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Tsering: Authenticity and Dependent Origination in a Portrait of a Tibetan Woman

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Abstract

This is an ethnographic portrait of Tsering, a Tibetan refugee who is seeking asylum in France under a false name, age, and marriage. The portrait is assembled and disassembled through employing three successive perspectives: first, second, and third persons. In sum, this multiple portrait challenges the notions of the relationship between selfhood and authenticity as Tsering asserts that her truest self is an inauthentic one, that comes into view when three factors emerge in dependence upon each other: being Tibetan, being a refugee, and being mutable. Tsering's articulation of her selfhood is compared to Buddhist notions of dependent origination in order to question when and how anthropologists of Tibet and the Himalayas utilize culturally derived explanatory frameworks such as "near concepts." Finally, Tsering and her daughters' concerns for the ethics of their inauthenticity are viewed in light of Buddhist arguments for the relationship between dependent origination and compassion.

Keywords

Portrait; migration; France; self; authenticity

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Introduction

I seek to portray, not simply describe, Tsering[1] so as to draw the reader into the intimate relations and particular moments I have shared with her and her daughters. Lisa Stevenson (2020) defines ethnographic portraits as selfconsciously a reflexive exercise, beginning with the act of "looking away," not unlike the painter who turns from the model to look at the canvas. This turning away embraces the second-order aspect of ethnography as an act of writing in hindsight (Ingold 2014). In *The Picture of Dorian Gray,* Oscar Wilde wrote we sometimes learn potentially as much about the writer as we do the subject of the writing, though writing about myself is not my goal or motivation, but an inevitable byproduct. Portraits by ethnographers are inherently intersubjective affairs, where the bond between researcher and collaborator is the fundamental social relation underlying the panoply of relations we normally trace for our readers when mapping out the field of our research.

Portrait painters are not omniscient narrators, nor do I pretend to be. This portrait is not intended as an encapsulation of my subject. Instead, I present captured moments where to be human is experienced in building a relationship to another through carefully communicated ways Martin Buber named "I and Thou" interactions (1937). Whereas Stevenson writes about the portrait as a second order "looking away," I employ three types of looking away—in the first, second, and third person, which come together and apart into an assembled and deconstructed portrait. These interactions begin in Tsering's own words as she paints a portrait of herself, in which as a paperless migrant who has crossed multiple borders the self is fractured by having to morph into being multiple people. These continue, in the second person, in responses to my queries about her autobiography and our history together. Here Tsering and I are portrayed together in a mutually dependent relationship: Tsering as "my Tibetan" and me as "her Tibetologist." When Tsering and I look away together, reflect together on our interaction, what do we see? Her *fake selves* (her own words) constitute her authenticity. The final, third person interaction is between you the reader and me the author via what you are reading in these pages.

Picture, if you will, a woman sitting on a couch in the living room of a small apartment in a rundown public housing estate in France. Now include her three daughters next to her. See them through a video camera's LCD screen. Now step back and see me next to the camera talking with them and checking the camera, strolling through town on a sunny day, taking in the view of Paris from the Eiffel Tower. And now, finally, pay close attention to what Tsering says about herself, unprompted, and what she and I say to each other based on our mutual interest: portraying Tsering as a Tibetan refugee. But Tsering is not reduced to that. Contra, this is a portrait of Tsering who has lived many lives, and has at times had multiple selves, such that she can articulate those lives and selves as arising fundamentally in relation to other persons. Who are Tsering and I in relation to each other?

Deconstructing Tibetan Refugees

The population of Tibetan refugees—though small, around 120,000—must be one of the most studied in the world. A broad overview of anthropological publications alone would fill the entire space allowed for this article. Directly or indirectly many of these publications address questions of identity in part because of the popularity of studying identity and ethnicity across the Himalayas (Beek 2001) and in Tibet (Hillman 2018), both anthropologically and historically (Shneiderman 2015). Some publications discuss refugees and identity without a secondary focus (Mountcastle 1997); others focus on women, even using the idea of portraits (Henrion-Dourcy 2005). Ethnographies have been written about the youth in Dharamsala (Diehl 2002) and the elderly in Dharamsala (Gill 2020), where Tsering lived for a time. There are many publications about the day-to-day lives of marginalized Himalayan women. One of

the most prevalent themes has been that of religious women, who have for too long been marginalized in the Himalayas both as women and as religious practitioners (Shneiderman 2006, Desjarlais 2000, Makley 1999, Havnevik 1989, Gutschow 2004, Grimshaw 1994, Härkönen 2023).

Finally, the Tibetan population in France has grown rapidly in the past decade. Members of the community report to me that they estimate that over 20,000 Tibetans now reside in France. While Tibetan migration to France is a relatively new phenomenon, there exists a bevy of anthropological publications on Tibetans in Switzerland, the US, and Canada, focusing on perennial anthropological concerns for identity, health, youth, and material culture. Some notable contributions have utilized fresher concepts—that capture specific features of the Tibetan refugee identity, such as Carole McGranahan's (2018) use of the concept of refusal—to unpack the complexity of refusing or accepting citizenship for Tibetan residents of India and Canada. Alternatively, there are autobiographical accounts of Tibetan women and their journeys to exile (Sadutshang 2012, Blakeslee and Adhe 1999, Pachen and Donnelley 2000, Kunsang Dolma 2013). As trade publications, they concern themselves with dichotomies of tradition and modernity, "oriental" mysticism versus authenticity, or else serve to advance a political narrative.

