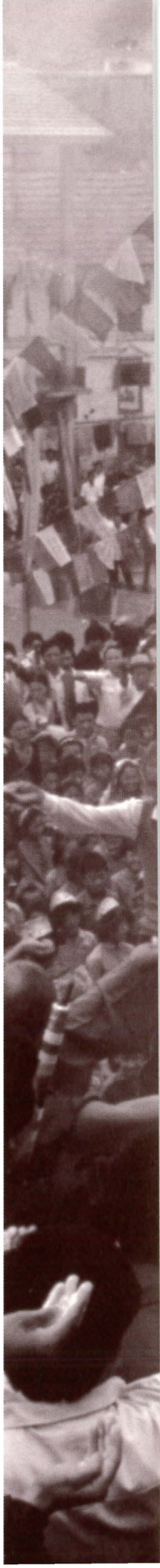


Tibetan Culture Beyond the Land of Snows



by Richard Kennedy

*T*ibetan Culture Beyond the Land of Snows uses a translation of the Tibetan term for Tibet, *Bhöd Gangchen-Jong*, or “land of snows,” to describe a community of people who are Tibetan in origin but are now living outside the historical and ethnographic boundaries of Tibet. These Tibetans began to leave Tibet in 1959 after His Holiness the 14th Dalai Lama, the spiritual and temporal leader of the people of Tibet, fled to India. The Dalai Lama fled Tibet after a decade of negotiations with the Chinese government for peaceful co-existence had failed. He eventually established a government-in-exile in the Himalayan town of Dharamsala. Over the subsequent 40



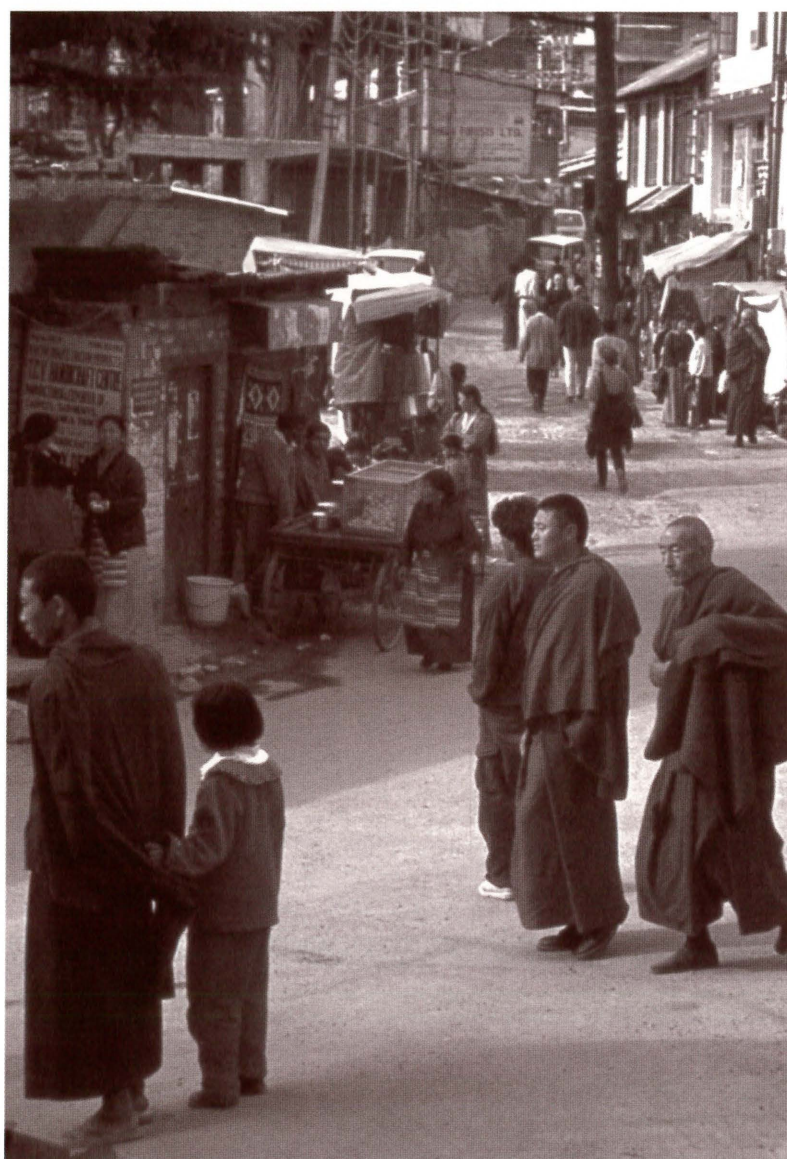




years many other Tibetans have escaped from Chinese-occupied Tibet and settled throughout India and Nepal, and smaller numbers have emigrated to North America and Europe. Now approximately 140,000 Tibetans live outside of Tibet. Another 6 million Tibetans remain in the Tibetan areas of present-day China. This Festival program focuses on the culture of the Tibetan refugee community, beyond the land of snows.

