
Exile meets homeland: politics, performance, and authenticity in the Tibetan diaspora

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Abstract. Tibetans are often imagined as authentic, pure, and geographically undifferentiated, but Tibetan identity formation is, in fact, varied and deeply inflected by national location and transnational trajectories. In this paper I examine the frictions of encounter between three groups of Tibetans who arrived in the USA around the same time, but who differ in their relationships to the homeland. The numerically dominant group consists of refugees who left Tibet in 1959 and of exiles born in South Asia; second are Tibetans who left Tibet after the 1980s for India and Nepal; and third are those whose routes have taken them from Tibet directly to the United States. Whereas the cultural authority claimed by long-term exiles derives from the notion of preserving tradition outside of Tibet, that of Tibetans from Tibet is based on their embodied knowledge of the actual place of the homeland. Their struggles over authenticity, which play out in everyday practices such as language use and embodied reactions to staged performances of ‘traditional culture’, call for an understanding of diaspora without guarantees. In this paper I use habitus as an analytic for exploring the ways in which identity is inscribed on and read off of bodies, and the political stakes of everyday practices that produce fractures and fault lines.

“Oil and water cannot mix
Tibetans and Chinese cannot mix ...
We are Buddhists
You are its destroyers
We are yak meat-eaters
You are dog meat-eaters
We are tsampa-eaters
You are worm-eaters”

Red Chinese Robber Gang by Techung, a California-based Tibetan artist⁽¹⁾

A diasporic story

In February 2004 the board of directors of a regional Tibetan Association received an anonymous letter, written in bright red capital letters, accusing one of its members of “faxing documents to the Chinese government” about Tibetans in the USA, and of receiving hundreds of thousands of dollars for his ‘spying’ activities. The accused, who I will call Tenzin, is a Tibetan man in his mid-thirties. Raised in a village in the Tibet Autonomous Region of China, he fled to India after participating in Tibetan independence protests in the late 1980s. Not long after arriving in Dharasmala, India, seat of the Dalai Lama and the Tibetan government in exile, he was picked by lottery to participate in the Tibet US Resettlement Project. In the USA he has been actively involved in the local Tibetan community. He also communicates regularly by telephone with family and friends in Tibet, remaining up to date on the latest trends in music and the changing economy of his home village.

Despite having been naturalized as a US citizen, Tenzin has not returned to Tibet because of lingering fear for his family members and because of the fact that they

⁽¹⁾ ‘rGya-dmar Jagtshogs’ (lyrics in Tibetan, my translation) *Courage (snying-stobs)* 2002, track 9, mp3.com, San Diego, CA.

have already been made to suffer for his actions; one brother was jailed for six years. When I met his elderly mother in Tibet, she pleaded, “please, tell him not to come back for another couple of years at least” even though she longed to see her son after a separation of more than a decade. The family’s experience is both tragic and exemplary of the type of political repression to which the transnational Tibet Movement has called attention. The fact that he is a political refugee, together with his dedication to improving conditions in Tibet, suggest that Tenzin should be a poster child for the Tibet Movement, held out by the community as a model for others. Why, then, has he instead been suspected and accused (more than once) of being a spy for China?

Significantly, Tenzin is one of the very few Tibetans in the area to have spent a good part of his life in Tibet, rather than in India or Nepal. To at least a few Tibetans from India, the fact that he is from Tibet, is very active in the local organization, and has at times refused to have his photograph posted on community websites is ‘proof’ enough that he is a spy. More generally, his strong ties to the homeland, and the way the homeland is inscribed on his body, make him the object of derision and suspicion.

Migrants’ stories have theoretical power beyond their own uniqueness (Lawson, 2000). Tenzin’s story alerts us to some of the political and cultural contradictions of the Tibetan diaspora which emerge around the issues of migrants’ roots and routes. Like other groups of transnational immigrants, Tibetans in the USA “forge and sustain multistranded social relations that link together their societies of origin and settlement” (Basch et al, 1994, page 6). Yet the structure of Tibetan immigration to the USA is such that the ‘society of origin’ to which the vast majority of Tibetans have immediate ties is in South Asia, not in Tibet. Tibetan immigrants in the USA can be divided into three groups vis-à-vis their embodied experience of Tibet and their immediate society of origin. First, the largest group is comprised of those who either left Tibet in 1959 or were born in South Asian refugee communities: for convenience, I refer to them here as ‘exile Tibetans’. Second, a smaller number, who I refer to as ‘new arrivals’, were born and raised in Tibet, but left for India or Nepal in the 1980s and 1990s. Third, the smallest group are those whose routes have taken them directly from Tibet to the United States; I call them ‘Tibetans from Tibet’.⁽²⁾

In this paper I examine struggles over the authenticity of everyday embodied practices as well as of staged performances of ‘Tibetan culture’, which fracture the imagined unity of a seamless diasporic community. Marked as ‘Tibetan’ in distinct ways by the varied national locations through which they have traveled, Tibetans also draw on different strategies for establishing their authority to speak as Tibetan. Tibetans from Tibet draw on the embodied knowledge and experience of homeland, whereas ‘exile Tibetans’ seek to recenter authentic Tibet-ness away from the physical territory of the homeland and toward other geographical spaces—particularly Dharamsala. Exile Tibetans are numerically dominant in the USA, and it is their views that set the discursive terrain. However, their authority is challenged by the Tibetans from Tibet whom they encounter. The project of recentering the locus of authenticity is thus unstable, and requires an enormous amount of everyday cultural work.

⁽²⁾ This categorization of Tibetans vis-à-vis their route of migration to the USA is not meant to be absolute. For example, neither exiles from India who have spent years in Taiwan, nor Tibetans who have returned from India to Tibet (both of which are beyond the scope of this paper), fit neatly into these categories. However, the larger point about different sites of subject formation and the importance of routes still holds true in these cases as well.

Diaspora, identity, and habitus

Responding to celebrations of diaspora and of border crossings as metaphors of emancipation, transgression, and subversion, critical geographers have suggested rethinking diaspora as being ‘without guarantees’, to borrow from Hall (1986). That is, a diasporic condition may indeed be subversive or transgressive, but it is not necessarily so. Furthermore, diasporic identities and communities are always multiple and contested (Mitchell, 1997; Nagar, 1997; Nagel, 2001). All of this is quite evident in the lyrics of *Red China Robber Gang* by Techung, a popular California-based Tibetan singer. In exuding a sense of defiance and pride in Tibetan identity, the song also plays directly into existing Western stereotypes of Chinese as alien, dog-eating, and/or Communist Others. This demonization of the Chinese is often extended by Tibetans reared in South Asia to Tibetans who have grown up in Tibet—who are suspected of being ‘brainwashed’ by China.

The need to recognize that a diasporic condition is not always already politically progressive is acute in the Tibetan case, because of the way in which the diasporic struggle has been structured by the Cold War and by the conflation of Chinese-ness with Communism. The CIA’s covert support for the Tibetan resistance army, Chushi Gangdrug, from 1956 until 1972 grew directly out of the Cold War project to contain Communism (Conboy and Morrison, 2002; Knaus, 1999). These geopolitical entanglements have made for strange political bedfellows; former Republican Senator Jesse Helms, known for his distaste for what he called “Red China” and the “barbarous, Communist Chinese government”, was one of the earliest and most vocal supporters of the Tibetan cause in the US government (Collinson, 2001). In an ironic twist, performances in the 1970s by the Dharamsala-based Tibetan Institute of Performing Arts were heckled vociferously by audiences in Washington DC, Madison, and Berkeley, who were ideologically supportive of, if not well-informed about, the Communist project in China (Calkowski, 1997). The partial structuring of the internal politics of Tibetan communities by this field of global geopolitics makes their dynamics all the more important to tease apart.

