Central Tibet], Kham [Eastern Tibet] and Amdo [North Eastern Tibet]. Shakya further contends that this image of Tibet has no recent historical basis while Hess (Hess) argues that it is difficult to even envision how much support such a construction has within the larger population in Tibet itself. Furthermore the exilic discourse around the constituents of a ‘Tibetan’ identity is built around the imagination of a unified Tibetan polity that comprises of a uniform Tibetan language, culture and history but in reality, is one that is primarily Lhasa [Central Tibet which had Lhasa as its

Capital] centric in nature (Anand 2000). The exile histories homogenize the nation in service to the state, specifically to the political struggle of the Tibetan state versus the Chinese state (McGranahan 2010).

Anderson's conceptualization of an "imagined community" contains assumptions of shared values and identities, often at a national level, the assumption that these values would incorporate an understanding of a shared common history, language, institutions, etc. (Anderson 1991). The notion of a 'common history' in the study of nation states has been subjected to much criticism as history, languages and ethnicity are not universally shared or bounded by such neat territorial boundaries. History is a product of social and political processes, which goes into the construction of certain pasts that are historicized while others are marginalized or not recognized. In the context of the Tibetan diaspora, this marginalization can come about primarily in the context of regional Tibetan identities and histories. McGranahan makes an important argument that the aspect of 'region' is a key category through which Tibetan identities are grounded (McGranahan 2010). She goes on to argue that,

"In Tibet before 1959 and in exile society after 1959, region serves as a central marker for difference. Central Tibetan social and political forms before 1959 were privileged over those from other regions; after 1959 these same Central Tibetan norms were recast in exile as a shared Pan -Tibetan identity" (McGranahan 2010, 4)

Within the British construction of a 'historical image' of Tibet in the 20<sup>th</sup> Century, the British cadres that were the prime engineers of this image and its propagation outside of the Tibetan borders were primarily allied with the ruling class in Lhasa / Central Tibet and so privileged the Lhasa perspective. As McKay note, "their [the British cadres] alliance with the Lhasa ruling class meant that they did not, for example, articulate the interests of those eastern

Tibetan principalities, which aspired to autonomy and even to closer ties with China. Thus, the historical image is Lhasa centric” (McKay 2001, 85). Additionally, the Tibetan Government- in - exile , claims its legitimacy to govern as the successor of the Dalai Lama regime that was based in Lhasa and primarily governed parts of Central Tibet ( both the erstwhile Dalai Lama regime and the Tibetan Government - in - exile appropriated the ‘historical image’ to lay its claim to an independent Tibet ) . Within the exile population, two thirds are from *U-Tsang*, a quarter from *Kham* and a small minority from *Amdo*. (Anand, (Re) imaginining nationalism : identity and representation in the Tibetan Diaspora of South Asia 2000). Therefore as a result of all these circumstances, the Tibetan nation state project, that pushed for having such a shared notion of history and culture and one which saw an absence of such a united Tibetan polity as a cause for its loss to China, privileged Central Tibetan centric depictions of such history, culture and language but subsequently marginalizing the rest of the other regions from the grand narratives of the Tibetan nation state in exile. Similarly, the exile leadership have attempted to construct a narrative of a ‘modern’ form of Tibetan ethnic nationalism, as a way to legitimize it claims to an independent state. Shakya (Shakya 1999) and Anand (Anand 2000) both assert that the discourse of this ethnic nationalism is one that is built around the aspirations of a specific Tibetan Nation State, one that has shares ethnic homogeneity in term of history, culture and language but in reality is one determined by a Lhasa centric perspective [which has been the political and cultural center of Central Tibet since the 17<sup>th</sup> Century].

In the 1950s and onwards, nationalism turned into the ideology of the Tibetan people and state (McGranahan 2010). As history was interpreted as national history, one that was linear and uniform, the diaspora presented an image of a homogenized Tibetan refugee identity which was

produced through the flattening and silencing of regional and sectarian identities and tangent histories. McGranahan articulates and sums it up well when she writes,

“In exile Tibet, a nationalist identity both flourishes and flattens. The perceived need for internal cohesion, given the political state of Tibet, resulted in the devaluing of diversity in the exile community. A homogenous and hegemonic Lhasa centered identity critiques regional and sectarian identities as backward, divisive and harmful to the Tibetan cause. Favored are central Tibetan styles of language and dress, general sense of propriety and comportment, and ideas of class, hierarchy and prestige directly correlated to central Tibetan sociopolitical worlds”

(McGranahan 2010, 17)

### *Articulating sovereignty in exile*

A detailed discussion of the sovereign nature of the Tibetan Government - in - exile is beyond the scope of this chapter. Therefore, I will be elucidating the key arguments that are necessary in establishing the ‘sovereign’ relationship between the Government-in-exile and the Tibetan diaspora.

As mentioned above, the Tibetan Government - in - exile lacks international recognition from any country in the world and its formal change in title to Central Tibetan Administration reflects this lack of recognition. Therefore there is a tension between its state-like character, as evident in its ability to conduct democratic elections, manage the education system of 73 different schools and 58 Tibetan settlements in India and Nepal as well as healthcare, collect a voluntary ‘tax’, issuing of Tibetan ‘passports’ and maintaining Bureau offices that act as



‘embassies’ in twelve different countries (Central Tibetan Administration) , and its stateless nature due to a lack of international recognition and jurisdiction both in Tibet and in exilic territories, limited juridical or economic decision making authority and no police or army to ‘defend’ itself or its ‘citizens’. As Goldstein aptly puts it,

“ [the Tibetan Government-in-exile] unenviable position of having no “legal” or “constitutional” status... and consequently is not able to use coercive force to compel acquiescence with their policies” (O. Goldstein 20)

Despite the lack of such a de jure or legal sovereignty, the Tibetan Government - in - exile produces and maintains its symbolic and de facto ‘sovereignty’ and ‘loyalty; of the Tibetan diaspora through its institutionalization of its ‘state’- ‘citizen’ relationship with latter. Article 2 of its Charter published on its website, under ‘Jurisdiction’ elucidates this relationship,

“This Charter shall be binding and enforceable on all Tibetans under the jurisdiction of the Tibetan Administration in exile” (Central Tibetan Administration)

Furthermore Article 8 of the same charter lays out the conditions for someone to be a “Citizen of Tibet”, which is an unequivocal statement of intent in terms of building and maintaining a state – citizen relationship , outside of Chinese State as well as any of host countries that Tibetans in diaspora have taken refuge in. As far as material symbols of this relationship go, there is none more visible than the existence of *Rangzen Lag-Teb* (which literally translates into “Independence Hand Book”) or Green Book which is given to those who pay the annual payment of *chatrel* or a tax to the Tibetan Government-in-exile, that is voluntary. The Green Book is a document of identification of Tibetans (stateless or otherwise) that is recognized only by the Tibetan Government-in-exile. These material attributes of citizenship are

the key mechanisms through which the Tibetan Government-in-exile's production of loyalty and moral power can be observed. As stated in the website of the Tibetan Government-in-exile:

“The existence of chatrel ... and green book ... symbolizes the Tibetan people's recognition of CTA as their legitimate representative” (Central Tibetan Administration)

The Green Book is additionally important because it effectively acts as a document allowing the holder to vote during the elections that are conducted every four years, in order to elect its Prime Minister as well as Members of its exile- Parliament. The elections are vital, not just in terms of securing legitimacy from in and out of the diaspora but as the Tibetans vote for their Members of Parliament based on the regions they hail from ( in the Parliament, 10 seats are given each to members from the three provinces, reinforcing the notion of Tibet as a three provincial united political entity ), they symbolically recreate their homeland in exile as well as in the Tibetan exile politics but within the framework set by the Tibetan Government - in - exile itself. This is extremely vital to the nation state building project of the Tibetan Government-in-exile, as it along with its ‘governmentalizing’ actions of taking census ( The Tibetan Demographic Survey ) as well as ideological image building through its exilic centers of discourse such as the Tibetan schools, monasteries, cultural performing centers, etc. construct a Tibetan population that is “ essentially a population-in-waiting ready to return to Tibet; a population-in-training to govern the homeland; and a population-as-cultural-repository, preserving Tibetan identity outside of the homeland” (McConnell 2009, 346). These formation of images of the Tibetan exile population, along with the homogenized pan Tibetan identity, attempt to construct a unified and essentialized national identity.

What is of significance, going forwards, is that these materials symbols of sovereignty such as Green Book and paying of the voluntary tax, despite the lack of legal recognition, server

as vital markers of the relationship between the Tibetan Government-in-exile and its diasporan population, reiterating the former's claims to be a legitimate governing body of the Tibetan polity and the latter's status as a "Citizen of Tibet" (Administration, Tibet in Exile). This transnational loyalty, that extends between the Tibetan Government-in-exile and the Tibetan diaspora, whether they be stateless Tibetans or legal citizens of other countries, Hess argues (Hess), creates a "diaspora consciousness", one that is sustained by a shared notion of community, history and sense of responsibility. The Tibetan Government-in-exile therefore in its functioning as a "sovereign" state within another sovereign state [India], attempts to gain authority over the narrative of Tibet and its ideational markers, in order to legitimize its status and its sovereign – citizen relationship with its population. In the next chapter, I argue that this relationship is under constant negotiation and strain. I fundamentally disagree with Hess' notion of a diaspora consciousness, arguing instead that as the diaspora moves further away from the exilic centers of discourse, there are emerging challenges to the authority of the Tibetan Government-in-exile hold over these grand narratives, which can be observed in the ruptures between its attempts to homogenize aspects of Tibetan identities and the alternative voices that seek to pluralize it.

## Chapter 3      **Stepping out of the Images: The Tibetan diaspora**

Methodological nationalism (Quayson and Daswani 2013) can be defined as scholarly research that takes the “nation state as a ‘natural’ container for understanding the social and political form of the modern world”. Arjun Appadurai (Appadurai 1996) asserts that the nation state no longer remains the only medium of organization or construction of an imagined community. Different landscapes such as economic, digital, ideological, etc. play increasingly heightened roles to form communities and cross border network. The study of diasporas since the days of James Clifford and others have essentially criticized the model of methodological nationalism, arguing that diasporic identity formations and connections are able to transcend borders, opening up new avenues of social interactions and spaces that cannot be contained within the rubric of the nation state ((Appadurai 1996) , (Clifford 1994) , (Marlowe 2018) , (Levitt and Schiller 2004) )

I have taken a tangent to this position, drawing from the rich research on transnational diasporas to argue that the Tibetan diaspora itself cannot be subsumed under the rubric of methodological nationalism that is apparent within the nation state building project of the exilic centers of discourse. There is a dearth of research on the emerging alternate narratives from the Tibetan Diaspora in the West with respect to the ‘Tibetan’ nation state building discourses produced by Tibetan Government - in - exile and traditional religious and cultural centers of power in exile. Hess (Hess) has written perhaps one of the only full-fledged scholarly work on the Tibetan diaspora in America (Yeh 2010), where she writes in great depth about the tension within the hybrid citizenry of Tibetan Americans citizens. Although she does elucidate on the process of the construction of a modern nation Tibetan State in exile, she asserts that the

Tibetans in America have developed a “diaspora consciousness which will bind Tibetans together in the future” (Hess 5) , a consciousness that she argues is built on persevering connections to an imagined homeland and a loyalty to the aspirations of a nation state being constructed in exile.

I draw upon interviews with my respondents to lay an alternative claim, that increased spatial and temporal distance from the centers of traditional exilic centers of discourse are generating instead a diasporic detachment from the dominant narratives produced by the exile leadership in India since many do not identify either with the totalizing historical and cultural discourses or they seek to escape the hybridity of citizenry and loyalties altogether through recourse to ideological spaces such as “global citizenship”. More importantly, the realm of digital spaces or digital diasporas are particularly emerging as de-territorialized and decentralized spaces for Tibetans to posit their own narratives and positionality to the landscapes of ideologies, politics and history put up by the dominant discourses in exile.

*“My history wasn’t there”*

The purpose of this section is to illustrate some of the primary nodes of contention between the nation state project and the Tibetan diaspora that is receding away from the exilic centers of discourse, in order to understand the ruptures and tensions between the two, in the context of an increasingly globalized world view.

Kirti Kyab<sup>7</sup> is a 26 years old male, who was born in *Amdo*, who left his village at the age of 14 for India, where he completed his education at one of the Tibetan schools, pursued his

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<sup>7</sup> I have known Kirti for almost ten years, since he and I went to the same High school as well as Undergrad colleges. We reconnected in the United States, since he had already been here two years prior to my arrival.

master's degree in the US and now works in D.C. In July of 2018, he was living at this employer's house and so beside a pool and the American flag waving behind us, we met thrice for the purpose of my Independent study. Over a "American" breakfast of sausage, eggs and toast with coffee, I asked Kirti about his experiences being a student at a Tibetan exile school:

*Me: How did you learn your own history?*

*Kirti: I think when I was in T.C.V [one of the major Tibetan school systems in India]<sup>8</sup>, the little bit of history that we learnt was very Buddhist oriented and centered around one person, His Holiness the Dalai Lama and nothing else. That why we got a very, very small glimpse of what Tibet was or is. And then we hear these stories of people protesting and about the Chinese oppression. So, we just have this singular story centered around one person and certain events. Then there is this recent news on social media coming out of Tibet of protests, self-immolations which happened outside of TAR [Tibetan Autonomous region] in Kham and Amdo but we never learn this history of Kham or Amdo. I think exile school system did not really do justice to us as a new generation. We all had to do this ourselves, study our own history. We read books, listened to people, watched documentaries. That how we learnt our own histories. We did not learn through the school system.*

*Me: So why do you think the history was taught in that way?*

*Kirti: There are different reasons. There aren't enough resources since it is a small institution. The other reason could be that there was a huge sense of insecurity as community of a lost nation and so they don't necessarily bring lot of diverse perspective all at once. It is always*

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<sup>8</sup> T.C.V stands for Tibetan Children's Village, the largest and oldest school system for Tibetans in India. Set up in 1960, it has over 20000 enrolled Tibetan students from Tibet and outside of it.

