

*In the loving memory of Mo Samdrup Drolma
who is featured on the front page and passed
away 22nd of November 2023*

Contents

1 Editorial

Jeevan R. Sharma and Michael T. Heneise

SPECIAL ISSUE GUEST EDITORIAL

3 Writing with Care: Ethnographies from the Margins of Tibet and the Himalayas

Harmandeep Kaur Gill and Theresia Hofer

SPECIAL ISSUE FOREWORD

12 The Politics and Poetics of Himalayan Lives

Sienna R. Craig

SPECIAL ISSUE RESEARCH ARTICLES AND ARTWORKS

Childhood

20 Amulets as Infrastructure: Enabling the Ordinary for Children in Mugum, Western Nepal

Heidi E. Fjeld and Inger K. Vasstveit

Young Adults

42 Tibetan Writing from the Socio-linguistic Margins of Tibet: Deaf Students, Tibetan Literacy and WeChat at the Lhasa Special School

Theresia Hofer

71 Working Out in “Sunlight Happiness Gym”: Fitness, Well-Being, and Temporal Rhythms in the Contemporary Tibetan City

Anne Kukuczka

89 གལ་སྲིད་ང་རང་གཞན་ལྷུ་དུ་གི་ན། - “If I were to die in Exile” and ཟུ་ཡིས་? - “Who would?”

Kunchok Rabten

Older Adults

- 92 **Resistance to Marriage, Family Responsibilities, and Mobility: A Turbulent Life Story from Kyidrong**
Geoff Childs and Namgyal Choedup
- 108 ***Thuenlam*: Keeping 'Harmonious Relations' Through the Lens of Hosting and Hospitality in Bhutan**
Ulrike Čokl
- 131 **Tsering: Authenticity and Dependent Origination in a Portrait of a Tibetan Woman**
Cameron David Warner
- 148 **Cotton Singers**
Tsering Wangmo Dhompa

SPECIAL ISSUE PHOTO ESSAY

Old Age

- 150 **Old Tibetan Hands**
Harmandeep Kaur Gill

SPECIAL ISSUE AFTERWORD

- 182 **Stories are Reasons**
Sienna R. Craig

- 186 **REVIEWS**

Editorial

Jeevan R. Sharma and Michael T. Heneise

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We are very pleased to introduce a second special issue of the HIMALAYA in 2023, in this instance titled “Writing with Care: Ethnographies from the Margins of Tibet and the Himalayas”. Curated by guest editors Harmandeep Kaur Gill and Theresia Hofer, this issue is an important contribution to a relatively recent, more conscious, effort to diversify and deepen the discourse within area studies, emphasising the voices and perspectives of ordinary people, and especially of those living at the margins of mainstream society.

The contributions within this issue, ranging from research articles to poetry and a photo essay, highlight an array of socio-cultural practices and lived experiences. The focus on the struggles and joys adds a critical dimension to our understanding of Tibetan and Himalayan studies. It is a reminder that to truly comprehend a region, we must listen to all its voices,

not just those that echo from the centres of power and influence. The special issue takes a life-course approach, a key theme in anthropology, and is organized under four sections: Childhood, Younger Adults, Older Adults and Old Age. The essays help us to recognise the value of everyday lives.

The guest editors have brought together a collection that challenges and rearticulates social categories like gender, class, and disability. They emphasize the need to look beyond fixed generalizations and to embrace the complexities and contradictions of individual lives. This approach, rooted in feminist and decolonial methodologies, not only enriches our academic understanding but also connects us more deeply with the human aspects of the subjects we study. Writing with care, as the editors put, is to ‘enable the reader to connect with people as individual personalities and not merely as

members of social and third-person categories.’

This issue is more than just a compilation of articles; it is a call to rethink and reshape how we approach the study of Tibetan and Himalayan societies. By highlighting the margins, it brings to the forefront the diverse realities and experiences that shape the region, urging us to consider perspectives that have been overlooked or underrepresented in traditional academic discourse.

This editorial process of opening up to special issues and themes is vital. It allows us to bridge scholarly gaps and form collaborations that would otherwise remain unexplored. In this and in previous HIMALAYA projects we have witnessed a growing and very welcome trend towards more partnership with in-region scholarly organizations and contributors. Indeed, this special issue is exemplary in this regard, and reflects the journal’s commitment to

exploring and understanding a fuller range of human voices and lived experiences in the Himalayan region and not just those deemed extraordinary.

The decolonisation of Himalayan Studies will need a conscious prioritization of marginalized epistemologies, and lived experiences into the knowledge systems and this will be a lengthy and fraught process. It will require the production of nuanced, place-specific knowledge that is grounded in the lived experiences and perspectives of various local and regional actors.

As co-editors, we extend our deepest gratitude to the guest editors and contributors for their insightful work. We also thank our readers, whose continued engagement and support make such ventures possible.

Jeevan R. Sharma and
Michael T. Heneise

Editors, HIMALAYA

Special Issue Guest Editorial

Writing with Care: Ethnographies from the Margins of Tibet and the Himalayas

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Keywords

Decolonizing area studies of Tibet and the Himalayas; margins; ethnographies of ‘ordinary’ people; everyday lives; sensitive scholarship

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Numerous projects and initiatives in Tibetan and Himalayan communities are devoted to people occupying marginal spaces; this work is led by grass-root organizations, writers, artists and social entrepreneurs who use social spaces and online social-media platforms to support and amplify marginal voices. By contrast, much work in Tibetan and Himalayan Studies continues to focus on ‘extraordinary’ persons, such as Buddhist scholars and practitioners and others in usually high socio-economic positions. They often represent a geographic, a political, a religious, a socio-cultural, or a symbolic ‘center’. This Special Issue presents alternatives to such accounts.

Publishing the presentations from a conference panel that the editors co-organized in July 2022 and an additional photo essay and poems by two Tibetan writers,¹ this Special Issue considers a wider range of people and socio-cultural practices in Tibet and the Himalayas, and focuses instead on more ‘ordinary’ people who are often at the edges of society. It presents accounts on and by children, deaf people, women and the elderly, with many of such individuals living precarious and disadvantaged lives. As such this volume complements the rather limited space so far given to this group in Tibetan and Himalayan Studies (Atwill 2018, Chan 2022, Chettri et al. 2022,

Childs 2004, Choedup 2018, Desjarlais 2003, Dolma and Denno 2013, Fjeld 2008, Fjeld 2022, Gill 2022, Gagné 2018, Gyatso and Havnevik 2005, Hofer 2020, Holmberg 2007, Jabb 2022, Makley 2007, March 2002, Nulo 2014, Paldron 2023, Ramble, Schwieger and Travers 2013, Ramble 2021, Robin 2015) and adds also to understanding Buddhist ideas and practices of ordinary people (cf. Shneiderman 2006, Childs 2014, Lewis 2014).

Some of the contributions in the Special Issue seek to describe and analyze the lived experiences of geographic, socio-cultural, political and linguistic ‘margins’, while others give space to voices that are not necessarily

‘marginalized’ in their respective communities, but have nonetheless been confined to the periphery in academia. In approaching this concept of the margins, we were inspired by anthropologist Anna Tsing who considers them as “an analytic placement that makes evident both the constraining, oppressive quality of cultural exclusion and the creative potential of rearticulating, enlivening, and rearranging the very social categories that peripheralize a group’s existence” (1994: 279). Following Tsing, we ask: how can we bring to the fore the creative potential hiding – sometimes in plain sight – at the margins of Tibetan and Himalayan worlds? And, how in the process might this rearrange and enliven social categories, such as gender, class, disability, or age, that have peripheralized a group’s existence or made them invisible and unimportant even to academic eyes?

Similar to more classic anthropological studies, regional Tibetan and Himalayan Studies have so far tended to place emphasis not just on ‘extraordinary’ people, but also on extraordinary events, such as rituals, weddings, performances, artistic and literary productions, and dramatic moments of healing. As a corollary, certain types of phenomena deemed specific and unique to Tibetan and Himalayan societies are foregrounded at the expense of everyday ground realities for individuals. This

has led to certain fixed and holistic generalizations about people, which tend to prioritize a Tibetan Buddhist framework of explanation. As articulated by the Tibetan writer and editor Bhuchung D. Sonam, Tibetan writers living in the West have long struggled against “narratives with a spiritual focus that flattened the experience of Tibetans” (Tsagong 2023). While Sonam is specifically referring to Tibetans, we believe that his statement also holds true for non-Tibetan writers, artists, or academics living across the Himalayan region. Furthermore, we argue that what is shared across various groups in Tibetan and Himalayan societies, and across different social worlds, has often been absent.

People’s inner life worlds are not only impacted by wider religious, socio-cultural, or political structures, but also by their upbringing, their desires, family dynamics, or their personalities. This has not been emphasized enough in regional scholarship, and even in certain traditions within anthropology. People’s decisions and actions have predominately been interpreted as “intellectual deliberations or conscious choices determined by cultural codes, rationalities or ideals” writes the anthropologist Michael Jackson (2008, xii). This has left little room for thinking about and engaging with doubt, dilemmas, contradictions and the messiness of lived lives. This volume

engages with these emotions and struggles in the everyday and as such adds to existing works in academia and examples in literature and films by indigenous artists, writers and directors of the region, such as Chettri 2022, Childs 2004, Craig 2020, Dasel 2016, Dhomba 2014, Dickie 2017, Dolma and Denno 2013, Gardner 2019, Gyal 1982, Gyal and Dondrup 1983, Gyeltshen 2018, Hofer 2018, McGranahan 2010, Norbu 2016, 2019, Sonam 2017, Tseden 2005, 2011, 2015, 2018, 2019, Virtanen 2000, Woesser 2020, and Yangkyi 2022.

The erasure and absence of certain groups of people and their everyday lives from academic knowledge production has resulted in hierarchies in the field of Tibetan and Himalayan Studies, something we consider to be problematic. For one, because presumed hierarchies among and between groups of people may not actually exist (such as those between ‘male’ public and ‘female’ private spaces), and secondly, because certain types of academic knowledge continue to be placed in privileged positions over others, for example, in the continuing scholarly emphasis on Buddhist and religious studies, or the privileging of textual knowledge over practical knowledge, skills and spoken and signed languages. As a result of this, certain people and phenomena continue to be overlooked and excluded not only from the cultural order

but also from the academic order of Tibetan studies (Gill forthcoming).

In *Feminist Theory: From Margin to Center* (1984), the Black feminist writer, bell hooks, argues that feminist theory tends to be produced by privileged women who live at the center and that it thus “lacks wholeness, lacks the broad analysis that could encompass a variety of human experiences” (1984: xviii). We extend hooks’ insights to the field of Tibetan and Himalayan Studies and write as female scholars with mixed economic and family backgrounds, one of us coming from an immigrant and minority ethnic background from Norway. From these positionalities and based on observations and insights from our diverse and international network of younger colleagues and students in the field, we ask: Have marginalized persons and groups in Tibetan and Himalayan communities been overlooked or excluded as the result of an academic field being dominated by scholars from a white, privileged background, most of whom have not experienced marginalization either due to race, class, gender, sexuality, disability or any combination of them, and thus lack interest in marginal experiences and the phenomenon of marginalization? Furthermore, in Tibetan and Himalayan Studies, does this also perhaps lead to a field that ‘lacks wholeness’?

We argue that an attention to the everyday realities of persons in more varied socio-economic and more or less marginalized positions holds great potential for expanding and enriching Tibetan Studies, especially through the anthropology of Tibet and the Himalayas. Turning our gaze to the margins in all senses, holds the potential for rearticulating and broadening our understanding of the lived experiences of gender and of social class, of ability and disability, of selfhood, or lay religion, whilst also opening our eyes to other phenomena that are pressing concerns in people’s everyday lives such as love, making a living, stigmatization, or loneliness, topics that are highlighted in the contributions.

The works of native creators from Tibetan and Himalayan communities, demand, to use the words of Bhuchung D. Sonam, that the world look at them “as human beings first and foremost” (Tsagong 2023). Thus, we need to tune our attention towards the complexities, contradictions and messiness of people’s lived lives, which will—in the words of anthropologist Lila Abu-Lughod—enable us to see, “that others live as we perceive ourselves living, not as robots programmed with “cultural” rules, but as people going through life agonizing over decisions, making mistakes, trying to make themselves look good, enduring tragedies and personal losses, enjoying others, and finding moments

of happiness” (1991: 157-58). Although expressed over 30 years ago, we think that “ethnographies of the particular”, one of Abu-Lughod’s strategies in ‘writing against culture’ (1991: 473-476) to avoid the pitfalls of “othering” and in making generalizations about others, are still highly relevant for Tibetan and Himalayan Studies. With this inspiration in mind, we offer to the field of Tibetan Studies this broad collection of ethnographies of people considered to be ‘ordinary’ and their everyday lives.

To uncover the creative potential of the margins, in this Special Issue, we also open up to more sensitive kinds of knowing in line with scholars such as Abu-Lughod 1986, Behar 1997, Biehl 2005, Craig 2020, D’Amico-Samuels 1991, Garcia 2010, Jackson 2017, Mattingly and Grøn 2022, McGranahan 2020, Narayan 1989, Pandian & Mariappan 2014, Stoller 1989, and Wikan 1981. By taking inspiration from these scholars and from feminist and decolonial approaches such as Abu-Lughod 1990, 1991, Asad 1995, Behar 2003, Glissant 1997, Harrison 1991, McLaurin 2001, and Morgen 1989, we steer towards a more hesitant form of knowing that does not fix people in place but strives to leave their life worlds opaque and unresolved. By writing with a great deal of care and reflexivity, such sensitive and critical approaches enable the reader to connect

with people as individual personalities and not merely as members of social or third-person categories (Gill, forthcoming), something we also attempt to put into practice in this Special Issue.

Disciplines and Methods

This Special Issue is an interdisciplinary collaboration between scholars with backgrounds in anthropology, history, and religious studies. We pay attention to the Tibetan and Himalayan margins by bringing together a variety of writing, in the forms of research articles, poetry and a photo essay, covering life phases from early childhood to old age. The contributions are set in Tibetan areas of the PRC, Bhutan, Nepal, and Tibetan exile in India and France. They range from the time period of 1950–2023. Regarding methods, the basis for most of the contributions has been long-term anthropological fieldwork in Tibetan and Himalayan regions. This has involved participant observation and community engagement, gaining language competency and self-critical forms of translation, as well as visual documentation. Several authors have also engaged deeply with historical documents and Cameron David Warner also brings with him perspectives from religious studies.

Outline

We open up the Special Issue with an intellectual and affective Foreword (pp. 12

– pp. 19) by Sienna Craig. The Special Issue itself is divided into four sections that cover life phases from childhood to old age and include the stories of boys and girls, and men and women as well as a variety of other positions and experiences, from the margins in Tibet, Nepal, Bhutan and Tibetan exile.

The first section on *Childhood* has the contribution ‘Amulets as Infrastructure: Enabling the ordinary for children in Mugum, western Nepal’ (pp. 20 – pp. 41) by Heidi Fjeld and Inger Vasstveit to explore the amulets of a boy called Tashi from Mugum in western Nepal. Fjeld and Vasstveit analyze the phenomenon of amulets as ordinary, ubiquitous and unremarkable in terms of ‘infrastructure’ and taken-for-granted techniques of child development. They show how amulets help the safe transitions of newborns and young children (toddlers) to slightly older children and how amulets structure the blurred spaces between the extraordinary and ordinary. The paper addresses marginality in three important ways: by bringing children and childhood into the focus of Tibetan and Himalayan studies; by describing amulet practices in an area marginal to religious centres and thus to the production of powerful amulet ingredients; and by exploring the marginality of Mugum as a geographical space for the placing and wearing of amulets.

From Mugum, we move to Tibet and onto the second section on *Young Adults*. Remarkably we are able to offer here two ethnographies from the city of Lhasa, which has become notoriously hard to access, let alone carry out social science research in its midst. The section opens up with Theresia Hofer’s contribution, ‘Writing from the Socio-linguistic Margins of Tibet: Deaf Students, Tibetan Literacy and WeChat at the Lhasa Special School’ (pp. 42 – pp. 70), on the writing of Tashi and Yangzom, two young deaf graduates from this boarding school, which houses over 200 deaf students as well as some blind youths and children with multiple disabilities. Tashi and Yangzom offer exceptional expressions of their minds and hearts of their desires and hopes for deaf students to gain literacy in Tibetan and for deaf people’s futures in Tibetan society. Hofer analyzes how the two multiply marginalized writers engage with and enact the state through certain terminology, yet how they simultaneously and creatively challenge and ultimately escape some of these demands of the state. Anne Kukuczka in ‘Working Out in “Sunlight Happiness Gym”: Fitness, Well-Being and Temporal Rhythms in the Contemporary Tibetan City’ (pp. 71 – pp. 88) takes as a starting point the everyday experiences of two Tibetan women spending part of their leisure time in ‘Sunlight Happiness Gym’, a high-end fitness studio in Lhasa. The

article explores how desires for particular bodies and bodily practices are linked to complex self-making projects among Tibetan women and government civil servants. Working for the government and living in the highly controlled space of Lhasa, they have to navigate multiple constraints to their self-expressions at work and other domains. By exploring the quest for well-being and self-making through an emphasis on sport and fitness, Kukuczka foregrounds a thematic lens that has been marginal within Tibetan and Himalayan Studies. The last contribution in this section are two poems ‘གཤམ་མེད་པུ་མ་གཞན་ལུ་ཤི་ན།’ (‘If I were to Die in Exile’ and ‘སྤྱི་ཡིས?’ (‘Who Would?’) (pp. 89 - pp. 91) by translator and writer Kunchok Rabten who shares with his readers his pains and dilemmas of being separated from his Tibetan homeland and beloved family members there.

The third section on *Older Adults* opens up with ‘Resistance to Marriage, Family Responsibilities, and Mobility: A Turbulent Life Story from Kyidrong’ (pp. 92 - pp. 107) by Geoff Childs and Namgyal Choedup. This looks at Kyidrong during the 1950s and 1960s and gendered family dynamics through the eyes of Yangchen, the eldest of three daughters in a sonless household. By exploring her story, Childs and Choedup shed light on the connections between gender, social status and autonomy among Tibetan commoners during

the mid-twentieth century. This section continues with the contribution ‘*Thuenlam: Keeping “Harmonious Relations” Through the Lens of Hosting and Hospitality in Bhutan*’ (pp. 108 – pp. 130) by Ulrike Čokl who takes us to Bhumthang in East-central Bhutan to introduce readers to *thuenlam*, considered one of the most important prerequisites and unwritten codes of conduct for successful coexistence in daily social life in Bhutan. The article explores the different ways local people keep *thuenlam* during a trip Čokl made with them along an old trade and exchange route that connects two valleys. The focus on informal etiquette as practiced by ‘ordinary’ people sets Čokl’s work apart from an explosion of academic writings on formalized and codified etiquette in Bhutan. From Bhutan, we move to France with a contribution by Cameron David Warner on ‘Tsering: Authenticity and Dependent Origination in a Portrait of a Tibetan Woman’ (pp. 131 – pp. 147). He paints a portrait—as a scholar and a friend—of a Tibetan woman who fled from Tibet to Nepal, before she, like many Tibetan exiles, migrated to Europe in pursuit of a better life. Through Tsering’s story, Warner calls attention to the challenges and reflections brought about by a life on the move and how these come to shape a Tibetan woman’s sense of self. The final contribution in this section is the poem ‘Cotton

Singers’ (pp. 148 – pp. 149) by poet and writer Tsering Wangmo Dhompa who writes about what a young girl recalls.

The final section on *Old Age* has the contribution ‘Old Tibetan Hands’ (pp. 150 - pp. 181), by Harmandeep Kaur Gill where she shares stories—through words and images—about a group of elderly exiled Tibetans living in Dharamsala. Through intimate connections to her elderly Tibetan friends, Gill provides glimpses into their old age and lived lives.

We conclude the Special Issue with an Afterword (pp. 182 – pp. 185) by Sienna Craig who weaves together the threads that connect the individuals and communities presented within this rich volume. As editors, we are proud to have such wonderful colleagues and writers, and that we together have contributed towards understanding a group of individual personalities in Tibetan and Himalayan worlds, who are clearly living remarkable lives. We hope this Special Issue will give people like the ones featured here a much more central position in the anthropology of this region.

Acknowledgements

The editors would like to thank each other for many forms of mutual support and the intellectual engagement the IATS panel and this themed issue has meant for us. Theresia Hofer would like to specifically acknowledge the tremendous

intellectual contribution that Harmandeep Kaur Gill has had in the writing of this introduction and in her exemplary attempts in bridging anthropology and Tibetan Studies more broadly. We express our heartfelt thanks to Sienna Craig for delivering the keynote to the panel, acting as discussant on two papers and for crafting the Special Issue ends, as well as her steadfast and unwavering support well beyond this issue. Our sincere gratitude also goes to Carole McGranahan, Heidi Fjeld and Geoff Childs for their highly valuable and constructive feedback on individual papers during the panel. We are also grateful to all contributors to the panel, their generous collegiality, for seeing their papers through to publication, and thus forging new paths together. We are incredibly honored that poet and writer Tsering Wangmo Dhompā accepted our invitation to publish her work in the Special issue. A special thank you to Kunchok Rabten who did not take part in our panel during the IATS, but still chose the Special Issue as a home for his writings. Stefan Lueder has been an exemplary managing editor to HIMALAYA journal – thank you for all your hard work on this issue. Our heartfelt gratitude to Geoff Childs, Dechen Pemba and Sienna Craig for reading the Introduction to the Special Issue and offering critical feedback. Last but not least, many thanks to

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Endnotes

1. The panel ‘Ordinary Lives and Ethnographies of the Everyday in Tibet and the Himalayas’ was held on 7th of July at the 16th IATS in Prague, Czech Republic (3-9 July 2022).

