The Tibetan Diaspora and the Digital Landscape: Voices of Pluralistic and Decentralized Narratives

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Pema[1] migrated to the United States as part of the Tibetan Rehabilitation Program, a product of the 1990 Immigration Act that brought 1000 Tibetans from India and Nepal and resettled them in the United States. During one of our conversations, she remarked "I will always be grateful to the US Government for all it has done for me and 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 Chemi is a 24-year-old graduate student at New York University, born in India. As we sipped coffee together, she muses

> When you see a picture of *Chungba* (a township in Chinese-occupied Tibet) for example, my feelings would be the same as seeing a picture of people in Africa. So that is 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 hard and assimilate. 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 I think I am so withdrawn from the true community in Tibet that I can relate in some ways to it but that would be my feeling with anything else.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.

These two widely differing conversations offer an appropriate view of the primary thesis of this paper: with the advent of wider access to digital landscapes and the distancing of the Tibetan diasporic population, physically and ideologically, from the exilic centers of discourse i.e. the Tibetan Government in exile and the various exile

[1] 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, I requested an interview with her, which was conducted over three separate sessions at her home in Virginia.

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cultural and religious institutions, Tibetans have constructed and expressed views on regional diversity, identities, history, culture, and belongingness to the conceptual notion of Tibet as home, ones that reengage and reinterpret the narratives constructed by the exile polity and exile Tibetan Nationalism.

Carol 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 pasts 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.[2]

These historical "truths" have played their way into the construction of grand narratives by the exile polity, marginalizing regional and sectarian affiliations to the nation–state project. These 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 the past while distancing from oppressive elements of history."[3] These depictions are not a phenomenon exclusively stemming from the exile polity but rather have precedents in the past 250 years of Western fascination with Tibet, both as an object of almost a voyeuristic desire as well as part of its imperial expansionist and colonial project.

1. Research Methodology

Methodologically, this paper is built on 16 interviews with young Tibetans, all of them living in the United States conducted between 2018–2020. Some of the interlocutors' names have been altered with respect to their wishes, but to protect anonymity even further, I have not indicated whose names have been altered. The interviews were primarily conducted in English and Tibetan, with frequent crossing between both languages during conversations. The interlocutors were primarily chosen based on prior acquaintances and interactions during gatherings, workshops, conferences, etc.

The limitation of my selection of interviewees is quite apparent. The Tibetan community in the United States is a minority within the

[2] McGranahan 2010: 3.
[3] Anand 2002: 12.

diaspora and more importantly it is a very recent community.[4] Tibetans in the United States differ from those in India as they are spatially and, in many cases, ideologically away from the exilic centers of discourse that influence much of Tibetans in South Asia. Furthermore, most of my interlocutors hold a US passport. Therefore, their voices would be qualitatively different from those who live in proximity (physical and ideological) to such exilic centers of discourse in India since most Tibetans in India are registered as stateless foreigners by the Indian State. Therefore, my findings need to be taken into consideration in this context and not be seen as definite 'evidence' of such a digital diaspora but rather as an indicator of the emergence of one.

However, my interlocutors are also uniquely placed to answer the questions posed in this paper. Most of them migrated to the United States from India and grew up under the Tibetan School System in India as well as lived in the various Tibetan settlements. Many of them were born in Tibet and those who were not retain close kinship and personal ties to Tibet. All of them have lived for a substantial period in the United States as students and professionals. Therefore, their pluralistic experiences of being a refugee, stateless foreigners, and then legal citizens, along with having roots in the different provinces of Tibet while being educated under the exile Tibetan school system, positions them between the nationalist narrative of exile and the emerging alternatives that run counter to them.

2. Defining the Tibetan Nation-in-exile

The model of the nation-state was introduced to Tibet in the 19th Century, due to the changing conditions of an increasingly 'Westphalian' world structure[5] as well as a modernizing China. In reality, 'pre-modern' Tibet[6] was not characterized by the unity between territory and governance, like a typical definition of a modern state, but rather the three 'provinces' that correspond to modern-day

[4] The first large group of 1000 Tibetans entered the United States in 1991 as part of the "Tibetan U.S Resettlement Project." However, the rate of immigration from India has risen substantially, and thus the diasporic community in the United States is the largest outside India and Nepal.