In contrast, my portrait of Tsering engages in anthropological critique, in which my act of writing the portrait calls itself into question—including my own interests, biases, and limitations. Why do I deliberately, perhaps stubbornly, insist on using "near concepts" familiar to Tsering and derived from Tibetan discourse to frame and analyze Tsering rather than more popular theories derived from continental European philosophy? Why cite the Dalai Lama's words on "compassion" instead of Hannah Arendt's thoughts on "love"?

It is relatively rare for anthropologists or scholars of religion to explicitly confront their own construction of Tibetanness within their publications. A cottage industry emerged in the wake of Edward Said's *Orientalism* (1978) to criticize earlier generations of White authors who constructed a "Tibet" to serve their own economic, political, or academic agendas (Dodin and Räther 1996, Lopez 1998, Brauen, Koller, and Vock 2004). Only to a certain extent did these publications dare to address the more controversial question of how Tibetans participated in a co-construction of themselves as the world's ideal refugees (Anand 2007). More recently Tibetan anthropologists have begun to publish on their own participation in representation, decolonialism, and the so-called "native turn in Asian academia" (Jinpa Tenzin 2022). Similar trajectories exist for other Himalayan peoples, notably Vincanne Adams's work on representations of Sherpa authenticity among "Westerners" and Sherpas themselves (Adams 1995). Where Adams explored the authenticating effects of the word "Sherpa" in many contexts and how authenticity is produced by a relationship between the observed and the observed, these portraits of Tsering are focused on her own articulations of her inauthenticity and the ethical issues it raises for her daughters.

When performing anthropological analysis, the choice of critical theory is an ethical choice in which consideration should be given to representation done by "[framing] people's experiences within their conceptual worlds," says McGranahan (2022: 297). Sienna Craig (2020) employed this method in developing the concept of *khora* (a combination of སྐྱོར་བ and འཁོར་བ) to analyze how circular migration from Mustang to Queens, New York resembles both the Buddhist devotional act of circumambulation and the cosmological cycle of birth, death, and reincarnation. McGranahan framed the practice an ethical choice, but rhetorically it is far from a new move in ethnography; for example, Adams (1995) drew on ideas from both Buddhism and shamanism in her portrayal of virtual Sherpas.

While religion has not been the primary focus of Tsering's conceptual world as much

as it might be for a lama, I argue that a lifetime of listening to lectures by the Dalai Lama, reading his books, and praying for his long life every day has formed Tsering—similar to the finding in Akhil Gupta's ethnography of farmers that linked rural life in North India with national trends and global forces (1998). Tsering might not use the same technical terms as a Buddhist lama, but the patterns of her thoughts and structure of her life narrative resonate with fundamental, *basic* Buddhist concepts, which I prioritize in analyzing her. I am also inspired by the call of Butler, Gambetti, and Sabsay (2016) to investigate vulnerability as a mobilizing factor for resistance through a focus on agency, not victimhood. Their focus on agency resonates with Tsering, who portrays herself as an empowered agent after childhood more than one marginalized by others.

The First Person Portrait: Changing Identities

> [TSERING]: Here in France I am not Tsering. My name is now [redacted]. My family name has also changed. Like here, my family name is [redacted] But before it was [redacted]. My daughters' names have changed too. My daughter Thubten Sherab is now [redacted].
>
> [THUBTEN SHERAB]:[2] Mom, you said the wrong name.
>
> [TSERING]: [laughing] Oh right, this one is [redacted] and that one is [redacted]. Even after two years, I confuse their new names.
>
> …
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> [TSERING]: When I went to Lhasa from my village, I remember I was young, too young to tie my shoes. I cooked and cleaned for my uncle whose knees were destroyed cleaning toilets in the Chinese prison labor camps. Years later, my father took me home to see my mom. During the journey back to my village, my dad asked me if I needed water and I was not feeling well because of the bumpy road. I almost felt like vomiting. When I replied in the Lhasa dialect [of Tibetan], my dad got angry and said, "What are you saying, I can't understand your language!" I had totally forgotten my village dialect [of Tibetan]. So when I was home with my family, and we sat in a circle, I was asking myself, "Who is that? Who is that? Who are these people?"?"
>
> …
>
> [TSERING]: [During the Lhasa Uprising in 1987] The protest was right outside our window. Some of their rocks hit our window. The monks encouraged me to throw stones. Later a monk's face was burned by fire, his skin was dropping off. Someone shouted, "Bring milk!" So I gave them some milk and someone poured it on him …. Later the Chinese Army was taking protestors to jail. From the CCTV they knew who the protestors were. I was scared to stay in Lhasa but did not want to go back to my village because it had been so long since I lived there. I didn't know how to be a farmer. I wished to meet His Holiness the Fourteenth Dalai Lama. I heard His Holiness established a school in India. I told my aunt I wanted to meet His Holiness in real life.
>
> …
>
> [TSERING]: Later I had trouble getting to the border. I had a brother who lived near the border. He put me into a sand container in a vehicle that transports sand. He said no one would check. From there, two others were with me.
>
> …
>
> [TSERING]: [When I crossed the border into Nepal], I put a bit of