The Festival often has featured the cultures of immigrant groups; these programs have explored the transformations that take place in cultures uprooted and reestablished in new settings. In the case of Tibetans, those who settled in India have adopted elements of Indian culture, many of which have long been familiar to them. These Tibetans have learned Hindi, altered their diet to suit the Indian sub-continent, and established Indian bureaucratic systems. Similarly, Tibetans in North America have learned English, formed rock bands, and eaten hamburgers at McDonalds. But although the immigration of Tibetans to India, Europe, and the United States is similar to the migrations of many peoples who have fled war, destitution, and/or political chaos, the degree to which Tibetans immediately seized on culture as a focus for their new identities is striking.

The destruction of Tibetan monasteries and cultural institutions over the past four decades, but particularly during the Cultural Revolution of 1966–78, left many in the Tibetan community fearing the total annihilation of the centuries-old religious and secular traditions of the country. Cultural preservation often is important to immigrant identity; however, the Tibetans have made it a central goal not only of their new society but also of their new government. The establishment of cultural institutions that would revitalize and strengthen traditional Tibetan culture was among the first considerations of the government-in-exile. TIPA (the Tibetan Institute for Performing Arts), Men-tse Khang (The Tibetan Medical and Astro Institute), and the Library of Tibetan Works and Archives are but three of

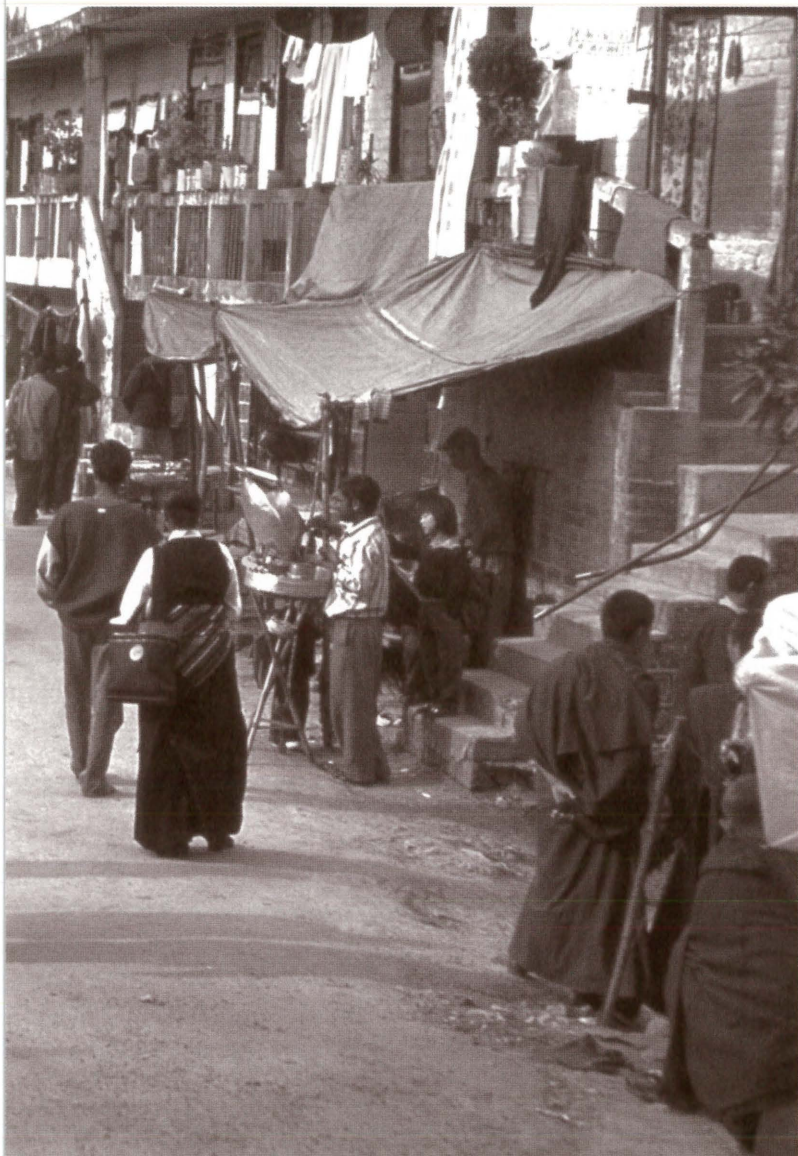


Tibetans and Indians live together in Dharamsala in the foothills of the Indian Himalayas. Dharamsala is home of the Tibetan government-in-exile and the Dalai Lama.

Photo © Alison Wright

Previous page: Tibetans young and old, monks and lay people in Kathmandu, Nepal, celebrate Tibetan New Year by tossing *tsampa* (roasted barley flour) in the air, an expression of positive intentions for one's own and others' happiness.

Photo © Alison Wright



numerous institutions that are integral to the policies of that government.