*easier to choose sort of singular, unifying narrative. I do think it has a counterproductive repercussion. When I was studying history in exile, my history wasn't there. "My" in the sense that the place where I come from did not exist, did not matter. Amdo is not at all important. So, there is a denial of the entire part of Tibet. Then you are fighting for a cause that you think you are a part of, but you are learning something totally different.*

As elaborated in the earlier chapter, the nation state project in exile is built around a homogenizing narrative of modernity, one which is exclusive and streamlined. Kirti's dissatisfaction, his understanding of the marginalization of regional histories as "*the exile system did not really do justice to us as a new generation*" and his frustration that his "*history wasn't there ... the place that I come from did not exist, did not matter*", highlights the ruptures and tension between the grand narratives and the marginalized 'pasts' that is existent in an increasingly globalized diaspora stepping out of the frameworks of the Tibetan 'nation state project'. Bernal (Bernal) and Alinejad (Alinejad) notes similar ruptures within the Eritrean and Iranian diasporas, between dominant nationalist discourse and alternative perspectives, ruptures that are personified and expressed through spaces in the digital media. As Kirti notes, the images of self-immolations and protests are from the regions of Amdo and Kham [and are appropriated by the Tibetan Government-in-exile to strengthen its depicted of Tibet as a region of 'violated specialness' (Barnett)] but their histories and narratives are silenced within the grand narratives of a Tibetan modern nation state.

Tenzin Choekyi <sup>9</sup> and I conducted out interview in her shared apartment. The Tibetan flag took up a large portion of the wall in her room while pictures of her family in Tibet and friends occupied the other wall. She had erected a makeshift altar, which contained a statue of the Green Tara [an important Bodhisattva or an enlightened being in Tibetan Buddhism] and a portrait of the 14<sup>th</sup> Dalai Lama. When asked she told me that she prays regularly and never forgets to light the lamp or offer fresh water at the altar every day.

*Me: So, when you moved to India and studied in TCV [a Tibetan school in India], did you face difficulties in adjusting to life especially since in exile, we normally speak the U-Tsang dialect while you would speak a different dialect back home in Tibet?*

*Choekyi: I remember having difficulty learning the formal Utsang dialect, using She-Tza [Honorifics ]Back home we just called our parents Ama and Aba while here in India, we have to call them Ama La and Pa La [ the “La” syllable is a connotation of respect used in the U-Tsang dialect] . It was very uncomfortable. It wasn’t hard to learn but I really forgot my own dialect. After eight years, I met my Dad in India at Bodhgaya [ the holiest of all Buddhist pilgrimage sites in India] and I talked to him for an hour and he was like “Whatever you said, I couldn’t understand anything” and that really disappointed me. When I met him, from the station to the hotel it was an hour drive and during that time I was talking and crying the whole time and at the end he couldn’t even understand me.*

Choekyi’s personal conflict of forgetting her own dialect at the expense of learning the one favored by the exilic leadership as the Tibetan language and her inability to converse with

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<sup>9</sup> Tenzin Choekyi is a graduate student at Penn State University. Having met her at a Tibetan Youth Forum event in New York, I learnt that she was from Lithang, a region in Eastern Tibet and came from a nomadic family and later moved to India for her education. In 2010, she moved to the US at the age of 17 years.



her father reflects the regional affiliations and ideational markers that have been flattened and silenced in the pursuit of constructing a nation state that is homogenous, linear and “modern”, one that plays into Kirti’s own account of feeling a loss of his history, that was also regional and as he calls it “ a denial of the entire part of Tibet”

Anand and a number of other researchers ((Anand, (Re) imaginining nationalism : identity and representation in the Tibetan Diaspora of South Asia), (Barnett), (Dreyfus), (Lopez), (Hess)) have argued that the nation building project in exile has frozen the modern Tibetan historical memory of Tibet to one before 1959 i.e. before the modernization of Tibet under China, as cultural milieu to reclaim, a primordial ethnic past that is crucial for building a sense of modern nationalism (Smith). This desire is reflected in Pema’s evocation for the youth and the Tibetan Government- in-exile to save the Tibetan ‘culture’

*Pema: Traditional Tibet is no longer there, and, in some ways, it is good there is modernization, but it has also led to the degradation of our culture. Due to influence from outside, Tibet remains Tibet in a geographical sense, but the traditional Tibet is no longer there. The Chinese have systematically attempted to destroy our culture on all pretexts. Our resilience is then extremely important, and we must attempt to preserve all the good aspects of our traditions. In exile, external influences play a role while inside Tibet, it’s the government itself that is responsible, so that there won’t be anything authentically Tibetan.*

The notion of an “authentic Tibetan” is one that Anand argues is an essential trope of the exile political discourse, as “a time when it is vital to preserve a pure form of this civilization since it is itself under erasure in the original home” (Anand, A guide to Little Lhasa 19). As Tibetans gradually move away from these exilic centers of discourse and gain access to

alternative sources of information and perspectives, these assumptions, of a frozen past and the authenticity it entails that is being preserved in exile, are being subjected to much scrutiny.

Tenzin Yewong, a Columbia University doctoral candidate,<sup>10</sup> and I met thrice over the course of last year. Yewong's research into the material cultural history of China and the Himalayas perked my interest and over the course of our interaction, I asked her to be a respondent for my Independent study and for the purpose of this thesis. Seated in the sunlight behind a charming coffee shop I was able to find at Astoria, New York, our conversations certainly have been one of the bedrocks of this particular project. Her response played out the skepticism she maintained to the notion of an "authentic Tibetan":

*Me: Besides the political tone that receives more expression in the diaspora, do you see other narratives or images that are coming out of the diaspora and Tibet?*

*Yewong: I do notice the differences in language. Most of the Tibetans who come from Tibet have a better grasp of the language than I do. I feel like we always say that it is in exile where we preserve the Tibetan language while in Tibet it is not being allowed to survive but somehow people from Tibet have better Tibetan than we do. I never noticed this in school much but as I went to UWC [United World College] and then later to America, I met these Tibetans, saw shows from Tibet as well as the music, which gave me the idea that our language is better in Tibet.*

Lekey Leidecker<sup>11</sup>, seated in her office in Washington D.C., invited me over for coffee and tea. She is an individual of mixed heritage, the only one among all of my respondents, and

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<sup>10</sup> Tenzin Yewong was born in Nepal and was educated in one of the Tibetan schools in India. She later pursued her High School education from United World College in England and then moved to the United State for her further education. Yewong and I have known each other for two years, having had a number of informal conversations on Tibet and history, and we met at a Tibetan Youth gathering, organized by Machik, an NGO that works inside Tibet.

