

Special Issue Photo Essay

## Old Tibetan Hands

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### Abstract

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Hands bear memories, embodying the weight of personal histories. The hands of the first generation of Tibetans escaping into exile carry stories of hardship and struggle. In old age, these hands are finally allowed to rest. However, many of the elderly Tibetans find themselves aging in the absence of love and support from family members. Hands that had once cared for others and the world, have for many, been left to themselves in old age. This photo essay hopes to connect the readers to the stories of my elderly Tibetan friends who are lay women and men, and monastics of a lower rank living in the Tibetan exile capital of Dharamsala, northern India. During my fieldwork, I reached out to them with my hands by massaging their legs and feet on a daily basis for 14 months. Through the act of massaging – touch – physical and emotional, connected us to one another. By combining words and photography on hands and the elderly's surroundings, I also hope to aid the reader with getting in touch with the silence or loneliness that surrounded the elderly's everyday lives.

### Keywords

Old age; hands; Tibetan exile; touch; sensorial anthropology

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A child first experiences their surroundings with their hands. From infancy, hands serve as one of the body parts for reaching out and taking in the world. Hands caress. Hands can also hurt and push people away. Hands bear memories, embodying the weight of personal histories.

The hands of the first generation of Tibetans-in-exile carry stories of hardship and struggle; toiling the soil in the high Himalayas in India or Nepal, breaking rocks to build roads and construct buildings, serving in the Indian army, carrying out seasonal winter business across India to sell winter clothes, or working as caregivers of Tibetan refugee children in the Tibetan Children's Village (TCV) schools. Unlike the hands of the younger generation of Tibetans, the hands of the first generation of exiled Tibetans are worn and calloused. They tell stories of the arduous, physical labour carried out during their younger days in Tibet and later in exile. In old age, these hands are finally allowed to rest.

Many elderly Tibetans, however, find themselves aging in the absence of physical or moral support from family members. Some left behind entire families in Tibet; and others have had their children or family members migrate to Europe, North America, or Australia. Hands that once cared for others and the world by raising children, building Tibetan settlements in exile from scratch, or building up or protecting their host country, have been left to themselves in old age. Alongside their shared experiences of escaping into and then living in exile, all of the first generation of exiled Tibetans also find themselves facing death far away from their precious homeland of Tibet, where they had hoped to return one day.

This photo essay hopes to connect the readers to the stories of my elderly Tibetan friends through images of their hands and surroundings. They are lay women, and men, and monastics of a lower rank, with whom I began working with during my doctoral fieldwork in the Tibetan exile capital of Dharamsala, northern India, in 2018 – 2019. Old age had confined a few of them to their homes, or left them with a partial disability.

Over the fourteen months of my fieldwork, I reached out to the elderly Tibetans, among others, with my hands by massaging their legs and feet on a daily basis. I visited them from Monday to Saturday. Some days I massaged three people a day and on other days two people. I also stepped in for other things, such as buying groceries, purchasing medicine, accompanying them on hospital visits, or helping out with other practicalities, such as toilet visits. I adopted the idea of massaging the legs and feet of elderly Tibetans through work with a Tibetan NGO, known as Tibet Charity, where I volunteered from January to mid-February 2018. The NGO's small team of nurses and health care workers regularly check up on elderly Tibetans, among others, through the provision of free medicine, or by offering them leg massages. Apart from Tibet Charity, a local Tibetan clinic used to provide leg and feet massages in the past, albeit with payment, something most of the elderly I am familiar with found to be expensive. In addition, the Mentseekhang in Dharamsala provides various types of massages, but none of the elderly I know have ever made use of them as these are unaffordable for most locals. Tibet Charity used to offer a basic massage of the feet and the lower legs, which was intended to warm up muscles and increase blood circulation. I learned to massage by observing the nurses and health care workers in action. While it is not common among the elderly to touch each other (e.g. hold hands or embrace one another), I learned that being massaged is not considered to be inappropriate, for men and women alike, including monastics, especially when it is something one has requested oneself, which was the case for all of my elderly friends.