Of course, Tibetan communities have always been cross cut by multiple identities. Nevertheless, practices such as long-distance trade and pilgrimage gave a relative coherence to Tibetan cultural identity, including a sense of shared history, a common literary language, aspects of genealogy, myth, and religion, and folkloric notions such as Tibetans as eaters of *tsampa* (ground barley flour) (Kapstein, 1998). However, the ‘imagined community’ of Tibet as a *nation* and the belief that Tibetans should thus have a unique nation-state (Anderson, 1983), emerged strongly only in the early 20th century, after the 13th Dalai Lama fled to India and then to Mongolia after British and Chinese invasions, and especially after the 1951 incorporation of Tibet into the People’s Republic of China (PRC).

Prior to this century, Tibetans conceived of themselves primarily in relation to sectarian and regional affiliations. Thus, the term *Bod-pa*, now a general term for ‘Tibetan’, was used only in reference to nonnomadic inhabitants of Central Tibet (Stoddard, 1994). Even in the 1970s the Tibetan government in exile worked hard to forge a national Tibetan identity to supercede divisive regional and sectarian identifications (Nowak, 1984). In exile communities today there are still undercurrents of regional divisiveness, but, like the ‘Kham for the Khampas’⁽³⁾ movements of the 1930s and the history of the Kham-oriented Chushi Gangdrug resistance movement (McGranahan, 2005), they are largely papered over in the transnational nation-building

⁽³⁾ Kham, Amdo, and Central Tibet (U-Tsang) are the three main regions of cultural Tibet; Khampas are people of Kham, a region of eastern Tibet.

project of the Tibetan government in exile and of the Tibet Movement. Tibetans in exile insist today that, “For more than two thousand years, Tibet ... existed as a sovereign nation” (<http://www.tibet.net/diir/eng/enviro/overview/>). As Renan (1939 [1882], page 190) has observed, “To forget and ... to get one’s history wrong, are essential factors in the making of a nation.”

In addition to regional affiliation, axes of identification that were socially relevant both in the 1950s and today (in diaspora as well as in Tibet) include gender, age, class, and social status (aristocrats and commoners), religious and sectarian affiliation, and the lay–monastic divide. However, these differ from the contestation of identities that are the specific focus of this paper: the varying routes to the US diaspora through different national locations, and the consequent forms of identification with homeland. The latter are the product of the diasporic process itself, and thus constitute a newly formed axis of struggle and consent. This axis is not, however, independent of other axes of identification, particularly that of region, as I discuss below. Though these distinctions are relatively new and are not as formalized in linguistic categories as are other types of identifications, they are nevertheless social facts that permeate everyday practices and struggles around recognition.

The importance of everyday practice, and the ways in which the ‘authenticity’ of Tibetan identities is both inscribed on and read off of bodies, suggests habitus as a productive analytical frame. Bourdieu (1990) emphasizes that habitus is a set of ‘durable dispositions’, a kind of historical sedimentation in and of the body: “The habitus, a product of history, produces individual and collective practices ... it ensures the active presence of past experiences which, deposited in each organism in the form of schemes of perception, thought and action, tend to guarantee the ‘correctness’ of practices and their constancy over time, more reliably than all formal rules and explicit norms” (page 53). Habitus mediates between places and selves; it is the way in which bodies bear traces of the places in which they have dwelled. Casey (2001, page 688) describes these traces as being “continually laid down in the body, sedimenting themselves there and thus becoming formative of its specific somatography.”

Despite the remarkable influence that this concept has had on contemporary understandings of culture and society in critical human geography (Cresswell, 2002, page 379), habitus has been relatively neglected in geographical studies of diaspora and transnationalism (but see Bauder, 2005; Friedmann, 2002; Kelly and Lusi, 2006; McKay, 2001). However, Kelly and Lusi (2006) write that “the habitus of Filipino immigrants is constructed not just within a geographically contiguous space, but also through transnational linkages with their place of origin”, a useful observation for understanding how Tibetan immigrants, who imagine that they should share a set of unique and recognizable characteristics with all other Tibetans, nevertheless have divergent embodied, durable dispositions, constructed through transnational linkages with different national locations. The variations in habitus encounter the expectation of similarity and recognizability, leading to the frictions explored here.

Sedimentations in the body include the deployment of particular languages and of words within a language, as well as taken-for-granted dispositions such as intonation, gestures, and ‘taste’, appreciation for or reaction against particular styles, such as of dress, food, and staged performances of ‘authentic’ song and dance. Habitus is durable, but not eternal. As a sedimentation of past determinations it has a certain inertia which confers “upon practices their relative autonomy with respect to the external determinations of the immediate present” (Bourdieu, 1990, page 56). On the other hand, change—within limits of continuity—can occur through a dialectical confrontation between habitus and social field; this happens when “dispositions encounter conditions (including fields) different from those in which they were constructed

and assembled”, such as in a rapidly changing society (2002, pages 29–31). This describes the Tibetan diaspora in the USA, in which the habitus of Tibetans from Tibet, of Tibetans from exile, and of those who have experienced both are unmoored from their social fields and places of sedimentation and encounter each other. Thus, I do not argue in what follows that the community fractures described here are fixed forever, but rather try to capture the present moment of confrontation and negotiation.

After a brief overview of the Tibetan diaspora, I trace the experience of ‘new arrivals’ such as Tenzin from India to the USA. Next, I turn to two key arenas of struggle over authenticity: language choice and staged ‘cultural’ performances, including embodied reactions of appreciation or distaste for certain types of performances. Of importance here is not only the fact that dispositions, mannerisms, and appreciation of style are different but that each set of dispositions is understood as the only way to be authentically Tibetan. After this I examine different strategies of establishing cultural authority, and, finally, look at the political stakes in seemingly inconsequential matters of taste.

The multisited ethnography (Hannerz, 2003; Marcus, 1995) presented here draws upon participant observation and a series of semistructured interviews with Tibetans living in Lhasa, Tibet, northern California, and the Denver metro area of Colorado. By participant observation, I refer to attendance at picnics, meetings, parties, discussions, and performances, and visits in private homes. The approach is grounded in the understanding that “unearth[ing] what the group takes for granted” (Herbert, 2000, page 551) requires extensive interactions and familiarity with social setting. Interviews and unstructured conversations and interactions were conducted primarily in Tibetan, and, less frequently, in Chinese.

The Tibetan diaspora in brief

After the failed uprising in Lhasa in 1959, roughly 80 000 Tibetans followed the 14th Dalai Lama to exile in South Asia. Some lived in towns such as Kathmandu, Delhi, Mussoorie, and Dharamsala, and others settled in agricultural and handicraft settlements established by the government in exile with the help of Western aid organizations. After the peak years of exodus from 1959 to 1961, the borders of Tibet were effectively closed (Nowak, 1984, page 9). The political isolation of China meant that there was very little contact between Tibetans inside Tibet and the refugee community for more than two decades.

Only after the death of Mao, the beginning of reform, and the then Chinese Party Secretary Hu Yaobang’s fact-finding visit to Tibet in 1980 were restrictions somewhat loosened. In the early 1980s refugees were allowed to visit their relatives in Tibet if they applied for ‘overseas Chinese’ passports (many refused to do so). Between 1985 and 1988 some Tibetans were given permission to go on pilgrimage and to visit relatives in India, where many of them stayed (Ström, 1997, page 37). At the same time, parents began to send their children to schools in India to receive a Tibetan education.