[5] A "Westphalian world structure" is one that emerged out of the 1648 Westphalian treaty signed between members of the European powers after the defeat of Napoleon. It laid the foundation of western model of nation states, that included notions of sovereign borders, statehood and bureaucracy, one that was adopted in various shapes by other nations once Europe lost its colonies.

[6] I take the historical period from 1642, when the 5th Dalai Lama assumed his power, to 1950 which signaled the invasion of Tibet by the PLA, as 'pre – modern Tibet'.

provinces of U-Tsang, Amdo, and Kham were connected by complex layers of religious and cultural affiliations, primarily to Central Tibet, as well as shifting allegiances.[7] Geoffrey Samuel contends,

> Premodern Tibet contained a greater variety of social and political formations than is often appreciated. Certainly, it makes little sense to think of Tibet as a strongly centralized state ruled by a theocratic government at Lhasa… The Dalai Lama's regime at Lhasa was only one, if in recent times the largest, of a variety of state formations within the Tibetan region.[8]

Furthermore, Georges Dreyfus argues that the reason for a lack of national self-awareness cannot be based on the fact that Tibet was never colonized i.e. physically occupied and directly governed by an external power before the invasion of the People's Liberation Army but because of the conscious decision of the Central Tibetan Government ruling elite to isolate Tibet from Asia during the 18th and 19th Centuries, 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–state."[9]

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 have been defined differently. The nation-state building project was based on the objectives of constructing a narrative that could run against the Chinese colonial state-building project inside Tibet, deeming it as illegitimate and repressive, while at the same time appropriating the Westphalian model of the nation–state to gain acceptance from the West (which remains its primary supporter) as well as to conform to international norms. As Carole McGranahan defines it, "[a]s a transnational state centered within the territorial boundaries of another state (India), the exiled Tibetan state departs from geographic expectations of statehood but meets other norms."[10]

An in-depth discussion on the definition of this exile nation–state vis–a–vis the de facto sovereignty of the Tibetan Government–in–exile

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[7] These provinces comprise the modern day concept of Bod Cholka-sum or 'Greater Tibet', which remains at the center of the Tibetan national imagination, particularly in exile, one that runs counter to China's division of Tibet into the Tibet Autonomous region (largely U-Tsang) and Amdo and Kham being incorporated into the Chinese provinces of Qinghai and Sichuan.

[8] Samuel 1993: 3.

[9] Dreyfus 2002: 39.

[10] McGranahan 2010: 15.

is beyond the scope of this paper.[11] What is of importance for this particular argument is that the idea of a "Tibetan nation–state" in exile is closely linked to the construction of an almost 'pan-Tibetan national identity' that is shared within the exile polity. Dibyesh Anand puts this notion 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 community as a nation … it has been argued that 'invented traditions' are used to create imagined communities.[12]

Similarly, on the notion of the construction of national political identity among the exilic polity, Tsering Shakya argues:

> The Dalai Lama's demand for unification of the entire Tibetan–speaking area under 'Bod Cholka–sum' has become deeply embedded in the political culture of the Tibetan diaspora, where the core of the refugees' political identity lay in the conception of Tibet as a unity of Kham, Amdo, and U-Tsang. This has been crucial in forging unity among diverse refugee groups. But although the idea enjoys universal support among the exile community, it has no recent historical base and it is difficult to assess the extent of support it might enjoy inside Greater Tibet.[13]

Furthermore, the exilic discourse around the constituents of a 'Tibetan' identity is built around the imagination of a unified Tibetan polity that comprises a uniform Tibetan language, culture, and history but in reality, is primarily Lhasa- or Central Tibet- centric in nature.[14] As McGranahan argues in her exposition of the use of history as a means for political governance, "The exile histories homogenize the nation in service to the state, specifically to the political struggle of the Tibetan state versus the Chinese state."[15]

Anderson's "imagined community" contains assumptions of shared values and identities, often at a national level, and that these values would incorporate an understanding of a shared common