Another motivation for choosing to massage the elderly Tibetans came from my experience of doing preliminary fieldwork at the local TCV old age in 2016 for two months, when some of the elderly women here had, understandably, gotten tired of my continuous presence and questions. Importantly, they had encouraged me to benefit the elderly in a practical way. That experience served as an important reminder of practicing reciprocity in fieldwork situations, a

cornerstone of contemporary ethnographic practice. I could not simply show up, hang around, and use their time to my advantage. I also needed to benefit them somehow, something I learned they appreciated. By observing and spending time with the staff from Tibet Charity, I also learned that local Tibetans perceived the act of massaging someone's legs and feet, especially those of an elderly, as a virtuous and honorable act. During our rounds in Dharamsala, the nurses or health care workers were usually stopped by many elderly Tibetans who greeted them with gratitude and respect. Their occasional massages, and small, infrequent donations of medicines were immensely appreciated. My elderly friends related to the massages as an act of care and even spoke of them as a practice of *chö* (ཆོས; teachings of the Buddha). I for my part, simply sought to reciprocate their kindness and give back.

While I was merely a stranger to the elderly Tibetans at the start of my fieldwork, or the “Indian girl” who wrote about their lives, towards the second half of my fieldwork in 2018, I became a personality to them and a part of their everyday lives, just as they did for me. Over time, the massages and my other efforts to assist my elderly friends and continuing to visit them and massage their legs and feet over the years, as well as their efforts at caring for me, bonded us in a relationship of mutual care. That is why I choose to refer to the elderly as friends because we accompanied and supported each other through the ups and downs of everyday life, who over time were also *touched* by each other's joys, worries and hopes (Gill Forthcoming). The words “informants”, “interlocutors” or “research participants” do not capture the intimacy we came to share. That being said, however, fulfilling my responsibilities towards my elderly friends and caring for them could also be challenging at times and there were probably also days when they were disappointed in me.

Some of the elderly Tibetans presented in this photo essay lived in their private homes in the upper parts of Dharamsala, better

known as McLeod Ganj. Others lived at the Tibetan Children's Village (TCV) old age home, also located in upper Dharamsala. The TCV old age home is a place for the retirement of the first generation of exiled Tibetans who worked for the school as cooks, teachers, or caregivers of Tibetan children for meagre salaries. At the moment of writing this in Dharamsala in July 2023, we have known each other for five years, while two of my female friends – Mo Dickyi Sangmo and Mo Tsering Wangmo – passed away in 2022. I use pseudonyms with the exception of Gen Lobsang Choedak, Ani Tenzin Pema, and Po Damchoe Ngawang.

The images of the elderly's hands are presented along with an image of the everyday spaces they inhabit. I do so in an effort to capture and bring to life some of the atmosphere the elderly found themselves in. These images capture spaces, set in various degrees of light and shade, filled with particular colours and objects with which the elderly were accompanied by on a daily basis. These spaces, in contrast to loved ones or friends and even one's own body, were stable and had a permanence in the sense that they were always there, unchanging. To me, they almost became an extension of my elderly friends as it is within these spaces that we spent time together. Often I cannot visualize the elderly detached from them, especially in the case of those who were confined to their homes and rarely stepped out. Importantly, living in these spaces and being surrounded by certain objects and even colours provided the elderly with familiarity, stability, and solace in the midst of the uncertainty of old age. One could even say that they played an important part in helping them to feel more at home-in-the-world, especially for those who lived in the absence of physical or emotional support from loved ones. Finally, I also hope that the images of the elderly's hands and the spaces they inhabit will aid the reader with getting in *touch* with the silence or loneliness that surrounded their old age. All images have been taken by the author.



Gen Lobsang holding a radio in his hands, bought during his military days.