turmeric on my face to look like a Nepali. I wore a Nepali dress and went over the bridge. I went a few steps and I got caught by the Nepali police …. After some days we were given to the Chinese army. The officer, she asked me, “Where do you live?” I replied that I lived with a Sherpa woman. She asked, “What do you do?” I said I wash their clothes. She said, “Don’t lie! Why are you speaking Lhasa dialect?” I called my sister in Nepal and asked her to help me. She said, “Why do you bother other people with your problems? Go back to the village or Lhasa. Don’t come here.” But in my mind, I had already decided to stay in Nepal. So I stayed near the border three months learning to speak Nepali. If I saw any Tibetan friends, I tried to hide my face because I thought if my Mom knew I was here [stuck at the border] she would be very worried. After I learned Nepali, me and a sister crossed the border. We wore the clothes of the Tamang (an ethnic group in Nepal). We pretended to be Nepali and we finally crossed the bridge.

Our Second Person Portrait: The Tibetan and her Tibetologist

[CAMERON]: Tsering, we have known each other a long time. You have told me many times about your life, your family, shown me their photographs, but can you tell me the whole story again? Especially, the part about coming to France? The part is still not clear.

[TSERING]: Yes, of course.

[CAMERON]: Can your daughters join us too?

[TSERING]: Yes, they will.

[CAMERON]: Is it all right if I use a camera to film the interview? I will not show the film to anyone or tell anyone your names.

[TSERING]: Trinley Wangpo-la,[3] if it is easier for you. I do not mind. Thank you for doing this for Tibet. If you keep this to yourself, I don’t mind talking and I am willing to do it. But I do have family in Tibet and because of one person, me, it could harm their life.

[CAMERON]: I will be careful. Can I tell others if I do not tell them your name?

[THUBTEN SHERAB]: Cho-cho (ཆོ་ཆོ) (elder brother), we have to keep our names in Nepal AND our names in France secret.

[TSERING]: We do not want to get Nyima Dawa’s[4] phayul cikpa (ཕ་ཡུལ་གཅིག་པ) (friend from the same village in Tibet) in trouble with France.

[THUBTEN SHERAB]: And it could hurt the feelings of our friends here in France. They do not know we changed our names and ages when we came here. How will they feel? They feel they are friends with us, but then they think we have lied. We are someone else.

[CAMERON]: I will keep your old names and new names both secret. I will not show this video to anyone ever.

[TSERING]: We are the only Tibetan family in this part of France. When they offered us an apartment, I did not know what to do. Remember we called you over WeChat in 2019 and you did not call back? I did not know we had a choice [of apartments/ towns]. We are the only Tibetans this far from Paris. Please be careful.

[CAMERON]: We don’t have to do this.

[TSERING]: It is ok. I am so happy, we can do something for Tibet. Today, I am an actress, Trinley Wangpo-la!

…

[TSERING]: We made an arrangement with Nyima Dawa [Tsering's husband in Nepal] that I would pretend to be the wife of his phayul cikpa. And my daughters would pretend to be his daughters. Just like that.

[CAMERON]: But where are his daughters? Who are they?

[TSERING]: We do not know. They are somewhere in Tibet. He has three daughters, I have three daughters, just like that.

[CAMERON]: So France thinks your daughters are his daughters from Tibet? France thinks his daughters went into exile in India and then he invited them to France?

[TSERING]: Yes, just like that.

[CAMERON]: So France thinks you are refugees from Tibet?

[TSERING]: We are refugees from Tibet.

[CAMERON]: But your daughters were born in Nepal.

[TSERING]: France likes Tibetans. They do not like others. But they like us Tibetans. Even [the] Sherpa come here and pretend to be Tibetan. But Sherpa are not real refugees. It is like that. I pretended to be Nepali, to be a Sherpa, in order to leave Tibet. Then my daughters were born in Nepal. But the Nepali government says they are not Nepalis. And they are not allowed to have refugee cards. And they would not renew my refugee card either. So I pretended to be Nepali to leave Tibet and now my daughters pretended to be from Tibet to leave Nepal. This is what it means to be Tibetan. Tibetans are the world's best refugees. The world's most real refugees. No one else in the world is a refugee like a Tibetan is a refugee. And this is what it means to be Tibetan. Many people come to France and pretend to be a refugee. But even if we are born in Nepal or India, we are still Tibetan. And we are the world's real refugees.

[CAMERON]: How do you just become someone else? What did you show the authorities at the airport? Were you scared?