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[11] For further readings, see Bridge 2011; Hess 2009; McConnell 2009; Vasantkumar, 2013.
[12] Anand 2000: 273.
[13] Shakya 1999: 387.
[14] McGranahan 2010: 16–17. For further readings see Barnett 2001; Bell 1928; McKay 2001.
[15] McGranahan 2010: 22.

history, language, institutions, et cetera.[16] 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 drawn 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, silenced, or not recognized. The anthropologist Michel–Rolph Trouillot articulates this well in his much-acclaimed text on the Haitian Revolution, *Silencing the Past: Power and Production of History*, where he writes:

> Thus, the presences and absences embodied in sources … or archives … are neither neutral nor natural. They are created. As such they are not mere presences and absences but mentions or silences … Mentions and silences are thus active, dialectical counterparts of which history is the synthesis.[17]

In the context of the Tibetan diaspora, this marginalization or 'silencing' can come primarily in the context of regional Tibetan identities and histories. McGranahan contends that the aspect of 'region' is a key category through which Tibetan identities are grounded. She goes on to argue that,

> In Tibet before 1959 and in exile society after 1959, the region serves as a central marker for the 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.[18]

The exile polity has attempted to construct a narrative of a 'modern' form of Tibetan ethnic nationalism, as a way to legitimize its claims to an independent state, one that has a shared sense of ethnic homogeneity in terms of history, culture, and language.

3. Beyond the Nation-State

Methodological nationalism can be defined as scholarly research that takes the nation as a 'natural' container for understanding the social and political form of the modern world".[19] Arjun Appadurai asserts

[16] Anderson 1991.
[17] Trouillot 1995: 4.
[18] McGranahan 2010: 4.
[19] Quayson and Daswani 2013.

that the nation-state no longer remains the only medium of organization or construction of an imagined community.[20] Different landscapes such as economic, digital, ideological, etc. play increasingly heightened roles in forming communities and cross-border networks. The study of diasporas since its early scholarship has essentially criticized the model of methodological nationalism, arguing that diasporic identity formations and connections can transcend borders, opening up new avenues of social interactions and spaces that cannot be contained within the rubric of the nation-state.[21]

This paper takes 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 concerning the 'Tibetan' nation-building discourses produced by the Tibetan government-in-exile and traditional religious and cultural centers of power in exile. Julia Meredith Hess has written perhaps one of the few full-fledged scholarly works on the Tibetan diaspora in America, where she notes the tension within the hybrid citizenry of Tibetan-American citizens.[22] 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", a consciousness that she argues is built on persevering connections to an imagined "homeland" and loyalty to the aspirations of a "nation" being constructed in exile.[23]

I draw upon interviews, which I have quoted in the following sections, with my respondents to lay an alternative claim, that is, the 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 polity 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 narratives and

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[20] Appadurai 1996.

[21] For works criticizing methodological nationalism see Appadurai 1996; Clifford 1994.

[22] This conjecture is based on insights drawn from my own research into the subject as well as a number of reviews by other scholars. For example, see Yeh 2010.

[23] Hess 2009: 8.

positionality to the landscapes of ideologies, politics, and history put up by the dominant discourses in exile.

"My history wasn't there"[24]

Kirti Kyab[25] is a 26-year-old male who was born in Amdo, Tibet. He left his village at the age of 14 for India, where he completed his education at one of the Tibetan schools, pursued his master's degree in the US. He now works in Washington D.C.

> *Me: How did you learn history?*
> *Kirti: I think when I was in TCV* [one of the major Tibetan school systems in India], *the little bit of history that we learned was very Buddhist-oriented and centered around one person, His Holiness the Dalai Lama, and nothing else. That is 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 on one person and certain events. Then there is this recent news on social media coming out of Tibet of protests, and 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 the exile school system did not do justice to us as a new generation. We all had to do this ourselves, study our history. We read books, listened to people, and watched documentaries. That is how we learned our histories. We did not learn through the school system.*
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> *Me: So why do you think 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 a community of a lost nation and so they don't necessarily bring a lot of diverse perspectives all at once. It is always easier to choose a sort of singular, unifying narrative. I do think it has counterproductive repercussions. 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 different.*

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[24] A quote from an interview with Kirti Kyab, one of my interlocutors.