## Gen Lobsang Choedak, 94

In Gen Lobsang's company, we always sat in a soothing and comfortable silence. His replies to my questions tended to be brief, although on some days he could keep a conversation going on his own. I used to massage Genla's right leg and foot three times a week. A bad fall in 1995 partly disabled his left leg, which he therefore did not want me to massage. Despite the impairment, he is nonetheless the most active and

healthy among my elderly friends. He still goes for walks and does between 50 – 150 prostrations on a daily basis. Genla was born and raised in Penpo in Tsang, Central Tibet. He was ordained as a monk at Ganden monastery at the age of 15, which in those days was a one-day walk from the Tibetan capital of Lhasa, he told me. He fled into exile in 1959, along with four other monks from Ganden monastery, following the

Chinese occupation of Tibet. Like other newly arrived refugees from Tibet, he was sent to northern India to build roads, first in Chamba and then in Mussorie. After working in road construction for a few years, Genla joined the Indian military in Chakrata in Dehradun. The Tibetan men served under "Establishment 22", later known as the "Special Frontier Force" (SFF).

The Tibetan Buddhist shrine  
(མཆོས་ཁང་།) in Genla's room.

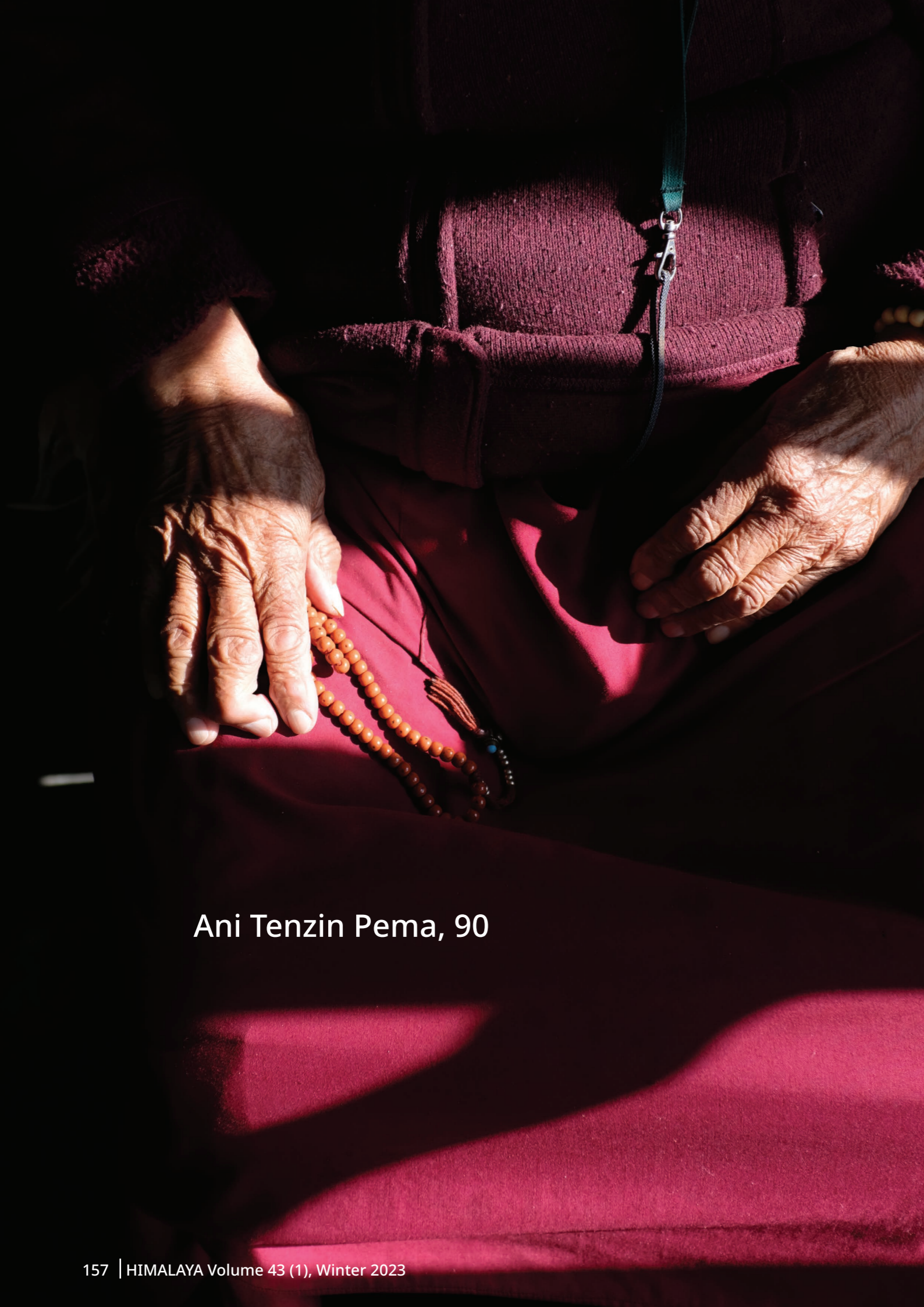


Like other Tibetan men, Genla enthusiastically joined the Indian army hoping to fight the People's Liberation Army (PLA). That did not happen, but the Tibetan men fought in other military operations, such as the Bangladeshi war. In the first image, Genla is holding a radio he bought while he

was stationed in Ladakh for three years. It is still with him, even though its ability to receive signals has diminished greatly. After 18 years of military service, Genla left for the TCV school in Dharamsala, where he took up work in the school kitchen from 1982 until 1995. In 2016, the TCV school

administration offered him residence at the TCV old age home and for the last time Genla packed his belongings and moved to the place that is his last stop in this life. Genla left his entire family back in Tibet and with only one close relative in exile, who visits him only once or twice a year, Genla is

aging and facing death in the absence of physical and emotional support from his family. He does not interact much with the other residents at the old age home and prefers spending time alone. In the absence of family, Genla hopes to die a sudden death and avoid the grim possibility of a bedridden end to life.



Ani Tenzin Pema, 90