However, the pro-independence demonstrations in Lhasa from 1987 to 1989 led to the imposition of martial law. Traveling legally to India became difficult once more, but the political crackdown that ensued produced another wave of Tibetans who fled to India. An estimated 2000–3000 Tibetans continue to leave illegally for India every year, though in recent years this has become increasingly difficult with the Chinese government’s pressure on Nepal to arrest and forcibly repatriate Tibetans passing through to India. ‘New arrivals’—as members of this second wave of Tibetans arriving in India are often referred to—are estimated to constitute more than 10% of the total diasporic population, which was estimated at 150 000 in 2002 (CTAC, 2002, page 4; Methfessel, 1997, page 14).

The two major processes in the Tibetan diaspora of interest here are, first, the arrival of this second wave of refugees from Tibet after 1985; and, second, the large-scale movement of Tibetans from South Asia to the USA after the passage of the 1990 Immigration Act. Section 134 of the Act, the Tibetan US Resettlement Program (TUSRP), granted permanent resident status to 1000 Tibetans living in South Asia. These were chosen by quota according to categories, including 100 slots for 'new arrivals' from Tibet (Hess, 2003). Beginning in 1996 the lottery winners, who had been assigned to resettlement clusters in eighteen states, became eligible to bring their families to the USA.

A secondary effect of both the remittances that they began to send home and the heavy representation of Tibetan elites among the participants was the accumulation of social capital to the migrants. This has motivated and facilitated the migration of Tibetans from Nepal and India through non-TUSRP channels as well. The current estimate of 10 000 Tibetans in North America is far beyond what TUSRP had originally envisioned (CTAC, 2002, page 11). Economically, there is intense pressure for remittances, and, symbolically, 'the West' has come to be seen in South Asian exile communities as a surrogate Shangri-la, diametrically opposed to China (Diehl, 2002).

Increasingly, however, the USA has also become the destination of Tibetans who travel directly from Tibet. They are few in number, no more than a handful in all but the largest Tibetan communities (such as, New York or San Francisco).⁽⁴⁾ Though a few have rural origins and minimal educational background,⁽⁵⁾ the dominant pattern of their transnational migration is through channels that rely on extensive education in the PRC, which in turn favors urban backgrounds. Some were cadres or staff for the small but increasing number of foreign development projects in Tibet, who come to the USA as visitors, trainees, or students. Their numbers also include a few who had come under political suspicion in their work units in Tibet. The contentious politics of authenticity between the long-time exiles, the 'new arrivals', and the Tibetans from Tibet, in the USA, grows out of the earlier reception of 'new arrivals' in India, to which I turn next.

'New arrivals': from India to the USA

Virtually all organized Tibetan community activity outside of Tibet has focused on reclaiming political control of the national homeland, and on speaking and struggling on behalf of those Tibetans who remain in Tibet. When Tibetan border policies were first relaxed in the mid-1980s, the newcomers were warmly welcomed. Political prisoners and religious leaders, such as the 17th Karmapa, who have escaped Tibet recently continue to receive unreserved welcomes. However, this is not necessarily the case for many ordinary Tibetans. New arrivals, whose first destination is usually Dharamsala because it is the residence of the Dalai Lama, are, in fact, crucial to the exile community as sources of the latest information about the situation in Tibet. However, when exiles, particularly the younger generation, find themselves face to face with the new arrivals and with their unfamiliar and hence 'Chinese' habits, mannerisms, and clothes the image of their fellow Tibetans as pure and uncorrupted (Ström, 1997, page 37) quickly gives way to a belief that they have been brainwashed by their upbringing under Chinese rule. The fact that Tibetan identity in exile has been constituted in opposition to China contributes to both the scorn and suspicion of the 'Chinese' appearance and behavior of new arrivals who, because they are different, are seen as less than authentically Tibetan.

⁽⁴⁾ Exact numbers are not available.

⁽⁵⁾ They come, for example, after fortuitously meeting Western travelers who are willing to sponsor their trips to the USA.

Even worse than being considered brainwashed, some new arrivals are suspected of being spies for the Chinese government, a situation that is reinforced both by the politics of language use, discussed in detail below, and by events such as the arrest in 1995 and 1998 of several new arrivals in Dharamsala for allegedly spying for China (Diehl, 2002).⁽⁶⁾ As a result, many new arrivals report that they feel like outsiders among Tibetan exiles in India. Even those who leave because of political difficulties sometimes feel they are not completely trusted because their narratives do not conform to the standard, expected story of Chinese oppression. The situation is made no easier by the occasional Tibetan on an official visit to India. A PRC-based Tibetan who has founded a nongovernmental organization focused on cultural preservation, and who attended the 2004 World Social Forum in India, told me: “When I saw all of the Tibetans there [in India], I felt they were my brothers and sisters, but [because he was being closely monitored], I ignored them and acted like I didn’t know anything.” Such ‘acts’ by Tibetans concerned about repercussions back home confirm long-term exiles’ fears and also feed suspicions of new arrivals.

The other major reaction to the new arrivals’ unfamiliar bodily stylizations is scorn and embarrassment. These attitudes, with a strong element of class and urban condescension, are primarily directed at new arrivals from rural backgrounds; they tend to be looked down on, rather than seen as politically suspect (though sometimes the two reactions are mixed). Young Tibetan exiles often refer to the new arrivals (*sarjor*) as being *kacha*, or ‘raw’ in Hindi, which is a reference to their unfashionable clothing, haircuts, and musical tastes (Diehl, 2002). Decades of living in South Asia have produced a shift in style among Tibetan communities, whether it is the wearing of shawls and the *salwar kameez* by Tibetan women, or the Bollywood-inspired slicking back of men’s hair. However, the exile community’s view of themselves as the defenders and preservers of Tibetan culture (particularly in Dharamsala) prevents these influences from being fully acknowledged. Like all styles, those read as *kacha* vary over time, but among men they have included the wearing of large blocky sunglasses popular in Tibet, polyester pants, and thin-soled olive-green cloth army shoes (in contrast to the US-inspired jeans, T-shirts, and brand-name sneakers favored by exile youth). According to one exile from Nepal, in the late 1980s, “the most important thing was whether your pants were tapered or flared at the ankles; only the sarjors’ pants were tapered.” These sarjor are also said to be recognizable by their ruddy complexions, their propensity for wearing multiple thick layers of long underwear, and, say some, their tendency to bathe too infrequently.

An important and related image of the new arrivals is that they are ‘impolite’ and behave poorly, and that the men are ‘aggressive’ and prone to fighting. The Bir School for new arrivals was known for being a site of frequent fighting in the 1990s. Similarly, in the three main Gelukpa monasteries in exile, new arrivals are characterized by teachers and other students alike “as having less respect for monastic discipline as well as being wild and unruly” (Ström, 1997, page 41). For Tibetans in exile, long attuned to their positive public image as compassionate and gentle, nonviolence has become internalized as a marker of authentic Tibetan-ness (Huber 2001; Sperling, 2001). The Dalai Lama himself has framed the issue of authenticity in this way; when asked about the loss of Tibetan culture in a recent interview he replied:

⁽⁶⁾ China denied all allegations, although it has also accused Tibetans of spying for the exile government. One arrested Tibetan allegedly confessed during interrogation in 1998 (McGirk, 1998), but a conclusive answer in this and other cases is elusive. Although not completely implausible, suspicion about spying far exceeds the bounds of plausibility, as with Tenzin’s case.

“There are clear signs of the degeneration of the Tibetan traditions, and of moral principles. In recent years there have been a number of murder cases in the Tibetan community in India. All of them took place among people newly arrived from Tibet. This shows the degeneration of the spirit of tolerance and self-discipline. And then in Tibet itself, there is gambling and also prostitution” (Iyer, 2001).