[THUBTEN SHERAB]: No, not scared. Surprised. Then sad. Our parents only told us the day before we went to the airport. It was all very fast. We were standing outside the airport and they just handed us these papers: you are now named "[redacted], your age is 18" and "you are now named [redacted], and your age is 16…" like that. And that our father Nyima Dawa was not coming with us to France.

[CAMERON]: So your age has changed too?

[THUBTEN SHERAB]: Yes. Our birth dates have changed. In France, I am now one year older than I was in Nepal. She is now two years older [indicating her middle sister, Thubten Penba], and she [indicating her youngest sister, Thubten Pasang] is now four years older.

[THUBTEN PASANG]:[5] Yes, when we left Nepal I was ten years old. But the moment we landed in France, I was fourteen. Now I am twelve in Nepal, but France thinks I am sixteen.

[CAMERON]: Is that hard for you in school?

[THUBTEN PASANG]: Sometimes. I don't really have friends. But the

> school is very low quality. It is not as good as my school in Nepal. I have the highest grade in math in my class, even though I skipped four years and they teach everything in French.
>
> [THUBTEN PENBA]:[6] We cannot put our birthdays on social media. We cannot have parties or show ourselves opening presents. Either our Nepali friends or our French friends will see it is the wrong date. If someone sends us a birthday message, we delete it right away. We don't want our French friends to think we have lied to them.

My Portrait of Tsering in the Third Person

The main subject of this article, Tsering, is a Tibetan woman who was born into a large farming family that could not support her. She worked as a domestic servant to an abusive uncle in Lhasa where, from 1987 to 1989, she witnessed Tibetans protest against the People's Republic of China (PRC). The violence of those years inspired her to flee the PRC and cross the mountains into Nepal and continue on to Dharamsala, India. There, in exile, studying how to sew silk appliqué thangkas under the tutelage of the Dalai Lama's personal tailor, she fell in love with a young man from the Kham region of Eastern Tibet who had also just arrived in exile and studied thangka-sewing. After moving to the Boudha neighborhood of Kathmandu, Nepal, she worked again as a domestic servant, but this time to European residents who would not let her bring her baby to work, even when she was still breastfeeding. After her third daughter was born, she sent her eldest and middle daughters away to school in Himachal Pradesh, only seeing them twice a year, because too many non-Tibetans started to enroll in the local "Tibetan" school in Kathmandu. In 2015, the earthquakes in Nepal made her apartment building unsafe, and she briefly fled Kathmandu for Dharamsala, India. Through all these years she supported her husband as he built his small business. When the opportunity came, she boarded an airplane for the first time in her life together with her three daughters and landed in Paris pretending to be the wife of a man she had never met. Through riots and street protests, a global pandemic and lockdowns, she spent three years studying French full-time while living in a *banlieue* (slum-like, suburban public housing development), surrounded by other struggling migrants, completely cut off from the rest of the Tibetan community in France. Now middle-aged, French will be her sixth language after Tibetan, Chinese, Nepali, Hindi, and English.

The primary data for this portrait comes from over twenty years of fieldwork and friendship with Tsering in Nepal, India, and France. Nothing about Tsering's many life phases or need to change her identity would seem remarkable or unique to Tibetans or migrant woman from many places around the world. Yet, the multitude of her life is nothing short of extraordinary to me.

…

Tsering sits on the edge of the couch, her back rigid, facing me and the camera, with her hands folded in her lap. She never leans back, never eases her posture during the interview; when she speaks, she is alternatingly sincere and silly, serious and affable. Her daughters, too, sit idle and polite throughout most of the interview but, in contrast, they are bored; they slouch, glance at their phones, or cross their arms in front of their chests. Sometimes languid, at other times protective, their body language and postures belie, I imagine, their lack of interest in the activity for which I have traveled to their home: to record for the first time on video, the life-history of their mother, a story I have been told numerous times over the past twenty years.

This is the first time I have proposed to record the story, to begin to instrumentalize it into a research presentation, the production of knowledge of compassion and migration, a particular story expressed by the interaction between her and me in inescapable, a priori third person categories. Tsering says, for example, she is

grateful that her story will "do something for Tibet." Like so many Tibetans before her that have sat for interviews with other *injis* (foreigners) she expresses to me both physically, through her posture, and verbally, through her words, a series of expectations of how this formal interview will change our relationship from kin to research collaborators. She worries for her family back in Tibet and, therefore, insists on complete anonymity, and is at times hesitant to divulge too much. But she also expresses enthusiasm when she exclaims with a laugh, "Today, I am an actress, Trinley Wangpo-la!" She wants to tell her story. She has told me before. In her apartment back in Nepal, where she used her photo album to explain to me the many phases of her life, the people she has needed to be, the multiple selves—some lost, some contained, others emerging. She does not, however, express fear for her present circumstances. Like many Tibetans before her, she lied repeatedly about her identity and those of her three daughters in order to cross borders and seek asylum. First, she sought refuge, both political and religious, in the Dalai Lama's presence. Later, she took on the role of pretending to be the wife of a friend from her husband's village in Tibet in order to benefit her daughters. She decided to change her daughters' names and ages to match those of his children perceiving, wrongly, that only by shedding their previous identities would they find shelter in France.