On most days, regardless of good or bad weather, Ani Tenzin Pema can be found sitting by herself in the shared sitting area on the second floor of the TCV old age home. While slowly turning the beads of her mala, she peacefully recites mantras. Nonetheless, Anila is generally open to distraction, for example in the shape of a human figure such as me or her fellow elderly, always welcoming us with a warm smile. She is one of the most talkative people I know, someone with whom five minutes of chatter can quickly turn into an hour-long conversation. I have known both Ani Tenzin Pema and Gen Lobsang Choedak since 2016 when I conducted preliminary

fieldwork at the TCV old age home. Anila was born in Sakya in southwestern Tibet and was ordained as a nun at the age of 11. She was 26 years old when she escaped into exile in 1959, where she was joined by one of her uncles. Anila built roads in the Kalimpong area in northeastern India for two years before taking up work as a caregiver for Tibetan refugee children at a private school in Kalimpong, led by a rinpoche. In old age, Ani Pema cannot recall the exact number of years she worked for the school, but believed it was close to 20.

Anila enjoying the sun in the shared sitting area on the second floor at the TCV old age home while reciting a mantra (མ་ཏི།).

After a few years break, she moved to Dharamsala and began working for the TCV school, once again as a caregiver of Tibetan children, as did many of the other elderly at the TCV old age home. Anila was the sole caregiver (ཁྱིམ་ཚང་ཨ་མ་ལགས།) of household number five for 13 years, where she provided care for about 50 children. In old age, Anila recalls the ordeal of taking care of so many children, and how her stiff and bent fingers in old age are the result of washing dishes and the children's clothes in cold water. "I used to be a washing machine," Anila says jokingly. Unlike Gen Lobsang, Anila has several relatives living close by, upon whom she can rely on for regular visits

and assistance. Alongside her meagre pension from the TCV school, Anila is supported financially by her nieces who live abroad. However, in spite of the presence of close and distant family in Dharamsala and the emotional support of her nieces over the phone, Anila still worries about increasing old age. She is bothered by pain in the knees and on most days, she massages her legs on her own. I only massaged Ani Tenzin Pema for a brief period. In the last two years, her movements have become confined to the premises of the TCV old age home and its surroundings areas. Just like Genla and others at the old age home, Anila also hopes to die while still able to look after herself.

