



Rethinking Tibetan Identity

by Losang C. Rabgey

In Tibetan refugee settlements in rural South India, we drove for what seemed a short eternity past scattered clusters of whitewashed mud-brick bungalows covered with clay tiles and vast stretches of cleared farmland, ready for planting. Along the roadside, wild flowers, red, orange, yellow, grew in profusion. Finally, we turned and sped past an elderly woman in a thick black *chuba* (Tibetan dress) standing placidly under a banana tree. Although I only glimpsed her for a moment, I am sure I'll never forget the sight. I had never before seen a Tibetan in a tropical environment.

The scene was perfect. How jarring was this image of an elderly highlander woman standing in a heavy woollen dress in the unkind heat of India's summer plains? At that moment I began to let go of an earlier need to know the "real" past, to know one truth. I began to shift my gaze to the dialectic of our people's strategies, adaptations, and creativities. I began, in a sense, to search more for the spirit of a people than for a solidified historical lineage.

The Tibetan *identity* I so eagerly sought to quantify had just flashed by me in an instant. Far away and below the pastures and peaks of Tibet, it was there in a dignified old woman's pacific moment in the shade of a banana tree. A piece of the puzzle. My own concerns with diasporic identities did not disappear, but they landed on earth. The pieces were falling together — our story has turned a page to a daring new chapter, fraught with challenge, danger, and hope. And much of the story is still in our hands.

DIASPORA

It is not possible in the space of a few pages to describe fully the tremendous shifts Tibetans in the diaspora have experienced in over 40 years of exile. In that time we have willingly, and sometimes rather unwillingly, opened our eyes to a plethora of places, peoples, issues, and ways of life.

What makes us a diaspora now and not simply a people in exile? It is in part, I would argue, our very diversity. Undoubtedly, we were a diverse people before China occupied Tibet. About the size of Western Europe, Tibet's difficult terrain on the plateau resulted in a nation with a variety of dialects and customs. But our current diversity of languages spoken, cities lived in, professions pursued, and ideas thought is unprecedented in our 2,000 years of history.

For the first brief decade in India, we truly were refugees in exile. Literally uprooted and transplanted overnight into a new world, the displacement was felt most strongly by the adults of that generation. My generation, those in our twenties and thirties, stands as a group on their strong, broad, and *chuba*-clad shoulders.

CHANGES

One of the fundamental teachings of Buddhism centers around *mithakpa* — impermanence or change. After centuries of studying this concept, and to a large extent suppressing it in our secular world, change is now the one constant in Tibetan society, both inside and outside Tibet.





A Tibetan woman dressed in a *chuba* returns from a milk cooperative among the palm trees of South India. Tibetan refugees have had to adjust to the hot, humid environment of the Indian subcontinent.

Photo by Losang Rabgey

In response to a variety of political forces, we have altered our social order, governmental structure, gender relations, even our spoken language. Ordinary Tibetans from all corners of Tibet have never had so much direct contact with each other. The linguistic mix of Tibetan, Hindi, and English is something I like to call “Thinglish”: untraditional, but it *works*. This is a key to Tibetan survival beyond the land of snows — we approach what is around us and combine it with what we need and know to define a space uniquely ours. Today, there are *many* Tibetan identities coexisting, all related yet different. If we can reconcile the gaps in this diversity, we can only benefit from the strength of a variety of knowledge, experiences, and outlooks.

MY STORY

My own story is a diasporic one throughout: My parents fled from Tibet, I was born in India, I grew up in Canada, and was educated in England. What has this patchwork past taught me? I am amazed, again and again, at how much Tibetans have had to absorb and adapt, and how quickly and efficiently we have done so in a few short decades. The Tibet before the Chinese invasion is no more. There is a new sun that lights our days, no longer solely a Tibetan sun, but one that reaches all the different spaces we now call home — India, Nepal, Burma, Brazil, South Africa, Prague, Holland, Japan, the United States, Canada, Taiwan, Australia, Switzerland, even Beijing and Chengdu. The list goes on. Those dearest to us are scattered around the world, making our community a village on a global scale.

Growing up in Lindsay, a small town in Ontario, Canada, certainly presented challenges in the 1970s, when tolerance of diversity was not as widely accepted. It was a struggle to maintain a sense of identity that made sense in two worlds, one that engulfed us and one located on the opposite side of the world. It was a struggle to compete with legions of peers who had the cultural and economic capital to succeed.

But like immigrants everywhere, there is the will to move beyond the confines of a blue-collar existence. Education has been a vital avenue for the new generation. Young women and men are encouraged by parents to learn. While our parents are factory workers, janitors, and short-order cooks standing behind us, we are now lawyers, architects, investment bankers, doctors, professors, and writers. In my case, my parents clearly emphasized the need to balance independence with work that positively impacts society.

CHALLENGES

For each new group of Tibetans that arrives in India or the West, once they begin to stand on their own feet economically, I think the question quickly arises — what does it mean to be a



Tibetans on the West Coast of the United States gather for a soccer match during their annual summer picnic in 1998.

Photo courtesy Tenzin Dhongtog

Tibetan now? What is my relation to my homeland and culture? What are my responsibilities? What are my joys and privileges? How will my children identify as Tibetans? How much will it matter to them?

As a Tibetan of the diaspora, I can attest to the fact that most young Tibetans at some point develop a strong desire to connect with their cultural heritage. One of the most precious gifts my parents have given my sister, brother, and me is the language. Through our native tongue, we have been empowered to choose how and when to explore Tibetan culture. Certainly, much can be understood through other languages. But much more of the culture can be *felt* by speaking face to face with knowledge bearers. Thus, the challenge lies ahead for current and future parents to somehow ensure that the future generations speak this ancient word.

Another question that is often asked of Tibetans in the diaspora is whether we would return to a “free” Tibet. Each person has, of course, her/his

own reasoning and response. But instead of focusing on this answer, perhaps what we can do instead is to shift to a more pertinent question. We are just about 140,000 in the diaspora. There are several million Tibetans inside Tibet. A crucial challenge we now collectively face is this: With our hard-won experience and knowledge from the diaspora, what can we offer and what can we do for our sisters and brothers in Tibet? What can we do for our sisters and brothers in this shrinking global village?

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After her parents fled Tibet in 1959, Losang was born in a refugee settlement in northern India. Her family soon emigrated to Canada and, by the late 1970s, founded the Potala Tibetan Performance Arts group. In 1987, Losang traveled with her family to Tibet and her father's village in Kham.