Violence, then, is read as proof that Tibetans from Tibet have been Sinicized and are no longer authentically Tibetan. What this framing obscures is the long history of socially and culturally sanctioned codes of honor and revenge, and the celebration of weaponry and fighting as a performance of masculinity in some parts of Tibet (for example, Norbu, 1997). This is not to suggest that all behavior of new arrivals is an unproblematic continuation from a pre-1959 past, but it is equally problematic to assume that everything that Tibetans in exile now associate with authentic Tibetan-ness is a true preservation of a single ‘pure’ Tibetan culture.

The behavior of some new arrivals is also seen as deplorable because of the exiles’ self-understanding of Tibetans as refugees, temporary guests of the Indian state. Long-term refugees believe that bad behavior on the part of the new arrivals engenders Indian resentment towards the Tibetan population as a whole, giving them an undeservedly bad reputation. These issues are exacerbated by the scarcity of resources in South Asian exile communities, which are further taxed by continual arrivals from Tibet. Thus, although *sarjor* means literally new arrival, many of those labeled *sarjor* understand the term as an insult.

In the USA, the new arrivals are on a more level playing field with other Tibetans than was the case in South Asia, where they were more structurally dependent on the larger Tibetan community. Almost everyone struggles to make ends meet, and the immediate Tibetan community diminishes in economic as well as in political importance. In interviews several former new arrivals pointedly claimed that they were as successful in the USA as the long-term exiles, if not more so. Nevertheless, the term *sarjor* continues to be used in sometimes perjorative ways. “That man is *such* a *sarjor*”, said one exile who himself had recently immigrated to the USA, as a marker of his exasperation with another man with whom he squabbled over a downtown Oakland parking space. On another occasion, when one Tibetan man called out in jest to two other Tibetan basketball players on a languid Saturday afternoon in Denver, “hey, you two *sarjor* are pretty darn good at basketball”, the comment nearly provoked a fistfight, again indicating that the term continues to be saturated with meanings far beyond the length of residence time in a particular place.

In fact, the term *sarjor* is used in the USA in reference not only to Tibetans such as Tenzin who arrived in India in the 1980s but also to those who have migrated directly from Tibet to the USA.⁽⁷⁾ This suggests that the term has taken on multiple valences. As discussed above, those who have migrated directly from Tibet to the USA are often urban and educated, and thus are not seen as “raw” or uncouth. But their more urban styles are read even more strongly as ‘Chinese’; something as innocuous as wearing glasses, which is much more common in the PRC than among Tibetans in South Asia, can come to be read as part of a ‘Chinese’ rather than Tibetan gestalt. These Tibetans are treated with much greater political suspicion, particularly because of their linguistic practices—one of the most emotionally charged arenas of struggle over authenticity.

⁽⁷⁾ Of course, those who use the labels and those to whom they refer are usually equally ‘new arrivals’ to the USA. In a similar example of how labels do not necessarily change to reflect the actual structural situation, many Tibetans in the USA continue to refer to white Americans as *phyi-rgyal* or ‘foreigner’.

The politics of language

Language—dialect and words used, as well as intonations and accompanying gestures—is an embodied competence which in turn structures social relations. Bourdieu (1977, page 81) writes that:

“every confrontation between agents ... brings together ... systems of dispositions, such as a linguistic competence and a cultural competence, and, through these habitus, all the objective structures of which they are a part, structures which are active only when *embodied* in a competence acquired in the course of a particular history (with the different types of bilingualism or pronunciation, for example, stemming from different modes of acquisition)” (emphasis in original).

Not surprisingly, then, a key element in the distrust of ‘new arrivals’ in India, and, even more so, of Tibetans from Tibet in the USA, is the fact that they speak Chinese, which is understood as ‘the language of the enemy’. Many Tibetans who escaped to India in the 1980s—particularly those who came of age during the Cultural Revolution—recounted to me their frustrations at arriving in Dharamsala unable to read or write Tibetan because they had not been taught in school.

Linguistic tensions are considerably heightened by certain characteristics of the Tibetan language itself. Classical literary Tibetan has a remarkably conservative orthography, but the many spoken dialects have changed dramatically, such that they are consistent neither with the literary language nor with each other. Vernacular Tibetan is highly nonstandardized, with large regional variations that are mutually incomprehensible; dialects diverge significantly even within small geographical areas. In exile a version of Lhasa dialect is taught in schools and has become the common, standardized language of the diaspora. As a result, few younger Tibetans in the diaspora are able to speak or understand regional dialects. In Tibet, by contrast, regional dialects continue to be used, but much less has been done to promote a transregional standardized Tibetan—with Mandarin instead filling the role of a lingua franca. Linguistic differences thus inflect the different national contexts with which Tibetans are associated.

As a result, many new arrivals from the eastern regions of Kham and Amdo are perfectly fluent in their own Tibetan dialects, but have a great deal of difficulty with the Lhasa dialect that has become the diasporic standard. On the other hand, many of them can speak at least some Chinese. Indeed, several Tibetans from Gyalthang, in Yunnan, recalled that, when they first arrived in Lhasa on the way to India, they resorted to Chinese to communicate with other Tibetans, even though their own Mandarin was far from perfect. When they tried the same way of communicating in India, however, they were chastised for speaking Chinese. Another man from Chamdo remembers, “When I first arrived in India, I constantly had to explain [to other Tibetans] that just because I sometimes read a Chinese newspaper didn’t mean that I didn’t understand [Tibetan] politics. I always had to explain that one must consider the contents of a book or what someone is saying, not just what language it’s in.” These misunderstandings are exacerbated by the changing regional composition of the diasporic population. In 1991 only about 5% of Tibetans in South Asia were from Amdo, though Amdo accounted for 27% of the Tibetan population before 1959 (Methfessel, 1997). The proportion of Tibetans from Amdo leaving Tibet has been increasing, however. The fact that Amdo dialects are the most divergent from the ‘standard’ Lhasa dialect means that these Tibetans are especially likely to encounter these linguistic difficulties, which are sometimes read as problems of authenticity and, by extension, of national loyalty.

For example, one day in the winter of 2001 I walked down a busy street in Berkeley, California, with a young woman from Amdo whom I had worked with

several years prior, in Qinghai province, and who had just arrived in the USA. We ran into an older man, a former headmaster of a Tibetan high school in India. I introduced the two, and was part of the following exchange:

Man [in Lhasa Tibetan]: “So you’re from Amdo? Did you come to the US for school?”

Woman [not comprehending]: [no response]

Man [in Lhasa Tibetan]: “I said, did you come to the US to go to school?”

Woman [to me in Chinese]: “What did he say?”

Author [in Chinese]: “He asked whether you came to the US to study.”

Woman [in Amdo dialect to man]: “No, I came to visit my boyfriend.”

Man [in Lhasa Tibetan, not understanding her response]: “Such a shame. When I see Tibetans who can’t speak Tibetan, I feel very sad.”

Author [in Lhasa Tibetan, protesting]: “But she’s speaking Tibetan!”

The linguistic sensibilities of the long-time exiles include not only the view that using Chinese is unacceptable but also, particularly among the younger generation, a tendency to code switch with Hindi and English.⁽⁸⁾ Indeed, many younger Tibetans in South Asia speak Hindi and Nepali as well as, or better than, Tibetan; in the USA, virtually all Tibetans speak English better than Tibetan. However, whereas mixing Hindi and English words into Tibetan sentences is considered hip and stylish, the use of Chinese words is considered unacceptable. For them, a Tibetan who speaks Chinese cannot be truly Tibetan and cannot be trusted for his or her political viewpoints.