Partial view of the shared sitting area on the second floor which can be rather lively during certain parts of (sunny) days. In between the recitation of mantras, the elderly share news, stories and gossip.





Mo Dickyi Sangmo, 86

By 2022, painful knees and legs had confined Mo Dickyi to her home for nearly six years. I still see her sitting by herself in front of the kitchen window. Just sitting there silently, looking out, her focus seemingly zooming in and fading out, sometimes while deep in thought. As with Gen Lobsang, I used to massage Mo Dickyi three times a week. However, unlike Genla and others, she rarely commented that the massages benefitted her; nevertheless, she never told me to stop massaging her. Maybe it was comforting to have someone reach out to her with a caring touch? Mo Dickyi was born in Kyirong in Southwest Tibet. She escaped into exile with her entire family in 1963.

They stayed at the Nepalese border for one and a half year, constructing dams, before making their way to India in 1965. Mo Dickyi remembers that upon their arrival in Dharamsala, they were granted an audience with the Dalai Lama, who at the time used to live at Swarg Ashram in upper Dharamsala, known among the local Tibetans as “photrang nyingpa” (པོ་བླ་རྒྱུང་པ།; the old palace). It is in the area below Swarg Ashram that the first Tibetans in town, including Mo Dickyi’s family, built their houses and settled down in.

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Mo Dickyi sitting in front of the kitchen window, which is how she spent a large part of her days.

After their arrival in India, Mo Dickyi's family members got scattered to different parts of northern India. Some built roads in the Shimla area, while others, including Mo Dickyi, ended up in Pandoh – near Rewalsar, also known among Tibetans as Tso Pema – where they built houses and buildings. Mo Dickyi did construction work for about 10 years, before shifting to Dharamsala and taking up the seasonal winter business to make a livelihood. Mo Dickyi and her husband sold winter clothing in the state of Punjab. What she appreciated the most about this region was the quality of its milk, butter and curd. It reminded her of the thick and delicious milk and butter they sourced from their animals in Kyirong. After escaping from Kyirong, the family had no choice but to leave the animals with a family friend living at the Nepalese border. Whenever Mo Dickyi spoke about the animals, she would refer

to them compassionately as “nyingje” (ཉིང་ཇེ།; ‘poor things’). She missed her village and homeland, sometimes unbearably. In old age, Mo Dickyi spent much of her time sitting by the kitchen window from where she could look out at her neighborhood known as “Kyirong Camp” in upper Dharamsala, inhabited by her fellow Tibetans from Kyirong. Her husband passed away over a decade ago and without emotional support from her siblings – most of them being old and more or less confined to their homes too – as well as of her son, Mo Dickyi lived a rather lonely life. Like my other elderly friends who were aging alone, Mo Dickyi worried about how she might end her days. Mo Dickyi Sangmo died a bedridden death in April 2022, but under the precious care of family members.

A view of the kitchen door and the dark imprints left by the monsoon on the door curtain.





Mo Tsering sitting in a chair  
in her living room where  
she spent her days, from  
morning until night.

## Mo Tsering Wangmo, 78

I had become speechless  
the first time Mo Tsering  
expressed a desperate wish  
to die. But over the years,  
as I became accustomed  
to hearing the same words  
regularly, I grew immune

to their effect. They stopped  
unsettling me as they had  
the first few times. A bad  
fall had left Mo Tsering  
with a fractured hip and  
from about 2013 onwards  
she became completely  
dependent on paid care,  
even for intimate tasks

such as urinating. When I  
met her in 2018, she had  
been confined to her home  
for about 10 years. The  
condition of Mola's legs was  
always uncertain and she  
never knew how they would  
feel from one part of the day  
to the next. Mo Tsering was  
born into a wealthy trader  
family in Kham and grew  
up in Lhasa from young  
age. The years following the  
Chinese occupation of Tibet  
were the most horrific part  
of her life. Mola's family  
were robbed off everything  
they owned and descended  
into poverty. She became  
pregnant in her late 30s and  
when her daughter was old  
enough, Mola took her to  
India and enrolled her at the  
TCV School in Dharamsala.  
Mo Tsering returned to  
Tibet, but made sure to visit  
her daughter regularly over  
the years.