Over the years, so much has gone unspoken between Tsering and me, Trinley Wangpo-la. Tsering has never used my American name. "It sounds wrong. Not like you," she says. But she has always added the honorific suffix *la* to my Tibetan name, continuing the practice years and years after a language textbook would say it was inappropriate between friends or relatives. Twenty-five years ago, when I first took refuge as a Buddhist, a lama gifted me my Tibetan name, like lamas do to foreigners; it comprises two of the many names of his root guru but combined in a fashion that would be strange for a newborn Tibetan baby. As Tibetan friends have often joked, it sounds much better to their ears than "Cameron," but it also marks me as neither an insider nor an outsider.

In the third person, Tsering has always spoken about me to her daughters as "Cho-cho" ([your] elder brother). This is not a default, not like addressing a strange man as "elder brother" out of respect. Though Tsering is only a few years my senior, when we met in 2003 she was already married with a one-year-old, while I was a single student. I played games with that first daughter like the ones I played with my baby cousins in Minnesota. I did not act in accordance with Tibetan expectations of my age or gender. To her new infant I must have seemed more like an older brother figure than Tsering's developmental peer. Or, perhaps, in that moment she quickly strategized that a sibling bond between her toddler and me would benefit that child in the future. If so, her strategy has proved somewhat correct.

Tsering wears her hair long, woven into a single simple braid down the length of her back. She did not dress up or down for the interview. She wears a variety of the same *chuba* (ཕྱུ་བ) and *pangden* (པང་དགན) she has worn each day I have visited her over the past twenty years: a conservative dark gray dress of rough silk that goes to her ankles, a light long-sleeve pastel undershirt that goes to her wrists, and an apron of horizontal bars in every color of the rainbow, which symbolizes her status as a married woman. In some ways, officially and outwardly, France has changed her: she has a new name, a new age, and a new husband, and her daughters have new names she cannot remember. But she admits to being very lonely in France. When I started to call her on the weekends during the pandemic, she would find excuses for us to stay on the phone. She would insist we speak more often for the benefit of my flagging Tibetan language skills. When I asked her directly if it was hard to live in a small town in France as an asylum seeker who has not seen her "real" husband in more than two years, she freely admitted yes:

> I did not know what it meant to accept this apartment in a small town so far from Paris. When the government offered I just said yes. There are no other Tibetans here. We are surrounded by other asylum seekers from all over the world. I had never met people from Africa before. Many have never even heard of Tibet! I have never lived apart from my own people. I have no one to really speak to except my daughters, and they do not understand life from an adult's point of view, a parent's point of view. Yes, it has been quite lonely.

And yet outwardly she looks identical to my image of her in Nepal. In the picture of the family I took at the Eiffel Tower, Tsering looks like someone cut a picture out of a magazine and pasted it next to the Eiffel, like a poor collage for a school art project. The effect is jarring, an ill-fit—not a dream finally achieved but another phase in a life born of struggle, crossing borders, self-reinvention, perpetually stuck in the liminal, never quite *there*.

Tsering often makes frequent, unprompted references to her self-identity. She speaks to me of her previous, interdependent selves. Of course, having multiple selves is not unique to Tsering or Tibetans; changing one's identity to cross a border and seek asylum is not unique to Tsering or to Tibetans. But we can instead look at the ways in which Tsering happens to experience the phenomenon of having multiple selves or how she phrases her experience of interdependence.

Tsering also speaks of her desire to "do something for the Tibetan cause." She thinks about "what I can do for Tibet" or is concerned "for my family back in Tibet" or "our red-faced" "*tsampa* (barley flour)-eating" "superstitious" "*mirik* (མི་རིགས) (nationality)." She speaks about the collective karma of her people and how members of a family, a class, or work unit are reliving connections with the people who have shared collective karma over multiple lifetimes.

Tsering often speaks of her "selves" in ways social science labels "processual" and "interpersonal." In contradistinction to the way I was raised as a Lutheran in America, Tsering does not speak of herself as an individual, nor is she akin to a seed that develops over time—she is not "blossoming" into the flower she was meant to be. As a child descended from Swedish immigrants in suburban Minnesota, I was taught a conception of the self epitomized by a lyric in a song by the band Fleet Foxes, who are descended from Norwegian immigrants to the Pacific Northwest:

> I was raised up believing I was somehow unique
>
> Like a snowflake distinct among snowflakes, unique in each way you can see
>
> And now after some thinking, I'd say I'd rather be
>
> A functioning cog in some great machinery serving something beyond me
>
> *Helplessness Blues*

Anthropologists have long recognized this sense of a person as "unique" in their own self-conception is something relatively new in human history and not the case in most of the world (Ewing 1990). To be distinct or even unique is predicated on the assumption one has a core, authentic self (Leeuwen 2001) underneath external signifiers (Clifford 1988), which one can consciously put on (Goffman 1981). And yet anthropologists have long argued that authenticity is a cultural construct of the "Modern West" closely tied to notions of the individual (Handler 1986). This "inner self" carries with it an ethical imperative of moral obligation and duty (Taylor 1989). It is not my interest or intention to set up a dichotomy between a constructed "West" and "East"; on the other hand, there is a contrast between "Tsering" and "I." As children we were taught different notions of the self, and we learned to speak of it in

different ways. And the world has afforded me as an adult much greater ability than it has Tsering to assert my identity as an individual and maintain a continuity of self over time and space. But what if—and as the Fleet Foxes chose and Tsering asserts—the self can be known through an ethical imperative to serve others? What if, as Tsering argues, the self originates in a dependent relation with others in community such that the self is not independent of those relations? Would that self be inauthentic? Would it pose moral quandaries?