In spite of the Tibetan government-in-exile's efforts at cultural preservation, people in the West know little of Tibetan culture. The few available images of Tibet are often highly romanticized. The West has pictured Tibet only as an isolated land of pious Buddhists who have developed highly sophisticated religious practices removed from the currents of modern life. From 19th- and early 20th-century reports of travelers to Tibet, such as Alexandra David-Neel, and from translations of Tibetan religious texts to more recent New Age interpreters of Tibetan culture, Tibet, to many observers, has remained primarily a beacon of religious enlightenment. Certainly the international role played by the Dalai Lama to some degree reinforces this view. Some books by Western writers and early films such as the 1937 Frank Capra classic *Lost Horizon* have created a particularly compelling impression of a very foreign and spiritual "land of snows." Although portrayals such as that of Shangri-La in the Capra film are patently false and misleading, there is much truth in some of the images established by earlier writers. Nevertheless, together they are only part of the story.

Because Tibet was never colonized by a Western power and remained particularly isolated during the period of Western expansion, it did, in fact, appear to have been perennially cut off from European history. In reality Tibet during much of its history was in close commercial and cultural contact with its neighbors and, throughout its history, has played a role in regional affairs. Tibet was a land of merchants, nomads, fighters, and great scholars as well as monks. Little about this side of the country's history ever reached the West. However, after the Dalai Lama's escape in 1959 and particularly again in the 1990s after he was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize, a more complete image of Tibet has been available. This time, rather than Buddhist texts or travelers' reports, Tibetans themselves have come to tell the tale.



Tibetan Culture Beyond the Land of Snows provides a platform for a number of Tibetans to speak and hopefully, in turn, paints a more complete picture of the culture. Festival participants may tell of the horrors of torture and cultural destruction by the Chinese, while others will speak about the Buddhist insights developed by Tibetan masters over centuries into highly sophisticated intellectual reflections and meditation practices. Some of these narratives will reinforce what Westerners have always thought about the spiritual preeminence of Tibet, while others may test preconceptions and question the feudal traditions and inequities historically found in the country's social order. Young Tibetans born in India or the West have less grounding in the spiritual Tibet of memory and text, and some are quick to look for new sources of inspiration in secular Tibetan and Western cultures. This Festival program will allow a broader number of Tibetan voices to be heard in the West.

Tibetan Culture Beyond the Land of Snows affords a rare opportunity for the public to hear directly from monks, nuns, and religious leaders from India and the United States, and from the very finest of traditional artists now living outside Tibet, and to speak with musicians from Canada,

craftsmen from Dharamsala, cooks from the United States, and weavers from Nepal. From these discussions we should gain a clearer understanding of the status of Tibetan culture in the 21st century. I hope the picture that comes into focus will be a complex one that includes images of Tibet as a contemporary living ethnic community, as well as a historical ideal. Certainly visitors will gain a deeper understanding of how critical a role culture does play in shaping the identities of both a refugee community and a nation.

Suggested Reading

- Avedon, John F. 1984. *In Exile from the Land of Snows*. New York: Harper Perennial.
- Lopez, Donald S. 1998. *Prisoners of Shangri-la: Tibetan Buddhism and the West*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Richardson, Hugh. 1998. *High Peaks, Pure Earth: Collected Writings on Tibetan History and Culture*. London: Serindia Publications.
- Conservancy for Tibetan Art & Culture
<www.tibetanculture.org>.

Richard Kennedy is Deputy Director of the Smithsonian Center for Folklife and Cultural Heritage and co-curator of the Festival program on Tibetan culture. He has curated Festival programs on Hawai'i, Indonesia, Thailand, Philippines, and Russian music. Before coming to the Smithsonian he was Associate Director of the National Council for the Traditional Arts and Chair of South Asian Area Studies at the U.S. State Department's Foreign Service Institute. He earned his Ph.D. in South and Southeast Asian studies at the University of California, Berkeley.

THIS PROGRAM IS PRODUCED IN COLLABORATION WITH THE CONSERVANCY FOR TIBETAN ART & CULTURE AND WITH THE ASSISTANCE OF HIS HOLINESS THE 14TH DALAI LAMA OF TIBET AND THE TIBETAN GOVERNMENT-IN-EXILE. MAJOR SUPPORT IS PROVIDED BY THE INTERNATIONAL CAMPAIGN FOR TIBET, TIBET FUND, TIBET HOUSE NEW YORK, THE ROCKEFELLER FOUNDATION, THE GERE FOUNDATION, INNER HARMONY WELLNESS CENTER/PETER AMATO, STEVEN AND BARBARA ROCKEFELLER, EDWARD F. NAZARKO, THE KRUGLAK FAMILY, TIBETAN ALLIANCE OF CHICAGO, INC., THE SHELLEY AND DONALD RUBIN FOUNDATION, INC., UTAH TIBET SUPPORT GROUP, AND KAZUKO TATSUMURA HILLYER.



Tibetan officials pose in Lhasa, Tibet, during Losar (Tibetan New Year). The Potala Palace is shown in the background. This photo was published in a book by Alexandra David-Neel in the 1930s, and was one among only a few images available to Westerners before the 1950s.

Photographer and year unknown, courtesy The Newark Museum/Art Resource, NY