An unlit butter lamp offering (མཆོད་མེ།) placed at a table in Mola's living room. Because of her condition, Mola was not able to make daily water bowl offerings (ཡེན་ཆུ།) at the Buddhist shrine. Instead, her caregiver made one large butter lamp offering daily.

In 1990, after attending a Kalachakra teaching in India, Mola decided not to return to Tibet. In exile, she began making a livelihood in the seasonal winter business. She told me that she used to be independent and fearless, once even threatening an Indian rickshaw driver with a knife when he threatened to rob her of her seasonal income. When Mo Tsering enthusiastically acted out the scene, she pretended to hold a knife against her own throat, and repeated the

exact words with which she had threatened the rickshaw driver. She had travelled all over India, from north to south and west to east. Old age had taken away her independent and fearless spirit. Mo Tsering's daughter moved to Europe several years before her fall, but was present for her mother through weekly phone calls. She also provided for her mother financially, something Mola was very proud of. Mo Tsering's biggest hope in life was to be able

to walk to the toilet without her walker or the fear of falling. The leg and foot massages helped to keep this hope alive. For half a year, I massaged her legs from Monday to Saturday for an hour each time, but had to cut it down to three times a week later on due to exhaustion on my part. Despite her best attempts to remain hopeful for the future, Mo Tsering was also aware that with increasing old age, the condition of her legs might only become worse. Even

though she was the most engaged in others and her surroundings among my elderly friends, Mo Tsering also told me that she prayed everyday for death to befall her. In December 2019, Mola moved in with her relatives living in northeast India as she found it too stressful and precarious to rely on paid care from non-kin. Mo Tsering Wangmo passed away under the care of family members in March 2022.



Ani Jamyang sitting on her bed and reading Tibetan Buddhist texts (དཔེ་ཆ།).

Ani Jamyang Dechen, 89

Ani Jamyang lives rent-free in a building that is owned by one of her siblings. Her younger sister, Mo Dickyi Sangmo used to lived in the same building, one floor below Ani Jamyang. Anila was in much better shape than Mo Dickyi and until March 2023, when she fell and broke her right wrist, Anila used to regularly visit one of their younger sisters who lived close by and walk into town for groceries. Nevertheless, compared with Mo Dickyi, Ani Jamyang had a poorer memory of both the distant and more recent past. I used to massage Anila three times a week, usually on the same day as I massaged her younger sister. Whenever I show up at Anila’s door, she tends to be immersed in her daily Tibetan Buddhist practice. Anila was ordained as a nun at the age of 18. She and 13 other nuns from their nunnery in Kyirong escaped to the Helambu region in Nepal before the Chinese government took control of Kyirong.



The Tibetan Buddhist Hyolmos of the region were generous to the nuns. They gave them a piece of land upon which they built a prayer hall and basic accommodation for themselves. From time to time, the Hyolmos also gave them food. For three of the years Anila spent in the region, she worked in the construction of a monastery of the Drukpa-Kagyu order. She recalled the experience of extreme cold and hunger. They lived solely on porridge and nettle soup; they never even saw Tibetan butter tea. When there was no food, which there often was not, they went to bed hungry. Anila recalled that she did such arduous physical labor – carrying wood planks,

rocks, and sand on her back – that she lost all of her hair. The heavy labor left Anila seriously ill. To this day, she recalls how her eldest sister Samdrup Drolma, had travelled to the Helambu region to get her: “My sister looked at me and cried. She said, ‘You look as if you are near death’”. After arriving in India, Anila settled down in Dharamsala, in close proximity to her siblings and continued her religious practice privately from her residence. In November 2022, Anila received – what

most likely will be – her final audience with the Dalai Lama. Anila believes that those difficult years in the Helambu region and her lifelong practice of Tibetan Buddhism, must have cleared the path for those precious final blessings from their holiest lama. Ani Jamyang says that she is now ready to die.