[25] 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.

The nation–state-building project in exile is constructed 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 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 marginalised 'pasts' that is existent in an increasingly globalized diaspora stepping out of the frameworks of the exilic nation-building project. Victoria Bernal and Donya Alinejad note similar ruptures within the Eritrean and Iranian diasporas respectively, between dominant nationalist discourse and alternative perspectives, ruptures that are personified and expressed through spaces in the digital media.[26] As Kirti notes, the images of self-immolations and protests are from the regions of Amdo and Kham, but their histories and narratives are silenced within the grand narratives of a Tibetan modern nation.

Tenzin Choekyi,[27] a Tibetan–American citizen, expressed similar opinions:

> *Me: So when you moved to India and studied in TCV, did you face difficulties in adjusting to life especially since in exile?*
> *Choekyi: I remember having difficulty learning the formal U - Tsang dialect, using zhe-sa* [Translation: 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]. *It was very uncomfortable. It wasn't hard to learn but I 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's 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 conflict of forgetting her dialect at the expense of learning the one favored by the exilic leadership as the Tibetan language and her inability to converse with her father reflects the regional affiliations and ideational markers that have been flattened and silenced in the pursuit of constructing a nation that is homogenous, linear and

[26] Alinejad 2017; Bernal 2006.

[27] 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.

'modern', one that plays into Kirti's 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'.

Several other researchers have argued that the nation-state 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 the governance of the People's Republic of China, as a cultural milieu to reclaim a supposed primordial ethnic past that is crucial for building a sense of modern nationalism.[28] 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 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 preserving a pure form of this civilization since it is itself under erasure in the original home."[29] 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 is a Columbia University doctoral candidate, whose research focuses on the history of Chinese Material Culture and the Himalayas.[30] Her response to my questions played out the skepticism she maintained toward the notion of an 'authentic Tibetan':

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28 Anand 2000: 277; Smith 1996: 21.

29 Anand 2002: 19.

30 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.

> *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 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 and saw shows from Tibet as well as the music, which gave me the idea that our language is better in Tibet.*

Lekey Leidecker is an individual of mixed heritage, the only one among all of my respondents, and someone who is quite active in her organization's work inside Tibet.[31] 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 inquiry altogether.

> *Me: Do you think that images of rituals or ceremonies from Tibet are more authentic than those that come from India?*
> *Lekey: 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 the apron-like clothing that Tibetan women in different parts of Tibet and Bhutan wear as a symbol of their married status]. *You won'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 Lekey's and Yewong's responses are indicative of the distancing of Tibetans from the grand narratives of the exilic leadership, particularly on two accounts: one, that the "authentic" Tibetan culture

[31] 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 a student event organized by Machik which later led to us collaborating as organizers for Machik Weekend, an annual gathering of Tibetans organized by Machik.

and identity 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 the central point of note here is her observation of this difference) went counter to what was propagated in exile and Lekey's assertion that the notion of being Tibetan is constantly changing and subject to negotiation and that 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.

Perhaps the strongest assertion of such distancing from the Tibetan government-in-exile's construction of a nation in exile can be found in my conversation with Rinzin Wangmo, with whom I conversed through Skype (an excellent example of the trans-territorial connections that digital forums allow individuals to engage in).[32] 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][33] *since Upper TCV* [her high school in 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 space for other voices, other than UmayLam and Rangzen [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 reprocess what democracy means to us. One strong person, one Rinpoche puts*

[32] 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.

[33] The Middle Way Approach is the official diplomatic position of the Tibetan Government in exile since 1988, one that seeks autonomy under Chinese rule, but includes the provinces of U-Tsang, Amdo and Kham under the autonomous governance of a Tibetan provincial government.

> *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 the 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 14th 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, would there be a space for its expression is a central concern that cuts to the theme of this paper.

Robert Cohen argues that "victim diasporas" has become the normative way of defining and thinking about the study of diasporas.[34] Diasporas emerge out of dispersals from one land of origin, usually due to a cataclysmic event or events.[35] 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 emerged 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 (although I have not conducted any interviews in India for this paper, the stateless political status of Tibetans roots them much more to the "Tibetan" discourse of the Tibetan Government-in-exile) are increasingly turning to alternative pathways of identification.