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Special Issue Foreword

The Politics and Poetics of Himalayan Lives

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Miniatures

The lockdown baby to whom I am *ani* (paternal aunt), rankles and delights her parents. She has her father's wide forehead, her mother's ochre eyes. Language is sparse at 14 months, but she demands "ball" in English while reaching for her mother's breast, clambering for *oma* (milk). Her mother, tired after a night of the child's teething, responds with love and exasperation. Outside this apartment in Woodside, New York, summer heat blankets the concrete and thickens the sky. A few weeks from now, this child's Himalayan playmate will drown beside his parents in a basement apartment just blocks away, inundated by Hurricane Ida. That Sherpa family's immigrant home will become a space overwhelmed by infrastructures of inequality in this "land of opportunity." For now—in a moment before this tragic event but while ordinary lives are still punctuated by pandemic precarity—we consider outings to the Bronx Zoo and Jones Beach, weighing a child's amusement against subway delays, the Delta variant of COVID-19, the father's all-too-infrequent days off, the need for rest.

A friend calls from a high mountain village. This night of New Hampshire summer thunderstorms meets the simultaneity of a Mustang dawn. I hear cocks crowing, a pressure cooker, the graceful slide of sweet tea into a porcelain mug. Her speaker phone becomes a form of travel at a time when movement is constrained, as we live with new forms of distance. In the background floats the voice of another woman I know, together with the low thrum of a *mantra* voiced by that woman's brother, a lama. I see him seated by a kitchen window; his ivory prayer beads in the shape of tiny human skulls pulse through his fingers. A ladle slices water, cool in its copper cistern by the door. A teacup is refilled. Present in absence, it is as if I, too, am holding out my cup. Am I here or there? On both sides of the world, unspoken words punctuate the levity of our conversation. Cancer. Floods. Death. Divorce. As with the joy we take in each other's company, these silences tether us to each other. They bear weight.

Framing

I wrote these miniatures in response to an invitation from the editors of this special issue, Harmandeep Kaur Gill and Theresia Hofer, to engage in a conversation about writing, care, and the lives of "ordinary" people in Tibetan and Himalayan worlds. This dialogue began in the form of a panel at the 16th International Association for Tibetan Studies meetings in Prague in July 2022 and has extended in this form. I am grateful to Resi and Harman for the invitation and, most of all, to those Himalayan friends from whom I learn, about and with whom I write, as we embrace life in each other's company.

As ethnographers, how do we parse what is said from what can be known, and what is known from what is intuited or entrusted (Craig 2020, 2024)? What knits together small moments of lived experiences that we come to know not only through intellect but also by feel? What intentions do we bring to the privilege of ethnography when we view it as an opportunity to ponder seemingly quotidian encounters with "ordinary" people? What does this teach us about what matters most? How can Himalayan and Tibetan studies be challenged and changed if we foreground close attention to stories of people whose life histories might not be "extraordinary" by conventional measures but whose lives are remarkable, still? How do social status, immigration status, gender, language, or other markers of identity and positionality inflect both lived experience and representations of that lived experience? These questions animate the contributions in this special collection and guide my practice—writing through the gaps in knowing, in what can be known, to some form of answer.

In recent years, I've become invested in the idea that ethnographic miniatures—told not in the mode of "vignette" but with a sense of wholeness despite brevity—accomplish more than "mere" description or scene-setting (McGranahan and Craig 2023). Rather, such flash ethnography (McGranahan and Stone 2020) can produce both affective specificity and conceptual

insight—a form of what Carole McGranahan might call “theoretical storytelling” (2020). In the spirit of such experimentation, the remainder of this Foreword offers several flashes, each crafted in a different form, that speak to the poetics and politics of “marginal” and “ordinary” lives. A list of figures (inspired by *Harper’s Index*) leaves an impression about the costs, benefits, and values governing translocal Himalayan lives. An ethnographic reflection on fathers and families, labor, and rest speaks to transformations in Tibetan masculinities during times punctuated by migration and social change. A meditation on uranium discovery in Mustang bespeaks possible futures at the crossroads of environmental crisis and political economies bent toward “growth” and “security.” A fictional letter written by a Himalayan New Yorker youth to her once-and-future self takes up questions about identity and belonging across generations and cultures. Consider these flashes as ethnographic spaces that allow detail and specificity about marginal places and ordinary people to illuminate broader currents of our extraordinary, troubled, and mutually implicated world.

Calculations

- Average price of a home in Queens, New York: \$767, 693. For houses that can accommodate multi-generational families and a rental unit that generates money to cover the mortgage or taxes, the average price is \$1–1.2 million.
- Support that a Himalayan community member typically receives toward the cost of a down payment on a house from a community loan: \$150,000.
- Number of New York City households significantly behind on rent at the end of 2021: 68,000.
- Rent owed to a Himalayan landlord in Elmhurst, Queens, by his non-Himalayan tenant at the end of 2021: \$24,000.
- Months it takes, on average, for an individual landlord to receive a hardship payment against foreclosure under

the COVID-19 Emergency Eviction and Foreclosure Act: 18.

- Amount this landlord, who makes his living as a dog walker, paid his tenant to leave the property after a year of unpaid rent: \$14,000.
- Number of people this landlord supports in New York: 4.
- Number of people this landlord supports in Nepal: 5.
- Years since this landlord has returned to Nepal, given his immigration status: 24.
- Price per head for a Tibetan goat in northern Nepal in 2022: Rs. 40,000.
- Price per head in 2019: Rs. 15,000.
- Cost per liter of petrol in Nepal, summer 2022: Rs. 199 or \$1.60.
- Cost per liter of gasoline in the US during this same time: Rs. 163 or \$1.30.
- Number of hotels and guest houses in Lo Monthang, Mustang, Nepal, in 1997: 2.
- Number of hotels and guest houses in Lo Monthang in 2022: 39.
- Amount that members of a Mustangi community organization in New York raised over eight years to purchase a community center building (which, in its previous life, was a Bangladeshi auto-repair shop): \$3.8 million.
- Amount raised within this community since 2020 toward renovation costs: \$2 million.
- Amount still needed to complete renovations and meet long-term community needs: \$4 million.
- Cost of purchasing socially expected gifts by one family returning to visit relatives in Nepal in 2022: \$16,000.
- Centuries that a small village in Mustang has been in existence: 9.
- Months it took for glacial floods to severely damage or destroy a third of this village’s homes and fields: 2.

- Donations raised from international friends toward rebuilding one such home: Rs. 5,68,370.
- Actual estimated cost of rebuilding this home: Rs. 1,700,000.
- Number of hours per week that a man from Dolpo, Nepal, now living in New York City, drives his Uber: 30.
- Number of hours per week that this Uber driver cares for his daughter while his wife nannies on Long Island: 60.
- Monthly tuition for one child at a licensed daycare center in Astoria, Queens: \$900.
- Number of individuals living today in Lo Monthang who are over 65 years of age: 1 in 3.
- Ratio of local students to government teachers at several government schools in Upper Mustang before they closed in 2021: 0 to 3.
- Number of Mustangi-American children who attend a weekly language and culture class in Woodside, Queens: 60.
- Approximate percentage of Mustangi-New Yorkers that this class represents: 3.

Father's Day

I'm taking a walk on a Friday morning before driving to New York when my phone rings, announcing a call from a Loba friend.

"Rinchen la, *thangbo ü de*."

"*Thangbo ü, Se-na-la*. When will you arrive in Queens? How long will you stay?"

This father of two from Lo Monthang has been in New York for a quarter century, nearly as long as he has lived in Nepal. He's a householder and a homeowner, although the property deed is in his wife's name since she's the citizen and he remains undocumented. I tell Rinchen that I'll be in town for the weekend and head home on Monday morning.

"Then I'll miss you," Rinchen answers. "We are driving *upstate* to celebrate Father's

Day," he says. "And now we have an extra day on Monday because of Juneteenth!" he adds, referring to a new federal holiday to mark the emancipation of African Americans. I marvel at the ways this Himalayan community has transformed quintessentially American events into occasions for gathering on their own cultural terms. Fourth of July, Thanksgiving, Father's Day, and now Juneteenth, a commemoration to reckon slavery's legacies, have all been repurposed into opportunities to eat dumpplings, play dice games, and sing and circle dance.

In the background, I hear male voices chatting in Loge-Nepali-English about meat, radishes, and lighter fluid against a din of '80s supermarket music. "We're at Costco, buying food and supplies!" Rinchen explains. This is the second year in a row that about thirty Loba fathers have gathered in this way. They have rented a former summer camp, complete with an industrial kitchen and a hall for singing, dancing, and playing cards into the early hours. I tease Rinchen that this is a convenient moment—as the Saka Dawa moon wanes—to escape the confines of wives, children, and work. "I heard you talking about steak and Johnny Walker," I tease. Rinchen laughs.

Joking aside, the fact that these men are spending time together in this way moves me. Each one works so hard. Beyond the remittance routine or older patterns of bringing home the trade and paying boarding school fees, many of them have embraced fatherhood here in America in ways that have rewritten models of Himalayan masculinity.

I think about how Angyal advocates for his dyslexic son at a local public school and how Tsering cares for his two autistic children each afternoon after working the early morning shift at a grocery store. About how Dzambling endures a gnawing form of guilt and grief, remaining patient with his son—this boy who does well in school and draws Spiderman with aplomb but refuses to speak his parents' language, saying, simply, "My tongue doesn't work for those words." I think about Gyaltsen who, after

years of cooking at Chinese restaurants, became a stay-at-home dad. The French braid technique he's mastered on his nine-year-old daughter is the envy of all the girls at Himalayan Language and Culture Sunday School.

These are not the only stories. Others circulate among women Himalayan-New Yorkers about husbands who refuse to do laundry or who remain unsupportive of their professional aspirations, fathers who insist that daughters do the dishes but never ask their sons, and, yes, about domestic abuse. But gender dynamics are changing. As one fiery, well-educated Loba woman put it, "Our men? They're learning. In America, it must be different! Sometimes I think they're a little scared!"

Later that weekend, I'm in the home of my old friend Dolma, a domestic space dominated by this graceful matriarch, her daughters, and granddaughters. With only one *meme* (grandfather) and one *makpa* (adoptive son-in-law) in the household, men are outnumbered two to one. On this evening, the *makpa* is downstairs, packing for a summer trip to Nepal, while the *meme* is with his fellow fathers, uncles, and grandfathers upstate. *Meme* Kalden calls us on FaceTime, his wrinkled yet still boyish face awash in joy. "We've been singing and dancing for hours," he says.

I can't help but think about his brother, the uncle this family lost to Covid in April 2020. Uncle made a decent living and sent money to his wife and sons in Nepal, but he never made papers. That grim spring, this "essential worker" labored at his grocery store job on Tuesday, spent Wednesday and Thursday rummaging for care—not sick enough, not the right language—and died on Friday in the family's tenement apartment. Twenty-three years into life in America, he never had the chance to return to Nepal. Dolma knows what I am thinking. All she says is, *Ma ngu a*. Don't cry.

After we hang up, Dolma shows me other videos and photos Kalden has been sending from the Father's Day weekend. The men borrowed costumes from a Tibetan

performing arts troupe for the excursion. I watch men lament in harmony and move in lockstep. Men dressed in Nepali drag. Men wearing fur-lined Losar hats, even though summer solstice is days away. Men cooking *dal bhaat* and making beds. Men seated around a campfire, together, whispering to each other under a milky blaze of stars.

Elemental

This turtle on whose back we rest is made of so many elements. Across the Land of Snows, they are parsed as earth, air, fire, water, space—wherein space also lives as consciousness. Metal threads through neighboring cosmologies, filtering from plateau to plain. Then there is the Periodic Table of the Elements, a garden of earthly delights.

Today we are concerned with U 92. Uranium. To speak of it in this way sounds like an amusement: *U 92? U 92? Bingo!* But these are serious games.

It is iridescent, some say, like the inside of a conch shell. Others describe an emerald glint. "Like the color of Jetsun Dolma," recounts an elderly woman from Samdzong village, comparing the sheen of river stones bearing uranium to Green Tara. It is an uncanny reckoning. "But I have heard that the rock can be peaceful or wrathful," she says.

Tibetan physicians remind us that every substance on earth can manifest as medicine or poison. In my mind's eye, I see a river that now runs dry, having forced another village to relocate. Even the goats found this place too desiccated for survival.

Nepali parliament resurrects the Safe and Peaceful Use of Nuclear and Radioactive Materials Bill, 2075 [2018]. News outlets from India and China are quick to report on this event.

We are sitting in the mayor's living room. Swaths of cotton fabric printed with fruits and flowers are tacked to the ceiling to catch dust. The floor is pounded earth, swept clean, and sprinkled with water twice daily. Afternoon sun bisects the room into shadow and light.

The lowland Nepali surveyors wait for the mayor's wife to serve them tea. The mayor, his brow a river of worry, pontificates: "Who will get the mining rights? Will Nepal give its body away, like the Buddha to the tiger?" *Maybe*, I think. *But this is not an act of compassion.*

Some uncomfortable truths:

That the concrete cluster of buildings at the Kora La border crossing are, in fact, not located at the border at all, and that this corner of Nepal is already a simulacrum of sovereignty.

That the expansiveness of thought, which once fashioned vast irrigation systems so that people might thrive in a desert, is itself running dry as people scramble for power or passage abroad. And, that possible futures—Indian tourists, Chinese trade—rest as much on sacred territory as on unstable ground.

That prophecy can become complacency.

That greed can be as slippery and toxic as another element, Hg 80, mercury.

What does all this evoke?

Reservations. As in questions, regrets, the knot in one's stomach.

Reservations. As in Diné (Navajo) lessons on Himalayan soil.

Erasure. As in the idea that if something is not named—*colonialism*, *extractive capitalism*, *climate change*—it does not exist.

Erasure. As in a glacial lake that bursts and wipes out sentient centuries in minutes.

Refusal. As in the statue that, upon being stolen from the village monastery, grows heavier and heavier in the thief's hands until it can no longer be moved.

Refusal. As in letting territory remain undisturbed, letting trace elements rest.

A Letter to My Self

Dear Pema Lhamo (aka me):

Ms. D'Amato told the class we are supposed to write to our 12th grade selves. That means four years from now. I don't know what to write. Who knows? I mean, who knew we'd have a pandemic? In my culture, we are supposed to respect elders, but adults don't know anything.

Tomorrow, I graduate 8th grade from Central Queens Academy. This summer after we get back from Nepal to see *ibi*, we're moving to the Bronx. I don't want to go to the Bronx, especially for high school. It is so ghetto. (I know. I'm being salty¹ and maybe a little racist. I'm not supposed to use that word, but it is true!) The Bronx is where my parents say we can afford to buy a house. I don't know why we need to buy one. I like our apartment. It is near the park and the subway. I like the trees in our neighborhood. There are no trees in the Bronx.

Last time we went to Nepal, I was in 4th grade. I liked Nepal, but it smelled weird, and my head hurt when we went to Mustang, and everyone was always telling me to be quiet or telling me I talk funny. But my mom was happy, so that's cool.

My school fam² thinks I'm shy and that I just sip tea but never spill it.³ But my cousin-friends from Sunday School think I'm funny AF⁴ and a sick dancer. My favorite part of Sunday School is learning to play the *tamyin*. I'm, like, CEO of that shit. (Nobody but me is reading this, right?) I really want to learn how to play the guitar too and write songs like Taylor Swift. She's the GOAT⁵, even though everyone thinks Arianna⁶ or Selena⁷ are better. Whatever. They don't write their own songs. I'm going to write my own songs. About life and friends, but also about Tibet and other political things. We read Amanda Gorman's inauguration poem⁸ in English class this year. It was *amazing*. How she did that with words about America? I want to do that too, about New York.

Since I'm writing this only to me, I'm going to write a secret: I have a crush on Alicia. I think I'm bi or queer, or whatever. She's Dominican. Everybody wants to 'ship⁹ me with this other Asian kid, but he's Pakistani or Bangladeshi or something and spends all his time roasting¹⁰ people, especially girls. Not my vibe. Maybe I can talk to my aunt about it. The crush, I mean. She went to college here and understands things. I'll never tell my parents. There isn't even a word for "gay" in our language. At least, I don't think so.

Ok, Self, see you in four years! Tashi Delek!
Wish me luck! ☺

Sienna R. Craig is the Orvil Dryfoos Professor of Public Affairs, Department of Anthropology, Dartmouth College. A cultural and medical anthropologist whose work with Himalayan and Tibetan communities spans three decades and circles between Asia and North America. She is the author of *The Ends of Kinship: Connecting Himalayan Lives between Nepal and New York* (University of Washington Press, 2020) and *Healing Elements: Efficacy and the Social Ecologies of Tibetan Medicine* (University of California Press, 2012), among other books and articles. She enjoys writing across genres, from literary ethnography to poetry, fiction, and creative nonfiction.

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Endnotes

1. “Salty” is American English slang for being angry, upset, or having a bad attitude.
2. “Fam” is American English slang for “family”, in this case implying close friendships.
3. To “spill tea” in American English slang means to gossip; to “sip tea” implies just listening to gossip or rumor but not offering any in return, in a social circle.
4. “AF” is American English slang for “as fuck”. It is used for emphasis.
5. American English acronym meaning “greatest of all time.”
6. Pop singer Ariana Grande.
7. Pop singer and actress Selena Gomez.
8. Gorman, Amanda. 2021. *The Hill We Climb*. New York: Viking Books.
9. To “ship” someone in American slang means to indicate that you are in a romantic relationship with someone.
10. To “roast” someone in American slang means to tease or taunt them.

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Special Issue Research Article

Amulets as Infrastructure: Enabling the Ordinary for Children in Mugum, Western Nepal

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Abstract

This article explores the use of amulets on children's bodies, drawing on empirical examples from Mugum in western Nepal and theoretical insights from anthropology of personhood, kinship and infrastructure. Taking four-year old Tashi and his family in Mugum as a starting point, we show how the status of toddlers and small children is "extraordinary"; they are physically fragile, emotionally uncontrolled, and weakly connected, and in need of special protection. In the complex transition to ordinary personhood, amulets serve as one of many "technologies of protection" for children (Garrett 2013, 189). We suggest that amulets act as a stable infrastructure that enables a hope for children to live ordinary lives, and argue that the significance of these means of protection intersects closely with notions of marginality.

Keywords

Amulets; children; anthropology; infrastructure; protection

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It was September 2017, and we¹ were heading back to our host family in Mugum village, where we had been staying for the last two weeks, while conducting an explorative research trip to the upper Mugu district. Mugu is located between Humla and Dolpo, close to the Tibetan border, and Mugum village was once a busy market place on one of the trans-Himalayan trade routes.² These days, lacking road access and involving a threeday walk from the district center, the atmosphere in the village conveys a strong sense of remoteness. In Mugum, villagers talked about the place being half-empty and explained how most people spend a large part of the year elsewhere. These late summer months were pleasant, and the village seemed busy as families were starting to prepare for their seasonal shift of location to their winter residence further south. Walking along the wide riverbank toward the village, we met a young boy and his mother, who were returning from their fields to the north. As we conversed with the mother about their plans to move to the district center, Gamgadhi, later that month and about what things they wanted to bring and leave behind, the young boy, whom we here call Tashi, followed our conversation while playing with a string of objects he wore around his shoulder. The objects looked familiar: a leather pouch with an amulet inside, images of Rinpoches and Buddhas, a little silver box decorated with the eternity symbol, folded paper notes, a thick black lashed thread—all known to protect the carrier against harm and misfortune. Attached to a thick red woolen thread, the objects were hanging on the outside of his jacket, on the right side of his chest. Although a common sight across the Tibetan cultural world, Tashi's amulets were more numerous, heavier, and, importantly, more visible than was usual for a small child.

As part of parents' protective efforts, all children in Mugum shared the practice and experience of wearing amulets (*M. sungnye*³). Sometimes visible but usually hidden under the clothes, amulets are part of children's bodies, placed on them a short time after birth and added consecutively



Figure 1: Tashi's string of amulets, worn outside his clothes, clearly visible.

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through childhood and later into adulthood. Yet, when asking for information about how the amulets were placed on the child and about the reasons for and purpose of particular amulets, we often received generic and unspecific answers, as if their value and efficacy were taken for granted, and were hard to articulate in detail. The constant presence of amulets could be understood, we suggest, as serving as an infrastructure of protection in everyday life in Mugum, as in other Tibetan and Himalayan communities.

Introduction

Being a child, and having been a child, is one of the inherent shared human experiences, in many ways the most ordinary one. Childhoods and child-rearing and caring have been a core interest in anthropology since the inception of the discipline, well-known from Margaret Mead's work on socialization and psychological development in Samoa, New Guinea, and Bali in the 1920s and 1930s (1928; 1931); Raymond Firth's studies of care and learning among children in Tikopia in the 1930s (1936); and Audrey Richard's work on rituals and socialization among Bemba girls in the 1950s (1956)—to give some examples. These early studies and work closer to our times—such as by Christina Toren (1993) and Nancy Scheper-Hughes (1992)—both take children, child-rearing, and childhoods as a lens to study cultural values and social lives in

particular communities (for overviews of anthropological approaches to childhoods and for extensive examples of case studies, see Montgomery 2009 and Lancy 2014).

More recent approaches in ethnographies of childhoods, or, rather, studies of children's lives explore children's own perspectives and give prominent space to their voices. Hence, these take children's experiences as a study in its own right rather than as a lens to sociocultural life (Bluebond-Lagner 1978, James and Prout 1990, James 1993, Lancy 2014). Also, in South Asia, there is a long tradition of studies of children and their lives and experiences (Sarangapati 2003, Behera 2007, Balagopalan 2014, Bowen and Hinchy 2015), focusing on topics such as children and personhood (Carrin 2015); learning and education (Froerer 2012, Lancy, Bock, and Gaskins 2010); and labor, exploitation, and rights (McCarthy 2021).