<sup>11</sup> Lekey Leidecker is an individual of mixed heritage. Her father is a Tibetan while her mother is ethnically German but an American citizen. She was born in the United States and currently is employed at Machik, an NGO that works for social and educational empowerment inside Tibet. I have known her for two years, having met at an

someone who is quite active in her organization's work inside Tibet. As it goes with most interviews, my question regarding differing images between those from inside Tibet and outside, elicited answers that were indicative of a different line of query altogether.

*Me: Do you think that images of rituals or ceremonies from Tibet are more authentic than those that come from India?*

*Chemey: I don't think that makes it any less authentic. I truly don't feel that. Like both of us right now are communicating in English but it does not make us any less Tibetan. I think when you talk about being authentic, it changes from place to place. For example, wearing Pangdhen ["Pangdhen" refers to an apron like clothing that Tibetan women in different parts of Tibet and Bhutan wear as a symbol of their married status]. You don't find it in every place in Tibet. How do we even know it is Tibetan? Even the culture in Tibet is continuously evolving. I don't think we have to be stuck in the old ways. Nothing is going to remain the same. Sticking to the past is not healthy.*

Both responses, Lekey's and Yewong's, are indicative of the distancing of Tibetan diasporans from the grand narratives of the exilic leadership, particularly on two accounts : one, that the "authentic" Tibetan culture and identity is one that is singular and frozen in a past before the formation of the exile community in 1959 and second, that the Tibetan Government-in-exile has the legitimacy to define the contours of this authenticity. Yewong's observation that the Tibetans from Tibet that she met had better mastery over the language than those from exile [the validity of which can be debated but what important here is her observation of this difference] which went counter to what was propagated in exile and Lekey's assertion that the notion of

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student event organized by Machik which later led to us collaborating as organizers for Machik Weekend, an annual gatherings of Tibetans organized by Machik.

being Tibetan is constantly changing and subject to negotiation and it is “not healthy to stick to the past” lays challenges to the authority of both the narratives constructed by the Tibetan-Government-in-exile and to its position as the centers of production of discourse defining the frameworks of Tibetan identity, although one could draw assumptions that her mixed parentage could have also played a role in developing such insights.

Perhaps the strongest assertion of such distancing from the Tibetan Government-in-exile’s construction of a nation state in exile can be found in my conversation with Rinzin Wangmo. Rinzin <sup>12</sup>, with whom I conversed through Skype [an excellent example of the trans-territorial connections that digital forums allow individuals to engage in]. After we spoke about her life and the pathways she had taken to get to this point, her frustrations with the exile community and the centered space that the voices have to exist in echoed in her response.

*Me: So, you spoke about feeling a sense of frustration when you left school and joined your college in Bangalore. Could you elaborate on that?*

*Rinzin: When I was in school and even later, there was never a space for a third voice. You’re living in one narrative and have a singular perspective, a Umay Lam [can be translated into Middle Way Approach, the official policy of the Tibetan Government-in-exile that seeks genuine autonomy for “Ethnic Tibet” within the Chinese polity] since Upper TCV [ her high school in Dharamsala, India] is located in the hub of it all. There are no third voices. The irony is that CTA claims to be a democracy, but do we really give the space for other voices, other than UmayLam and Rangzen [ translation: independence]. We as a democratic society should allow this space and I am not 100% sure we allow this space. We need to reimagine, rethink and*

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<sup>12</sup> Rinzin Wangmo is currently a Teacher’s Assistant at CUNY Graduate School. She was born in Tibet but later, at the age of eight, moved to India where she pursued her education in a Tibetan school located in Dharamsala, moved to Bangalore for her higher education and then continued to pursue her education in the United States. She has been involved in Tibetan activism in New York City and so I requested her to give me an interview.

*reprocess what democracy means to us. One strong person, one Rinpoche [refers to any reincarnated High Buddhist priest] puts their words in our mouths but sometimes we need to think for our own. Even if one does it, do we have the space to express our voices?*

. Rinzin's observation that, although the Tibetan Government-in-exile draws its legitimacy from being a democratic polity, there is a lack of public space for expression of "third voices" besides autonomy or independence, alludes to the political struggle for meaning that has emerged in the Tibetan diasporic population, the former of which is the official polity of the exile leadership, one formulated by the 14<sup>th</sup> Dalai Lama since the 1970s. Her assertion that it was vital to "*reimagine, rethink and reprocess what democracy means to us*" and her skepticism that even if such a process exists would there be a space for its expression is a central concern that cuts to the theme of this Thesis.

Robert Cohen argues that "victim diasporas" (R. Cohen 2) has become the normative way of defining and thinking about the study of diasporas. Diasporas emerge out of dispersals from one land of origin, usually due to a cataclysmic event or events (Quayson and Daswani 2013). According to Anand (Anand, A guide to Little Lhasa 2002), and Hess (Hess), this remains one of the key aspects of the Tibetan Government - in - exile narrative for encouraging the Tibetans in India to retain their stateless identities. The loss of "homeland" remains a key image building narrative of the exilic discourse on Tibetan identity and one that has been presented as such to the outside world. One of the central narratives that emerges out of my interactions with my respondents is this un-identification with the victimhood mentality associated with being refugees (or bearers of that legacy). What I argue and this runs counter to the arguments of Hess, is that with the attempt to escape from the identification of victimhood, Tibetans in the West who

are legal citizens of their host countries <sup>13</sup>are increasingly turning to alternative pathways of identification.

My conversation with Chemi Dolkar <sup>14</sup>, a Tibetan American graduate student at NYU, is illustrative of this tension between identifying oneself as a Tibetan but unable to reconcile with the dominant narrative of victimhood and loss that is aligned with its political characteristic:

*Me: Do you think that the idea of Tibet being a unique place and a unique situation was a larger narrative created by the exile society?*

*Chemi: Yes, I think. The problem I have with the narrative is that it is one of victimization.*

*Maybe that is what I'm resisting. Being victim in the sense that you are not in control of your own situation or your life, to some extent that you are not governing your own constituency, that it is being governed by outside forces, that you are just a recipient of what is happening and you are always waiting for someone to rescue you, for someone to provide welfare for you. Whatever it is, I don't think that it is healthy if you plan to have a freedom struggle, for people self-esteem. I think you should now be able to do things on your own. In the beginning such help was required but now that has become such a strong part of our narrative " Oh Please help us! We have this Buddhist rich culture, so unique but this terrible thing has happened to us, our people are suffering!" This is true but then it's just like why go out to ask for help. I am kind of tired of it.*

Kirti espoused similar frustration with the notion of being a “victim diaspora”,

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<sup>13</sup> Although I have not conducted any interviews in India, the stateless political status of Tibetans roots them much more to the “Tibetan” discourse of the Tibetan Government-in-exile

<sup>14</sup> Chemi Dolkar was born in Nepal but moved to the United State at a young age, so she has practically been raised and educated outside of Nepal and India. We met at a Tibetan marriage in New York, where I was placed next to her at a table, and that how our initial conversation started.