Dependent Origination and Authenticity

Throughout our conversations, Tsering referred to the many lives she has lived, and people she has had to be, and yet she describes this unfolding of selves as something *Tibetan* people experience. As she put it,

> Sometimes we Tibetans have to pretend to be Nepalis. I did to cross the border. Others used to buy citizenship papers from Nepalis to make a passport to travel to America. But when we get to places like France, we have to be Tibetans again because the French government likes us better than Nepalis, you know like Sherpas and such. We Tibetans are the true refugees. The real refugees.

Likewise she referred to her "fake husband," the girls' "fake father" as "my husband's ཕ་ཡུལ་གཅིག་པ." Tsering's real husband, in Nepal, migrated from Eastern Tibet to India in the 1990s. They decided Tsering and their daughters would move to France partly because another man from her husband's area of Tibet (ཕ་ཡུལ) was living in France. That man concocted a plan to be Tsering's "fake husband" and her daughters' "fake father" because they assumed—mistakenly—that they needed these identities to enter France and stay there. Tsering spoke about how her daughters had to change their names and ages to match those of her fake husband's daughters "somewhere in Tibet." Each of the girls' ages were changed to match those girls' ages. The youngest daughter had to pretend to be 14 when she was only 10. The oldest daughter struggles with having to be this new person. However, the middle daughter likes her new name better than the old one. And the youngest daughter is thriving in school and is buoyed by the knowledge she is top of her class in all her subjects even though she skipped two grades and is doing it all in French.[7] All of them are very careful over social media as they try to prevent friends from India, Nepal, and France discovering their alternate identities. They can try to explain that they have family nicknames or made false usernames intentionally for a social media profile. But they don't announce on social media their own birthdays or post pictures of gifts; they even delete any public comments wishing them a happy birthday. In that sense, they cannot "celebrate" online either their previous or new birthdates, because of their fear one of their friends somewhere in the world will notice the discrepancy. They worry at best their friends will feel betrayed; at worst they could report them to the authorities. This fear continues a pattern throughout Tsering's life: that one's actions in the present might be harmful to members of one's family if the state (previously the PRC, now France) becomes aware one has changed one's name, age, ethnicity, or national background in order to cross a border.

Since the 1990s, anthropology has accumulated a number of portraits of women, mothers, or marginalized asylum seekers under a rubric Joel Robbins termed "the suffering subject" (Kleinman 1997, Farmer 2004, Robbins 2013), a replacement for the "cultural other" as the object of anthropological analysis. Sherry Ortner termed this anthropology "dark anthropology" and contrasted it with the emergence of the anthropology of the good and the anthropology of ethics (2016). In a recent lecture at the "MEGA Seminar: Quests for a Good Life" conference at Sandbjerg Gods in Denmark, Robbins summarized the present state of the field as presenting some images of the good life, but too often limited by portraits of resistance or refusal. He criticized anthropology for not taking advantage of

religion as a place to find alternative visions of a good life.

In the portraits presented here, Tsering is neither a sufferer nor an emblem of a good life. In her mind she is doing the best she can to pursue opportunities through being whoever she needs to be to achieve short and long-term goals. In our relationship she has been the mother and pious, conscientious Tibetan Buddhist housewife to the self our relationship produces from me, a person she knows has a professional interest in Tibetan history and religion and who identifies as a Buddhist. In that sense, Tsering and I draw out from each other selves that first formed twenty years ago, even as we have both aged and changed. Another researcher less interested in religion as lived would elicit a different Tsering.

Following McGranahan's (2022) call to make the ethical choice to use near concepts when possible for analyzing our research subjects, I introduce here the basic Buddhist concept of dependent origination (Skt. *pratītya-samutpāda*, Tib. རྟེན་ཅིང་འབྲེལ་བར་འབྱུང་བ), also translated as interdependence, to understand how Tsering and her daughters grapple with the ethical dilemmas that arise from their insistence on the authenticity of being a Tibetan refugee coupled with their mutable identities. Dependent origination is one of a handful of Buddhist concepts all forms of Buddhism that arose in Asia agree is fundamental to a Buddhist worldview; it is frequently featured in talks given to lay people or novices to introduce or reinforce in them a Buddhist perspective. For example, when the Dalai Lama gave a basic Buddhist teaching on April 21, 2023, he spoke on dependent origination. The lecture was broadcast live in Tibetan with simultaneous English translation. The YouTube version of the video has been watched over 172,000 times and was popular with many Buddhist Tibetans because it was the Dalai Lama's first public appearance following a controversial video on social media.[8]