Despite this long tradition of child studies in anthropology and its adjacent disciplines, childhoods as social and cultural experiences and categories are under-researched in Tibetan studies. Although childhood is often mentioned in passing in monographs from the region (such as Childs 2004, Childs and Namgyal Choedup 2019, Craig 2020, Jacoby 2014, Gerke 2012)⁴ there is "no thorough study of children or childhood in Tibet" (Garrett 2013: 199). In Himalayan studies, on the other hand, there are numerous scholarly works about children, focusing mostly on health, including infant mortality, as well as differential childcare (Levine 1987, Miller 1981, Van Vleet 2012), and children at risk (Baker and Panter-Brick 2000). In neither Tibetan nor Himalayan studies is there much research on the classic topics in the anthropology of children and childhoods, such as socialization, personhood, and the coming of age, and children remain marginal in the dominant debates of our regional studies.

The vast literature in cross-cultural childhood studies clearly shows the social and cultural work that goes into "making" children as social beings with the potential for living ordinary lives (Lancy 2014, McCallum 2001, Gregor and Tuzin 2001, Ulturgasheva

2012). How can we explore childhood at the intersection of the ordinary and the extraordinary in Tibetan and Himalayan studies? How can a focus on individual lives contribute to knowledge about such an intersection?

In this article, we focus on the ritual protection of children as part of the making of personhood. We suggest that amulets serve as forms of infrastructure for Tibetan Buddhist personhoods, connecting and enabling the transitions to ordinary lives for small children. Infrastructures, Bowker and Star write, "disappear almost by definition. The easier they are to use, the harder they are to see" (2000: 33). Amulets, too, we argue, are taken-for-granted techniques of child development, often rendered invisible both by the way they are worn under layers of clothes and are talked about in generic terms. We suggest that exploring collections of amulets can be a way to reveal and reflect on extraordinary events—misfortune, illness, and loss—in children's lives, that is, incidents called "moments of inversion" in infrastructure studies (Chandler 2019). The placing and wearing of amulets can also make visible efforts to secure growth and smooth transitions (such as being named, starting school, shifting locations), and investigating these objects can thus serve as a method to gain new insight on children's lives in general and how the ordinary and extraordinary intersect and blur in childhoods, in particular.

We approach children's amulets from two closely connected angles: 1) the anthropology of personhood and cosmology, or the ontological status of (especially small) children and the ways and techniques of transitioning from that status, and 2) the anthropology of kinship, or the exploration of formative efforts to connect a child to the larger socio-cosmological networks in the Tibetan Buddhist worlds. By engaging in a framework of personhood, cosmology, and kinship, we aim to contribute to the literature on childhood transitions in between the bodily and the spiritual (McCallum 2001, Montgomery 2009, Ulturgasheva 2012, Michelet 2015, Scheper-Hughes 1992).

Taking Tashi and his family in Mugum as a starting point, we argue that the status of toddlers and small children is “extraordinary”—physically fragile, emotionally uncontrolled, and weakly connected; they are ontologically different from older children and, therefore, in need of special protection to transition to what is perceived as an ordinary social status. In this complex transition, amulets serve as one of many “technologies of protection” for children (Garrett 2013: 189). We suggest that they act as a stable infrastructure that enables or produces the hope for children to live ordinary lives, and argue that the significance of these means of protection intersects closely with notions of marginality. We address marginality by exploring the geographical remoteness of Mugum as a factor in the placing and wearing of children’s amulets; describing amulet practices in an area marginal to religious centers and, thus, to the production of powerful amulet ingredients; and by bringing children and childhoods—marginal in Tibetan and Himalayan studies—into focus.

Thus, this article aims to contribute to the rich discussion of the anthropology of children, childhoods, and personhood by describing the placing and wearing of amulets in the early years of life in Mugum as a new ethnographic case study of childhood transitions.

Methods

This paper is inspired by observations from Fjeld’s fieldworks conducted in different parts of the Tibetan Buddhist world from the mid-1990s onward: in Lhasa and Panam in Central Tibet, in Rebgong in Amdo, and recently in Haa in Bhutan. The ethnographic examples included are from the Fjeld’s research on Mugum communities in Nepal and from Vasstveit’s fieldwork in Dharamsala, India. The wearing of amulets was an integrated part of the research questions of the fieldwork in Dharamsala in 2008 and 2012 and an indirect part of the work with Mugum communities from 2017 onward.

Due to the explicit focus on individual lives in this special issue, the ethnography presented here is from interactions with people from Mugum residing in Mugum village, Jumla, or Kathmandu rather than from any of the other field sites.

Fjeld conducted the fieldwork among the Mugu community in 2017 and 2019. As part of an explorative research trip to upper Mugum in September 2017, Fjeld worked in tandem with Chhorden, a young woman from Mugum village who served as a research assistant and language and cultural translator. Together, we visited and interviewed people in 25 households, including five private gompas. In addition, Chhorden did a household survey of seasonal migration patterns in 29 households in the village.

One of the topics covered in our interviews was women’s and children’s health, including access to health services. The protection of small children was an integral theme in these conversations.⁵

There is a large Mugu community in Kathmandu. Fjeld conducted interviews with Muwas residing there in both 2017 and 2019, first with the assistance of Tashi and later with Mingzom, both young Muwas originally from Mugum village living in Kathmandu. These included interviews with ritual experts and representatives of important *ngakpa* (ལྷནས་པ།) households from Mugum. Between visits, Tashi also worked as a research assistant, inquiring about amulet use in families in Kathmandu.

Lastly, in 2019, the Fjeld stayed with the Mugum community in Jumla, again working with Mingzom, who has family there.

In Jumla, we interviewed 15 households about migration histories, including protective practices for bodies and houses, such as the placing and wearing of amulets. In addition, the paper draws on Vasstveit’s fieldwork in Dharamsala in 2008 and 2012, where she worked with families in exile and their use of “power objects,” including amulets. While this research did not focus explicitly on children’s use of amulets and

thus is not reflected in the empirical cases mentioned below, the insight from these observations and conversations about the use of these and other protective objects by adults informs our analysis in this article.

Growing up in Mugum village

Tashi, the young boy we met in September 2017, lived with his mother and father, two siblings, and a grandmother in one of the houses in the lower part of the village. This was, in many ways, an ordinary Mugum household. At that time, Mugum consisted of approximately 100 inhabited houses, and the vast majority of the residents practiced seasonal migration, moving south in the winter, either to Gamgadhi or Jumla, to Kathmandu, or even abroad. The exceptions to this seasonal migration were the people in the 15 blacksmith households and the two persons who served as caretakers of the two communal gompas, as well as a few elderly people who maintained their private (*ger*, མེར་) gompas themselves. From a poor commoner household, four-year-old Tashi, who was still too young for school, lived with his family throughout the year—Mugum in the winter and Gamgadhi in the summer. Like most Muwas, they shifted back to the village in March, opening their house again, farming their small plots of land, and seeing their two yaks return to the summer pasture. Tashi's parents and his two elderly siblings, who came back from their boarding schools for the occasion, also took part in the search for cordyceps (*yartsa gunbu*, དྭུར་ཅོ་དབྱུག་འབྱུང་) in June, as most Muwas had done every year from the beginning of the 2000s. Lacking good trade relations themselves, Tashi's family made their income from selling cordyceps to local traders, who then took the goods to sell beyond Mugu district. While around ten of the Mugum households in the village were relatively affluent (due to long histories of trade and business, including *yartsa gunbu* and other medical herbs over the last two decades), most of the households were poor, struggling with both food security and access to clothes and other basic necessities. Although not excluded or marginalized, like the blacksmith families

in the village, Tashi's parents struggled to make ends meet; their income from picking *yartsa gunbu* and other medicinal herbs was limited, their land was small and not very fertile, and they had expenses for three children in Kathmandu boarding schools. Like other villages in the high Himalayas in Nepal, the population of Mugum is gradually decreasing because the younger generation move out for education and do not return after graduation, young adults leave for labor migration, and the elderly either remain in the village or move south with one or more of their adult children (Childs and Namgyal Choeden 2020, Craig 2020). Tashi's family is typical of those returning to Mugum in the summer: parents, their pre-school children, and one elderly grandparent. The reasons for the outmigration are complex, but, in addition to concerns about education and future opportunities, the lack of services in the village is an important contributing factor. Life in the Mugum is precarious and involves high risks, with only partially working healthcare provision or schools and long walking distances to alternative services, and, in 2017, without mobile coverage or access to the Internet.⁶ A sensitivity to vulnerability and remoteness was strongly present in conversations with people in the village and influenced child-care practices.

Tashi spent his days playing around the house, roaming the village grounds with other children, going out with his mother, or staying with his grandmother inside the house. Small children had considerable freedom and were not closely monitored by their parents, but Tashi liked to follow his mother, being close to her and helping with chores.⁷ He was a careful child, loving and cuddly with his mother and grandmother, whom he slept with alternately, but he could also be loud and rough, especially with his younger sister. Although childcare in Mugum is generally warm and loving, Tashi was scolded harshly by his parents if he misbehaved, such as by spilling food or being careless. Now that he was approaching five years old, his parents expected him to control his body

movements so as not to hurt himself or others or break anything around the house, but they were lenient in terms of letting him roam and do as he pleased. Yet Mugum is geographically remote, with a threeday walk to hospitals or other well-functioning healthcare facilities, and Tashi and other children are vulnerable to accidents as well as illnesses and misfortunes from a range of possible sources, something that parents were very aware of. When speaking about giving birth and raising small children in Mugum, parents commonly and deeply expressed concerns about health and, fundamentally, survival. The notion of the village becoming an increasingly marginal place, lacking road access and health care, strongly informed discussions about children and their childhoods in Mugum.

Growing up with his parents in Mugum, Tashi had, since birth, been part of a social network of kin, neighbors, and friends in the village and beyond, a network that provided connections and care. Mugum's social landscape can be divided into three social categories—simply ranked high, middle, and low—and sometimes referred to by locals as “castes” in English: the ten patrilineages (*gyüpa*, རྒྱུ་པ།), one of which Tashi and his family shared⁸, the lower-ranked *dagre* (M. also called *jela*)⁹; and the lowest-ranked, blacksmiths (*gara*, རྩལ་པ།). Although people of these three categories did not intermarry and interactions with blacksmiths were strictly socially regulated,¹⁰ they are connected through kinship and marriage,¹¹ as well as through labor exchange and contracts. An important socio-ritual connection in Mugum is that between the 13 *ngakpa* households (*gerkyi gompa*) and the households of the village. These private gompas, together with the two communal gompas (*yulkyi gompa*)¹² performed important ritual work, both for the village as a whole, the particular households, and their individual members. While the two communal gompas were responsible for the yearly ritual cycle of the village, the private gompas provided ritual work, labor, and care for the individual households and their members. The relations between the households and the

private gompas have spanned generations, and often, but not always, they share patrilineage. All households are connected to a *ngakpa* or lama in a private gompa, who is responsible for all ritual events in the yearly cycle of a household, including the ritual care for newborn and smaller children.¹³

Tashi's house was served by one lama who lived in the upper part of the Mugum village, and as a member of the household, Tashi received protection from the lama's ritual work for them. These were biannual *yang* (ཡམ་པ།) rituals, new year's cleansings, harvest rituals, cleansings after birth and death, rituals as responses to illness and misfortune, as well as predictions (*mo*, མོ།) to remove potential obstacles before new events, such as trade, relocation, or school start. Adults and children are embedded in these networks of ritual protection that aim to reduce harm and enhance well-being and growth and all things good, including good luck for the *yartsa gunbu* season. The amulets that Tashi wore were objects that commonly circulate within and beyond these socio-cosmological networks of households in the Mugum community, in and beyond the village itself, and these serve, we will show, as stable infrastructures of protection for children residing in the village. Moreover, we suggest that, as material objects that feel heavy when they are worn, amulets work as mnemonic devices for the children, reminding them of these social and religious networks that they are embedded in through their household and their village belonging.

Amulets, Taken-for-grantedness and Efficacy

The wearing of amulets, also called charms and talismans, is common throughout the Tibetan Buddhist world (Skorupski 1983, Gentry 2017, Bellezza 1998, Douglas 1998, Havnevik 1989, as well as older texts such as Hildburgh 1909, Waddell 1956).¹⁴ The generic terms used to describe amulets, or protective objects, vary across the Tibetan cultural sphere; in Mugum, people used *sung nye*, while in Shigatse we often heard *sungkhor* (སུང་ཁོར།), and in Dharamsala the term was *tunga* (a variant of *sungba*, སུང་

བྱེད་པུ་ལྷ་མོ་¹⁵, or simply *jinlab* (བྱེད་ལྷ་མོ་). Amulets and other protective measures are described in great detail in various textual sources, including biographies, ritual manuals, medical treatises, and contemporary medical texts. Most of this literature is text-based and focuses relatively little on everyday practice (Cabezón 2009, Turpeinen 2019, Gentry 2017). Recently, James Gentry, based on ritual specialist Sokdokpa Lodrö Gyaltsen's writings from the 16th to the 17th century, has explored the role of power objects, including amulets, with a focus in what he calls "liberation-through-wearing amulets," which, although based on textual sources, also describes daily practices (2017: 274). We return to Gentry's work below. Spending time in Tibetan Buddhist communities, one sees amulets everywhere, used not only for soteriological purposes but also for very pragmatic and everyday concerns. Amulets are seen on bodies, hanging (high up) inside houses, in drawers, in hospitals and clinics, and as Gentry notes, "the practice of wearing amulets is one of the most visible and ubiquitous facets of Tibetan religious life" (2017: 237). It seems that most bodies are protected by one or several amulets, worn for different time periods and for different purposes. Amulets not only protect against negative forces—spirits, diseases, disasters, or harm—but also produce or enhance positive effects, for example, in relation to medical treatments or, more broadly, to wealth and luck. The use of amulets is not rigidly defined; it can take on new forms according to changing situations, as Gerke recently described with respect to the use of *rimsung* pills among Tibetans in India as amulets to protect from COVID-19 (2020). As objects, amulets move from religious experts to attendants at rituals and from medical institutions to their customers. They circulate between people as gifts and commodities and as objects of belonging and care, but most significantly as items for protection and treatment. The practice of wearing amulets can be seen as the woodwork (Chandler 2019) of Tibetan Buddhist personhood; it is an extensive and taken-for-granted practice, a basic and inherent technology on the

bodymind that serves to protect or reduce against harm and maintain or enhance benefits as part of "being in the world."

Across the Tibetan cultural sphere, adults wear numerous types of objects as amulets: stones such as *zi* (འཛིན།) and turquoise, blessed grains (*chag ne*) or soil, pills (*rimsung*), cotton knotted strings (*sung dü*, སུང་ཐུག་ཏུ།), images (*kubar*, སྐུ་པར།), and paper or other objects (*sungkhör*). The paper amulets that circulate extensively are made by medical or Buddhist institutions, consisting of "powerful speech formulas, such as dhāraṇī, mantra, vidyā, or short instruction manuals, which are written down with prescribed materials on prescribed sacred days, according to specific ritual procedures" (Gentry 2017: 274). The formulas are often written in circular patterns, sometimes accompanied by images and/or powerful substances, and they are folded, often using colorful threads, and then consecrated. They are worn around the neck, upper body, arm, or wrist or kept in boxes or other containers disconnected from the body (Figures 1–8).

The efficacy of amulets comes from blessings (*jinlab*) from the power (*wang*, བླ་པོ།) installed in them by people with access to power sources. *Jinlab*, literally meaning "wave of blessing"¹⁶ (Samuel 1993: 440, Gerke 2012: 232), is central to Tibetan Buddhist rituals and objects. It is generally understood as a blessing power inherent in sacred sites and landscapes, as well as in deities and objects. Samuel suggests that *jinlab* is one of the prerequisites for a Buddhist master to "claim to be an effective supplier of magical power" (2005, 70–71).¹⁷ Across the Tibetan Buddhist world, Buddhist masters' abilities to infuse objects with power are linked to their spiritual accomplishments, and almost every Tibetan Buddhist master has made and circulated special objects (called *jinten*, བྱེད་རྟེན།, a blessed object) (Gerke 2019). A vital characteristic of the inherent potency and power coming from religious experts is its ability to radiate and affect its surroundings. *Jinlab* contain the ability to influence or transform its immediate environment. It can,

moreover, be conjured into an object or a substance, turning them into power objects. It is a potency that has an effect on beings and the environment. *Jin* affects the environment, any substance, or being, which in turn produces the “empowered” (*jinten*) (Gerke 2012: 232, Gayley 2007: 465–466, Huber 1999: 15). Thus, it can be understood as an active force that operates on the environment and on those who encounter it (Gayley 2007: fn. 19).

Mugum children, like adults, often wear amulets under their clothes, around their necks, or inside their shirts or jackets. When staying in local households across Tibet, India, and Bhutan, we have seen many examples of children’s daily embodied interaction with amulets. Returning from school for lunch, for example, and as part of removing their school uniforms for the break, we have seen how children also remove their string of amulets and carefully hang them somewhere inside the house,



Figure 2: Men-Tsee-Khang in Dharamsala: the making of sungkhor, often referred to as “the yellow wheel of Manjushri,” “jam dpal dbyangs ser khor,” see Vasstveit 2014. © Inger K. Vasstveit.



Figure 3: A string of amulets worn by an adult woman in Dharmasala. © Inger K. Vasstveit.



Figure 4: *Chag né*, blessed seeds that are used alone as protective objects or added to amulets, circulating as gifts among Tibetans in India. © Inger K. Vasstveit.

often high up on the wall, before putting them back on when preparing to go outside again. In these daily movements of acts of placing the amulets on and off the body, the everyday sensibilities of wearing these objects, the sense of them being part of the body, appear to become naturalized and normalized. In Tashi’s case, he wore his amulets outside his cotton jacket every time we saw him in the house and in the village. The string was tight over his shoulder, lying close to his chest; the weight and tightness surely noticeable for him. One day we saw him running and jumping from stones with other children, the amulets closely following his body movements.

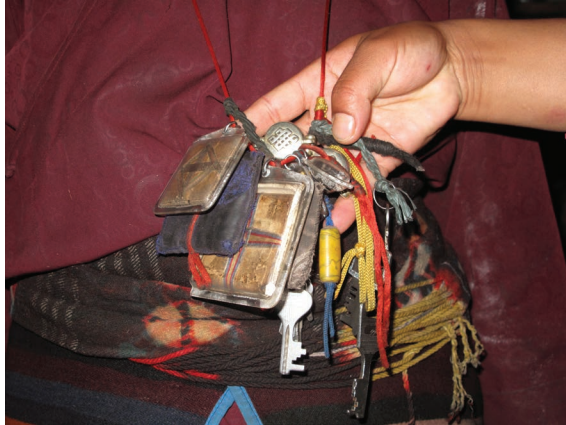


Figure 5: Close-up of an adult woman's amulets in Mugum. © Heidi Fjeld



Figure 7: Children's amulets in Mugum. © Heidi Fjeld



Figure 6: Children's amulets in Mugum. © Heidi Fjeld

What was exceptional, if anything, with Tashi's amulet use? To begin with, the objects were more elaborate and heavier than those in other children's amulet collections (see Figure 8 for a smaller collection of children's amulets). Furthermore, he wore them on the outside of his clothes, clearly visible and tangible, which is less usual. The objects themselves were not extraordinary, although the red woolen thread carried more amulets than we saw on other Muwa children, both in the village and in other Mugum communities elsewhere in Nepal. Indeed, children's amulet collections in Mugum village were more elaborate compared to Muwa children in Jumla or Kathmandu, due, we contend, to the vulnerabilities involved in growing up in a remote village. Tashi's string consisted of one amulet (*sungnye*) wrapped in a leather



Figure 8: *Tsedü* around the wrist, as also worn by Tashi. ©Tashi (RA).

pouch (M. *tepa*), several photos (*kubar*) of lamas, root lamas, or other Buddhist figures, a small box (*gau*, གཤམ་) with amulet paper and medicinal substances and pills inside, another *sungnye*, and a long black object known as *sungdü* (*srung mdud*), and also what his mother called a *dhikpa-raja* (scorpion, N.), and a *sungngak* (M., an object that had been blessed by the blowing of a Rinpoche). In addition, Tashi also wore a protective cord (*tsedü* ཚེད་དུ), a black knotted string, around his right wrist (see Figure 9). We asked his mother about these particular objects and the background for these being attached to Tashi's body, and she explained (paraphrased here),

From the left, the amulet (*sungnye*) inside the leather pouch is called *dukar* (འདུག་པ་དཀར་, white umbrella). *Dukar* is a manifestation of the Buddha who protects against and removes obstacles, and is very commonly given to children in Mugum. We asked how she had obtained this *dukar* and she revealed that it was given to Tashi during

an illness when he was around one year old. He became ill while they were staying in Gamgadhi one winter, and they took him to the hospital there, where the doctors gave him medicines and he recovered. After his recovery, they asked the lama of the private *gompa* serving their household for a *sungnye*. Then, the lama gave him this *dukar*.

She further explained that the amulet was not for the treatment of this illness but rather for future protection. They felt that Tashi was vulnerable to disease and feared that he was weak. Later, again because Tashi had been ill, his mother gave him the *kubar* she had received when attending a ritual in Jumla. This *kubar* was also for general protection, she said. The other *kubar* also originated from rituals common in the region and was given to Tashi as a gift. “How about the little box (*gau*)?” we asked. This was given to him after he had been ill with fever when he was a bit older, to help him recover and make him stronger, she said.

We then asked whether Tashi’s siblings had the same amulets as he does. Some are the same, some are different, she replied. We learned later that Tashi’s little sister had only two amulets hanging around her neck, both with blessed objects from local rituals in Mugu district. In conclusion, Tashi mother explained that all her children had a *tsedü*, the long-life thread worn around their wrists, given by their private lama three days after their birth.