My conversation with Chemi Dolkar,[36] a Tibetan-American citizen, is illustrative of this tension between identifying oneself as a Tibetan but being 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 a 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*

[34] Cohen 1997.
[35] Quayson and Daswani 2013.
[36] Chemi Dolkar was born in Nepal but moved to the United States at a young age, so she was practically raised and educated outside Nepal and India.

> *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's 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.*

Similarly, Kirti espoused similar frustration with the notion of being a "victim diaspora."

> *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 it's fake news, 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 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, represent 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.

4. Spaces and Voices: Agency in the Digital Forum

The rise of mass media and literacy allowed the political, cultural, and commercial elites of "imagined communities" of nation-states to construct the grand nationalist narratives that would define these

states.[37] Such media then constructed consensus among the citizens on ideals of "national unity" which were defined by the elites. These mass media spaces 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 respectively.

Robert Saunders argues 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, thus creating networks of communications that crossed borders and resisted, successfully, control of these elites.[38] He further notes that the advent of the internet successfully de-territorialized communications, allowing a near simultaneity between the production and consumption of information as well as decentering it at the same time. Alinejad's work on the Iranian-American diaspora shows that in today's world of digital communication which has conglomerated all different forms of communications, the relationship between the producers and consumers is no longer 'fixed' but rather it is a dialectical one, with the consumers having agency to choose what they want as well as 'speak back' to the narratives and agendas put out on the digital space.[39] As Bernal puts it, while discussing the Eritrean diaspora, the Internet "assists in the development of Habermasian transnational public sphere where marginalized groups can produce and debate narratives of history, culture, democracy and identity."[40]

Before dwelling further into the interviews, an acknowledgment must be made concerning the nature of the internet and access to it in the context of the Tibetan community inside and outside Tibet. Internet within Tibet is severely censored by the Chinese Government, and Tibetans must be extremely careful about how they use it, whether it be communication applications such as WeChat or browsing websites. Furthermore, Tibetans inside Tibet access the internet using VPNs, particularly popular websites like Facebook, Instagram, YouTube, and Google which are banned by the Chinese Government. Much of the content that is available on popular digital platforms is, therefore, curated by Tibetans who can access VPN services or by those who have access to Chinese social media platforms such as Douyin, Weixin, Weibo, et cetera. In the exile community, access to these digital spaces is much easier but they also give rise to challenges. India, for example, banned WeChat in 2021, along with a host of other applications that originate from China, and thus Tibetans in India have turned to using VPNs to remain in connection with their families and

[37] Anderson 1991: 114.
[38] Saunders 2011: 2.
[39] Anlinejad 2017: 2.
[40] Bernal 2006: 61.

friends inside Tibet. It is also vital to note that access to the internet, like everywhere else, is a social, economic, and educational privilege, one that is not available to everyone.

My conversation with Tsering Sangpo, 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 the decentralized nature of the Internet as a public space.[41]

> *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 to Tibetans who have never seen Tibet but now those who grew up in exile, including me, have the ability to know what is happening in Tibet which 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 of this new connection to Tibet?*
> *Sangpo: I guess it played an indispensable role. In 2009 I only had Facebook, 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 and information and so I follow artists and musicians on social media. It's just about finding my own space, my own tribe, and people who think in other ways and then seeing how they are doing it.*

His assertion that 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 that is in danger from modernization. His statement on the plurality of sources of 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 "find 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

[41] Tsering 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.

connections across borders and outside of the framework of the nation- 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 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, Facebook, 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 allow her to connect to her audience from her home indicates the potential of digital forums to create virtual communities that are as imagined as Anderson's notion of imagined communities, since both entail individuals and communities that share commonalities of experience, ideas, and symbols but have in most probability never physically met each other. In particular, her observation that different forums of the digital landscape such as Twitter, Facebook, and Instagram, allow 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 a simultaneous interview with Tenzin Yewong and Tenzin Dechen, a resident of Boston.[42] I had already

[42] 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

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 in Queens New York, we shared a meal and an insightful discussion.