*Kirti: We always hear negative stuff about Tibet, how poor and suffering it is and we see Tibet through this lens. And then we want to see Tibetans as being poor, suffering and when we see these images, we get happy. That satisfies the exile community image of Tibet. But there are Tibetans who are doing well in Tibet, in business and otherwise. The information that the exile community gets is very limited. If they hear an alternative narrative, then they may think its fake news, a news of Chinese propaganda”*

Both accounts, representative of a number of my other respondents, are symbolic of the rupture between a Tibetan identity constructed by the nation state building project and alternative Tibetan identities that are growing in a changing Tibetan diaspora. Kirti’s assertion that images of successful Tibetans in Tibet are seen as Chinese propaganda or counter to the exile community image of Tibet can be analyzed as clashes with the exile government mode of legitimacy, in the sense that they, the Government, claims to represents the alternative model of governance to Chinese modern state project, one that is democratic, “pure” and successful in contrast to Tibetans in Tibet who lack freedom, are losing their cultural identity and are oppressed.

#### *Spaces and voices: Agency in the Digital Forum*

Benedict Anderson has argued that the rise of mass media and literacy allowed the political, cultural and commercial elites of a strengthening imagined communities of nation states to construct the grand narratives that would define these states (Anderson). Such media then constructed consensus from the citizens on ideals of “national unity” which were defined by the elites. Such mass media, such as newspapers and radio were in many ways centralized

apparatuses, with the relationship between them and the population being one of producer and consumer.

Saunders argued that the rapid technological advancements that followed the end of World War II challenged the cultural hegemony of the elites, as Information Communication Technology ( ICT ) rapidly developed creating networks of communications that crossed borders and resisted, successfully, control of these elites (R. Saunders). He further notes that the advent of the internet successfully de-territorialized communications, allowing a near simultaneity between the producing and consuming of information as well as decentering it. As Alinejad work on the Iranian American shows, in today's world of digital communication which has conglomerated all different forms of communications, the relationship between the producers and consumers are no longer 'fixed' but rather it is a dialectical one, with the consumers have agency to choose what they want as well as 'speak back' to the narratives and agendas put out on the digital space (Alinejad) . As Bernal puts it, while discussing the Eritrean diaspora, the Internet is "assists in the development of Habermasian transnational public sphere where marginalized groups can produce and debate narratives of history, culture, democracy and identity" (Bernal 61).

My conversations with Tenzin Sangpo<sup>15</sup>, a naturalized American citizen, who was born in Tibet and grew up in India, represents similar views that my other respondents have shared with me on this particular issue of decentralized nature of Internet as a public space:

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<sup>15</sup> Tenzin Sangpo was born in Tibet (Central Tibet), from where he moved to India at a young age with his family. He later moved with his parents to the United States, where he is currently a Masters student at Rutgers University. I have known Sangpo for a number of years, since we both attended senior High School together.



*Me: So, if we think of Tibetans in exile who lack an intrinsic connection to Tibet but have a connection to Tibet in a digital sense, either through social media or digital forums, have these mediums changed the connection to Tibet?*

*Sangpo: Certainly, it has changed. I think it has made Tibet seem a little more real Tibetans who have never seen Tibet but now for those who grew up in exile, including me, having the ability to know what happening in Tibet gives us a very diverse idea of what Tibet is. Tibet is not the Tibet of old anymore.*

*Me: How important then do you think social media or digital media play in this idea this new connection to Tibet?*

*Y: I guess it played an indispensable role. In 2009 I only had FB, but the information was faster and almost curated, where I could choose whom to follow or whose posts to read. That is the power of social media for me where to an extent I do have the power to curate whom I listen to. These days I don't feel like listening to much exile news because it's all political news and it's the same news. I want other kinds of news, information and so I follow artists and musicians on social media. It's just about finding my own space, my own tribe, people who think in other ways and then seeing how they are doing it.*

His assertion that the access to social media allowed him to know a new diverse Tibet, one that is different from 'old Tibet', is a break from Pema's earlier assertion of her desire to retain a traditional Tibet which is in danger from modernization. His last statement on the plurality of sources on information, as the ability to "curate whom I listen to" and the expression of his agency to avoid "exile news because it's all political news" and his desire to "finding my own space, my own tribe" is indicative of the potential of digital spaces for the

construction of alternative “imagined communities” through the ability to foster connections across borders and outside of the framework of the nation state project in exile. It plays into the notion of decentralized and demonopolized digital media access, where one’s agency can be expressed in defining one’s transnational connections.

Rinzin’s description of her presence on social media is highly indicative of this decentralized and pluralized nature of the digital forum, particularly in the context of exercising one’s ability to choose sources of and express one’s own narratives and consequently, the potential for such spaces of choice offered by it.

*Me: Do you have an active social media presence?*

*Rinzin: Yes. I am quite active on social media. It’s a great platform for expressing oneself.*

*Me: So why and how do you express yourself on social media platforms?*

*Rinzin: Social media is a great tool to reach out to your audience while staying in the comfort of your home. I use twitter, FB and Instagram but I use them all differently. I feel Instagram is something the younger generation uses for sharing their personal pictures or videos while Facebook is a much larger platform for doing the same as well as organizing activities and events. I prefer Twitter for more serious conversations because in general I feel that the discussions are more serious, since the tweets are limited to 150 characters and so most discussions are rather brief and to the point.*

Similarly to Sangpo’s assertions, Rinzin’s statement that social media platforms allows her to connect to her audience from her home indicates at the potential of digital forums to create virtual communities that are as imagined as Anderson’s construct of imagined communities,

since both entails individuals and communities that share commonalities of experience and ideas but have in most probability never physically met each other. In particular, her observation that different forums of the digital platforms such as Twitter, Facebook and Instagram, allows her to diversify her use of social media , assigning different roles and expectations based on her perceived nature of each, is vital in the context of understanding how the digital landscape is decentralized, pluralistic and expressive of individual agency and choice.