Tashi’s mother’s explanations point to the general sense of protection, of a prophylactic sensibility, rather than treatment, although this distinction can also be blurred. With the exception of their private lama, the origin of the amulets, the source of potency, and the protective efficacy of the amulets are less important in her descriptions. This type of narrative is common when hearing stories about children’s amulets and their efficacy in Mugum; in fact, most of the answers we got about amulets conveyed generic, somewhat vague notions of protection. When asking other mothers in Mugum about their children’s

amulets, we received answers such as, “The child got sick and the objects are for protection against harm,” or “a lama gave this to her to protect against harm (*nöba*, རྟོ་པ།)” or “we got this *sungnye* after she became ill; our lama gave it to her”, or, lastly, including unclear origin, “this is from when he was very young and this other one he got later. I don’t know where it came from.” We asked these questions together, the first author and the local research assistants, and when probing for more details, the stories we got to hear pointed to a general sense of protection sought and achieved from the network of Buddhist powers in which they were entangled but were not necessarily associated with distinct sources of power.

While the amulets are tangible as objects and the sense of efficacy is felt on the body itself, the ways to talk about and convey explanations about children’s amulets have a certain generic quality to them. In Dharamsala, for example, we heard more detailed narratives about the sources of adults’ amulets: a person’s birthplace (with respect to soil), the highest religious authorities, or the biggest rituals, such as the Kalachakra. In the Mugum communities, both in the village and in Jumla and Kathmandu, these concrete details of children’s amulets’ sources for potency and efficacy were less pronounced, and the narratives conveyed a sense of taken-for-granted efficacy. This might also be because these amulets seldom originate from high lamas, except from Pema Rigtsal Rinpoche from Humla, who is a significant regional lama for Mugu. When discussing amulets with adults from Mugum, we often heard the same explanatory indistinctness. Sitting with an old Muwa woman in Jumla, for example, talking about the numerous amulets that she had collected throughout her long life, we, the first author, Mingzom, and two of the woman’s young female relatives, asked about the origin of her different objects. She had asked one of the relatives with whom she stayed to find all the amulets that she kept in her cupboard in her room and bring them outside for us to see. “When did you get these?” we asked. “When I was sick,” she replied, and

continued: “Some are from lamas visiting Mugum, some from lamas in Kathmandu. I got one after an attack by a demon (*dré*, འདྲེ), and one is against harm (*nöba*).”

“Which one did you get after the *dre* attack?” we asked. But she did not know. However, she showed us two rings on her fingers and called them *nöba* stoppers, rings we had also seen in Mugum village (see Figure 11). “How about the amulets that stop *nöba*? Do you remember which ones they are?” we continued. Again, she was uncertain about the specifics of the individual amulets and their origins. Yet she did not doubt the efficacy and value of the amulets; rather, they were objects she showed and talked about with joy and fondness, something she kept close to her body.



Figure 9: An old Muwa woman in Jumla showing us her collection of amulets.
© Heidi Fjeld



Figure 10: Harm-stopping rings, Mugum.
© Heidi Fjeld



Figure 11: Amulets placed on a woman's back while working in the fields, Mugum.
© Heidi Fjeld

In summary, Mugum children's use of amulets has six characteristics.

1. Amulets, including protective cords, are added to children's bodies on the third day after birth, or at least within the first week.
2. Amulets are mostly, but not always, prophylactic protection against future harm, but the distinction between protection and treatment is often blurred.
3. Amulets are cumulatively added to a child's body, increasing with the perceived vulnerability, which is assessed by previous events (such as illness and death of siblings, pregnancy problems, but also the geographical and topographical remoteness).
4. The first amulets used are made and provided by the lama connected to and serving the child's household, who is often from the same patrilineage, while later amulets are made and provided by lamas from a wider network.

5. Amulets are used in combination with other objects and employed alongside other protective measures and events.
6. Children's amulets receive their efficacy from religious, rather than medical, origin and association.

Amulets and Embodied Boundaries

The amulets are power objects in the broadest sense of the term. As Gentry writes, they “have the capacity or ability to direct or influence the behaviors of others or the course of events” (Gentry 2017: 12). Amulets, as other “objects transformed by mantra” (*damdzé*), have the capacity of “binding those who encounter them via the senses to one another, to the substances themselves, and through the substances to their masters” (ibid.: 11). Their functions can be on a spectrum from the soteriological, enabling liberation as mentioned above, to the pragmatic (Cabezón 2010: 21),¹⁸ i.e., protecting against illness or physical pain, but also assisting with mundane processes such as enhancing chances of winning competitions, getting admitted into schools, or obtaining a visa to the US. Children's amulets are on the pragmatic end of the spectrum, strongly interconnected with illness and well-being, but also, as we will show, with strength, growth, transitions, and subjectivities.

In one of the few publications on children's protection in Tibetan texts, *What Children Need*, Frances Garrett (2013) explores what she calls “technologies of protection for children” in detail, as these are presented primarily in a collection of older and contemporary medical textbooks, all still in use at her time of writing. *Healing Children*, the contemporary book she describes, is based on, or corresponds to, chapters 71, 72, and 73 of the *Instructional Tantra*, the third book of the *Four Tantra* (*Gyuzhi*), the core text of traditional Tibetan medicine (Sowa Rigpa). These chapters deal with the care of children from birth to early childhood and describe a range of protective measures to be employed from birth, categorized into feeding, physically manipulating bodies, the wearing of objects, and the staging of

rituals: “feeding of pills, soups, butter, beers, or texts to children, parents, or deities; physically manipulating techniques, such as surgery, washing, anointing, fumigating, or massaging; the wearing of all manners of amulets, talismans, strings, papers, ointments, or letters; the theatrical staging of elaborate hospitality or ransom dramas” (2013: 183). The wearing of amulets is thus one of many such technologies of protection for children, often described together with the wearing of other objects such as talismans, strings, papers, ointments, or letters (Brown et al. 2007). In an often-cited paper, Thubten Sangay 2011 [1984] also describes a very broad range of ritual and care interventions for small children.¹⁹

Worn objects, Garrett notes, build a “second skin,”²⁰ a “defensive armor,” around the baby, on the body itself, just as protective objects do for the house in which the baby lives. With this, she writes, “even babies are given power over harmful forces” (2013: 186).²¹ The cultural comparison between bodies and houses is well known in anthropology, especially in terms of protective measures. Efforts to protect openings, of houses and especially of female bodies, are often based on overlapping cultural ideas and motivations (Carsten and Hugh-Jones 1995). There are indeed many similarities between bodies and houses in Tibetan Buddhist communities, too. In one of Fjeld's previous studies based on ethnography from rural Central Tibet, she has written about how residents, through embodied everyday practices including offerings and hospitality, create and reproduce the house as a ritually efficacious space—a tamed Buddhist space—that enables proper and controlled relationality (and sociality) between humans and non-humans. Such ordering of space enables protection, which, in the case of the house and its residents, contributes to enhancing fertility and growth on the one hand and reducing harm, misfortune, and pollution on the other. The house as such is a microcosm, placing humans and non-humans in an ontological order and facilitating proper and friendly relations between them. Ordering the house and acting accordingly, we have argued,

enables ritual efficacy within the space of the house. This efficacy is existential in a state of ontological continuity where the world is shared by humans, animals, spirits, demons, and deities, as well as corporeal, semi-corporeal, and non-corporeal beings and forces. Much ritual activity in Tibetan communities is aimed at taming the local deities and maintaining proper relations between humans and non-humans, and the house is a crucial space in which an extended sociality unfolds and is explained and controlled (Fjeld and Lindskog 2017, Fjeld 2022).



Figure 12: The local protector of Mugum village. © Heidi Fjeld

Tashi and his family, and other Mugum residents, share a similar ontology of potential “cosmological collapse,” as Da Col called it (2012: 75), in which harm (*nöba*) easily passes from nonhuman to the human world. Moreover, the remoteness and marginality of Mugum, in which state services are notable by their absence, inform the perception that small children’s lives are particularly precarious and vulnerable and thus in need of protection. As the house is marked as a tamed Buddhist space

through architecture, interior ordering of the area, as well as ritual practice and the marking of the outer openings, amulets, we suggest, have the power to transform and uphold the child’s body into a ritually efficacious space, i.e., a space where Buddhist powers work. Gentry, discussing power objects more broadly, describes an underlying “ritual sensibility, or ethos,” that is built on “a dispositional tendency... formed from the creation and operation within a specialized space where the boundaries between the materiality of the object-world and the immateriality of the subject-world are blurred to enable a controlled fluidity of power between human and non-human domains” (2017: 6). It is in such specialized spaces that ritual masters operate, he argues, and power objects—amulets—play important roles in the blurring of boundaries between the material/objective and the immaterial/subjective in these practices.

Material objects, like amulets, also work on children’s bodies, forming subjectivity while blurring boundaries within such specialized spaces, creating new body-object constellations. The material turn in religious studies shifts emphasis toward what bodies and things do, on the practices that put them to work together, and on the epistemological and aesthetic paradigms that organize bodily experience of things (Meyer et al. 2010: 209). Within this material framework, the production and wearing of amulets can be seen as what Warnier calls a “technology,” i.e., as “traditional and efficacious action” on matter and human beings (Warnier 2009: 463). Technology here means practices or performances rather than ready-made things, and the carrying of amulets on the body makes them an empowering technology in a precarious, vulnerable childhood. However, through perception, motion, and emotions—what Warnier terms “sensori-motor conducts”—the objects also become incorporated in the body, thus producing a subject. A subject, then, he writes, is a subject-with-its-object in motion (ibid.: 465). In the following, we turn to the role of amulets in childhood transitions and in the formation of subjectivity and personhood.

Amulets as Material and Affective Infrastructure

In the anthropology and sociology of childhood, there has been a paradigmatic shift in both the research questions asked and the ontological status of children studied. As mentioned above, earlier studies of children often had as their starting point that children are vulnerable and in need of protection on the one hand and, on the other, they are “merely becoming” rather than “already being” (Garzia-Sanchez 2018: 172). These earlier approaches have been critiqued for being “ethnocentric and classed” (ibid.), based on European and North American notions of childhoods that see children primarily as persons in need of care while they are transitioning to adulthood. Critics argue that these approaches blinded scholars to the many ways that children play active roles in their lives, including being caregivers as well as receivers. Recent approaches thus emphasize children’s agency more strongly (Montgomery 2009, Lancy 2014). However, it is outside the scope of this article to discuss children as caregivers or taking other active roles as participants in local communities.

Protective amulets enable us to revisit children’s ontological status and development of personhood, issues that remain central to the anthropology of childhood and cross-cultural studies of children more broadly, contributing Tibetan and Himalayan perspectives to the existing literature (Bluebond-Langner and Korbin 2007, Montgomery 2009). Children are not merely becoming adults but are going through inherent transitions from birth into and through childhood, through adults’ social and cosmological interventions (McCallum 2001, Ulturgasheva 2012, see also Montgomery 2009 for examples). The placing and wearing of amulets, we suggest, adds an interesting angle to these studies, showing how power objects are essential to childhood transitions in Tibetan and Himalayan communities. This brings us back to the question of the role of amulets in the landscape of protective measures for children.

What roles do amulets play in childhood during the transition from margin to center, from extraordinary to ordinary? What is particular about amulets when used on children’s bodies? Aude Michelet’s paper (2015) on the care practices and personhood of young children among Tibetan Buddhists (Halh) in Mongolia provides an interesting comparison to the ontological status of children in Tibet and its borderlands. Michelet describes the multifaceted transition from younger to older children in Mongolia. She analyzes the privileged status—sometimes called “kingly status”—of “young children” (babies, toddlers, up to 3–4 years) and the radically different approaches to the care they receive as they grow older, and show how adults spoil young children, treating them as kings and making sure their needs are met. Young children are not encouraged to control their desires (such as refusing to share with others). Moreover, they are not corrected, and never scolded.

Michelet shows how physical frailty, emotional sensitivity, and inherent virtue converge to give them this privileged status (2015: 289). A small child has a fragile body-mind and uncontrollable desires; they are emotionally sensitive and cannot control fear, which leaves them highly at risk for demon attacks.²² They are “without sin,” and so making them happy is a virtuous deed.²³ Michelet argues that the transition from privileged status to an older, non-exceptional child is not through one rite of passage (in Mongolia commonly described as the hair-cutting ritual), but rather through everyday practices that address the different elements of a child’s personhood, involving different timelines.

Physical frailty changes when the body grows stronger; emotional sensitivity changes with an increasing ability to control fear; and the capacity to understand and follow rules changes the development of language, an indication of intellectual maturity. These changes are different processes; they are individual and do not happen at the same time.

Tashi and other children in Mugum and, we believe, in many communities in the

Tibetan cultural world, experience a similar care pattern, although, of course, it is not identical. The beginning of life is fragile in Mugum. The vast majority of women give birth at home with a female relative, far away from skilled birth attendants or more advanced healthcare. The infant mortality rates are high, and many women have experienced losing one or several children, either through stillbirth or during the first year. Tashi's mother had not lost children, but she also talked about the fear haunting the first period of a baby's life. During the first years of a child's life, the body is seen to be fragile. The body, especially the bones, is still soft, and the baby (and its mother) is very sensitive to cold. Moreover, the child's emotions are uncontrolled, and they are at life's most vulnerable point in terms of being affected by various possible external harms. In addition, small children are only partially socio-cosmologically connected and thus weakly protected. Although less elaborately and explicitly than in Mongolia, newborns, toddlers, and small children in Mugum are held outside the spotlight through a range of care practices informed by an "etic of non-attention," as Empson calls it (in Michelet 2015). These practices include secrecy around pregnancy, applying soot when taking the baby outside, giving the baby an ugly name, and making the baby less attractive to potential sources of harm—all common practices in Mugum—and elsewhere in the Tibetan cultural world.

The inclusion of a child into a community or into society, the marking of social personhood, has often been described as *one* ritual event, such as the three days blessing (Diemberger 1993), or the *bangsöl* (བང་གསེལ།) in Tibetan and Himalayan communities. However, we know that there are great regional variations in how children's personhoods are considered, often depending on age. For example, in Panam in Central Tibet, the dead bodies of stillborn and very small babies are placed in a clay container and kept in the house until the next birth, while the bodies of slightly older children are placed on a mountaintop or ritually marked in the household. Similar

to Michelet's analysis from Mongolia, we suggest that in Mugum and in other communities across the Tibetan cultural world, social inclusion of children could fruitfully be seen as a complex processual transition that involves different elements of personhood at different timelines.

Why does this matter when thinking about children's amulets? Importantly, it frames amulets and the broader landscape of protective care within the issue of temporality. Childhood transitions involve elements with inherently different timelines—body, emotional, and moral changes—and these are managed through a range of episodic care practices (events), including feeding, manipulating, and staging ritual events, such as elaborate ransom rituals and *pecha* readings (Garrett 2013). The wearing of amulets, on the other hand, involves a different temporality; they are stable objects, providing a continuous effect on the child's body. On a side note, amulets are also more accessible, especially in rural areas. The inequity in access to protection measures is striking; the technologies of protection described in texts and recommended by experts are complex, extensive, and expensive, and clearly not available to many. The expense of rituals was an open concern in Mugum communities, both in Mugum village and Jumla, where only the bigger trade households had the capacity to stage larger rituals for individual members.

In this frame, we argue that amulets can be seen as the infrastructure of Tibetan Buddhist personhood and of childhood transitions from extraordinary to ordinary status. This helps explain the wide use of the objects on children's bodies. Amulets, as infrastructure, are part of the woodwork of embodied persons in a world shared by humans and non-humans. This world is an ontology of potential cosmological collapse, entangled with the way of life where Buddhist powers enable, or support, a good life and a full life course. Putting a child's body in touch with these objects and transforming the body into a ritually efficacious space allows for a "controlled fluidity

of power,” to use Gentry’s words (2017, 6), enabling power to move from the religious domain onto the subjective body.

Providing an extra layer of skin, amulets become a part of the child’s body. Inspired by Chandler (2019), we suggest that amulets, in the pragmatic, not the soteriological sense of use, are infrastructure in two different ways: material and affective. Amulets serve as material infrastructure, enabling the protection of children in resource-limited settings, and are more extensively used when there is a lack of health systems or other social services for children. Parents in Mugum openly recognize the extensive precarity their children potentially face, which is why Tashi and other children in Mugum wear much more elaborate amulets than Muwa children do in Jumla or Kathmandu.

More importantly, amulets are affective infrastructure, that is, objects that enable and define relations—not only between the child and its parents, local and regional religious experts, the community, root lamas, and other relevant persons—but also between the child and potentially harmful forces and substances and Buddhist protective powers, in their local place and beyond. Gentry, writing mostly about amulets as objects of liberation in advanced tantra, describes heated debates about whether amulets have these soteriological powers or whether they merely serve as mnemonic devices, reminding the wearer of his or her religious practice.²⁴ As affective infrastructure, children’s (pragmatic) amulets can also serve as mnemonic devices of this socio-cosmological connectivity for the children as well. The weight of the amulets can be a reminder not only of religious practice but also of the network of which the children are part. Although this is not the main purpose of the placing and wearing of amulets on children, it can, we suggest, serve this affective purpose through the materiality of the objects. Moreover, we heard, both in Mugum and also among adults in Dharamsala, that people “felt better” when using amulets. Thus, the amulets not only have an emotional effect,

they are also felt to work and provide real protection.

Amulets establish continuous connections, as opposed to an episodic protection of a different temporality. They produce a hope of an ordinary life, of a smooth transition from an infant/toddler to a small child to a less fragile, older child with substantial and material connections to a wider network. As a technology, amulets are efficacious and act on the subjects themselves by shaping and transforming their subjectivities.

Conclusion

Placed and worn on the body, amulets can transform and uphold the child’s body as a ritually efficacious space, a place that can be protected by Buddhist forces. The practice of placing and wearing amulets on children’s bodies in Mugum is shared by many Tibetan and Himalayan communities, albeit with regional variations. Amulets are put on children’s bodies shortly after birth and are successively added to the body. Often, these are prophylactic rather than treatments. In precarious settings, amulets are more elaborate. They are often made and provided by local and regional lamas in the wider network of the child’s household. Amulets are not used as the sole protective measure for a child, but are affordable tools to keep religious powers effective in a landscape of extensive and expensive protective measures. Like many parents in Mugum, Tashi’s mother spoke of her son’s amulets in ways that did not detail their expected effect, the source of their powers, or their potency and efficacy. This absence of expressed details—or rather, the presence of a sense of taken-for-grantedness about the efficacy of amulets—resonates with the notion of amulets as infrastructure.

We have argued that amulets can be seen as part of the woodwork of Tibetan Buddhist personhood and being-in-the-world and are important tools to assist the range of childhood transitions. Amulets are both material and affective infrastructures; they maintain relationality and connections between a child and their socio-cosmological networks and a ritual connectedness of importance

in a setting of precarity and vulnerability. Amulets serve as infrastructures of care in a setting of marginalization, remoteness, and the absence of health and other services. Explanations of amulet use have infrastructural elements founded in the entanglements of *jinlab*, *wang*, potency, and efficacy, materializing a form of efficacious infrastructure.

These findings highlight an important methodological point that we wish to end with. As infrastructures often remain invisible, they are taken for granted when they work. The value of prolonged engagement in a community becomes obvious to access what Chandler (2019), following Bowker and Star, calls “moments of inversion” of the status quo. By following individual lives, observing how amulets circulate in everyday and extraordinary events, and witnessing moments of inversion, such as illness, misfortune, or embarking on a new path, one can uncover the details of placing and using amulets. Being present at these moments might be the best way to unpack the nuances of amulets on children’s embodied persons and add to the knowledge of everyday religious protective practices.

More research is needed into Tibetan and Himalayan childhoods. Such research should incorporate children’s perspectives and voices. Focusing on the uses of amulets can yield new insight into not only childhoods but also personhood, ritual efficacy, health, and well-being.

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Endnotes

1. The first author, Chhorden, research assistant from Mugum, and Hira Nepali, a local culture and art entrepreneur and art center director.
2. According to Lama Trinley Gyatso's local history book *Mugum* (2011), Mugum was initially inhabited by Zhang Zhung, Tibetans, and Mongolians some 800 years ago and was ruled first by Purang, then the Jumla king, and later the Gorkhas.
3. The language spoken in Mugum, *Muké*, shares many words and structures with Tibetan, yet is a distinct dialect. Members of the community use different transliteration systems for *Muké*, including Devanagari, Tibetan script, and Latin letters, depending on their education. We provide the Tibetan for standardized shared terms, such as *yartsa gunbu* and *jinlab*, but give only phonetics with Latin letters for *Muké* words to avoid Tibetanizing the local dialect. *Muké* words are marked with an M.
4. Writing for a non-academic audience, Brown, Farwell, and Nyarongsha (1997) describe Tibetan parenthood and childcare practices from studies with Tibetans in exile in India and Ladakh.
5. In addition, three MA students in the *International Community Health* program at the University of Oslo, all from Nepal and supervised by Fjeld, conducted fieldwork in upper Mugu from 2018 to 2020, focusing on maternal and infant health and elderly nutrition, adding insights into the protection of small children in the region. See Shrestha 2020 and Karki 2019 for information relevant to children.
6. The phone connection was reopened in 2018.
7. See Rogoff 2003 and Lancy 2014 for cross-cultural examples of children with high degrees of freedom growing up in non-western societies.
8. Known as Khamen, Trawo, Thuwo, Aljen, Changma, Tsowa, Sakpa, Choita, Trietri, and Seltsa.
9. There are only three *dagre* (*jela*, spelling unclear) households in the village, and this category needs to be explored further.
10. All the villagers we spoke to explained that the *gara* are the poorest of the poor.
11. People from Mugum village practice endogamous marriages, (mostly arranged) virilocal monogamy, and has no history of polygamy.
12. Known as Serkhang and Labrang.
13. The lamas usually reside in the village, and in the event of their absence, other community lamas take up their obligations, making ritual services easily accessible to the villagers.
14. Amulets are well known in other Buddhist traditions; see Tambiah 1984 for one example.
15. *Tunga* might be a variant of *tu ngag*, from *tu* (*mtu*) (magical powers) and *ngag* (mantra), or a variant of *sungba* (protection).
16. According to Huber, *byin* is one of the attributes associated with the old Tibetan kings. The pre-Buddhist divine king possessed *byin* as a "personal property and quality of this physical body" in the sense of "splendor" and "glory" (Huber 1999: 90, Gerke 2012: 232).
17. Havnevik has pointed out that in early Buddhism and the classical yoga system, displaying and clinging to "magical powers" was an obstacle on the path to reach the final goal of liberation; however, in tantric Buddhism, a more positive attitude toward attainment of potent powers is more evident (1989: 66).
18. Amulets and pills are examples of how the lines between the soteriological and pragmatic rituals are blurred, or "fuzzy." They can protect against harm in the present but are often also touted as being capable of granting liberation through merely wearing and ingesting them, respectively. The efficacy of pragmatic amulets is legitimized by being connected to or associated with the soteriological aspects (Cabezón 2010: 21).
19. There was one Sowa Rigpa doctor in Mugum village, but he did not make or provide amulets to children. Amulets were associated with local and regional religious, rather than medical, experts.
20. She takes the notion of a "second skin," "through which the performative agency of the wearer is protected and enhanced," from Richard's study of clothing and war (Richard in Garrett 2013: 203).