When Buddhists speak of dependent origination, they acknowledge that the self exists but only when it is understood as having arisen or come into being in an innumerable set of dependent relations with other people, things, and experiences. Likewise, those other objects—if they are to be described as having their own selves—also arose in the same interrelated manner. Once the self can be said to exist, it is not considered permanent (Geismar, Otto, and Warner 2022). It continues to evolve in that web of relations. Buddhists care about dependent origination because they argue humans are attached to the idea of the self as having some kind of reality, a truth, independent of other objects, and that humans "grasp" onto that sense of self. But as that independent self is an illusion, trying to define it, find it, understand it, protect it from the world ends up producing much of our own suffering.

For the sake of this article, I want to rename that "independent self" as the "authentic self" underlying external signifiers commonly used in both psychology and anthropology (see above). Buddhists argue that our real self is not that "*in*dependent/authentic self" but an *inter*dependent/mutable self. We can compare Buddhist language to Tsering's language when she views her "self" as "fake," as "changing," as deliberately inauthentic. Therefore, we could conclude that Tsering's experience as a refugee has led to viewing her life in terms similar to Buddhist views of the self as interdependent, also termed "dependently originated." We could thus avoid reducing Tsering to *only* a Tibetan Buddhist while also accepting that being a devout Buddhist has had some effect on her perception of self.

From Tsering's point of view, her Tibetanness also makes her more naturally compassionate toward other people, a trait the Dalai Lama says is a natural outcome of realizing one's dependent origination—that is, depending on others, not ethnicity. Tsering related a story to me about a picnic she attended with other immigrants from her language classes. One of the women, an African, had a young baby she could not console. At first, Tsering had perceived that an African baby would be very different from hers, but she asked if she could help,

and then easily soothed the baby as, in her words, her “superior motherly skills” took over. The other mothers wondered at her success; and she taught them how to hold their babies, give them active attention, feed them, and put them to sleep. She attributed her superior motherly skills to being Tibetan, which made her more compassionate, similar to how she thought being Tibetan made her a “real” or “true” refugee.

When I followed up with her for this article, she attributed that compassion to a lifetime of devotion to the Dalai Lama, whom devout Tibetans consider an emanation of the “Bodhisattva of Compassion,” or Chenrezig (སྤྱན་རས་གཟིགས་), the patron deity of Tibet. For the Dalai Lama, when

> you are able to gain deep insight into the nature of reality … compassion will naturally arise for the beings who are suffering in the world. So compassion for suffering beings is a by-product of wisdom that is cultivated…[9]

One who has thought deeply about the truth of dependent origination is naturally compassionate toward other beings, says the Dalai Lama; because one’s sense of self is interdependent with others, one loves them naturally. Tsering, too, says that her ability to care for others’ babies arises naturally from her sense of self, but she roots her confidence in her ethnic identity, not explicitly her religion; it seemed to me, however, that the two are coterminous for her. Her motherly self, her ethnic-religious identity, and the baby form an interdependent triangle and produce the compassion needed to soothe the child. Tsering repeatedly refers to a variety of properties that originate in dependence with each other, as one might expect a Buddhist to do, but she never says directly that her worldview is informed exclusively by her religion. We could conclude that Tsering’s sense of self resonates with basic Buddhist concepts.

However, though Tsering asserts her Tibetanness with me, a “Tibetologist,” and ultimately her sense of self derives from life experience and, in her words, “being Tibetan”—which for her carries ethnic, religious, and historical connotations—I observed subtle hints toward Tsering becoming more of an immigrant than a “Tibetan refugee.” Living in rural France away from the Tibetan community, taking language classes with other immigrants, going on social outings like picnics, or taking art classes at a community center, Tsering has made friendships with other women of her social class and present circumstances. The nature of our mutual interest in “doing something for Tibet” or the method of a videotaped life-history interview leaves these other contextually important details of the portrait out of the frame.

Tsering’s identity as a mother is interdependent with each of her daughters, whose experience of her decisions and authority is not uniform or placid. The eldest daughter is rebellious and resentful at being relocated at the cusp of adulthood. Her education nearly over, she is frustrated that her job prospects in France are limited to that of being an English teacher; she wishes they had moved to America or stayed in India. The youngest child is closest to Tsering. She never moved away to boarding school in India like her sisters. She gets the best grades of the three and lords it over everyone. Because I am a scholar in her eyes, Tsering often reminds me of the youngest daughter’s accomplishments, while in private moments vents her frustration at the oldest daughter. When we pray together before meals, the oldest daughter is stubbornly silent, eyes open, almost as if she refuses to perform the identity her mother wants for her or the one she thinks “*Cho-cho* (ཚོ་ཚོ)” would expect of her.