By contrast, those Tibetans who have experienced ‘new arrival’ status in India have had personal experience in Tibet and thus have had a closer engagement with Chinese culture. Though many of them left Tibet for political reasons, they do not assume that other Tibetans’ use of the Chinese language has a necessary connection to political views. There is an even greater linguistic gap between long-time exiles and the Tibetans who come directly from Tibet, because many of the latter come having finished college in the PRC, and thus may find speaking Chinese just as convenient as speaking Tibetan (or, at least, Lhasa-dialect Tibetan). Even more than the new arrivals in India, they are likely to speak excellent Chinese, enjoy Chinese television and music, and have mannerisms, gestures, and taste in food and clothing that mark them as ‘un-Tibetan’ to the Tibetan exiles from South Asia.

They also use Chinese loan words. Indeed, Tibetan intellectuals in exile as well as Western Tibet scholars have expressed dismay at the general inability of most Tibetans in Lhasa to speak Tibetan without extensive borrowing of Chinese. This includes not only relatively new words, such as ‘television’ and ‘fax’, for which Tibetan equivalents have been created but have failed to be widely adopted, but also familiar words such as numbers and days of the week. Tibetans in Tibet are well aware of, and worried about, the fact that Tibetan literacy rates are low, and that some youth, particularly those whose high marks allow them to study in schools in other parts of China, have a hard time speaking pure Tibetan. In Tibet today some Tibetans privately voice dismay that their own language is, in their words, ‘so useless’. With both government affairs and business conducted in Mandarin there is little incentive for students to study Tibetan.

At the same time, however, many ‘homeland’ Tibetans wonder about Tibetan intellectuals in exile who feel more comfortable speaking English. From their perspective it is the diasporic Tibetans who really have a choice about whether to use Tibetan, and, in this, they have done no better than those who live in Tibet. Thus, they point out the hypocrisy of diasporic critics who also have trouble speaking Tibetan without code

⁽⁸⁾ Common Hindi usages include *hapta* instead of *gz’a-khor* or *bdun-phrag* (‘week’); *tarik* for *tshes-pa* (‘date’); and *jola* for *lto-phad* (‘backpack’).

switching—to English. In fact, except in some remote areas in Tibet, in monastic settings, and among the elderly, there are few spaces in the contemporary world in which Tibetans do not make extensive use of loan words and code switching to another language. A historian in Lhasa spoke caustically to me about the criticisms he had encountered at an international conference of Tibetan scholars:

“The Tibetans outside [Tibet] call us *ra-ma-lug* [literally ‘neither goat nor sheep’, ie hybrid or mixture, implying that they are not ‘real’ Tibetans]. Well, I’d like to challenge them to a contest. I’d like to see who can speak more Tibetan without mixing in another language! We’d [Tibetans in Tibet] win that competition for sure. Then we could find out for sure—who is more *ra-ma-lug*!”

Unlike this scholar, whose own mastery of literary Tibetan makes him resentful of exile charges of linguistic incompetence, a Tibetan woman from Amdo, who spent a number of years in Beijing before immigrating to the USA, calls her own inability to read and write Tibetan “a victory for the Chinese government”. She explained to me that she wants independence for Tibet and is a Tibetan Buddhist (*nangpa*, literally an ‘insider’). However, she also believes that Tibetans outside should not hold anything against the Chinese language, people, or culture per se. Even more importantly, she would like more sympathetic understanding from other Tibetans in the USA that she cannot just erase seventeen years of Chinese education, and, at the same time, that this does not make her *sems* (mind) any less Tibetan.

‘Homeland’ Tibetans also bring their own linguistic sensibilities, shaped in the reality of contemporary Tibet, with them to the USA, leading to considerable friction.⁽⁹⁾ In addition to language choice, regional dialect, and the actual vocabulary used, divergent linguistic sensibilities also include the more subtle issue of *how* words are spoken. Even when the same Lhasa dialect is being spoken, there are subtle differences in intonation and insertion of marker words. As Bourdieu (1977, page 87) writes, “Body hexis speaks directly to the motor function, in the form of postures that is both individual and systematic ... a way of walking, a tilt of the head, facial expressions, ways of sitting and using implements, always associated with a tone of voice, a style of speech, and ... a certain subjective experience.” Class habitus, and the distinction between aristocratic and nonaristocratic ways of speaking, remains strong even today in the diasporic community. At the same time, speech patterns and movements, such as a subtle tilting of the head to indicate agreement or dissent, or gestures that indicate embarrassment, can distinguish PRC Tibetans from their South Asia counterparts. Thus, even Tibetan that is relatively ‘pure’ in vocabulary and authentic to some, can sound or feel ‘Chinese’ to others.

Staging ‘cultural performance’

Another arena in which habitus becomes important in struggles over authenticity is what anthropologist Diehl calls ‘sound values’—particular types of music and dance, including accompanying bodily stylizations, intonations, and gestures, and appreciation (or not) of these performances. Diehl (2002, page 64) describes a performance she witnessed by a number of women from Lhasa who managed to travel to Dharamsala on religious pilgrimage. They gathered one day in a square and sang patriotic songs about Tibet—some of which they could be imprisoned for singing inside Tibet. Although the “high wavering tones” and “sweeping arm gestures” (2002, page 92) of their songs were unfamiliar to the exile context, the lyrics were not. Nevertheless, not a single Dharamsala resident participated in or watched the pilgrims’ performance.

⁽⁹⁾ For example, Tibetans from Lhasa tend to use *dug-ga* (‘isn’t it so?’) at the end of many sentences; slang such as *yamatsha-a-la* (‘how annoying’) marks exile speech.

Instead, after it was over, a group of older exile Tibetan women, “amused each other by singing parodic imitations” and “howled with laughter” at the Tibetans from Tibet (page 94).

In the USA staged performances of ‘traditional culture’ are fraught spaces of encounter of different habitus. The larger Tibetan communities organize gatherings, demonstrations, and parties for the Tibetan New Year, the Dalai Lama’s birthday, 10 March (uprising day), and so forth. There are also regional events such as the ‘West coast Tibetan gathering’ that has been held every summer since 1995. These gatherings usually include staged performances, mostly by young Tibetans, of traditional songs and dances from different regions of Tibet, ‘cultural competitions’ in which such performances are rated against each other, and more free-form open-mikes and talent shows. These open mikes and talent shows typically feature many renditions of Hindi and Nepali pop songs, an increasing amount of singing in English, few Tibetan songs, and no songs at all in Chinese (even though there are now a number of popular Tibetan singers in China who sing Tibetan-themed songs in Chinese). Singing in Hindi or Nepali, like watching a Hindi movie, is a normal and unremarkable activity in the US-based Tibetan diaspora, but singing in Chinese continues to be unthinkable. At the same time, nobody seems to mind that only a few participants sing in Tibetan for the talent show portion.

The more scripted traditional Tibetan songs and dances provoke stronger reactions. In 2002 I attended one such ‘cultural show’ in the San Francisco Bay Area at a celebration of the anniversary of the founding of the Tibetan Youth Congress, with Drolgar, a Tibetan woman from Lhasa. Drolgar had told me a number of times that she disliked socializing with other Tibetans because, she said, she had learned that they talked behind her back about the possibility that she might be a spy. As we watched the performances, with a motley collection of Tibetan regional costumes, Drolgar turned to me and whispered, in Chinese, “watching them is so funny—it’s hilarious”. A few minutes later she turned to me again and said, this time in Tibetan, “*snying-rje*”—meaning ‘poor things’ several times. She then switched back to Chinese and said “poor things—they don’t know anything about Tibetan culture, they only know the very surface”, implying that, no matter how hard they tried with their dancing and costumes, they would never be as authentically Tibetan as herself, someone who had personally experienced growing up in Tibet.