21. Gentry also notes in his book on Sokdokpa's life and writings that "the thread running throughout much of Sokdokpa's activities in the diverse areas of medicine, literary production, ritual, and vision quest was his concern with protecting borders—bodily, sectarian, territorial—against threats of external attacks" (2017: 3).

22. Small children, she writes, can see supernatural beings, as because demons attack through fear, their inability to control emotions is an important part of their vulnerability.

23. These deeds, including handling out sweets to children, produce *hishig* and small children (like the elderly) are "vessels" of fortune. Although *hishig* and *yang* share many similarities, we have not seen *yang* being connected to small children in this way in the Tibetan communities in which we have worked.

24. Gentry's main concern is about the nature of liberate-through-wearing amulets (*btags grol*) and Sokdokpa's debates on this question of the power of the amulets. The position in the debate is whether the amulet serves as a mnemonic device (to practice advanced tantra) or whether the object has the power to liberate in itself. He argues that the amulets work on three levels: in the pragmatic sphere of illness and physical pain, in the karmic sphere of delivery from negative rebirth, and in the soteriological goal of freedom from samsara (2017).

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Special Issue Research Article

Tibetan Writing from the Socio-linguistic Margins of Tibet: Deaf Students, Tibetan Literacy and WeChat at the Lhasa Special School

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Abstract

Through the writings of Tashi and Yangzom, two young deaf Tibetans, and my narrative of our encounters during ethnographic fieldwork at the Lhasa Special School (LSS) in 2016-2017, this article explores their lives, the role of and their views on the Tibetan language. While their writings reproduce important state-endorsed categories for disabled people in China (Kohrman 2005) and of the state's 'civilizing project' of deaf Tibetans (Hofer and Sagli 2017), they also creatively challenge, critique and ultimately escape those terms and categories through their writings and through the creation of novel, meaningful social networks. Their use of written Tibetan in WeChat posts and their desires expressed therein for strengthening of Tibetan literacy among deaf Tibetans stand out; they are also in stark contrast to those of most other deaf Tibetans and the trend of literacy in the Tibetan language being increasingly considered "useless", even by educated, urban-based Tibetan parents under duress of coercive state structures (Leibold and Dorjee 2023). I examine and draw on anthropological, analytical concepts of 'margins' and 'marginality' (Das and Poole, 2004; Tsing, 1994) to make sense of this phenomenon and to look at the role of Tibetan language in moving in and out of various positions on the socio-linguistic margins of Tibet and China. By using written Tibetan and asking for support and the strengthening of literacy in written Tibetan for young deaf Tibetans, Tashi and Yangzom are able to join a wider Tibetan language-related activism (Robin 2014a, Roche 2021), can "practice hope" (Mattingly 2010) and experience meaningful senses of belonging beyond those envisioned and created by the Chinese state.

Keywords

Deaf Tibetans; margins and marginalization; Tibetan Sign Language (TSL); Special Education; Lhasa

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Beginnings

In February 2016 and during the first month of fieldwork that year, shortly before Losar (the Tibetan New Year), Yangzom showed me a much debated WeChat post on her phone at a festive dinner one evening. It was written and posted by Tashi, a student at the state-run Lhasa Special School (the LSS, or Miksel Lopdra, དམིགས་བསལ་སྒྲིབ་གླ་), whom I would encounter there later that year.¹ Yangzom and I were at a foreign restaurant near the central Barkhor area of Lhasa and most of the conversations were taking place in signed languages. In TSL (Tibetan Sign Language), in CSL (Chinese Sign Language) and a combination of the two, known also as ‘neither-goat-nor-sheep sign language’ (*ramalug lakda*, ར་མ་ལུག་ལག་བརྒྱུད་). People were also using what they referred to as ‘spontaneous sign’ (*rangchung lakda*, རང་བྱུང་ལག་བརྒྱུད་), a gestural repertoire that developed and is used among deaf Tibetans and between some deaf and hearing Tibetans.² Two of us were hearing among the group of roughly 15 sitting around a large table; one a woman who used to work for an international NGO supporting the Tibet Deaf Association (TDA) and myself. The two of us used mainly TSL and ‘spontaneous sign’ and spoke English and Tibetan with each other, using Tibetan with two hard-of-hearing Tibetans. We celebrated the first steps in developing a TSL Dictionary App, a project led by the TDA and one I had been involved in with content development and filming. The dinner was also a wonderful chance for all of us to see each other before many spent time with their families during the long Losar holidays. Spirits were high and we stayed till the restaurant closed late at night.

While Yangzom showed me Tashi’s message on her phone, she explained that Tashi, although a current student at the LSS, had exceptional written Tibetan language skills. This message’s content turned out to be highly critical and politically-sensitive in a context in which minor comments can be considered very sensitive and all phones, social media and public spaces are carefully monitored and watched by the authorities.

I felt like holding my breath while reading it. Titled ‘Message and Questions to the Teachers of the Lhasa Special School’, I will refer to it as the *Message*. Already that evening it had been a topic of conversation, but I had struggled to follow the fast-paced discussion across the table, much of it in *ramalug* sign. The *Message* started out like this:

In truth it is a shame that this message should be written by someone like me who only knows very little about literary composition. But one cannot remain silent when one has a great love for one’s ethnic group (*mirik*, མི་རིགས།) and language (*kéyik*, ཀླད་ཡིག།). I write this message after having attended this school for over one year. When I first arrived here and tried to connect with a classmate, I did not know any sign language, because I was a newcomer. I wrote a Tibetan message to ask for his name. He wrote back in Chinese: ‘I do not know Tibetan’. At that time, I thought he was Chinese and didn’t ask anything else.

To be honest, at that time, it was the first time for me to share a life with many disabled people (*wang kyön*, དབང་རྒྱུན།) like me, and I felt very happy about that. The reason is that we are all disabled people and it would be impossible to look down upon each other. However, after three weeks, all my joy and happiness vanished. That is because no disabled student knows written Tibetan (*bö yik*, བོད་ཡིག།).

Background to Research and Methods

Since 2007 I have been interested in, and anthropologically researching, the recently formalized Tibetan Sign Language, or TSL for short, locally known as ‘hand signs’ (*lakda*, ལག་བརྒྱུད།). I was interested in the role of the language in the creation of urban-based deaf worldings (Friedner 2015; 2019) and had a growing sense of deaf Tibetans keenly and increasingly turning to each

other using signed languages, rather than primarily aligning themselves and socializing with hearing members of their family and communities.³ Until 2016 I had worked closely with the TDA, the only organization supporting deaf Tibetans, through, for instance, providing spaces for deaf-deaf socializing in Lhasa as well as—often related—working to document and promote TSL.⁴

Lhasa's 'Special School' (LSS) was founded in the year 2000. In 2016 it had over 200 deaf resident students, almost all ethnically Tibetan. The 35 teachers were also almost exclusively of Tibetan ethnicity. The curriculum and textbooks were the same as in regular Lhasa schools, but the contents were taught much more slowly. LSS leadership had been consistently dedicated to Chinese-medium based education, with hearing teachers using written Chinese and sign-supported Chinese, a signing system in which one speaks and signs simultaneously, following the word order and grammar of spoken Chinese.⁵ There were four deaf instructors working at LSS, who all used CSL⁶ as the medium of instruction in the classroom. They were unable to comprehend what was said at staff meetings and hearing colleagues signed with them only occasionally and at a basic, insufficient level.

As an exception to the three kinds of Chinese mediums of instruction, in the daily Tibetan language classes rudimentary TSL, 'spontaneous sign', spoken Tibetan as well as the use of the TSL manual alphabet to spell out words were used (see Figure 2).⁷ In the past, between 2007 and 2014, TDA activists had been teaching TSL as a subject and in conjunction with Tibetan literacy in extra-curricular classes on weekends at the LSS, having even developed a whole TSL and TSL-cum-Tibetan language curriculum (Figure 1). They were heeding a Tibet Autonomous Region (TAR) Education Law from 2008 that stipulated TSL was to be taught to ethnically deaf Tibetans in Special Schools of the TAR and was a key policy within a CPC TAR Party Committee Opinion paper from 2010 (Hofer 2017: 134).

Once the first graduates from the LSS returned to Lhasa after their intermittent College years in inland China (relying mainly on Chinese and CSL there), they began to mingle with previously TSL-dominant signers in Lhasa (many active in the TDA). This saw the beginnings of CSL use among older deaf signers in Lhasa as the young graduates knew no TSL. In spoken Tibetan the resulting language practices became referred to as *ramalug lakda* 'neither-goat-nor-sheep sign language' and by deaf signers as 'goat-sheep-mixed-sign' and 'Chinese-Tibetan-mixed-sign'.⁸ I could observe shifts towards *ramalug lakda* close-up in everyday signed office chat, for instance, when in early 2016 the TDA, for the first time, employed two graduates from the LSS. The organization's previously TSL-dominant signers adjusted more and more and incorporated CSL signs into their repertoire, while the opposite transfer was less common (Hofer 2020). In addition, 'spontaneous sign', or *rangchung lakda*, also played a role to ease communication as a shared gestural repertoire useful for Tibetans who had otherwise different dominant sign languages.

Yangzom, I learned at our dinner, was from a village not far from Lhasa. She was Tibetan, 26 years old and since the age of 14 had been profoundly deaf, which she told me was due to the physical abuse of a drunken teacher at her school hostel. I read, later, in an account she wrote for a government volume lauding new educational developments (and therefore having to follow the party-line), that her hearing loss was due to an illness and her own *karma*. After becoming deaf she could no longer follow the teaching in her mainstream school and came to LSS, where she eventually graduated as one of the five top students in her year group, an achievement which earned her the chance to go and study in inland China.⁹ She first went to an inclusive high school and thereafter gained a college degree in landscape architecture from Nanjing Institute of Technology, where a handful of courses had CSL interpretation for deaf students. When we met she had already been offered a job as a teacher of

Chinese language at a recently established Special School in a prefectures outside of Lhasa, which is also part of the TAR Special School network now comprising 7 such establishments overall (Huaxia, 2023).¹⁰ Yangzom was dominant in CSL, but due to her experience of becoming deaf later in life, she also had excellent spoken and written Tibetan, something students who became deaf early on struggled with a lot. Because of a recent but close friendship with a TSL-dominant signer and her own interest and socio-economic background, Yangzom began to complement her CSL with TSL. The two of us therefore chatted in TSL, with me also using some spoken Tibetan alongside, which she could lip-read and understand well. She struck me as a very intelligent and curious young woman.

When I set out to translate the *Message* into English with the help of a friend the following day, the content of this message made me nervous given the ongoing political and Tibetan-language related sensitivities. Yet, I had also noted during the evening with Yangzom at the dinner and in line with previous observations, that deaf Tibetans could discuss in public spaces topics otherwise considered highly sensitive and avoided. This was for a range of reasons, the most obvious one being that nobody around them was able to follow their signed conversations (Hofer, 2017). The *Message*, however was written down and posted online, hence highly legible to state authorities, leaving a permanent trace on the Chinese cyberspace, on people's personal online accounts, and probably saved by the authorities even when deleted from people's personal mobile devices. The content, as well as tone and style, was so radically different from everything else I had seen posted thus far by Lhasa-based deaf and hearing friends.

Disability, Tibetan Margins and China's 'Civilizing Project'

This article explores the lives of Tashi and Yangzom on the margins of Tibetan society and specifically how they use and think about Tibetan language. I provide my own narrative of our encounters

during ethnographic fieldwork in Lhasa and at LSS in 2016-2017 and draw on and analyze the *Message* by Tashi as well as Yangzom's approving response to it, which she co-authored in Tibetan with another Tibetan and posted online not long after Tashi's original post. I will thereby engage readers with Tashi and Yangzom's own voices and creative use of written Tibetan in expressing their views, their emotions and hopes for a different future for deaf and disabled people in Tibet, and for Tibetans within China writ large, analyzing these through anthropological theories of 'margins' and 'marginality'.

While our understanding of the positions and lived realities of disabled people in Tibetan societies, past and present, is very limited,¹¹ written accounts and other creative expressions by disabled people in the region are particularly rare. This may be in part due to lack of educational opportunities and societal stigma, as well as no *namthar* (ནམ་ཐར།) or hagiography, and no *rangnam* (རང་མཁན།) or autobiography of a disabled Tibetan individual discovered so far. By giving voice to at least two young deaf people in Lhasa, who have themselves been able to write about their lives in 2016, even if in shorter formats and largely on WeChat, I aim to complement and counter the general bias in Tibetan and Himalayan Studies as well as among Tibetans themselves towards accounts on and by able-bodied, and most often highly-ranked, 'extra-ordinary' people in society. I also hope to inspire greater curiosity among colleagues, creating intersectional dialogue and understanding about how Tibetans in different marginalized positions experience and reflect a range of Chinese state interventions and socio-cultural discriminations, including through language and education policies and practices as well as disability-related categories and ideas. This article showcases the positions and stances of two deaf Tibetans¹² and their networks in the TAR, and their every-day negotiations and dynamics in the domain of Tibetan language and communication more broadly. It thus underlines core insights from deaf anthropology, on how different forms of

communication and signed languages, social practices and government policies impinge on deaf peoples' lives differently around the globe, how they evolve in particular places and moments in time and are shaped by the socio-political constructions and experiences of ethnicity, gender, and class (Friedner and Kusters, 2020).

This article draws on excellent work on China-wide disability policies and reforms. In particular, the work by Matthew Kohrman on the highly political processes through which the category of "disabled persons" (Ch. *can ji ren*, 残疾人) has been created in reform-era China of the 1980s and 1990s and under a largely medical model of disability, with the China Disabled People's Federation (CDPF) at the helm (Kohrman, 2005).¹³ In previous work, and together with Gry Sagli, I have shown how China-wide disability policies combined with ethnic minority policies in the TAR and in Inner Mongolia, and how they impacted on the doubly-minoritized populations of deaf Tibetans and deaf Mongolians (Hofer and Sagli 2017). To interpret findings from fieldwork and an extensive review of literature and policy documents, we used Harrell's theory of the state 'civilizing project' of ethnic minorities in China, which he defines as a means of codifying the relations of power between dominant groups at the 'centre' – largely the Han Chinese – and subjugated populations and those classified as minorities on the 'margins' (Harrell 1995: 3–36). Both language and education are important components in the 'civilizing project' (Hansen 1999, Postiglione 1999, Harrell 1995; 2001). We found that in daily life and in state-run Special Schools (which are separate institutions, mostly boarding schools, where disabled children are taught), the promotion of Chinese (via CSL or sign supported Chinese) was even more pronounced for deaf Tibetans than for hearing members of their ethnic groups. Among those who had gone through special education, their 'civilizing' by the state was more effective, leaving them virtually bereft of the written languages of their ethnic groups:

The peoples in the ethnic minority regions, whether hearing or deaf, have their lives and life opportunities shaped by the tension between powerful national policies aimed at unifying the nation and policies intended to preserve only carefully-selected aspects of minority cultures, languages and other so-called 'ethnic characteristics'. Within the civilizing project the preservation of minority languages and cultures is not a goal in itself. It is perceived merely as a phase in development towards ultimate 'civilization'. Government incentives in support of more, official *minzu* (ethnic) sign languages are therefore unlikely to be introduced. On the contrary, it is in full compliance with the 'civilizing' mission to expect the deaf to learn Chinese and CSL rather than minority (sign) languages. (Hofer and Sagli 2017: 19)

And yet Tashi's *Message*, as we read on, demands that deaf Tibetans learn Tibetan language and do so well. Moreover, Tashi's position receives the support of Yangzom, who goes even further by also addressing the common practice of code-switching (the 'goat-sheep-mixed-sign'), the lack of professional development for deaf people, and the need for TSL and TSL fingerspelling for effective Tibetan literacy training. Significantly, they put their wishes and hopes out there on highly-surveilled Chinese social media, writing in Tibetan.

To analyze these writings and make sense of the highly complex socio-linguistic positions and experiences of Tashi and Yangzom on the margins of both Tibetan society and of the Chinese state, this article will engage with existing literature on the marginalization of Tibetan languages in China (Roche 2021, Leibold and Dorjee 2023) and Harrell's 'civilizing project' (1995). It also engages with anthropological literature on 'margins' and 'marginality', in line with the overall aim of the volume, such as with Das and Poole's landmark volume *Anthropology in the Margins of the State* (2004). This

work's focus on the everyday life on the margins and the engagement with 'state practices' there helps diversify and nuance understandings of the nature and the role of 'states' on the lives on the margins. This approach can show what categories the

state enforces on disabled people, as found in the writings by Tashi and Yangzom, and what ideas the state promotes regarding the use of Tibetan languages in contemporary Tibet by disabled people and deaf people, and in turn what they themselves



Figure 1: TSL fingerspelling chart with Tibetan letters to the right hand side of the manual signs. Below the 30 consonants are the 4 vowels and signs for subscripts and punctuation found in the last row (TDPF and HI 2005: 100).

think about these state-led ideas. How, in particular, does the Chinese state apparatus inscribe itself into the lives of deaf students at LSS? And how is the Chinese state's 'civilizing project' carried out through disabled and deaf people in Lhasa, via language policies and in education? To this will be added perspectives, in particular on Yangzom's writing, by anthropologists Anna Tsing (1994), focusing on the creative responses to such state interventions on the margins, and Cheryl Mattingly (2010) who conceptualizes hope as an everyday practice.

Methods and Place: Fieldwork in Lhasa and at Lhasa Special School (LSS)

Tashi and Yangzom's stories and me encountering them was part of a broader anthropological and linguistic research project I carried out with deaf Tibetans, and in particular with users of TSL between 2007 and 2017. My initial curiosity about

this topic was doubtless influenced by the fact that I grew up with a father who is deaf, but myself only learned to sign as an adult. Serendipity led to my father making connections with deaf Tibetans, when he visited me during my doctoral fieldwork in Lhasa in the summer of 2007. This helped establish my positionality as a 'part insider' and 'part outsider' during subsequent fieldwork with deaf Tibetans (Hofer 2022, Hofer [forthcoming a]). The project's main themes were the emergence and particular features of TSL, affordances the language enabled in combination with, or in contrast to, other forms of communication, such as CSL, deaf people's political discourse and their experience of the overall highly politically-charged social and linguistic space of Lhasa in the decade of 2007-2017. During the latter half of 2016 I began working with younger Tibetans, whose primary sign language was CSL and who had attended



Figure 2: A TDA member teaching Tibetan literacy via TSL and TSL fingerspelling in an extra-curricular Saturday Tibetan language class at LSS in 2007. © Theresia Hofer



Figure 3: Inside the new 'Education District' of Lhasa, where the Lhasa Special School is located, 2016. © Theresia Hofer

the LSS. Both Tashi and Yangzom were from this latter cohort.

I had visited LSS in previous years alongside my deaf Tibetan friends from the Tibetan Deaf Association (TDA) who, up until 2014, helped run an extra-curricular Saturday class teaching TSL and Tibetan literacy via TSL and TSL fingerspelling (Hofer 2017, Figure 1).

Actual access to LSS for prolonged research purposes and official engagement came only slowly, after considerable effort and thanks to the fortuitous support of the relative of a friend who held a leadership position. The school-based ethnography at LSS and my work with younger deaf Tibetans thus complemented participant observation, interviews and conversations with 25, mostly older deaf Tibetans (then above the age of 30) who I had met earlier and whose dominant sign language was

TSL. With them I had carried out interviews and observations in various private and public spaces in Lhasa, including work places, offices, cafes, and homes. The work within a Lhasa school was therefore new for me.

Early in 2016, LSS moved from near the Eastern side of the Barkor (བར་ཁོ་རྒྱུ་), to a brand new campus (Figures 3, 4). Where previously fields lay and village houses stood, four-lane roads had begun to dominate the landscape in 2015, to build - at approximately 8 kilometres east from the Barkor and to the south of the Kyichu - Lhasa's perhaps most significant social engineering project of the new millennium: the Education District. At the time I was told that a government plan wanted all Lhasa children to be educated and boarding in this Education District, from primary, secondary through to high school levels. Indeed, friends of mine with a daughter in her

second-last year at a central Lhasa primary school were getting prepared for having to send her in the following academic year. They were highly reluctant to do so. By early 2016, several middle schools had moved already, or were in the process of being relocated there from downtown Lhasa. The Education District housed many large school campuses, each a gated cluster of school buildings and high-rise student and teacher residences arranged around sports grounds. At the time of writing this article, the district makes up a very large area on current online maps of Lhasa.

The social and linguistic consequences of creating Lhasa's Education District, concentrating children in a secluded campus and cutting them off from family and Tibetan social life, are highly significant, not least for the future of the Tibetan language and Tibetan ethnic identity. Children are essentially in Chinese-language environments for weeks, if not months, on end (indeed

I was told they cannot return home on weekends, even when their parents are only 8 km away). Leibold and Dorjee argue that Chinese-medium boarding schools in ethnic minority areas of the PRC are “powerful incubators of colonial transformation” (2023: 3). As such, the boarding schools in the Education District are perfectly aligned with a massive shift in ideology at the very top of the party and by Xi Jinping, in which ideas about a multi-ethnically influenced heterogeneous sense of ‘culture’ have, over the past decade, been shifting towards the Chinese Communist Party’s (CCP) demand for all Chinese citizens, regardless of ethnicity, to embrace and espouse a highly homogenous “Zhonghua culture” (Leibold and Dorjee 2023). The ultimate ideological aim of “Zhonghua culture” is to ensure national unity and national security, with ethnic minorities being considered the main threat (ibid).