I was able to conduct an interview with Tenzin Yewong and Tenzin Dechen<sup>16</sup>, a resident of Boston. I had already interviewed both of them multiple times in the past, but this was the first that we three met together. Seated in a small breakfast joint with cups of coffee, one they had specifically chosen due to its distance from the Tibetan community located in Jackson Heights, New York , since they wanted to smoke, away from prying Tibetan elderly eyes and judgment, we shared an hour and a half long discussion, interspersed by orders of pancakes and what Yewong called “smoke breaks”. An additional layer of ‘security’ from such elders was asking me to buy them the cigarettes, since a Tibetan woman doing the same would be seen in much harsher light than if a male was found buying one.

*Me: Since both of you mentioned earlier that you have strong social media presence, what do you think of the narratives and stories put forward by Tibetans in these digital forums?*

*Yewong: I believe that social media plays a great role in allowing Tibetans in exile and from Tibet to express themselves. For example, the music of Phur [a very popular song in the diaspora which was produced from Tibet] and all these new artists are coming up through digital*

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<sup>16</sup> Tenzin Dechen is a Boston resident, who has known Yewong since their school days in India as well as studied together at United World College in London. We met at a “Tibetan Student Retreat” event which she had organized, and I had registered to participate

platforms. They are trying to do the same thing, that is tell the modern Tibetan story. I don't see myself or anyone else so different from them. So yeah, in that way, it's more like we are just the same. They are trying to take authority of their own stories and not afraid to criticize their community. In our exile society there are different expectations sets by Government-in-exile on what makes you Tibetan and these songs respond to those whereas in Phur, it's not about being Tibetan in a fixed way. The language is Tibetan, but you can be anyone. I have been following this singer called Tibchick on Instagram whose songs are about falling in love and she talks like me. My Tibetan is not like "standard" and she herself talks like that. When I speak Tibetan, I speak with an Amdo accent which comes with its slangs and number of abbreviations and some people look at it, they look at it as ghetto Tibetan. In her songs, she talks about having no fear since like hair regrows, you will also get your documents [referring to political asylum in Europe]. So that like throwing it out there and it captures our current reality

Dechen: There is a Tibetan photographer that I follow on Instagram who studied in London and now is in Lhasa. Her images are political in a sense where she makes fun of how people exoticize Tibet. It's such a powerful work and I can see how people in, and outside Tibet are trying to find their own voices and they want to tell the Tibetan story on their own terms. I can totally connect to these kinds of stuff.

Me: Earlier you mentioned that when you went to the UK for High School and met Tibetans from Tibet, then it made Tibet a lot more real for you, away from the narratives of loss or suffering. You relate to those stories of Tibetans that you met, and it seems more genuine to you.

Dechen: I think whatever the Tibetan Government - in - exile says and their narratives, there is an element of truth to it, since mostly they are made by Tibetans who have come from Tibet in the

*past. It's the reality of our grandparents or parents and they have experienced those loss and suffering. I don't deny their narratives but in today's world, there are new experiences and narratives also.*

*Yewong: By modern story I mean a secular national culture. That is what makes this pop culture modern because until recently culture has been about religious but now, we are trying to find a secular culture so that is what makes it modern.*

The transformative power of the digital space is not just in its decentralized and demonopolized access to information but rather, as argued, the ability to construct spaces of dissent, discussion and expression of pluralistic narratives, allowing netizens to tell their own story and create their own networks while at the same time, challenge official grand narratives and “collectively struggle to narrate history, frame debates and see to form shared understanding beyond control of political authorities or the commercial censorship of mass media” (R. Saunders 9). Yewong’s feelings of shared connections to the new artists that she follows on social media are due to the fact that like her, they all are telling the “*modern Tibetan story*”, one which I would argue is for a pluralistic account of histories, a decentering of ideals of “belongingness as a Tibetan” and space where one can speak “Amdo accent” or “Ghetto Tibetan”. The ability to “*tell their own story*” is key to this digital Tibetan diaspora which allows for the construction of multiple shifting imagined communities and connections in contrast to the unitary, fixed concept of a Tibetan imagined community of a Tibetan exilic nation state, one that is not fixed as an ontological whole through the constraints of fixed imperatives such as language, traditions, etc.

There is a question of the reason for such process of decentralization of ideals and narratives and the increasingly plural voices that are emerging through various platforms, digital

or otherwise, in the Tibetan diaspora. I argue that as Tibetans in diaspora move away from exilic centers of discourse, physically and ideologically, whether it be within India or Nepal or increasingly to the western countries, they adopt hybrid identities [most of my respondents are Tibetan – Americans and received varying degrees of education in the United States], the importance of which is that it allows them the conceptual tools and space to challenge the homogenized description of exile society and its history. Jennifer Brinkerhoff, in her case study of the internet chat forum known as “TibetBoard”, argues that “Tibetan diasporans use TibetBoard to negotiate their identity, questioning their traditional home culture as they embrace values, experience and culture from their host lands” (Brinkerhoff 77)

When I asked Tenzin Choekyi about what led her to question the frameworks of her identity as a Tibetan, after a long pause, she replied

*“In India, we are all living together in schools and settlements, so we don’t really question our identities. All we do is listen to a lot of Rangzen [Independence] but we never really think about who we are but in America, I started thinking about all of that, a lot more individualism. Whatever they said was right, I never questioned what the teachers taught us. Coming to America, you have to question everything”*

Rinzin Wangmo was more evocative of her frustration with the education system in Tibetan schools and the critical capacity she developed once she moved away from these exilic centers.

*Me: As you moved to Bangalore [metropolitan city in India] for your higher education and then to the US, did you attempt to renegotiate your identity as a Tibetan?*

*Rinzin: Yes, I certainly did in a big way. When you were in school, the teachers will like a big store of knowledge, with the emphasis on memorizing whatever they taught us. We never*

*questioned what we were taught or our identities as Tibetans. When I came to the United States and studied here, everything was questioned. I did not have to take a book just for reading it, but I had to critically question it and see whether I liked it or not. My own idea of being a Tibetan has gone through so many changes as American education encourages individualism.*

In both accounts as well as in the cases of my other respondents such as Kirti who moved away to the United States or Dechen and Yewong who pursued their High school education in United World College and then in the United States, the commonality of developing the capacity and the space to question one's identity as a Tibetan after leaving their respective Tibetan schools and coming to the United States is representative of the relationship between the emerging ruptures in the homogenized narratives of the exile leadership and the distancing of its diasporic population from its centers of discourse. The virtual and transnational community that is developing in the digital landscape with respect to the Tibetan diaspora is representative of both the sense of 'nomadic' nature of diasporas or as McGranahan describes it "one of lived impermanence vis-à-vis the world" (McGranahan 13) but also of escape from the rigidity of centralized, homogenized and linear frameworks of being a Tibetan, physically as well as ideologically, in the case of the Tibetan diaspora.

This is by no means an exhaustive work on the narratives of the Tibetan diaspora, because as my respondent Kirti Kyab mentions “*stories and experiences always change and never are the same*”. What I sought to attempt is to lay out , what I believe, is the emerging network and array of voices, histories and identities that have been long silenced either by the West through its orientalist fascination with a certain idea of “Tibet” or by the Tibetan Government-in-exile through its nation state building project in exile.