Another example that I will discuss at some length was a picnic held at a park in the San Francisco Bay Area in 2002. An official Tibetan song and dance troupe from Lhasa had been invited to California as part of a larger cultural exhibition and exchange program. However, the exhibition had been quickly shut down by protests, and the troupe was unable to perform at the exhibition as planned. A few days later, the Tibetan Association of Northern California (which was not officially involved in the protests, but a number of whose members had participated in protest action through other groups, such as Students for a Free Tibet) invited the Lhasa Tibetans to perform for the local community. They agreed, and on a bright and cloudless Saturday afternoon the two groups came together for a picnic. The troupe from Lhasa performed a number of songs, after which a California-based Tibetan band also performed.

For most of the show, I sat listening with several former new arrivals and a few other Tibetans who had arrived in California from Lhasa. They appeared to be having a tremendously good time, singing along, clapping frequently, and making remarks such as “Today is just like being at the Norbulinkga” (the summer palace of the Dalai Lama in Lhasa, where summer picnics are frequently held); “it’s just like being at Zholdon” (a yoghurt festival held in Lhasa every August); “it’s just like being at a nangma” (a Tibetan-style karaoke popular in Lhasa); and even “for those who haven’t

been to Lhasa, this is just like taking them there for the day!” One woman, who had just received political asylum in the USA, exclaimed to me that this was her happiest day since she had arrived in the United States two years earlier, because “it’s just like being back in Lhasa”.

Immersed as I was in my friends’ pleasant nostalgia for Lhasa, memories of which flooded back to them as they listened to the Tibetan singers, I assumed that everyone present was enjoying the music. When I walked around, however, I realized that this was not the case. A mother and daughter, both participants in TUSRP, complained to each other about the way the performers sang in such a strangely un-Tibetan way, their tones too high, and their smiles and gestures too perfect and too dramatic. The daughter then said that she had had enough of this, and suggested, “let’s go watch a Hindi movie”. When I later asked other long-time exiles about their reactions, some said that they “didn’t know whether to laugh or to cry, whether to be happy or sad”. Although they were happy to see Tibetans perform, they felt strongly that everything about the way these Tibetans had been trained—from the way they opened their mouths and smiled, to the way they stressed certain syllables in their songs, to their use of nasal tones—was ‘very Chinese’. Whatever happiness they might have expected to feel upon their encounter with those from the homeland for which they have been longing was dissipated by the alienness of what they saw and heard. Indeed, according to several, it was only a measure of their graciousness and goodwill that helped them refrain from laughing at the performers.

What I want to stress here is not just the bodily stylizations and sounds of those on stage, but also the audience’s reaction to these various performances. Their sometimes visceral reactions to different styles of song or dance, their perceptions of performers as authentically Tibetan or not, and their accompanying appreciation, distaste, or condescending laughter are also shaped by habitus as a structuring structure which “engenders all the thoughts, all the perceptions, and all the actions consistent with those conditions, and no others” (Bourdieu, 1977, page 95). In other words, significations of transnational migrant identity take place not only in the structured compulsion to repeat particular gestures, manners, and bearings, but also in structured reactions to embodied practices. In the next section I turn to a more detailed exploration of the sources of authority to which differently routed Tibetans appeal.

Authorities of homeland and subject formation

When Drolgar reacted to Tibetan exile youths’ performance of traditional Tibetan songs by exclaiming “poor things!” and “they don’t know anything about Tibetan culture”, she implied that she had greater authority than they to judge what is and what is not truly, or authentically, Tibetan. She commented that the regional styles of dance meant little to the performers, who most likely did not know the location of one region in relation to another. Her claim to cultural authority is based on her personal experience of the actual place of the homeland, and particularly on her concrete geographical and embodied spatial knowledge of it. Another woman from Amdo, Wangmo, who had also recently arrived in the San Francisco Bay Area after living in Beijing for some years, had similar reactions after the picnic described above. Witnessing the silence and unenthusiastic reception of the exiles to the Lhasa performers, she had the following to say about most of the Tibetans she had encountered in California: “I think these Tibetans here ... are not real, pure Tibetans. They’ve already changed. I think in the future there will be a lot of trouble among Tibetans. These people here don’t understand what Tibet is really like. They really should go to Tibet for themselves — then they would understand.” Tibet, in her view, is best known through embodied, lived experience.

In contrast, the authority that exile Tibetans claim to speak for Tibet is based neither on embodied experience of place nor on concrete geographical knowledge, but rather has a strong temporal dimension. Indeed, it is rare for Tibetan diasporic youth to have much concrete geographic knowledge beyond the most general regional divisions; Ström (1997, page 37) notes that he “met very few ... who are able to relate to a map of Tibet or locate an area according to the four directions ...” Instead, their relationship to Tibet as homeland is based on tradition, and on the claim that they have preserved the authentic Tibetan culture that existed before it was destroyed in Tibet, and transplanted it to Dharamsala, “a temporary home preserving a historical culture in its pure form before an inevitable return to the original homeland” (Anand, 2002, page 13). Exile is “a time when it is vital to preserve a pure form of this civilization since it is itself under erasure in the original home” (page 19).

As a result, everything that is viewed as authentically Tibetan derives from what older Tibetans remember from a time before 1959. Although the Tibetan government in exile has been careful in recent years to clarify that it does not object to ‘development’, and to change over time in Tibet per se, there is still a sense in which a pre-1959 moment is the point of comparison for all contemporary change (see also Harris, 1999). A certain nostalgic longing for the past, imbricated in romantic portrayals of an idealized but lost landscape, can be offensive to both kinds of new arrivals. Because they have experienced the complexities of change in Tibet, it seems to them that the ‘old arrivals’ wish to freeze Tibet in time and to deny modernity to the majority of Tibetans living in Tibet.⁽¹⁰⁾

For Tibetans who fled in 1959 and have spent most of their adult lives in exile, and for younger Tibetans raised in South Asia, being a refugee is a foundational principle of identity. Exile youth learn their parents’ nostalgic memories of an idealized pre-1959 Tibet, and claim them as their own. However, their attachment to the idea of Tibet as homeland is not complicated by the reality of living in Tibet over the past half century. Instead, they hold tightly to what Malkki (1995, pages 54–55), in her study of Hutu refugees, calls a ‘mythico-history’—a recasting and reinterpretation of the past in fundamentally moral terms. In this mythico-history, Tibet was a culturally unique and completely independent nation-state with a well-defined geographical territory, until it was occupied by China. Tibetans outside Tibet are responsible for preserving Tibetan culture and traditions that have been destroyed within the PRC, with the ultimate goal of returning to the homeland with this preserved culture.

This mythico-history is constituted not just as a set of ‘facts’ to learn about Tibet, but also through emotions. The mythico-history and its attendant bodily dispositions are formed through repetition, such as the singing of the Tibetan national anthem in schools, and rituals and rallies commemorating the Dalai Lama’s birthday, Democracy Day, and National Uprising Day. National Uprising Day includes the singing of *Rise up* (*Long Shog*), the lyrics of which include: “Rise up! .../The butchering enemy, their hands red [with blood]/The enemy of the religion, the red Chinese/We will drive them out of Tibet/Rise up, rise up, patriotic people of Tibet!” When practicing the song, children in Tibetan schools are admonished, “No smiling! Look serious [literally, ‘show a black face’]!” The mythico-history and the locus of Tibetan-ness are literally inscribed on bodies as children learn not only the words but also the proper emotions to associate with them; one Tibetan exile recalls from his elementary school days,

⁽¹⁰⁾ Ironically, a similar discursive tactic of ‘freezing in time’ is used by the Chinese government to glorify its achievements in Tibet and thus justify its presence; the official rhetoric about development is: “look at what little was here (in terms of roads, buildings, and other infrastructure) before 1951. Would you still want to be living (in that ‘primitive’ state) now?” The assumption is that, without Chinese intervention, Tibetans would still be stuck in the 1950s.