Figure 4: Grounds of Lhasa Special School, Education District, Lhasa, 2016. © Theresia Hofer

The establishment of Lhasa's Education District was also going to change further the ethnic make-up of central Lhasa. It is likely reducing further the proportion of ethnic Tibetans actually living in and around the central Barkor area in particular, where many family members had kept up households and household registrations in order to get kids into schools they had considered "more Tibetan". It occurred to me that the once common sight in central Lhasa of crowds of loving grandparents and streets filled with cars around school pick-up times, was soon going to be a memory of the past. Property developers were eagerly waiting for the centrally located ex-school plots to become available too.

What I saw in 2016 turned out to be in line with sweeping changes in education policy and practice for Tibetan areas of China under Xi Jinping's leadership. For lack of alternatives as well as due to the rigor of implementation, the new policies actually realized a much higher than average attendance of Tibetan children in boarding schools than among other ethnic groups (across the Tibetan plateau 3 out of 4 Tibetan children now live and study in a boarding school), even in urban areas and mainstream schools where families lived nearby (Campbell 2023, Jia Luo 2021, TAI 2021, Wright 2022).¹⁴

The then ongoing, slow, but soon-to-be complete, broad shift away from Tibetan-medium instruction in TAR primary schools¹⁵ seemed to progress without public outcry during my fieldwork. While LSS had enforced a Chinese-medium of instruction policy from its very beginnings, the mainstream Lhasa primary schools shifted to Chinese medium between 2010 and 2016 (again excepting Tibetan language classes). Last came all the other schools throughout the TAR, when village-level primary schools were shut and 'consolidated' into large township or county-based primary schools where primary school children had to board and which are also now run in Chinese-medium (cf. Jia Luo 2021, Wright 2022, Campbell 2023). Many Tibetan parents and grandparents with children

and grandchildren in Lhasa schools were conscious and unhappy about the loss of the use of Tibetan language as a medium of education—even prior to the boarding school policy for Lhasa-based kids and the realization of the Education District. They could do little else beyond expressing their concerns in personal conversations with friends or family, but that also with restraint and without showing overt disapproval of the government due to a wide network of spies, plain clothes police and digital surveillance. Tibetan language matters certainly fell into the local category of something considered 'political' (*chapsi*, རྒྱུ་མཁའ་) and were hence to be avoided in any public space. All that I could see Tibetan parents do in 2016 in Lhasa (that is prior to their kids being forced into full-time boarding at primary school level), was take their children to out-of-hours private Tibetan language tuition. Private Tibetan language classes have apparently also since been discontinued. Parents tried their best in using Tibetan at home. Given this context, how then can we make sense of such an outspokenly critical message by a young and highly-marginalized individual writing from within a Lhasa-based boarding school?

I was extremely intrigued about the content of Tashi's *Message*, how it was being received, and very much hoped to be able to meet Tashi one day in person, to find out who had dared to write such a critical message to his own teachers.

Message and Questions to the Teachers of the Lhasa Special School

Following on from the initial happiness experienced by Tashi at being together with other disabled students in class and "no one looking down on each other" (see p. 43), he writes that due to the fact that no student knows Tibetan meant that "all my joy and happiness vanished". In this section I offer a translation of the remaining text of the *Message*, before analyzing it within the broad theme of margins and marginality.

Thus, I want to ask a few questions to the teachers of the Special School:

1. Is it that you are looking down on the disabled students and it is impossible for them to learn written Tibetan?
2. Or perhaps, in today's society written Tibetan is not necessary?
3. Are you teaching written Tibetan well in class and on a daily basis?
4. Is it that the disabled students' not knowing written Tibetan is because they are not intelligent enough?

What are these? What is the reason for these? I really don't know. In this message (*trin tung*, འཇིག་བྱུང་།) I have not made any unjust claim or accusation. All I am doing is to write about the reality found at the Special School.

Actually, I have not forgotten that I have been fed, as well as learned skills in this school during this one year. Just because they have been feeding and clothing me, even so, I do not wish to keep the secret of the more than 300 disabled students' lack of knowing Tibetan.

Why do I write this letter? This is not to fight against you. Rather, I wish to express my hope and kind request for the disabled students to study written Tibetan well.

In reality, I am not brave enough to express such views (lit. speak such words). In a sense I have been waiting for one person among the hundreds and hundreds of thousands, who are attached to and have fondness (*sha zhen*, ཤ་ཞེན་།) for the Tibetan language, to come forward and say this. However, you people have kept silent altogether. There is no other option but to say it myself.

Note: The author is a disabled person (*wangpo kyönchen*, འགྲོ་ལོ་རྒྱལ་ཆེན་།).

Contesting and Reproducing the State on the Margins

While we might have expected such a message to emerge in the context of outspoken Tibetan language-related activism and protest that took place in Eastern Tibet in the years 2015 and 2016 (Robin 2014a, Roche 2021, Woesser 2015), such a direct and critical message is unique coming out of Lhasa and the TAR at the time. It is particularly noteworthy for coming from a group of Tibetans who are highly marginalized and of whom only a handful—usually late-deafened people—are literate and can compose such an articulate message. The vast majority, even after graduating from LSS after nine years of education are barely literate enough to write their own names and a simple short message in Tibetan, a state of affairs Tashi's *Message* is all about.

While the *Message* addresses the teachers directly, I think it needs to be read much more broadly as a question posed by this student to the Chinese state, as addressing a much larger situation than one just pertaining to the Special School. As such, Tashi joins the critique of government language policy and practice for Tibetan areas, and shares the anxiety existing among many other Tibetans over the stark decline in Tibetan literacy among ethnic Tibetans and over the very future of the language itself. Given the severe consequence for participation in open protest in Lhasa and in Tibetan areas of China in general, Roche has aptly referred to a 'fragmented civil society' that emerged around language issues, where rather than large-scale, organized mass protests, we find individuals and small, short-lived organizations and initiatives encouraging the study and use of Tibetan language in general, and at Tibetan schools in particular (2021: 70). Requests for genuine bi-lingual education and proper teaching of Tibetan was also found in several of the messages left by Tibetans who self-immolated since

2011. With Tashi asking for a renewed and increased emphasis on Tibetan in school he joined this ‘fragmented civil society’, if only momentarily and through an initially one-off online social media post. He was also seemingly sharing similar motivations, which he says are his “attachment and fondness (*sha zhen*, ཤ་ཞེན།) for one’s ethnic group and language”. The terms in which he expresses his desires differ from the language and terminology used by some of the other language activists, who have since ventured to claim ‘language rights’ for the use of Tibetan in school, at work and in daily life (Roche 2021: 72). Tashi in contrast asks for better instruction in Tibetan at the LSS in less strong terms, using the language of “hope” and making a “kind request for the disabled students to study Tibetan well”.

To be clear, Tashi’s expressed concern is the lack of literacy in Tibetan written language, or *böyik* (བོད་ཡིག།). He is not concerned with spoken Tibetan in this post, unlike others and the movement to incentivize, for instance ‘pure Tibetan’ (*böké tsangma*, བོད་སྐད་གཙང་མ། or *pa ké tsang ma* པ་ཀེ་གཙང་མ།) referring to either Tibetan free from code-switching to Chinese or free of influences from other, local Tibetan languages and/or accents (Roche and Bum 2018). Interestingly, Tashi makes also no reference to TSL. This can be explained by the fact that Tashi was not exposed to fluent TSL use at the school as he joined once the TSL-dominant TDA activists no longer taught Tibetan literacy and TSL extra-curricular classes.¹⁶

An important aspect of the Chinese state’s intervention on the margins and in Tibet is a pact struck by many if not most Tibetans and the Chinese state, within which Tibetans have to accept the ‘gift of Chinese development’ (Yeh 2013). According to Yeh this gift is so enormous that it cannot truly be reciprocated by Tibetans, aside from it being for many unwanted. Drawing on the classic work on gift giving in anthropology, Yeh argued that the unreciprocated gift however leaves Tibetans entangled in highly imbalanced power relations and a state of dependency. I saw this play out many times, with Tibetans discussing the

strings attached to the gifts of state-led development and benefits, ranging from education to civil servants’ salaries and the disability allowance. I noticed that complying and not complaining about the diminishing role of Tibetan in education, and in daily life, is—usually—part of this pact on the Tibetan side. Tashi acknowledges the gifts he has received, in that he has “been fed and clothed”, and “has learned skills” in his school during his one year prior to writing the message. Yet he openly states that this will not make him “keep the secret of the more than 300 disabled students’ lack of knowing Tibetan.” Through his strong critique of state language policy and practice at the school, Tashi outrightly rejects the expectation from the pact between the Chinese state and Tibetans. But we also learn that a part of the pact is that a) one must hide the truth when it does not conform to the state’s narrative, in this case, that one is expected to keep the fact that none of the 300+ students are illiterate in Tibetan secret. And, b) that as part of the ‘pact’ too, Tibetans are supposed not to reveal the ‘secrets’ (i.e. ugly truths) about the pact, including the deprivation of their right to learn Tibetan.

On the other hand, we also find instances in the *Message*, in which Tashi uses certain categories the state has assigned to people like him, in particular that of him being a *wangpo kyönchen* (དབང་པོ་སྟོན་ཅན།), a “disabled person”. By using this term, he participates in the larger state discourse, mainly propagated by the CDPE, its local branches and special schools, which guide, regulate and control disabled people’s lives in China while simultaneously promoting the vision of an inclusive modern state (cf Kohrman 2005, Friedner 2015). His use also likely aims to posit himself as an insider and give his message more weight.

The Tibetan term *wangpo kyönchen* has been the official translation of the Chinese term *can ji ren* (Ch. 残疾人) for “disabled person” (literally “deformed person”) since the Tibet Disabled People’s Federation (TDPE, *Boe rangkyong jong wangkyön lhentsok* (བོད་རང་སྐྱོང་ལྗོངས་དབང་པོ་སྟོན་ལྷན་ཚོགས།) was

founded as a local branch of the CDPF in the TAR in the early 1990s. Despite changes in terminology in Chinese, the term *wangpo kyönchen* remained unchanged in Tibetan.¹⁷ The term *wangpo kyönchen* initially cropped up in official discourse, for instance in the names for the various regional and Lhasa-city branches of the TDPF. From its initially bureaucratic term it then became more widely used. The generic, all-embracing term *wangpo kyönchen* was the common term used by teachers for students of LSS regardless of the fact that over 90% of its student population was deaf and teaching in most classes was effectively aimed at deaf students.¹⁸ Students too at LSS, Tashi included, use the term as they had not (yet) encountered alternative terms and the resistance of older deaf Tibetans in Lhasa against using the term *wangpo kyönchen* (disabled) to refer to deaf people.

Older deaf people did not like to refer to themselves as a *wangpo kyönchen*. They tended to use *wangpo kyönchen* (in written, spoken and signed forms) in the context of

government organizations and structures, such as the TDPF, when dealing with the state-run disability allowances, or when referencing physically disabled people. Indeed, the TSL sign for ‘disabled people’ derives from, and is phonologically close to, the sign for physically disabled people (see Figure 5, Image TDA, 2011: 12, 13).

Instead of *wangpo kyönchen*, older deaf Tibetans and those who had not gone to LSS were using the term *önpa* (འོན་པ།, ‘deaf’) as an emancipatory, colloquial term for deaf people, as I learned during my fieldwork. Through engagement with international deaf and hearing consultants promoting “Deaf culture”, deaf education and sign language research, they also began promoting a new sign for deaf person (Figure 5, Hofer 2022, Hofer [forthcoming a]).¹⁹ In spoken and written Tibetan, *önpa* now meant to replace *wangpo kyönchen* and especially the widespread use of the colloquial term *kukpa* (ཁུག་པ།) for deaf people. *Kukpa* was particularly disliked due to the range of meanings, including ‘mute’, ‘idiot’,

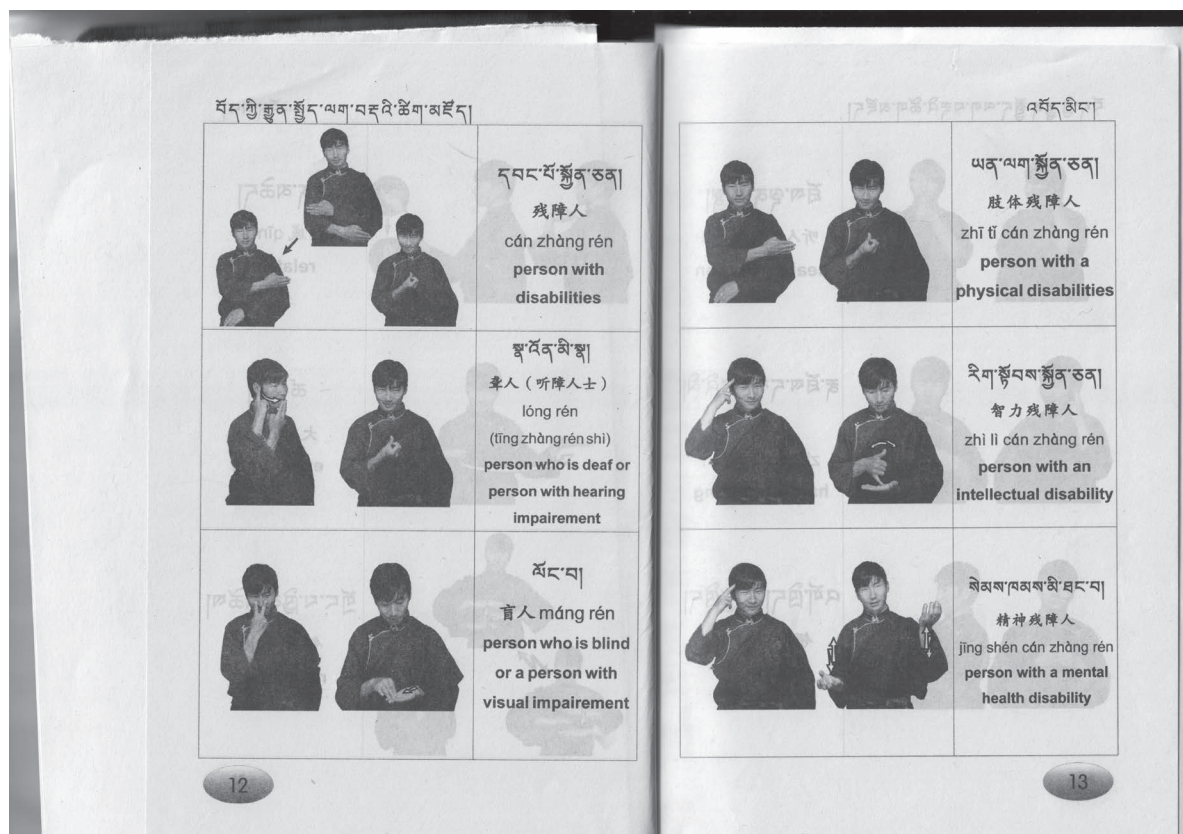


Figure 5: Image of TSL signs with glosses for different types of disability (TDA 2011: 12, 13)



Figure 6: Logos of the only deaf support organization in the TAR in 2004 and in 2011. They reflect changes of symbolism (from a focus on the ear towards the eye and ‘seeing’ sign language, with the five colors reminiscent of prayerflags remaining a constant) and of terminology for deaf persons in the Tibetan language: Tibet Assembly of Deaf-Mutes (བོད་ཕྱོད་མ་འོན་གླགས་ལྷན་ཚོགས།; 西藏聋哑协会 *Xizang Longya Xiehui*), 2004 (upper) to Tibet Deaf Association (བོད་ཕྱོད་མ་འོན་པའི་མཐུན་ཚོགས།; 西藏聋人协会 *Xizang Longren Xiehui*) in 2011 (lower)

‘stupid person’, or it denoting someone as ‘dumb’.²⁰ Deaf advocates abandoned the use of *onkuk* (འོན་གླགས།) (meaning ‘deaf-mute’, or ‘deaf-dumb’), informing their hearing family members and others that the term *önpa* was more correct and welcome. The name for the TDA also changed accordingly (Figure 6) and for ‘sign language’ the spoken

and written Tibetan terms used changed from *kugda* (གུས་ལག་བརྟ།) ‘mute signs’, or *önkug lagda* (འོན་གླགས་ལག་བརྟ།) ‘deaf-mute hand signs’ to ‘Tibetan hand sign’ or *bökyi lakda* (བོད་ཀྱི་ལག་བརྟ།).

At the beginning of the *Message*, Tashi writes of himself as someone who “is attached and fond of their ethnic group and Tibetan language”. At the very end, he explicitly positions himself as a *wangpo kyönchen*, when he states that “the writer is a disabled student”, using the state-endorsed category instead of, for example, *önpa*. This was in January 2016. Soon enough though, Tashi also abandoned *wangpo kyönchen* as a category of self-identification, when he started a Tibetan literary blog a few months later. Yet, he also did not refer to himself as a *önpa* there, suggesting that he chooses to become and be seen mainly as a Tibetan person and one who is not identified as either disabled, or deaf.

Both social categories, “Tibetan ethnicity” and being a “disabled person”—have been important to building the Chinese nation at different points in time. But equally, being Tibetan and feeling fondness, attachment and pride for the Tibetan language are also important Tibetan ‘projects’, stating differences and disagreement with the state-led ‘civilizing project’ which eventually aims to get Tibetans to abandon their ethnic languages and move towards the sole use of Chinese. It helps to think through Tashi’s categories by considering Das and Poole’s formulation of three main concepts of margins and approaches towards margins by states, as outlined in their introduction to *Anthropology on the Margins of the State* (2004).

The first concept of margins they outline gives primacy to the “idea of margins as peripheries seen to form natural containers for people considered insufficiently socialized into the law” (2004: 9), and it is the most relevant for this paper (the other two hinging “around issues of legibility and illegibility” and “margins as a space between bodies, laws and discipline”, *ibid*: 9). The first of these three ways of thinking ethnographically about margins resonates

most closely with the social categories and positions that the state has created for disabled Tibetans: as ethnic Tibetans and as ‘disabled’ people on the margins vis-a-vis the state. How do Tibetans negotiate these categories? Das and Poole encourage ethnographic understandings of the “specific technologies of power through which states attempt to ‘manage’ or ‘pacify’ these populations through both force and a pedagogy of conversion intended to transform ‘unruly subjects’ into lawful subjects of the state.” (Ibid: 9) Policies and practices towards the use of Chinese and CSL, institutions like boarding schools that remove students (including deaf students) from their Tibetan language-based home-environments, and finally giving prized rewards to those further educated in China (Jia Luo 2021), are methods to ‘convert’ unruly ethnic, peripheral and marginal subjects into lawful subjects of the state.

Other contributions in Das and Poole’s volume (including those based on work in Guatemala, Peru and South Africa) highlight the strategic importance of keeping up these practices to create multi-ethnic and benevolent states. They point out how marginal populations are often “formed of ‘indigenous’ or ‘natural’ subjects, who are at once considered to be foundational to particular national identities and excluded from these same identities by the sorts of disciplinary knowledge that marks them as racially or civilizationally ‘other’” (ibid). Tibetans and disabled people like Tashi have been members of groups that have been used at various moments to ‘build’ up the PRC either as a ‘united multinational country’ (Ch. *tongyi de duo minzu guojia*), or ‘othered’ as ‘disabled’, ready to offer fertile grounds for advocacy by the CDPF and the Chinese state (Kohrman 2005). They were thus used at various moments in their positions as marginalized people, seen as quintessential pre-requisites for the foundation for national identities, from which —through lack of opportunities and choices —they are however simultaneously and ultimately excluded. As a ‘disabled’ person they are furthermore made into a category of persons who can be controlled and ‘guided’

through CDPF policies and practices and those of their local branches, such as the TDPF, or local Special Schools, to carry out state-led projects and definitions.

Responses to Tashi’s Message

How then was the *Message* received? The friend from Amdo, who helped me translate it, was in awe of the student daring to write the *Message* and post it online. By all accounts, including Tashi’s own when we eventually met, he did not get into trouble for his message, which meant that neither was he “asked for tea with the Public Security Bureau (PSB)” (a nationally used euphemism for being summoned and interrogated at the police station), nor did he get any request to see the school director. Yet by the same token, he also did not get a response from the school leadership or the teachers and any sense whether they were engaging with his “kind request for the disabled students to study Tibetan well”. Perhaps the timing made it easy. The LSS shut for several weeks for Losar holidays making it perhaps natural and convenient not to respond, or teachers were wise not to draw any attention to it, lest they would have to take the incident further than they wanted. Due to the low level of literacy in Tibetan, the *Message* was largely inconsequential to Tashi’s classmates, who did not comprehend its content. Tashi did, however, get many ‘likes’ and ‘heart’ *emojis* from family members and friends back home.

Deaf Tibetans outside of the school, especially those TDA members who could read Tibetan and understood its content, were very impressed. Many were admiring of Tashi and his courage, some felt vindicated for their earlier efforts to teach TSL and TSL finger spelling at LSS in conjunction with Tibetan literacy, despite often feeling unwelcome by the school leadership.

Yangzom was among two people within my circle of friends and interlocutors, who opted to take a stance and express her feelings and views in response to Tashi’s message. During the following days I saw her and her friend, someone I will call Pema and who happened to be in a leadership

༼དམིགས་བསལ་སྟོབ་གསེའི་ལོ་དགུའི་འགན་བབས་སྟོབ་གསེའི་
ཟུང་འབྲས་༽

༼ ཏང་གི་དམིགས་བསལ་སློབ་གསའི་ལས་དོན་ལ་དོ་སྣང་གནང་བའི་འབྲས་བྱ༽

༼དབང་སྐྱོན་སྒྲོལ་མའི་རེ་འདུག༽

The Hopeful Wish of the Disabled Student

ང་ནི་བོད་དུ་སྐྱེ་བའ་མ་ཡིག་མཁོ།

I was born in Tibet, I need my mother tongue.