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Anila’s maroon robe;  
reflecting the dominant  
colour in her room.



Po Damchoe Ngawang, 85

A whisky glass with the words “8 p.m.” on it was always present on the table next to Po Damchoe’s bed, covered with a lid. Whenever I visited him, I found the glass either half full, less than half full, or empty. If Pola was cheerful, I knew he had started drinking. If he was rather solemn, not carrying even a trace of his usual cheerful self, I knew the opposite to be the case. He was happiest when he drank. Pola was born in Medrogongkar in Central Tibet. When he escaped from Lhasa in 1959, he was a monk at Drepung Monastery. After his escape from Lhasa, Pola joined the Chushi Gangdrug guerrilla army operations in Lho Gongkar in Central Tibet and

later in Mustang in Nepal for 14 years. Like some of the men in the guerrilla army, Pola began a relationship with a local woman from Mustang. After the Chushi Gangdrug operations had to be ended in Mustang in 1974, he moved to India, taking with him his wife and their two children. In India, Pola built roads in Patlikuhl in Kullu-Manali. He also provided for his family by selling handmade chairs, tables, and beds.

Po Damchoe Ngawang wearing a medallion and holding a framed letter from the Central Tibetan Administration which is an official recognition for his service in the Chushi Gangdrug guerrilla army.

In 1976, the Dalai Lama's younger sister, Jetsun Pema, brought him and about 100 other able-bodied men to Dharamsala to build the TCV school. Just as Tibetans cleared the forested areas in South India to build Tibetan settlements and to harvest the land, Tibetans undertook similar work in Dharamsala to build Tibetan institutions. Today, Pola still lives in the bright and sunny TCV area in upper Dharamsala that is known as TCV camp. This area is solely inhabited by the first generation of exiled Tibetans (and their children) who worked for the school as labourers. His youngest child, a son, moved to Europe a long time ago. Pola lives now with his two daughters, who take very good care of him. The difficult years in Mustang and later the arduous labour for the TCV school, had left Pola with serious back and knee pain. Pola told me that drinking alcohol made it easier to live with the body aches and go on with

his everyday life, such as managing to do at least one round of circumambulation around the TCV School monastery on most days. I massaged Pola three times a week, alternating between massaging his legs and back. More often, he wanted me to massage his back which bothered him more than his knees. For Po Damchoe and some of my other elderly friends, old age is an achievement after all the hardships their generation endured in the early years of exile. These days, Pola says, he does not think much about his time in Mustang. Yet, he still believes that if the Chushi Gangdrug had continued fighting, then "we would have won."

A framed image of the Dalai Lama hanging on top of the window in Pola's room.





Mo Samdrup Drolma, 93

Over the years, Mo Samdrup's words have become more and more limited due to increasing age, failing memory, and home confinement well before I met her for the first time in 2015. I met Mola through one of her relatives, who also happens to be one of my closest friends. I did not massage Mo Samdrup's legs (apart from a few times), but I have spent a considerable amount of time with her over the years. Witnessing her vanishing figure and reminiscences of their life in Kyirong, it is hard for me to imagine her as the young and rebellious woman that she once was. Mo Samdrup was the eldest of 12 siblings and is the older sister of Mo Dickyi Sangmo and Ani Jamyang Dechen. When a family from another village had asked for Mo Samdrup's hand in marriage, she had escaped from Kyirong with the man she loved. Their escape took place before the PLA took control of Kyirong. Mo Samdrup and her partner

escaped to Darjeeling and stayed there for over a year, making a living by working as porters and by selling tea in the streets. They made a brief return to Kyirong to visit their families but could not risk staying for too long because if caught, they would face punishment. Mola and her husband moved back to Kyirong after the region came under the direct control of the Chinese government, who altered its status as zong (རྫོང་; district level administrative unit), falling under the political rule of the Tibetan government based in Lhasa, Central Tibet. Despite being a great tragedy for the locals, the falling apart of the regional political and administrative system, meant that Mo Samdrup and her husband could live in Kyirong again without facing punishment for their escape. However, they and their family members would not remain in Kyirong for long, and escaped into exile in 1963.