> *Me: Since both of you mentioned earlier that you have a 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 that was produced in Tibet by the two-person band "Anu") *and all these new artists are coming up through digital 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 over their own stories and are not afraid to criticize their community. In our exile society there are different expectations set by the 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 slang and a 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 the sense that 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, 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*

met at a "Tibetan Student Retreat" event which she had organized, and I had registered to participate.

> *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 that loss and suffering. I don't deny their narratives but in today's world, there are new experiences and narratives also.*
> *Yewong: By a modern story, I mean a secular national culture. That is what makes this pop culture modern because until recently culture has been about religion 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 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 the control of political authorities or the commercial censorship of mass media."[43] Yewong's feelings of shared connections to the new artists that she follows on social media are because 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 freely speak 'Amdo accent' or 'Ghetto Tibetan' without any element of exotification. 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 an imagined community of a Tibetan exilic nation, one that is not fixed as an ontological whole through the constraints of fixed imperatives such as language, traditions, and so on.

There is a reason for such decentralized 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

[43] Saunders 2011: 9.

negotiate their identity, questioning their traditional home culture as they embrace values, experience, and culture from their host lands."[44]

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 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* [a 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 are in school, the teachers will act like a big store of knowledge, with an 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 to read it, but I had to critically question it and see whether I liked it. 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 higher education 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 concerning the Tibetan diaspora is representative of both the sense of the 'nomadic' nature of diasporas or as McGranahan describes it "one of lived

[44] Brinkerhoff 2009: 77.

impermanence vis-à-vis the world" [45] but also of escape from the rigidity of methodological nationalism, physically as well as ideologically in the case of the Tibetan diaspora.

Conclusion

This is by no means an exhaustive work on the narratives of the Tibetan diaspora, because as Kirti Kyab mentions "stories and experiences always change and never are the same". What I have sought to attempt is to lay 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 project in exile.

"Tibet" and the notion of "Tibetanness" are constantly being negotiated, challenged, and changing. The Tibetan diaspora is no longer static, both in an ideological and physical sense, with an incremental rise in the movement of the population from India and Nepal to the West. 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 in exile, absorbing hybrid identities or as Chemi 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 are not born in a vacuum but rather have precedents in the Western construction of 'Tibet'. The Tibetan diaspora has reacted against as well as appropriated these images in their pursuits of agency and narratives, whether it be for the aspiration for a nation or identification with their history, culture, and society.

I have argued throughout this paper that from an appropriation of these images by the exile leadership, we now see emerging alternative narratives, images, and expressions of identity that fundamentally challenge the legitimacy of such national narratives, effectively stepping out of the rigidity of methodological nationalism as personified by the nation – state-building project in exile. Tibetan nationalism in exile is dependent, besides 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 the Middle Way Approach have further complicated the association of the Tibetan diaspora with the idea of a nation. As the

[45] McGranahan 2010: 13.

community further spreads out, the identification with the imagination of the Tibetan nation as defined by the Tibetan Government–in–exile 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 narrative of 'Tibet' as a nation as defined by the exilic leadership.

I have also attempted to lay out the digital landscape and the Tibetan Diaspora engagement with it as a potential space for the expressions of such alternative narratives and the formation of virtual imagined communities, decentering the traditional centers for the production of such ideational discourses. Although the Tibetan Government–in–exile does not exert the same control over the digital space, as most 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. The Tibetan digital diaspora is still in its budding phase. Consequently, there are also avenues of distrust among the Tibetan diaspora about 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 a hate crime. Within Tibetan society, there is a danger of social media being a forum of rumors for regional and sectarian politics and chaos creating agenda."

Yet, as the diaspora 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 fix the linear truth of official history… spaces are secured for officially authorized truths only." [46] 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. However, this article is unable to clearly delineate the dimensions of these alternative narratives and the particular nature of the histories, cultures, and regional and religious identities they seek to construct within these digital spaces. The reason for this inability lies in both the limitations of my interviews, i.e., in terms of the number of interlocutors, their experiences, geographical location, and time. Furthermore, there is a lack of literature that dwells on this issue about the Tibetan diaspora that one draws upon, and this article is an attempt to contribute to this emerging field.

[46] McGranahan 2010: 26.

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