ང་ནི་བོད་རིགས་ཡིན་པས་མ་ཡིག་མཁོ།

I am Tibetan, my mother tongue is needed.

ང་ནི་བོད་པའི་རིགས་རྒྱུད་ཡིན་པས་མ་ཡིག་མཁོ།

I am of Tibetan descent, I need my mother tongue.

མ་ཡིག་དེ་ནི་ང་ལི་སློག་རྩ་ཡིན།

My mother tongue is the root of my life.

འདྲ་འཛིང་སྤྱི་ཚོགས་ཁོད་ཀྱི་འབྲུའི་རེ་སྤྲུག།

These are my hopes and expectations in the midst of this complex society.

Expectations, Hopes and Realities

Structured in five sections, the themes and concerns raised in what I, for short, will call the *Results*, are broader than in Tashi's *Message*. Written in verse and from the personal perspective of an imaginary disabled student and graduate from a Special School, the first section sets them out as the main character and as someone who brags about being a graduate, but is unashamed about their lack of Tibetan and their 'father-tongue sign language' (*paké lakda*, ཕ་སྐད་ལག་བརྟ།) being neither 'goat nor sheep' (*ramaluk*) (we will return to this interesting expression below). In the second section, kudos is given to good government policy and the high hopes placed in government Special Education. Yet the student's hopes are said to be crushed once they experienced LSS Party education and realize that they have no good teachers. The following, and in my mind particularly strong and poetic third section, expresses the "disabled student's words from the depth of their mind": as a person who has been given a mouth and hands they are part of humanity,²¹ yet fall out of humanity because they are ill-prepared by their state education for navigating the "torturous road" of making a living. Livelihood is

experienced as "a life-sized stone in their heart". The imaginary parents of a disabled student come to speak in section four. They claim "My child is disabled, so has no future" and entrust their only hope in education, which at last is also crushed, the implication here being, for the lack of opportunity to study Tibetan. The piece culminates in the last and fifth section "The Hopeful wish of the disabled student", making clear the need of a deaf Tibetan for their *ma yik*, or "mother tongue", here meaning written Tibetan, literally their "mother script". *Ma yik* is also a new and interesting expression, discussed further below, originally meaning an "original copy or draft". I translate it instead as "mother tongue" and "mother script". *Ma yik* is a creative choice by Yangzom and Pema, to refer to written Tibetan as the complementary language of deaf Tibetans, next to their first language and equally novel choice of *paké lakda*, their "father-tongue sign language". Together, they seem to imply, these two languages are their "parental languages". The Tibetan child needs both the writing (mother) and the sign language (father).

While Tashi's *Message* wrote mainly about the low quality of teaching Tibetan, the *Results* put forward a radical critique of Special Education. Yet despite the broader remit of their text and the plethora of issues raised therein, the authors seem to think they can be resolved through realizing the ultimate request and "hopeful wish" of the disabled student, by them becoming literate in the Tibetan language. This hope, however, stands in stark contrast to what can be achieved with the Tibetan language in today's societies and communities in Tibetan areas of China. There is an ever-diminishing use of Tibetan in educational settings (Leibold and Dorjee 2023)—even in some homes, and its usefulness (or rather lack of usefulness) for making a living was widely acknowledged and discussed, not least by Yangzom and Pema with me during my fieldwork. How shall we make sense of their message then, which asks for something that seems to be disappearing further

and further away, becoming out of sight even?

We can read *Results* as yet another perspective on how deaf Tibetans on the margins of the Chinese state and of Tibetan society use and think about the Tibetan language. How they use, refuse and negotiate state-endorsed categories in their daily lives, and it can give us insight into the role of hope in marginal people's lives. Like Tashi's *Message*, it seems, we see the state inscribing itself into the lives and the categories people use on the margins, for example, in the category of 'disabled'. Yet in *Results* Yangzom and Pema go further and strategically use that category to create an imaginary 'disabled student' and Special School graduate to put forward a radical critique of state-led Special Education. They can thus avoid writing from their own, personal positions, which would have been dangerous. In other words, Yangzom and Pema make a creative intervention and find a way to express their views in the midst of a very sensitive situation and from a very marginalized position.

In her work on 'margins', Anna Tsing highlights such creative expressions by marginal people in marginal places and urges ethnographers to also highlight "the creative potential of rearticulating, enlivening, and rearranging the very social categories that peripheralize a group's existence" (Tsing 1994: 279). This approach complements Tsing's other articulations of margins as indications of the "constraining, oppressive quality of cultural exclusion" (ibid), not dissimilar to Das and Poole's work introduced earlier, which I have used to analyze how the Chinese state's civilizing project "converts" disabled Tibetans on the margins into lawful subjects of the central state—such as through Chinese language and CSL in the Special Education system as well as through the work of the CDPF and TDPF.

How do Yangzom and Pema in *Results* rearticulate, enliven, and rearrange the "very social categories that peripheralize a group's existence"—in this case, deaf Tibetans? And how do they use the Tibetan language in that process? How even do they

conceive of that 'Tibetan language' or deaf Tibetans? How do they envision its role in the struggle for better education and professional opportunities for disabled people in Tibet?

We see several creative rearticulations of terminologies and categories in *Results*. One of the most striking examples is when Yangzom and Pema literally invent on their smartphones the novel, indigenous categories of "*mayik*" and "*paké lakda*": "mother script" and "father tongue sign language". In spoken and written Tibetan languages, father tongue is what English calls a "mother tongue". This association of one's first language being a "father tongue" is not primarily because of the actual language spoken by somebody's father, but mainly because of the association of that language with one's *payul* (ཕ་ཡུལ།) or "father land", the place where one was born, resides virilocally and keeps intimate (often also religious) connections with. By naming a signed language the "father tongue" of deaf Tibetans, the authors thus elevate massively the status of a signed language. Perhaps the first time in Tibetan history two deaf persons have claimed that a sign language is their "father tongue". This emancipatory claim could easily get lost, as it is used to make a point about something else, namely to lament that this signed father tongue is 'mixed' and '*ramaluk*' in nature.

Their direct point and the key demand is for written Tibetan as the disabled students *mayik* or "mother script", a term usually understood to refer to an original draft or copy of a written text. I translate *mayik* here as "mother tongue" and "mother script".

Roche has claimed that so far all language activism in support of a singular Tibetan language as the 'soul' of the Tibetan nation has at the same time enforced suppression and erasure of the other roughly 27 "minoritized languages of Tibet" (2021: 73). Users of such smaller languages, including the Ngandehua and Manegacha languages in Rebgong, Eastern Tibet, have often been construed as weakening the unity of Tibetans surrounding the Tibetan language,

or worse, have been considered traitors to that cause.²²

The case that Yangzom and Pema make in *Results* departs from that unitary language activism thus far described in the literature. They diversify claims to ‘Tibetan language’ for disabled students as being not about one, but at least two languages, or types of languages, namely written Tibetan and signed language. They do not make clear that the latter needs to be TSL, yet claiming improved teaching to foster successful literacy in Tibetan for a deaf person cannot be achieved without the use of the appropriate medium of instruction, which is TSL and one that makes use of TSL fingerspelling. It is this lack of an *effective* medium of instruction for learning their *mayik* that lies at the root of the problem at the early stages of learning Tibetan, and it is therefore crucial it should be improved. Yangzom and Pema are not explicit about this in the text, but from their position and

those of other deaf people trying to learn and requesting the ‘proper teaching’ of written Tibetan (and as they also explained to me in person), they are claiming that use of TSL and TSL fingerspelling needs to be improved as the teaching medium at least in the Tibetan language classes and TSL use, ideally expanded to the entire school (Figure 2).²³

Teachers at the LSS who teach Tibetan, in particular one of the most senior teachers are well aware of the necessity of TSL and TSL fingerspelling for successful Tibetan literacy among deaf Tibetans (Figure 2). While this senior Tibetan language teacher has a good level of TSL and has introduced significant improvements to the teaching of Tibetan grammar by inventing (together with the TDA) specific grammar signs in TSL, others, especially newly-arrived Tibetan language teachers only have very basic knowledge of TSL and TSL fingerspelling.²⁴ Quite apart from that, none of them



Figure 7: Studying written Tibetan at the Lhasa Special School (LSS), 2016. © Theresia Hofer

tend to regularly drill Tibetan spelling via TSL fingerspelling, something that remains crucial to the process of learning to read and write Tibetan, which has complex spelling and morphology.

Tibetan language teachers are not encouraged at all by the school leadership to improve their level of TSL and TSL fingerspelling or improve their methods for teaching Tibetan to deaf students. Surely influencing this is the unwritten premise of LSS leadership and many teachers that literacy in Chinese will be essential for those few deaf Tibetans who proceed to further education in China, or indeed anyone when they leave school and try to find employment. Tibetan teachers at LSS, whether teaching Tibetan or other subjects, are also themselves part of wider Tibetan society and are witnessing first-hand the decline in use of the Tibetan language in many formal domains, including education and professional work domains.

Even Yangzom and Pema on a joint trip in the holidays acknowledged this situation to me when we discussed the realpolitik of Tibetan in contemporary society. They could not see many tangible benefits for deaf Tibetans gaining literacy in Tibetan. A major topic of discussion was the overall decline in use of Tibetan in society, also as a factor in low Tibetan literacy among deaf Tibetans in addition to their experience of poor quality teaching. Pema said: “You see, when they graduate, everything is in Chinese. Their phones are in Chinese. If they go on to university everything is in Chinese. Then from their mouth they don’t speak. They sign, they don’t speak. So really they don’t use Tibetan. They have no use for it and no practice also.” I asked: “Ok, but what about reading a book in Tibetan?” to which Pema replied with slight disbelief “Reading a book? No way. Deaf Tibetans don’t read books, and certainly not a Tibetan book.” I said: “What about reading other things, like say, the newspaper?” I quickly realized that my example of reading a newspaper was a particularly bad one, as many hearing Tibetans I knew considered reading the state-run newspapers, even when written in

Tibetan, a waste of time. Pema and Yangzom laughed and Pema looked intently at me and said: “Look, you need to understand that the situation of deaf people is very different. Come the evening, they have to fill their stomachs. They work in the morning, they work in the afternoon, and they work after dinner to make some money. Then they have family in the countryside, who come and stay with them, their parents get old, and need looking after. So they also have these family responsibilities. There is no time to read a book or the newspaper.”

In comparison to their hearing counterparts, the lived reality of deaf Tibetans demonstrates that reading and writing skills in Tibetan language are often considered even more “useless” and a seeming luxury. The common saying that “Tibetan does not fill the stomach” was oft repeated by hearing friends to me, referencing the fact that hardly any professions were still requiring or rating solid literacy in Tibetan.²⁵

Hearing Tibetans benefit from speaking Tibetan with family. Deaf Tibetans did not use the spoken Tibetan language with family and friends. LSS students and graduates, it turned out, used Chinese in written communications with their parents and siblings, which they found easier than written Tibetan. For Chinese, moreover, excellent language software was available on their phones for correcting mistakes, something not so easily available for Tibetan – and where it was, of much lower quality. As most friends of younger deaf Tibetans came from LSS, they had a strong social network of peers who were also using CSL, with only a few loan signs from TSL for Tibetan food items, clothes and religious figures. This means throughout their years at the school (except for holidays) and then after graduation, these deaf Tibetans had very limited exposure to Tibetan language. Many of my new interlocutors at LSS and the graduates had indeed only installed Tibetan keyboards on their phones when they realized I could only text with them in Tibetan and not in Chinese.

Tashi – The Tibetan Writer

When I finally met Tashi in person he was 20 and in his second and final year at LSS. He was going to graduate from 9th grade the following summer, which was the highest level at that time at the school. As we slowly got to know each other, I discovered he was indeed a lover of all things Tibetan. I often saw him walking around the school compound, ferrying Tibetan books to and from the school library, sitting somewhere reading. The titles of books he carried under his arm changed rapidly. He wore thick glasses, their frames not unlike those of a famous Tibetan Lama living in Exile. He seemed so exceptional to me, having written the *Message* and being able to read and write Tibetan so much better than any other student at the school. I felt a little like I was finally meeting my deaf Tibetan hero. And a deaf Tibetan, who *did* like to read Tibetan books.

Tashi lost his hearing as a late teenager. When his local school on the Plateau could no longer accommodate him, he stayed at home. It took a couple of years before his family found out about the existence of LSS, indicating perhaps that local branches of the TDPF are not very active. When Tashi got to LSS he started in 8th grade. Whenever Tashi and I met in the school compound and once on an outing into town, our communication for some reason remained awkward. My CSL was still not great and he had no friends or acquaintances who were dominant in TSL, only once having met with Tibetans from the TDA. While he was also able to lip-read much of my spoken Tibetan, he seemed most comfortable to operate in the written word. After we exchanged WeChat contacts, we began to write to one another in Tibetan. It turned out that Tashi was regularly writing his own dedicated online blog, under his very own penname. Here he evocatively expressed the joys and suffering in his life, which he allowed me to access. In the string of blogposts from Tashi that I followed during the course of 2016 and 2017, he no longer posited himself as a disabled person at all—the term being entirely absent. This identity no longer existed in his writing.

His posts were about significant figures in his life, such as his mother and father, and extra-ordinary as well as ordinary places and emotions. Tashi expressed his love and admiration for his parents, a strong sense of wonder and delight in his nomadic home land, underlined by beautiful photos of black yak hair tents and the sweeping landscapes of the northern plateau. He was delighted to go back there for holidays and reluctant to leave to come back to Lhasa. Perhaps the strongest impressions were, however, left by Tashi's ability to express a wide range of emotions—including those of longing, of fear, of uselessness, despair, and of love. Not all of Tashi's posts were expressions of his own, particular life, emotions and significant others. For example, eulogies to the black yak hair tent have been featured in a lot of contemporary Tibetan writing due to its rapid disappearance in the aftermath of large state-led settlement projects of Tibetan pastoralists (Robin 2014b). The love he felt for the Dalai Lama as his Root Lama was also one shared by many Tibetans, but—very surprisingly and dangerously for someone living in the TAR—he expressed it quite openly on the highly surveilled WeChat platform.

Tashi's poems were often part of a visual-textual collage, in which a photo might be overlaid with its Tibetan calligraphic title, followed by the text itself. Some of the images he used were photos he had taken himself—such as of his homeland and family members; others were stock images. There was always a fine confluence and complementarity of visuals and text, and Tashi was talented in the graphic presentation of his posts. In some cases, *emoji* and reactions from others were also visible.

The personal and broader themes in Tashi's writings were in stark contrast to the posts by his fellow students at the school around the same time and that I also was party to. Other boys and young men of his age group at LSS tended to post photos of international football stars they admired, and of themselves posing in selfies in physically expressive and significant ways. There was also a large amount of photo traffic in

connection with disabled people's sports competitions that some participated in. LSS actively facilitated students' participation in disabled sports networks, enabling pupils to create wider networks of friends and to gain chances to travel for competitions. The corollary of accepting this gift: the students' entry into a highly political domain. Some of Tashi's peers even re-posted state-media items. I remember a string of five images with short captions being circulated, which showed and lauded party secretary Xi Jinping "supporting disabled people" and demonstrating him learning some simple CSL signs. Most posts of Tashi's fellow students were in Chinese, the ones written in Tibetan tending to be forwarded or re-posted items from family or friends.

In Tashi's blog we can see a powerful rejection of and escape from, at least in writing, any and all state narratives for and about disabled people in Tibet and in China. Tashi is not interested in presenting himself in any way as disabled any longer, nor did he choose to gain an identity as a *önpa*, or deaf person and participate in Lhasa-based *deaf worldings*. He hoped to connect to others as a human being, as a Tibetan and as a lover of the Tibetan language, literature and visual arts. Through his creative use of Tibetan and his posts he thus managed, against all odds, to belong to a section of mainstream Lhasa and Tibetan society that cares for and celebrates the Tibetan language and associated literature and arts. In fleeting moments, he came to participate in Tibet's 'fragmented civil society'.

In summer 2017, following directly on from his graduation from LSS, Tashi became a student and apprentice in a well-known Lhasa-based *thangkha* studio run by a senior Tibetan master. He chose that trajectory over staying at the LSS for vocational training or going to inland China for further studies, an offer open to him as one of the best students in his year— and something seen by others as the pinnacle of achievement in Tibetan Special Education. His aim was to return to his homeland after finishing his training in Lhasa, and to work there as a *thanka* painter and writer.

Endings – Margins, the State and the Work of Hope

The theme of margins is important because it helps us to understand better the roles that Tashi, Yangzom and Pema ascribe to the Tibetan language within ongoing negotiations of the overpowering state-led development and continued nation building—not least through education and language policies—that affect ethnic Tibetans and disabled people in China. The interrelated linguistic and socio-political categories of 'disabled' and 'Tibetan' emerged in the writings and in my ethnography as key sites for negotiating Chinese nation building and civilizing 'disabled' Tibetans. The role of language is of particular importance to deaf Tibetans because communication barriers exist and deaf people struggle to overcome them when attempting to belong and participate in hearing Tibetan society.

While most older, deaf adults outside of LSS networks tended to reject the state-endorsed label for them as 'disabled' (except in gaining or maintaining disability allowances by the state and a reduced bus card), the graduates from LSS, in their writing inhabit these labels. Yangzom and Pema used them strategically to make their claims and to articulate their hopes for increased use of Tibetan in the future of deaf education. They also creatively reformulated the very category of 'Tibetan language' for deaf Tibetans as two-fold: on the one hand pertaining to their written 'mother tongue', and on the other hand to a signed 'father tongue'.

Through their writings and positions on the use of Tibetan, both Tashi and Yangzom were able to go beyond local social networks available to other deaf Tibetans in Lhasa, such as local *deaf worldings* and associated social networks. Many deaf Tibetans began to experience these as a way to feel less marginalized and to expand their social horizons, with Yangzom and Pema for instance, actively participating when free. But Tashi did not. Through his use and defense of the Tibetan language, Tashi actively moved towards mainstream society and participated in its 'fragmented civil

society’ around the study and use of Tibetan languages. This was for him perhaps a way to escape social and linguistic marginalization, if only momentarily so. With his ability in Tibetan and love for the language as expressed in his new blog, he could and did engage meaningfully with hearing Tibetans across the Tibetan areas of China and also in exile. He read a wide range of Tibetan sources online and in print and contributed to them through his own blog and written exchanges on other social media platforms. I would say his ability to do so was really quite unique and exceptional.

The hopes of Yangzom and Pema for the Tibetan written language as the *mayik* of deaf Tibetans, stood in stark contrast to an actual rather hopeless situation. A situation in which domains for the use of Tibetan were shrinking, and the usefulness of Tibetan even doubted by many Tibetan parents, pertaining to education and gaining a job. Several deaf Tibetan men and women who graduated from LSS thrived as *thanka* painters, tailors and as teachers at Special Schools, but none of them needed to know Tibetan to do these jobs. The majority of graduates worked long-hour, low-paid service sector jobs, often changing employers for various reasons, including many having experienced work-related exploitation and discrimination with regard to pay; and for them too Tibetan was not necessary and probably would not change anything in the way they were treated either. The more I spoke with Yangzom and Pema about this broader situation, the more we got to know each other and the more time passed, the more unfulfillable and unrealistic did the stated “hopeful wish of the disabled student” seem to become. What should we then make of their seemingly impossible hopes for the Tibetan language? Their claim to Tibetan as a panacea to heal the many shortcomings of deaf education and societal attitudes towards them?

In her work *The Paradox of Hope* (2010), anthropologist Cheryl Mattingly conceptualizes hope as a form of practice. This rings

true with my experience of Tibetans living in Lhasa, as does Mattingly’s argument that there are social and political hierarchies to how we ‘hope’. Hope appears particularly important for those in marginalized and insecure social positions. As a practice, hope paradoxically conspires with despair. Hope represents things we want. Yet whilst we strive towards it, hope also has an unachievable and unrealistic quality. Hope and hoping, then, may be particularly significant for those Tibetans living lives on the edge and living on multiple margins. Like for young deaf Tibetans. They live at the margins of hearing society, at the margins of education, and at the margins of accepted and understood forms of communicating, in a doubly-minoritized signed language and as explicit targets of an enormously large civilizing machine.

Living in Lhasa, even as a hearing and well-respected member of society is sometimes so desperate one can only live in it through practicing hope, as the famous proverb, attested for many years in Tibetan society in the PRC, goes:

Tibetans are ruined by hope
 (བོད་རི་བས་འབྱུང་།)

Chinese are ruined by suspicion
 (བྱུ་དོགས་པས་འབྱུང་།)

Tibetans in Lhasa appear to be experts in hoping for a better, more Tibetan future for themselves, in the midst of a climate that marginalizes them ever more. Perhaps deaf Tibetans have to be even better at it?

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Endnotes

1. To protect the anonymity of my research participants, all personal names used in this article are pseudonyms, and some place names been changed.
2. The latter is a gestural repertoire shared between deaf Tibetans and between some deaf and hearing Tibetans, see Hofer 2018.
3. I had been acquainted and been friends with deaf Tibetans since 2007, formally starting the project in 2015, after a short pilot study in 2014.
4. On TSL language materials, see Hofer 2017. While the TDA was meant to assist deaf Tibetans across the TAR, their work was mainly limited to Lhasa due to lack of staff, funding and autonomy in decision making. It was one of 3 'DPOs' or 'Disabled People's Organizations', who were all firmly placed under the management and leadership of the Tibet Disabled People's Federation.
5. Worth noting here that word order in Chinese is SVO (subject verb object) and in Tibetan SOV (subject object verb). Grammar and lexicon are also totally different with the two languages being only very remotely related, less close even than Russian and French.
6. On general features and history of CSL, see Yang 2015.
7. The extra-curricular TDA-led Tibetan classes on weekends came to an end in 2014.
8. On codeswitching and mixing of spoken Tibetan and Chinese in Lhasa, the so-called *ramaluk ke*, or neither-goat-nor-sheep language, see Kelsang Yeshe 2008 and Tournadre 2003.
9. When Tibetans speak about the non-Tibetan areas of China, they tend to use the term *Gya* or *Gyanak* (Tibetan for "China"). However, when speaking or writing Chinese, the term *neidi* (Ch. "interior") is commonly used among Tibetans, in many publications translated as "mainland China". I use "inland China" or the "interior"

as translation for *neidi*, but “China” for the Tibetan *Gyanak* so as to preserve the strong sense of many Tibetans that “Tibet” is a categorically different place from “China”, even though it has been politically absorbed into the People’s Republic of China since 1950/51.

