



Tibetan Culture in the 21st Century

by Bhuchung K. Tsering

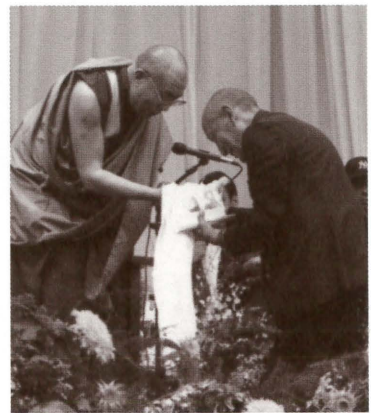
When tracing our cultural heritage, we Tibetans talk about three main sources of influence: for our spiritual tradition we looked towards our neighbor to the south, India; for our culinary tradition towards our neighbor to the east, China; and, for our style of dress we looked towards our neighbor to the northeast, Mongolia. We amalgamated these borrowings with our existing traditions to come out with a distinctly Tibetan culture. His Holiness the Dalai Lama points to the *khata*, the Tibetan greeting scarf, as a concrete example of this fusion of influences. The *khata*'s origin can be traced to India, but it has been mostly manufactured in China, and it is used only in the Tibetan cultural areas.

In its artistic expression and other aspects, Tibetan culture has a deeply spiritual foundation. In the Tibetan medical tradition, for example, Tibetan physicians place equal emphasis on medicines (mostly herb and mineral based) and on the spiritual component. Patients need to recite certain prayers before taking some medicines; in other instances, medicines, particularly the *rinchen rilbu* (precious pill), are said to be more efficacious if consumed during certain holy days. Tibetan culture has a holistic approach. It encourages a macro perspective of the issue, whether it is a discussion of deeper Buddhist philosophy or the treatment of sick people. The local lama (teacher) is a spiritual leader, psychiatric counselor, medical doctor, and business advisor all rolled into one. The culture also has a pragmatic

side, with people encouraged to find creative ways of adhering to their tradition. For example, traditionally Tibetans refrain from starting on a journey on a Sunday or on inauspicious days as calculated by Tibetan astrology. But when people cannot avoid doing this, they first undertake a

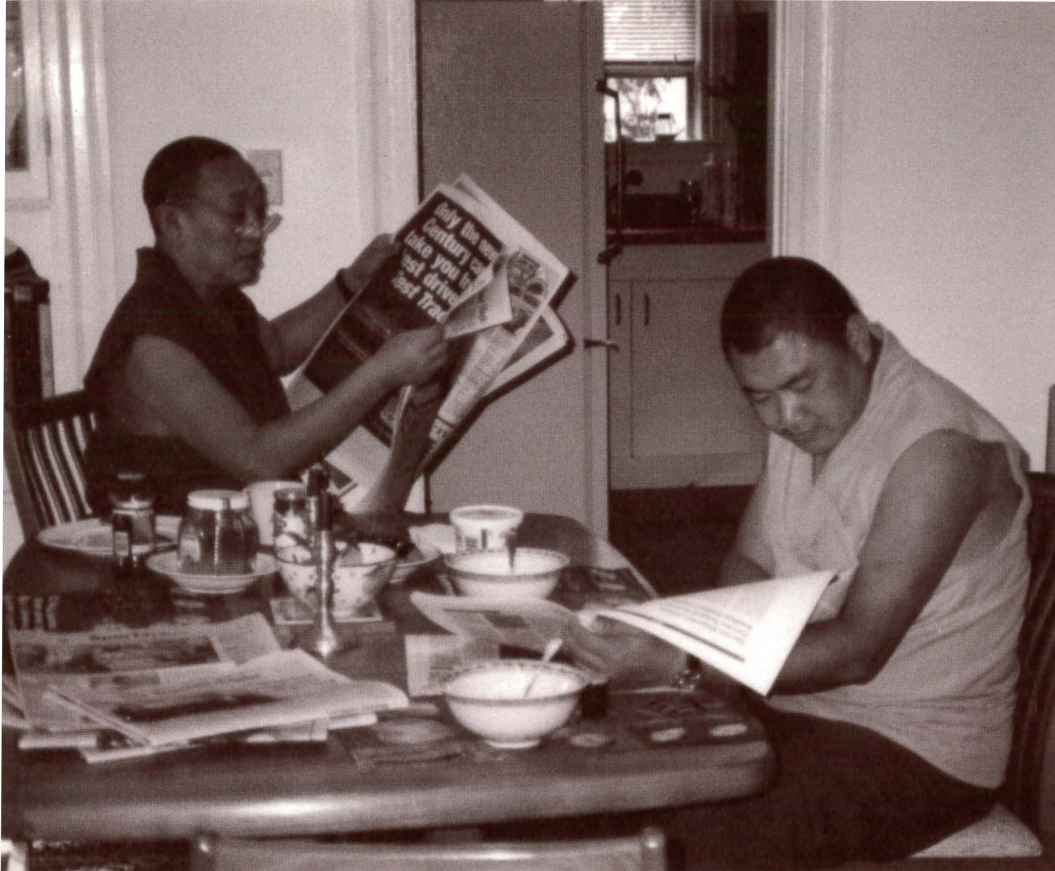
make-believe journey on the previous day, complete with a backpack, before returning home after a short trek, to fool the evil spirits. They then begin their actual journey the next day.