“Many of the adults cried when they sang ‘Rise up’, so I felt sad too, even when I was too young to fully understand the lyrics.” Remembering the student-led songs at Tibetan anniversaries and festivals at the holy site of Boudnath, he stated:

“Most of these songs are very serious in nature. We learned and practiced these songs for months prior to public gathering. I remember students getting punished for not taking them seriously. Some patriotic songs required us to make a serious face, raise our fists and make angry gestures against our ‘enemy.’ I had a difficult time making those gestures not because I was not conscious of the Tibetan plight but because it was difficult to relate to directly. However, I got better at it as I did it again and again. Furthermore, in public gathering as I found many older Tibetans getting sad and shedding tears, I also became sad and started shedding tears.”

My intent is not to suggest that Tibetans from Tibet or new arrivals may not also agree with or be moved by the words of patriotic songs. However, the structure of exile institutions predisposes particularly situated Tibetans to react in specific ways, and this is partly how the homeland becomes less a topographic entity than a moral destination for many exiles (compare Malkki, 1997, page 67). The embodied and visceral nature of habitus make the encounter with other Tibetans who do not meet predisposed expectations of ‘Tibetan-ness’ that much more fraught.

Another difficulty for young Tibetans born in exile is posed by the fact that Tibetans from Tibet seem ‘too Chinese’, despite their embodied experience with the homeland which they themselves have never seen. One reaction has been the emergence of an alternative imagined geography of homeland, particularly among young elites from Dharamsala. Frequently referred to as ‘Little Lhasa’, Dharamsala has become the center of Tibetan diasporic geography. As the Dalai Lama’s residence, it is the major site of Tibetan pilgrimage outside of Tibet. Although it is considered a ‘temporary resting place’ for Tibetan culture before its inevitable return home, some Tibetans have begun to see it, rather than Lhasa, as the center of Tibetan symbolic geography and as the locus of authentic Tibetan culture. Being from Dharamsala, not Lhasa, becomes the mark of pure Tibetan-ness, and geographical proximity to Dharamsala, rather than to Lhasa, is a measure of one’s Tibetan-ness. This is what enables occasional comments, for example, that Tibetans who live ‘too close to the border’ of Tibet, in Nepal, are deficient in the determination and resolve they have toward the ‘Tibetan cause’ (of independence). In this frame, it is contemporary Tibet (rather than the Tibet of the idealized past or the hoped-for future) that cannot be the site of authenticity.

Tibetans from Tibet, of course, do not agree. Although they acknowledge that there are significant differences between themselves and most of the Tibetans they encounter in the USA, it does not follow to them that they are any less Tibetan than the others or that Dharamsala is the real center of Tibetan culture. In contrast to the mythico-history of Tibet in exile, Tibetan-ness in the PRC stands in dialectical relationship to the imagining of Chinese-ness. Tibetans are, on the one hand, subject to negative stereotypes of Tibetans as backwards, dirty, lazy, and barbaric. On the other hand, urban and well-educated Tibetans are sometimes complimented for being difficult to recognize as Tibetan, a position which motivates them to identify more strongly with Tibetan-ness. Identifications with Tibetan-ness can be rooted, ironically, in the specters of their own potential inauthenticity. According to Drolma, who grew up in Xining, Qinghai province:

“When I was young I didn’t think there was any difference between Tibetan and Han. I didn’t think it was a big deal being Tibetan, since we were just another *minzu* [nationality; ethnic group]. But other people wanted to make me different. When I go out with my friends in the city and dress like a city girl, no one believes I am Tibetan.

Even when I tell them, they always ask me ‘which one of your parents is Han, your father or your mother?’ ... They congratulate me for not being like a Tibetan ... Whenever a rural Tibetan gets on a city bus, people hold their noses and walk away and make very rude comments. Once I took my cousin from the village to a hospital in Xining. All of the doctors tried to ignore her, each telling the others to go and examine the dirty Tibetan ... I started to feel: okay, I am Tibetan. I’m not at all like you Han people. Then after I finished junior high I decided to go back to another school to learn Tibetan for several years. I volunteered to teach for a year in a nomadic area ... Now I’m proud of being Tibetan ... I think it’s very important for us to keep our Tibetan culture.”

Younger Tibetan elites who have been educated and raised in urban China often come to first identify and then to perform their own Tibetan-ness through a contradictory process in which the misrecognition of Tibetans as a group, together with their own misrecognition as Han, is precisely what engenders their desire to become ‘real’ Tibetans, to inhabit and embody the category ‘Tibetan.’ At the same time, their identity is also shaped within the context of state discourse. The Chinese state actively promotes its own version of history, according to which Tibet has been part of China since the 11th century. It also seeks to shape imaginations of belonging through the regulation of linguistic categories and through the promotion of popular songs according to which, for example, “the Han and the Tibetans are daughters of one mother”.

The processes and contexts of Tibetan subject formation within the PRC contrast starkly to the experience of exile, where constant repetition and verbalization of the mythico-history of Tibet is a primary way in which identity is constituted and performed. These differences are then brought into the cultural politics of Tibetan-ness in the USA. Tibetans from Tibet challenge the critique that others make about their engagement with Chinese culture. One such man does so by criticizing some of the exiles for mistakenly reifying Tibetan culture, or in his words: “treating Tibetan culture like a thing which can be put on a table, bounded, and moved around.” These Tibetans base their claims to authenticity in an authority of place: they are, after all, literally from Tibet. They know what Tibet is like, whereas, they say, the long-term exiles carry around an image of Tibet in 1959 and act as if it is still accurate now. For them, being Tibetan is no more incompatible with speaking Chinese than it is with speaking English or enjoying Hindi movies. If some of these Tibetans are genuinely concerned with the way their own Tibetan-ness has been diluted by outside influences, or, more commonly, if they are concerned with the younger generation of Tibetans in the PRC, they see this as no different from the Indian and Western influences observable in the styles and language of Tibetans from exile.

Politics and national location

Why are these issues of cultural authenticity so contentious? Part of the reason is that the diasporic problem of maintaining a distinctive cultural identity faces new challenges in the USA, despite the fact that a major premise of TUSRP was precisely to help Tibetans “preserve Tibetan culture and identity” (Yeh and Lama, 2006). In contrast to South Asia, the Tibetan national anthem cannot be sung in school, and inflexible work schedules make protests much smaller and more poorly attended. Defiant teens in baggy pants, oversized athletic jerseys, gold chains, sporting cornrows appear at Tibet Youth Congress events dedicated to celebrating Tibetan culture (Yeh and Lama, 2006). In this context, the encounter with other Tibetans who appear alien and ‘Chinese’ looms as an even bigger problem—another challenge to the already vexed problem of cultural preservation—than it might otherwise be. Another reason is that, in the Tibetan diaspora, cultural and political identity are assumed to stand in for each other. Thus, a Tibetan who appears to be culturally ‘other’ is assumed to be politically ‘other’ as well—that is, to be

sympathetic to the Chinese state's claims of Tibetan 'liberation', rather than to the counternarrative of Tibetan occupation and colonization. The flip side is that only those who loudly proclaim a desire for independence are assumed to be authentically Tibetan—that is, not to have been hopelessly 'brainwashed' by China.