“Tibet” and the notion of “Tibetaness” is one that is constantly being negotiated, challenged and changing. The Tibetan diaspora is no longer static, both in an ideological sense and physical sense, with an incremental rise in the movement of the population from India and Nepal to the West, primarily for economic reasons. The Foreigners Act of 1946 and Registration of Foreigners Act of 1949, effectively terms Tibetans as “foreigners” in India while its citizenship laws for Tibetans grants citizenship opportunities to only those born in India between 1950 and 1987, effectively barring a large section of the population from government employment, land acquirement and other opportunities. Therefore, one does see the allure of the west, where immigration can translate into citizenship. Therefore the Tibetan Government-in-exile, as Hess argues, has strived to maintain the population in India, discouraging them from going to the West, on the basis that being a refugee is correlated to being a Tibetan (Hess). Such measures are required since the basis of the Tibetan Government-in-exile existence is as a governing polity over a diaspora population whilst in exile so a receding population would undermine its legitimacy.



But in reality, such movements continue to occur. Therefore, as the Tibetan diaspora starts to spread out and more importantly, the younger generation who are either born in the West or educated as such, start to lose identification with the grand narratives of “Tibet” and its construction of a nation state in exile, absorbing hybrid identities or as Chemey calls them “being globalized citizens” as well as conceptual tools outside of those portrayed by the Tibetan exilic centers. The images of the Tibetan Nation State are not born in a vacuum as are most other historical processes but rather has precedents in the western construction of Tibet from centuries past. The Tibetan diaspora have reacted against as well as appropriated these images in the own pursuits of agency and narratives, whether it be for the aspiration for a nation state or identifications with their own history, culture and society. I have argued throughout this Thesis that from an appropriation of these images by the exile leadership, we now see emerging alternative narratives, images and expression of identity that fundamentally challenge the legitimacy of such nation state narratives, effectively stepping out of the rigidity of methodological nationalism as personified by the nation state building project in exile. Anand argues that (Anand, (Re) imaginining nationalism : identity and representation in the Tibetan Diaspora of South Asia 2000) the Tibetan nationalism in exile is dependent, beside other factors, on the community’s desire for a nation in the future. The political debates within the diaspora for or against the Tibetan Government - in-exile led policy of Middle Way Approach (genuine autonomy within the Chinese State) has further complicated the association of the Tibetan diaspora with the idea of a nation state. As the community further spreads out, the identification with the Tibetan Government- in - exile defined imagination of the Tibetan nation state will undergo further ruptures as Tibetans increasingly identify with regional loyalties and across multiple strands of linguistic, cultural and historical trajectories, that may or may not be

contained within the narrow definition defined by the exilic leadership of “Tibet” as a nation state.

I have attempted to layout the digital landscape and the Tibetan Diaspora engagement with it as a potential space for the expressions of such alternative narratives and formation of virtual imagined communities, effectively decentering the Tibetan Government-in-exile as a center for production of such ideational discourses. Although the Tibetan Government - in - exile does not exert direct control over the digital space, like most nation states do in varying degrees, there are still cultural and ideological barriers that hinder the emergence of the digital diaspora as a true transnational public space. Foundational issues such as questioning the Dalai Lama, or his policies have received backlash from various sections of the digital as well as physical diaspora. The Tibetan digital diaspora is still at its budding phase. Consequently, there are also avenues of distrust among the Tibetan diaspora with regards to the nature of digital landscapes. As Rinzin notes, *“There is another part, the bad part. With regards to American politics and in other places, there is hate crime. Within the Tibetan society there is a danger of social media being a forum of rumors for regional and sectarian politics and chaos creating agenda.”* Recent events have led to the digital landscape being branded as a social evil, from the rise of hate speech, unverified news , invasion of privacy, allegations of external interferences in a nation’s governance with the alleged Russian interference in US elections being the most prominent and it’s use as a medium to cause social anxiety and rupture. It is also true that the digital forums have also allowed social and political elites and groups to further extend the reaches of their control and narratives, as Bernal argues the Eritrean state has attempted to do with its diasporic population (Bernal) or which can be observed with the spread of populist and / or state centric agendas whether it be in the United States , Germany , Britain, Hungary, etc. in terms of

Islamophobia and migration or in countries like China, Saudi Arabia, etc. where there are high degree of state control and use of digital forums to propagate the claims and legitimacy of the regime among its citizenry.

Yet I have attempted to define these digital forums in terms of a landscape that holds potential for the expression for voices, narratives and histories that have been flattened to produce exclusionary and unitary definition of identity, culture, history, etc. Within the case of the Tibetan diaspora, as it moves away from exilic centers of discourse, physically and ideologically, and experiences greater freedom for cross cultural and cross border interactions, the space for digital diaspora for alternative narratives and expression of agency will grow and change. McGranahan argues that “historical arrests fixes the linear truth of official history... spaces are secured for officially authorized truths only” (McGranahan 26). The central premise of this Thesis was to argue that the arena of digital media and its transnational, decentralized and pluralistic nature could serve as a potential space for such ‘unofficial’ truths, as the Tibetan diaspora speaks back to the past constructions of their identities and histories. Expanding this notion, it does provide crucial glimpses in terms of its larger global implications for reimagining the notion of a globalized, pluralistic landscape. The Westphalian and the post-colonial blueprint of nation states was drawn on the basis of print media being used to bolster and propagate the claims and narratives of elite (Anderson) or revolutionary groups that defined the process of negotiation of the citizenry / population with its imagined community. Even within social structures and movements, whether it be religion, cultures or mass movements, certain sections of these groups have used print media to define the agenda and nature of and for the collective, whether it be to preserve the status quo or to change it. There has been very little space for

“comments”, to use a social media allegory, from those who were reading or listening to these “posts” from above.

The digital landscape, as I personally view it, is then a phenomena that was not anticipated by the print capitalism that Anderson talks about in his conception of the nation state’s imagined community (Anderson). It allows its users to connect across borders, intervening at crucial ruptures with such homogenizing and top down narratives , through their ability to form decentralized , pluralistic virtual imagined communities through a process of constant negotiation and change that allows them to be consumers, challengers as well as producers of such different narratives, histories and stories that otherwise would have been buried, silenced and forgotten.

## APPENDIX: The Voices in Between

This Thesis is built and structured around and on the voices of my respondents who, like me, are all part of the Tibetan diaspora and constantly attempt to define their association to it and to the larger notion of Tibet as home in their own unique and diverse ways. Not all of the 16 Tibetans that I conversed with have been voiced in this Thesis but drawing upon the insight from my Advisor, Prof. John Fousek who made a significant argument that acknowledging the contribution of these Tibetans should not only be limited to a “Dedication” page, I briefly introduce the respondents and the nature of my relationship with them. All of my interviews were audio recorded while my questions were not picked from a prepared set but rather were developed as the interviews progressed.