The arrival of Chinese troops in Tibet, which forced a sizable number of Tibetans to seek refuge outside of their homeland, upset the Tibetan cultural balance. Tibetan culture, which had until then blossomed in familiar terrain, was exposed to pressure on a large scale. Within Tibet, Chinese values have been forced upon Tibetan society for predominantly political reasons. Chinese influence has become a norm in the daily lives of the Tibetans in Tibet, particularly those living in urban areas. Tibetan dress has become sinocized. Tibetan literature, painting, music, and dance have taken on Chinese overtones with a common



The Dalai Lama receives a ceremonial *khata* from Khyongla Rato Rinpoche in New York, 1999.

Photo © Sonam Zoksang



Left: Two monks read the newspaper during breakfast in Virginia. Teachers from the four schools of Tibetan Buddhism and Bön, the indigenous religion of Tibet, travel often to North America to teach meditation.

Photo courtesy Chongtul Rinpoche

Opposite page: Tibetan women in *chubas*, traditional hats, and aprons sing traditional *chang* (beer) songs in a Tibetan refugee camp in South India.

Photo © Sonam Zoksang

theme: depicting the supposedly terrible situation in Tibet in the pre-Chinese era and the so-called positive aspect of Chinese rule.

Tibetans in the diaspora have experienced a different kind of pressure. Having been transplanted to a different cultural environment, Tibetan refugees have had to cope with the cultural values, including climatic conditions, of their host societies, whether in the Indian subcontinent or the West. The post-1959 period also saw Tibetan cultural and religious institutions assuming dual identities. Major Tibetan monastic communities have been re-established in the Indian subcontinent. Today, there are Sera and Tashi Lhunpo monasteries both in Tibet and in exile.

The interaction with the outside culture has posed a dilemma for the Tibetans, particularly when there was contradiction between traditional Tibetan beliefs and the modern world view. The Dalai Lama from an early stage asked Tibetans to be pragmatic as they faced such a situation. Tibetans, he said, should differentiate between the essence of their culture and its more superficial ritualistic accouterments. He stressed the importance of preserving the former while being able to forgo

some of the latter, particularly in terms of rituals like customary ways of greeting that included sticking one's tongue out, or traditional burial styles which are not feasible at lower altitudes.

Tibetans are in the process of doing this. Take Tibetan dress, for instance. The traditional *chuba* (kimono-like garment) is not suitable for the climatic conditions in the Indian subcontinent. Thus, although Tibetan men in exile still preserve our *chuba*, they only use it during formal occasions. Tibetan women, on the other hand, have adapted the *chuba* for daily usage. Tibetan Buddhists also have learned to accept that the world is round, as scientifically proved, instead of being flat, as contained in some of the Buddhist scriptures.

The experience of the past four decades, during which Tibetans experienced close interaction with the outside world, showed that Tibetan culture had much to contribute to the development of world civilization. For example, in India there has been a reverse spread of Buddhism, from the Tibetans back to India. There is an interesting and moving process of re-translation from Tibetan to Sanskrit of Buddhist scriptures which had been



lost in India. Tibetan Buddhist philosophy is a field of study in very many institutions of higher learning in the West; the Tibetan medical tradition has a pride of place in the alternative healing systems of the world.

Tibetan culture itself, rather than being submerged in the cultures of our host societies, has acquired new dimensions. The exposure has created a new breed of teachers of Tibetan Buddhism. Western scholars in suits and ties as well as Western monks and nuns in Tibetan Buddhist robes now lecture on the deeper aspects of Tibetan Buddhist philosophy, which 50 years before would have been a strange sight for Tibetans. The widespread recognition of Tibetan culture has also engendered a new market for "Tibetan items" ranging from ashtrays, lighters, and singing bowls to designer prayer flags and root beer. It has also resulted in the secularization of Tibetan culture, if you will. The *thangka* paintings and sacred statues, which traditionally could be found only in the shrine rooms and altars of houses, have also moved into the living rooms. In addition to being symbols of spiritual visualization, these items have become decorative objects.

Today, Tibetan culture is at a crossroads. Diaspora life has changed the mode of its preservation. An institutionalized system has been estab-

lished with knowledge of the culture passed on more through the classroom than through living experience. The Library of Tibetan Works and Archives, the Norbulingka Institute, and the Central Institute of Higher Tibetan Studies in India, and Tibet House and numerous Dharma Centers in the United States are but a few examples of this development. The Asian Classics Input Project and Nirtartha International, both based in New York, have harnessed the power of the computer to preserve and make available Tibetan literature on the Web. The test for Tibetan culture is to be able to maintain its continuity while adapting to the changes in the situation. One important factor in this is the ability of Tibetan religious and cultural values to make themselves relevant to the daily life of the Tibetan people, whether in Tibet or beyond the land of snows. This 21st century will be a critical period in the evolution of Tibetan culture.

Suggested Reading

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New Haven: Yale University Press.

Shakya, Tsering. 1999. *The Dragon in the Land of Snows: A History of Modern Tibet Since 1947*.

New York: Columbia University Press.

Smith, Warren. 1996. *Tibetan Nation: A History of Tibetan Nationalism and Sino-Tibetan Relations*.

Boulder: Westview Press.

Canada Tibet Committee <<http://www.tibet.ca>>.

International Campaign for Tibet

<<http://www.savetibet.org>>.

Tibetan Government in Exile

<<http://www.tibet.com>>.

Bhuchung K. Tsering was born in Tibet and brought out by his parents when he was ten days old. He was raised and educated in the Tibetan refugee community in India. He was a journalist with the daily newspaper Indian Express in New Delhi before joining the Tibetan government-in-exile in Dharamsala, India, working as editor of the Tibetan journal Tibetan Bulletin, as well as working on issues in Zurich and Geneva with the United Nations Commission on Human Rights. He joined the International Campaign for Tibet in Washington, D.C., in 1995 and is presently its director.