The in-between position of the new arrivals in India who then come to the USA, between the long-term exiles and the new Tibetans from Tibet, speaks to the intensity of struggles over authenticity because of the new arrivals' imbrication with struggles for the nation. Like the 'homeland' Tibetans, the new arrivals can claim an authority derived from embodied knowledge of the homeland. However, as a group they tend to be less fluent in Chinese language and styles. At the same time, many are nevertheless enthusiastic consumers of Chinese music and movies, which can lead to ambivalence from others. A resident of Oakland, Dawa grew up near Lhasa but fled to India in the late 1980s. He also happens to be fond of watching Chinese soap operas, a hobby which led to a confrontation with a resentful roommate from India. Dawa defended himself by talking about his relatives who had been killed while they were participating in pro-independence rallies, and about his own harsh experience fleeing over freezing mountain passes to India. Content, he suggested, not language, is the better gauge for a person's political sympathies. Like him, many former new arrivals try to 'prove' their authenticity through public statements of their personal suffering and commitment to the Tibetan struggle. Others prominently display photographs of themselves at demonstrations or with the Dalai Lama, or work for Tibet Movement advocacy groups, but as in the case of Tenzin, such strategies do not always work.

Assumptions about authenticity and identity are read off of national location and citizenship. The Chinese state works hard to interpellate Tibetans as citizens of China, fostering Tibetans' conceptions of themselves as 'people of China' (*zhongguo ren*). Many Tibetans in Tibet do, in fact, use this term, regardless of how they might feel about issues of cultural identity, political repression, or future autonomy. The same Tibetan scholar who complained to me about the level of Tibetan linguistic competence of many Tibetan exiles also surprised me by telling me he was happy that the PRC (*zhongguo*) had finally won the bid for the 2008 Olympics, because "one is always happy when one's country [*guojia*] is shown to be powerful". At the same time, he is also committed to the project of keeping alive Tibetan language and culture, and sees himself as authentically Tibetan; he does not see these stances as being incompatible. The fact that a number of dissident intellectuals as well as political asylum seekers have emerged from among urban Tibetans who have been educated within the Chinese system (for example, the poet Woser, who writes in Chinese) suggests that a self-identification of a Tibetan as a 'person of China' is not necessarily evidence of complete political allegiance to the PRC (it may instead simply be a practical acknowledgement of the current political situation). However, what the exiles insist on is precisely this ability to read political interests from these other signs.

Thus, a Tibetan from the PRC who identifies as such is immediately suspect. This extends to the type of passport he or she possesses. When some of the first Tibetan exiles were naturalized as USA citizens, they found that they were not allowed to list 'Tibet' as their 'place of birth' because the USA does not officially recognize Tibet as a country. A long struggle ensued, leading to the concession in which Tibetans are allowed to list the city or town of their birth, without appending either 'Tibet' or 'China' after it. Given the symbolic importance of this issue, many exiles are somewhat taken aback by Tibetans who travel to the USA as Chinese citizens with Chinese passports. This has resulted in misunderstandings and in a closing down of chances at dialogue. One Beijing-based Tibetan researcher, originally from Lhasa, recalled an academic trip to the USA several years ago. It was his first visit to the USA, and he was excited about meeting other

Tibetans, until they asked him “strange questions, like ‘do you have a Chinese passport?’ Well, what kind of passport did they think I could possibly have? Then they seemed to become very wary of me, so I didn’t spend that much time with them after all.” There is no way to make the journey from Tibet directly to the USA except with a Chinese passport, which categorizes the passport bearer as ‘a person of China’. For Tibetan exiles, however, this identification with China is sometimes understood not as a practical necessity but as a capitulation, as a rejection of Tibet’s mythico-history, and thus further confirms the apparent rightness of recentering the locus of authenticity away, at least for the time being, from the actual place of the homeland.

Unlike Tibetans from exile who have been engaged in political protest for their entire lives, Tibetans from Tibet often profess that they have no interest in politics. Their studied lack of interest in ‘politics’ and the low priority given to attending protests, rallies, and meetings arise not only out of the frictions of their encounter with other Tibetans but also importantly from their concern about repercussions for close family members in Tibet and for their own possible plans to return. There is, in fact, a wide spectrum of political opinion among Tibetans from Tibet vis-à-vis Tibet’s political status, though many are focused on a hope for policies that will allow for equitable economic development without a complete loss of Tibetan language and culture. Regardless, most Tibetans came to the USA for reasons similar to those that motivated most TUSRP participants—because they see it as a way to a better life, whether through the opportunity for higher education or through the ability to send remittances home. However, because of the structure of migration to the USA and the cultural politics of routedness, they are challenged to ‘prove’ their Tibetan-ness in a way that others do not have to.

Conclusions

The many layers of romantic projection and desire that refract Western perceptions of Tibetans, as well as the lingering effects of Cold War perceptions of China on global imaginaries, make analyses of Tibetan diasporic politics particularly important. The discussion offered here should emphatically not be read as an attempt to undermine Tibetan struggles for human rights, for an end to religious and political oppression, or for other political claims. Instead, it is motivated by a concern that the idealized image rather than the empirical reality of Tibetans has produced certain uncritical forms of Western support and activism. The particular forms of support made available not only have been limited but “may have damaged the political prospects of the Tibetan issue as much as it helped them” (Barnett, 1998, page 194). An understanding of diaspora without guarantees requires a grounding of analyses in everyday social relations and situated practices, which can then reveal the limits of the liberatory potential of diasporic political projects.

Contestations over what constitutes proper “Tibetan” behavior, and what gets recognized as authentically Tibetan and what does not, reflect very different processes of subject formation at work in the different transnational routes that link the Tibetan homeland to the United States. The Tibetan identity of exile is constituted by the mythico-history of Tibet, a recasting of the past in moral terms. Viewing themselves as preservers of the traditions that have been destroyed within Tibet itself, they appeal to a kind of temporal authority to affirm their authentic Tibetan-ness. To be Tibetan is to be part of a community of sentiment in which the experience of exile is geared toward the eventual recovery of the homeland. In the meantime, however, the locus of authenticity is recentered, away from contemporary Tibet. By contrast, the (significantly fewer) Tibetans who arrive straight from the PRC locate their Tibetan-ness in the embodied authority of experiencing the homeland as a living place. Hence, despite the pervasive image of Tibetans as constant and pure across space, Tibetan identity formation

is varied and greatly inflected by national and linguistic locations. The question of what gets recognized as Tibetan by Tibetans in the new US diaspora, and why, is productive in that it forces us to examine the complex relationships between Tibet as a moral destination and Tibetan as a category of cultural identity, and the spaces in which these relationships are deployed and contested.

While homeland thus means very different things to differently routed Tibetans, the conscious meanings of Tibet are not the only ones that matter. Even more important is the embodied performance of Tibetan-ness—in language, dialect, code switching, grammatical patterns, as well as in the details of clothing, gesture, and taste. In short, the habitus, or set of ‘durable dispositions’, is a bodily inscription of the places and national locations through which differently positioned Tibetans dwell and travel. However, such dispositions are often unexpected; each group of Tibetans imagines that Tibetan-ness will always be easily recognizable through familiarity if not through selfsameness. It is the very visceral reaction to unfamiliar embodied aspects such as style of clothing, taste in music, and language usage that causes exile Tibetans to be disappointed by the apparent alienness of Tibetans from Tibet. This then becomes a lost opportunity to forge connections between exile and homeland.

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