Authenticity and Dependent Origination Compared

Self-representation depends on the context, but Tsering defined her *inauthentic* self—the ability to adapt to changing contexts, her mutability, as part and parcel of her being Tibetan and a refugee—as her real self. When compared to theories such as Goffman’s (1959) front stage and backstage

or psychological theories such as the Social Identity Approach (Brown 2000), dependent origination places emphasis on understanding why multiple identities can cause confusion or suffering. Rather than posit an essential, private individual who performs external identities in a variety of social settings, dependent origination uses logic to argue there cannot be an essential private self and, therefore, encourages one to let go of the stress caused by managing the switching of roles; it also alleviates some stress by emphasizing that in social settings others do not have an essential, underlying self either. Ideally, this realization ought to remove the concern over whether the other person is acting authentically toward oneself. But I cannot say Tsering is free from that anxiety, and her daughters regularly express out loud they suffer it.

Tsering does not assert that there is an essential "her" devoid of aspects that appear to be but are not really "her." And when I ask her to reflect on her Tibetanness, she points not to an essential trait but to the interdependent triangle formed by her chimeric mutability, refugee-ness, and Tibetan identity. One does not come before or lead to the others—all three originate in a dependent relation with the others—and this flat ontology of interdependent relations exists for Tsering separate from the confessional-based modern European conception of the self as related to interiority often attributed to Rousseau (Varga and Guignon 2020). Tsering used turmeric to darken her skin and changed her clothes to look Nepali when crossing the border, but she never describes that as a layer on top of a deeper, more authentic self; she has never spoken to me about peeling back layers of identity.

I do not highlight dependent origination as an example of something entirely new. Adorno (1973), Rorty (1989), Foucault (1994)—each in their own way—criticized the idea of an "original" or "essential" self. I choose to employ dependent origination here primarily to analyze the portraits because it is a near concept to Tsering's lifeworld that I find resonates with how she speaks of herself. Dependent origination also serves to push back against the tendency, persistent in anthropology, to consider a subject (such as Tsering) as suffering and reduce that person to someone in need of saving. Likewise, the anthropology of the Himalayas has too often assumed that despite spending decades listening to sermons by the Dalai Lama, patronizing monastic relatives, or reading pamphlets on animals rights and vegetarianism (like the ones Tsering keeps in her kitchen), a figure like Tsering cannot be a truly reflective person or capable of absorbing oft-repeated, very basic Buddhist concepts. To me, Tsering, in her mid-50s, is a theoretician of her own life—formed over years in conscious and unconscious ways by concepts repeated often by her guru. This does not mean she, or I, have a flippant disregard for her daily existential struggle. In particular moments, Tsering made pragmatic and moral choices to pursue compassion and eschew authenticity.

For Tsering's daughters, authenticity still presents an ethical dilemma: if their friends find out they are living in France under new identities, those friends will feel betrayed. They will wonder, "Who was that? With whom was I friends?" For Charles Taylor (Taylor 1989: 34-35), authenticity carries with it demands that come from our ties to others; one's identity is formed by being recognized by concrete others. Tsering's daughters struggle with being recognized simultaneously by two sets of concrete others (friends in South Asia and friends in France), neither of whom know the totality of their self-representations. Therefore, authenticity is not produced through recognition of one identity by one group of friends because that act of recognition would be predicated upon there being an independent, authentic identity. At this point in their young lives, Tsering's daughters consider their real selves their inauthentic selves—produced through being mutable, Tibetan refugees.

Immigration to France transformed Tsering from a paperless, undocumented asylum-seeker to an individual with a legally

recognized identity, relatively more empowered to control her own identity. In time Tsering will gain the right under French law to exert more agency over whom she wants to be; in time, her portrait will arise dependent on other factors, perhaps of her own choosing—rather than her real self always being her inauthentic mutable self—and without the need for mutability or refugee status.

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Endnotes

1. Tsering is a pseudonym for the main subject of this essay.

2. Thubten Sherab is a pseudonym for Tsering's eldest daughter.

3. Tsering has only ever addressed me using my Tibetan name.

4. Nyima Dawa is a pseudonym for Tsering's husband who lives in Nepal.

5. Thubten Pasang is a pseudonym for Tsering's youngest daughter.

6. Thubten Penba is a pseudonym for Tsering's middle daughter.

7. The French government placed all of the girls in classes two years below their reported age levels.

8. For instance, dependent origination was the topic the Dalai Lama spoke on when he gave a lecture on basic Buddhist teachings to monastic and lay Buddhist leaders from across Asia on April 21, 2023: "Address to the First Buddhist Summit," April 21, 2023, Ashok Hotel, New Delhi, India. https://youtu.be/1AM35kWO5s8 Broadcast live in Tibetan, with simultaneous English translation, the lecture has been watched over 165,000 times on YouTube. It is popular with many Buddhist Tibetans because it was the Dalai Lama's first public appearance days after internet trolls posted a controversial and deceivingly edited video accusing him of being a pedophile, which antagonized his supporters.

9. Transcribed from Thupten Jinpa's translation of the Dalai Lama's "Address to the First Buddhist Summit," April 21, 2023, Ashok Hotel, New Delhi India. https://youtu.be/1AM35kWO5s8

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