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Mola sitting outside on the balcony on the first day of the Tibetan new year (ལོ་གསར་) in 2023, wearing her finest blouse (ལོག་འཇུག་) with her hands resting on the traditional Tibetan apron (མང་གདན།) for married women.

After making their way into India, Mo Samdrup and her husband constructed roads in the Shimla area. They were the first ones in the family to move to Dharamsala in the late 1960s, and sometime in the early 1970s, her husband built a house for them in the area that came to be known as Kyirong camp, located below Swarg Ashram. After shifting to Dharamsala, Mo Samdrup took up seasonal business in Leh, Ladakh. She remembers that they eventually began travelling to Leh by airplane. Until early 2022, she was able to count in English to 100, and even 1000, although she tended to skip everything from about 50 and then all the numbers between the hundreds. Counting in English was a skill that was required when doing business in Leh. In between their work, she and her fellow Tibetans who also did business in the region took time to go for pilgrimage and picnics. Mo Samdrup has an album

with numerous photos taken in different sites in and around Leh, which she showed to me on several occasions. Mola's husband passed away in 2011. In the last three years, she became completely dependent on care and has since then been looked after by a relative. On the Tibetan new year in 2023, Mola turned 93, making her the oldest person in Kyirong camp who has outlived the majority of her contemporaries from Kyirong. Mo Samdrup believes that she will be gone any day now, something she has been repeating ever since I first met her. My remaining elderly friends are also forever aware of death's looming presence, sensing its closeness in dried-up bones, declined vision and hearing, a failing memory, or faltering looks. Whenever the Lord of Death should happen to knock on their doors, all of them feel ready to leave.

The last rays of sunlight in Mola's Tibetan Buddhist shrine room.



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## Note

By "Tibet", I am referring to the three regions of Tibet: Bod cholka sum (བོད་ཆོལ་ཁུ་གསུམ།), namely U- Tsang, Amdo and Kham (Shakya 1993).

Harmandeep Kaur Gill, Ph.D. is an anthropologist and a Junior Research Fellow at Linacre College, and Associate Researcher at the Faculty of Asian and Middle Eastern Studies, University of Oxford from Sept 2022 – Aug 2024, with funding from the Carlsberg Foundation. She has worked with Tibetans-in-exile in India for a decade and done fieldwork on and written about the Tibetan self-immolations, the Tibetan freedom struggle in exile, and most recently about aging and dying among elderly exiled Tibetans. Her monograph *Waiting at the Mountain Pass: Coming to Terms with Solitude, Decline, and Death in Tibetan Exile* is forthcoming with University of Pennsylvania Press.

I am forever indebted to my elderly Tibetan friends for opening up their homes to me and offering me the precious chance to take part in their lives and to write about them. Ani Jamyang Dechen la says that we [my elderly friends and I] became a part of each other's lives because we share a karmic connection. I truly believe that we do. I am grateful to the peer-reviewers and to Resi for offering invaluable feedback for this photo essay. I would like to convey my sincerest gratitude to the Carlsberg Foundation for funding my postdoctoral research at the University of Oxford (Grant Number CF21-0537) which made this publication possible. Finally, I am grateful to my former supervisors Lotte Meinert and Lone Grøn who granted me the possibility to be a doctoral student in their research project, "Aging as a Human Condition – Radical Uncertainty and the Search for a Good (Old) Life" (project number 25547) at Aarhus University from 2017 - 2020. The photo essay is primarily based upon the fieldwork I carried out during my doctoral studies.