- 1. Tenzin Chemi:** Chemi is a current graduate student at New York University and is born in India, where she lives with her husband and child. Like me, she is a Stateless individual in legal terms, having no citizenship of a recognized country. She worked for the Tibetan Government in exile for seven years before coming to the United States for her education. We have known each other well for the past two years, having travelled to the United States together from India, lived together at International House in New York where we conducted our interview and have developed a close friendship.
- 2. Dorjee Pasang:** A Tibetan restaurant owner in Queens, New York, Dorjee immigrated to the United States after studying and working in India. He was born in India and later moved to the United States in his late 30s. A “self-made entrepreneur” as he describes

himself, Dorjee's struggles within a foreign land trying to set up a business but retaining strong ties to the Tibetan Government in exile were what interested me in his story. He and I spoke for an hour at his restaurant.

- 3. Pema Tsamchoe, Ngawang Yonten, Kalsang Dechen, Dawa Dolma:** These four individuals are part of one family, and I interviewed them once all together in Queens, New York City. I have known them for almost a year, having met them through a Tibetan marriage. What makes their story interesting, beside the intergenerational framework, is that all of them [except for the grandmother Pema who was born in Tibet] were born in India but later found ways to unite the family in the United States as its citizens. Pema is the mother of Ngawang who has two children, Kalsang and Dawa. I did not interview his wife because I felt an immediate family would be a good way to trace their narratives. Pema and Ngawang, who lived in India felt very strongly about Tibet as a home, with the Tibetan Government in exile whereas the elder and younger daughters [they were teenagers] felt Tibet was not an exclusive part of their identity and they saw it as only one in their understanding of human identity as a globalized one.

Uptil this point I have introduced the respondents whose voices did not occur in this particular Thesis. The rest of the passage contains details of my respondents whose voices did appear and my relationship with them

- 4. Pema Dolma:** She was born in Tibet but now is a naturalized American citizen and is one of the two respondents who were above the age of 50. A former member of parliament in

the Tibetan Government-in-exile and currently working in the Tibetan section of Voice of America news station in Washington D.C, is the mother in law of my cousin and that is how I got to initially know her story. We met thrice over the course of two months at her home in East Falls Church, Virginia where she hosted me during these periods.

5. **Tenzin Chemey:** Chemey is a naturalized American citizen, having moved to the country from her birthplace in Nepal and currently a graduate student at New York University. I have known her for the past two years, having met through events organized by Machik which is a non-profit organization that works on education and social empowerment in Tibet and have collaborated with her on a number of events. Like most of my respondents, we share a commonality of having lived a large part of our lives outside of our community and being uncomfortable with exclusionary narratives of Tibetan identity and history. Since she travelled once a week from Connecticut to NYU, we met thrice over the course of two months in New York.
  
6. **Chemi Dolkar:** Chemi Dolkar is also a current graduate student at New York University and is a naturalized American citizen, having been born in Nepal but spent almost all of her life in the United States. Like a number of my acquaintances and friends in New York, we met at a Tibetan marriage and later kept our correspondence through Facebook and later met over coffee at various cafes in New York for our interviews.
  
7. **Tenzin Choekyi:** Choekyi is a naturalized American, currently studying in Penn State University. She was born in Tibet and belonged to a nomadic family but later travelled to

India to complete her education in a Tibetan school, far away from her parents who remains in Tibet. Like Tenzin Chemey [the second one], we met at a Machik organized event where her stories of her life in Tibet as a nomad interested me greatly and we kept up our correspondence over the course of two years. We met twice at her residence in University Place, Pennsylvania.

**8. Lekey Leidecker:** A Tibetan of ‘mixed’ parentage, Lekey was born in the United States where she completed her education and now works at Machik in Washington D.C. We met at a conference two years organized by George Washington University which discussed alternative pathways of defining autonomy for Tibetans in Tibet, instead of just the one framed by the Government-in-exile. Her desire to help out the Tibetan people in Tibet yet her feelings of being denied her Tibetan identity due to her parental heritage in varying degrees by the community in exile led me to seek her out as my respondent. Our interviews all took place in D.C itself.

**9. Kirti Kyab:** Kirti and I have known each other for the better part of almost ten years, having been to High School and then Under graduation together. He was born in Amdo, Tibet but received his education in one of the Tibetan schools in India and later pursued his graduation from the United States, where he is currently employed but is a Stateless individual. He is highly critical of the Tibetan Government in exile, its nation state history having seen his being silenced in it and sees himself as a “globalized, liberal person”. We met thrice over the course of three months, twice in D.C and once in Boston.



**10. Tenzin Yewong:** Yewong was born in Nepal, educated in one of the Tibetan schools in India and later pursued her education in the England and then in the United States, where is currently pursuing her PhD from Columbia University. She and I have known each other for almost two years having met at an Machik organized event and developing an interest in each other research interests [she is studying material cultural history of China and the Himalayas]. Her narratives are central to this Thesis which have been developed due to her experiences of having lived in many different places and settings as well as having frequent close interactions with Tibetans who travel abroad from Tibet to the West for education as Chinese citizens.

**11. Tenzin Dechen:** A close friend of Yewong and one with whom I conducted a joint conversation with Yewong, Dechen and Yewong have had identical educational journeys. Born in India, she went to a Tibetan school before going to England for her education alongside Yewong and then completing here education in the United States, where she is now an American citizen. An active organizer of events for Tibetan College students, I was interested by her contribution to a Tibetan Oral History Project centered around Tibetans in Boston which she organized alongside her friends. We met twice in Boston and the final time in New York with Yewong, where the both of them insisted on meeting in a non-tibetan neighborhood because they wanted to smoke

**12. Rinzin Wangmo:** Currently a Teacher's Assistant at CUNY Graduate School, Rinzin was born in India and later moved to Bangalore and then to the United States for her education. She is now a naturalized American citizen and one who is highly involved in

Tibetan activism as well as promoting in through various social media channels. We conversed over Skype with my interest in her story geared towards her active public role for the cause of Tibet yet her highly skeptical view of the Tibetan Government in exile, which, along with the exilic leadership, she maintains is suppressing alternative pathways to a future of Tibet.

**13. Tenzin Sangpo:** A naturalized American citizen, Sangpo was born in India but moved to the United States after completing his school in a Tibetan school. We have known each other since those days. Probably one of the most, if not the most, prolific users of social media forums of all my respondents in terms of sharing his ideas of pictures or trying to mobilize his friends and acquaintances for a Tibet rally, which he also frequents. His role as an activist and one that deeply thinks about his identity and Tibet interested me and we met twice over the period of more than three months at this residence at Rutgers University, Jersey.

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