10. According to government reports as of 2022 the 7 government Special Schools housed a total of 1,057 “disabled students” while “4,600 disabled students were studying in ordinary schools” (Huaxia 2023).

11. Disabled people only tend to get an occasional mention, such as in well-known ethnographies of Tibetan-speaking Himalayan communities (for example as physically or mentally disabled monks and nuns in Nubri, Childs 2004), in works on education in Tibet with brief reference to ‘special education’ (Bass 1998: 206-209) and in the vast corpus of secular Tibetan literature, for example in medical texts and illustrations (Hofer 2023). In the case of blind and deaf people, there is a tendency for metaphorical references (such as in Kache Palu’s *Advice on the Art of Living*, cf. Bommarito 2017) rather than to blind people as living and breathing personalities and characters. For fuller accounts on the lives of blind people in Lhasa see Tenberken 2003; 2006, Zheng 2011, Walker 2006, and of deaf Tibetans and signed languages, see Hofer 2017; 2018; 2020; 2022; [forthcoming a]. TSL is also increasingly acknowledged in linguistic works on the Tibetan languages (Roche 2021, Hofer [forthcoming b]). On deaf and hard-of-hearing Tibetans in Indian exile, see Langri 2019.

12. In this article I will use ‘deaf’, as translation of Tibetan *önpa* (འོན་པ།) for all deaf, hard of hearing and late-deafened Tibetans, as there were no common linguistic markers in either signed, spoken or written Tibetan that mapped onto the ‘d/Deaf’ distinction commonly made in Deaf Studies. Ladd uses ‘deaf’ to refer to people who are audiologically deaf, ‘Deaf’ to those considering themselves as a cultural and linguistic minority, and d/Deaf when indicating the mixed nature of the two (2003). These distinctions are increasingly questioned by anthropologists

(Friedner and Kusters 2020).

13. See also Sagli and Fjeld 2011 and Sagli, Zhang, Ingstad and Fjeld 2012.

14. Reports also confirm that in Qinghai, Sichuan and Gansu there are now boarding facilities for pre-school (kindergarten) children (Leibold and Dorjee 2023).

15. Human Rights Watch 2020 reports that in “June 2016, the Lhasa Education Bureau announced that Chinese was being used as the medium of instruction to teach mathematics in a majority of primary schools in the counties around Lhasa, including rural areas outside the region’s capital city. This was the first known direct admission by the government of a shift to Chinese-medium teaching in some classes within rural TAR primary schools.” <https://www.hrw.org/report/2020/03/05/chinas-bilingual-education-policy-tibet/tibetan-medium-schooling-under-threat>

16. A 2008 TAR Education Bureau law stated that ethnic deaf Tibetans have a right to learning TSL at Special Schools in the TAR, but this never was enacted. The actual use of CSL, oral Chinese and signed Chinese as the mediums of instruction at LSS has been justified by teachers and LSS leadership, claiming there are not enough signs in TSL to teach course contents fully. This lack of putting the law into practice, aligns well with the larger civilizing project of ethnic minorities by the Chinese state, controlling aspects of ethnic identity on the margins and defining the relationship between central state and marginal people that make up the “multi-ethnic” People’s Republic of China (PRC).

17. Since 2010 the CDPF advocates the use of the term *can zhang* (Ch. 残障) for disability and *can zhang ren* (Ch. 残障人) for a disabled person, literally meaning “incomplete and obstructed”. This new term was chosen with the intention of hinting at society’s role in obstructing ‘disabled people’ and to thereby acknowledge the social model of disability, famously developed in the UK in the 1960s and 1970s with key premise that individuals are not disabled per se, but disabled by society, such as through lack of ramps or sign

language interpretation (cf. Barnes *et al.* 2002). The older term *can ji ren* was still the commonly used Chinese term for disabled person in Lhasa during my fieldwork in 2016-2017.

18. Students with intellectual disabilities or with multiple disabilities were taught in separate classes. Before the Blind School founded by Sabriye Tenberken had to close in 2016, there were only a handful of blind kids at the Special School and were learning in separate classes from the deaf students.

19. The same efforts were made by blind activists in Lhasa, changing for instance the terminology and perception from *shara* (ཤ་ར་) to *long pa* (ལོང་པ་) in Lhasa Tibetan. It is likely that *önpa* was previously a more common term for a deaf person found in literary sources, including in medical works, than in spoken Tibetan.

20. *Kukpa* had also commonly, but perhaps not always derogatively, been used for people with intellectual disabilities.

21. An alternative meaning of *kha yod lag yod* is ‘meaningful’ or ‘whole’, whereas *kha yod lag med*, means ‘absurd’ and ‘devoid of meaning’. So there might be a double meaning here.

22. This is at times enforced due to Tibetan also being the language of Buddhism, and as such backed up by powerful Buddhist institutions and personalities. None of the minoritized languages of Tibet have been able to muster this kind of ideological and practical support from the clergy, least of all, the users of the TSL.

23. It would be impossible for Tibetans who are profoundly deaf to gain Tibetan literacy through the medium of CSL and its pin-yin-based finger alphabet. CSL and its finger spelling system are ideal to develop literacy in Chinese, and worldwide all fingers spelling systems are key for deaf people developing literacy in their regional and/or national written languages (Miller *et al.* 2020). Only an oral/aural approach to deaf education would get around the use of such methods, for instance forcing deaf Tibetans to learn to speak. Such approaches have and by and

large been abandoned in contemporary deaf education, yet are returning somewhat via AVT therapy for Cochlear Implant users (Friedner 2022).

24. Although not a signed version of spoken or written Lhasa Tibetan, TSL does have a number of influences from the spoken and written language environment, including the TSL finger spelling system of the 30 consonants and 4 vowels, use of which is proven as the ‘highway’ for teaching deaf children to acquire literacy in Tibetan (Hofer 2017). The same is done by teachers of Dzongkha to deaf students in Bhutan, which has the same Tibetan script, but where they use a different finger spelling for the same 30 Tibetan consonants and 4 Tibetan vowels.

25. Already in July 1988, this was an issue for debate on Lhasa TV, see Bass 1998: 240.

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Working Out in “Sunlight Happiness Gym”: Fitness, Well-Being, and Temporal Rhythms in the Contemporary Tibetan City

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Abstract

What might it mean to strive for well-being and a viable life in Lhasa, the capital of the Tibet Autonomous Region (TAR)? What are the temporal rhythms of urban life for government-employed Tibetan women in their mid-twenties? This article engages with these questions by foregrounding seemingly mundane activities related to fitness and sport as they are experienced by Yangkyi and Tselha, two highly educated government workers in their mid-20s. It draws on seven months of ethnographic research, followed up by communication on social media, to examine the everyday routines and concerns of the two women, exploring how “Sunlight Happiness Gym,” a high-end fitness studio catering to the city’s growing middle classes, emerged as significant in their efforts to be well. The article shows how working out created its own temporal rhythms for Yangkyi and Tselha and opened up potentials for self-making that were more difficult to create in other domains of their lives. By demonstrating that, for Yangkyi and Tselha, ideas and practices of well-being, self-care, and fitness get intertwined through going to the gym, I argue that working out plays an important part in their attempts to create joy, meaningful relationships, and a viable life in an environment characterized by often overwhelming structural conditions.

Keywords

Well-being; fitness; temporal rhythms; self-making; Tibet

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Introduction

The first encounters I had with Yangkyi and Tselha took place in the women's changing room of "Sunlight Happiness Gym" in the spring of 2015.¹ "Sunlight Happiness Gym" was a high-end gym catering to Lhasa's white-collar workers, many of whom worked for the government. According to its staff and members, it was the city's most upscale and popular gym. On a rainy evening, I was getting ready for the "Fashion Dance" class, along with a few other gym members. Twenty-six-year-old Tselha, whom I had become acquainted with during previous visits, was chatting with Yangkyi. When I overheard Tselha mentioning that her legs were fat, I chimed in to say that she should not say such crazy things, and the two of them let me join their conversation. On that day, Tselha attended a spinning lesson while Yangkyi and I danced together in the first row of class, facing our teacher Sonam on a small stage, with the large floor-to-ceiling mirrors covering the front wall of the studio space. Above the stage, a red banner declared that we were in "the great lecture hall for perfect health and knowledge" (Ch. *wanmei jiankang zhishi da jiangtang*). "Yi, er, san, si", Sonam was counting through her face microphone. As usual, she conducted the class in Putonghua, singing along to English and Chinese pop music that she played from her iPhone to encourage us. However, several participants gave up early. Sipping from their water bottles, they took a rest at the side, their red faces focused on observing the others. Yangkyi kept going until the end. Throughout the fifty-minute workout, we made eye contact a few times and smiled at each other. I remember being in awe of how quickly Yangkyi picked up the movement sequences. While dancing, her body seemed to move lightly and effortlessly. I, on the other hand, struggled to keep up with the fast-paced motions.

What might it mean to strive for well-being and a viable life in Lhasa, the capital of the Tibet Autonomous Region (TAR)? What are the temporal rhythms of urban life for government-employed Tibetan women in

their mid-twenties? In keeping with this special issue's aim to engage ethnographically with the "ordinary" and the margins of Tibetan and Himalayan worlds, I think through these questions by drawing on conversations, interviews, online chats, and time spent with Yangkyi and Tselha, whom I met while I was studying at Tibet University and carrying out seven months of ethnographic research on the making of urban belonging and gendered subjectivities in 2014–15 (Kukuczka 2019). As young civil servants working for government institutions, Yangkyi and Tselha grappled with existential questions such as how to be well and to make life viable under challenging circumstances. As Tibetans living in the TAR, they are structurally marginalized citizens. Yangkyi's and Tselha's socioeconomic and educational location, however, did not place them in the margins of Lhasa's urban fabric at the time I met them. Despite this, their personal circumstances and status as government employees often made them feel vulnerable and painfully aware of the constraints shaping their lives.

The quest for well-being and a life worth living is a shared human condition (Hage 2019, Jackson 2005; 2011, Mattingly 2014). In "Life Within Limits," Michael Jackson reminds us that we should understand human well-being "not as a settled state but as a field of struggle" (2011: ix). Yangkyi and Tselha had struggled with "being well" due to political, social, and biographical circumstances in school, university, and the workplace. Their struggle for well-being and their efforts to create a viable life that transcends what Ghassan Hage (2019) terms mere "bearability" take us to an unexpected place: a gym. When they narrate their lives, Yangkyi and Tselha emphasize that going to the gym means more to them than simply keeping fit. To them, gym-going is also crucial for their sense of well-being and their pursuit of "struggling to move from the domain of bearability to that of viability proper where life can also be enjoyed" (Hage 2019: 83).²

There is no doubt that Yangkyi's and Tselha's experiences are not only shaped

by the gendered temporalities that frame Tibetan women's lives, but that they are also embedded in socio-economic, political, material, as well as affective forces and ruptures in urban Tibet at a particular historical juncture, namely the 2010s onward. Their everyday lives unfold against the backdrop of public employment as a central career path for university graduates in Lhasa, the ongoing structural violence Tibetans experience within the People's Republic of China, Chinese media and state-promoted discourses of happiness and self-development, and the cultural imperative to care for parents. However, by attending to "women's own ideas of their work and daily lives" (Mohanty 2003: 74), I hope to provide glimpses into Yangkyi's and Tselha's everyday routines and concerns while exploring how the "Sunlight Happiness Gym" emerged as significant in their efforts to be well. By doing so, I tune into the existential questions that surfaced in fleeting moments and interactions I shared with Yangkyi and Tselha as they sought to craft a sense of well-being through routine gym visits and workouts—activities that appear ordinary or mundane, perhaps even insignificant at first. Although these glimpses speak to broader structural forces, they cannot simply be reduced to them. Above all, they show how two individuals, with their personal wishes and dreams, biographies, subjectivities, and family dynamics, try to make sense of and navigate the personal and political constraints and dilemmas arising in their everyday lives.

Self-making Through Sport and Fitness

Scholarship on sport and fitness demonstrates how women carve out space for self-care, sociality, and the creation of belonging through embodied practices that provide them with novel possibilities for gendered self-making (Archambault 2021; 2022, Leshkowich 2008; 2012, Rana 2022; 2023, Samie 2013, Sehlikoglu 2021, Spielvogel 2003, Thangaraj 2015: 188–195). Although reasons for working out may vary greatly within a given context and often evolve over time, what ethnographies on

Istanbulite "sporting aunties" (Sehlikoglu 2021), young Dutch Muslim kickboxers (Rana 2022; 2023), Vietnamese and Japanese urban middle-class women (Leshkowich 2008; 2012, Spielvogel 2003), and women from diverse social locations in a small Mozambiquan town (Archambault 2021; 2022) highlight is that working out is a crucial site for complex self-making projects that hold the promise of transformation, of alternative ways of becoming and reimagining life well beyond the confined space-time of exercise. In addition, this literature highlights sports' gendered dimensions and makes them visible as a relational pursuit embedded into hierarchies of class, labor, and care. Multiple societal and family demands are commonly placed on women's bodies and time, and it is relational care work that in turn shapes the ways women imagine and pursue working out.

This article foregrounds Yangkyi's and Tselha's quest for well-being, the temporal rhythms it creates, the potential for self-making it opens up at a gym in Lhasa, and thereby a thematical lens that has until now been marginal within Tibetan and Himalayan Studies, namely sport and fitness. I build on recent ethnographies on Tibetan women's everyday lives in Eastern Tibet that attend carefully to women's gendered, embodied, and material engagements with the world (Cho 2015, Fitzgerald 2020) as well as analyses scrutinizing desires for beauty and body modification within China, largely centering on Han Chinese women's practices and narratives in megacities such as Shanghai and Beijing (Lotti 2020, Starr 2023, Wen 2013, Yang 2011; 2017). Contributing to this literature, I deliberately centralize sport and leisure as a way to better understand Tibetan women's concerns and everyday experiences within the TAR.

Educational Trajectories, Educational Ruptures

Both Yangkyi and Tselha were born and grew up in Lhasa. Back in 2015, Yangkyi was a twenty-five-year-old unmarried civil servant who lived with her parents. Her

younger brother attended high school in a Chinese city. From the outset, Yangkyi's life trajectory up to that point seemed straightforward and perhaps not that unusual for a woman born in 1990s urban Tibet. After her schooling, she received a university education at Tibet University. She then took the civil service examination (Ch. *gong-wuyuan kaoshi*) and scored high, which meant she got invited to a job interview not just anywhere in the TAR, but in her city of choice, Lhasa, where she was successful in securing a position. While not providing an extraordinarily high salary, the job was stable and enabled her to provide for her family. Yet, Yangkyi's life could have turned out rather differently at several crucial junctures.

Over a cup of tea and a bowl of noodles in a restaurant overlooking the roof of the Jokhang temple, known to Tibetans as the Tsuglakhang, Yangkyi lowered her gentle voice and shared with me that her family had suffered hardship at the time when she finished elementary school. As a consequence, her parents wanted her to stop her education after the six years of elementary school. She remembered pleading with them desperately to let her continue going to school. A teacher came to intervene on her behalf, attesting that she was a hard-working, outstanding student. Ultimately, her parents agreed. Yangkyi continued studying. Due to her excellent grades, she later attended the best high school in Lhasa.

In more recent times, Yangkyi had also experienced hardship. She suffered from a mental health crisis during her first year at university that once again changed her educational trajectory. Originally, she had attended a university outside of the TAR where one of her fellow students became highly competitive toward her. The competition made Yangkyi feel extremely unwell. Eventually, she got sick from the pressure and stress. She recalled not wanting to do anything and being afraid of meeting people. Withdrawing from life and her studies, she stayed inside the dormitory. Yangkyi was sick for a year and spent months recovering in hospital. She then quit

her studies at that university, registered at Tibet University, and moved back in with her parents.

Tselha's educational trajectory was similar to Yangkyi's in some regards. However, their experiences also differed. By 2015, Tselha had been working for nearly four years as a civil servant in a city office. As a child and teenager, she grew up with her grandparents and paternal aunt's family because her parents lived in the countryside. Tselha was an only child, but her aunt's son was like a younger brother to her. Because Tselha's grandfather did not see any benefit in a Tibetan language education and, by extension, exposure to Tibetan culture and religion in general, Tselha attended a Chinese school in Lhasa, where she was one of the few Tibetan kids. Tselha's childhood was devoid of pilgrimage trips or learning about Tibetan Buddhism; her grandfather despised religion.³ Because of his disregard for transmitting Tibetan culture to his children and grandchildren, Tselha never learned to read and write Tibetan properly, something she felt embarrassed about and regretted deeply. In fact, the very first time we met in the gym's changing room, ready to change clothes after a sweaty workout, Tselha wore a T-shirt decorated with Ume script (Tib. དབྱ་ཐེད་), a common fashion among young adults at the time. During this encounter, she praised me for studying the Tibetan language. Tselha was trying to learn Tibetan on her own by practicing with children's books in the evenings after returning home from the gym. However, it was proving difficult for her to become proficient in reading and writing.

Tselha had not only missed out on attending school with Tibetan children, but also the staff in the office in which she worked mostly used the Chinese language. The general absence of the Tibetan language even extended into the intimate space of her home. Her grandfather and father preferred speaking Chinese within the family. Being an only child, Tselha imagined having two kids in the future. They would receive their schooling in Lhasa, she once stressed, learning their language among

other Tibetan children. For her university education, Tselha spent four years in a province located 2700 km northeast of Lhasa. She enjoyed her studies there and remembered this time fondly as one of independence and possibility. After graduating, her family expected her to return to Lhasa. At the age of twenty-two, she moved in with her parents, who had relocated to the city after their retirement. Tselha's grandparents were now splitting their time between her aunt's and her parent's houses, a living arrangement for the elderly that Tibetans in Lhasa would traditionally consider "bad care".

Paths Taken, Paths Foreclosed: Struggling to be Well

When Yangkyi and Tselha talked about their work, no spark or element of excitement was apparent to me. On a warm day in July, Tselha and I met during her lunch break in a popular coffee shop located within walking distance of the Barkor, the heart of the old city and the circumambulation path around the Tsuglakhang temple. As a civil servant working for the Chinese state, she was not allowed to enter the circumambulation path, so I had suggested a coffee shop far enough from the Barkor to avoid any issues. After some initial talk, during which Tselha spoke rapidly in Tibetan, occasionally relying on a Chinese-English dictionary app to make our exchange flow smoothly, the conversation became more serious. Perhaps encouraged by the atmosphere of a café frequented by Lhasa's affluent middle classes as well as Han Chinese and foreign tourists, she shared with me her previous aspiration to travel. After graduating, she had planned to travel around China, visiting different places and taking on occasional jobs. However, her family, especially her grandfather, emphasized the infeasibility of this dream, given Tselha's gender. "I wanted to travel. Maybe I would take a job as a waitress. I wanted freedom. But they said I shouldn't do that. I should take the government exam and a government job." Pondering her current situation, Tselha expressed her view that a person only has one life and that this was now her life. "Now

I am *surviving*. But there is a difference between *surviving* and life," she said. She used the English term "surviving" as if to lend more substance and urgency to her thought and perhaps to ensure that I would grasp the severity of her situation.⁴

Yangkyi was also trying to come to terms with the path she had taken. Upon graduation, she had worked for a private company. When I didn't understand what kind of company this was, she made a reference to the movie "The Pursuit of Happyness," explaining that the main character, played by Will Smith, worked for an investment company in a similar office. While she found meaning in her job and felt that she could learn a lot of skills, including how to make money, her parents were not content. During her year at the company, her parents pressured her to find a permanent and stable job, such as in the civil service.⁵ "My parents are old," Yangkyi explained. Her mother and father were in their early forties and fifties, respectively, and were no longer working, making her the family's primary breadwinner. Respecting their wishes, Yangkyi gave in. In our conversations, she never questioned the responsibility to care for her family and provide them with a sense of financial stability, but I sensed that it weighed heavily on her. Yangkyi disliked her job, which mainly consisted of handling paperwork and did not feel meaningful to her. The strict work routine, stress, and severe restrictions that extended into her personal life, such as being prohibited from participating in public religious acts, were challenges Yangkyi accepted for the sake of honoring her parents' wishes. Like other young government employees whom I got to know in Lhasa, Yangkyi dreamed of a different life from the one she led. She loved learning English and wanted to study in the US. However, despite the few success stories of Tibetans from the TAR attending universities abroad, she did not have any illusions about the slim chances of obtaining a passport.

Becoming civil servants had not been Yangkyi's and Tselha's first choice: in fact,

quite the contrary. Although financial responsibility towards family was absent when Tselha narrated her professional trajectory, she too had respected her grandfather's and parents' directives. Accepting family responsibilities and demands meant that other possibilities were foreclosed for Tselha and Yangkyi. During the brief moments they addressed their work routines and civil servant status in conversations with me, I sensed a profound sense of loss and sadness about imagined paths that could not be taken and lives unlived. Tselha's emphasis on "surviving" as opposed to "living" is present in my mind, even though it has been years since the conversation took place. Her words address an existential concern: that of living a life one does not truly feel at home in, a feeling that there is more to life than what currently appears, and the sense that life should be more than just bearable.

As daughters, granddaughters, and sisters, Yangkyi and Tselha navigated and cared about their family members' needs and opinions. As agents of the state, they were faced with multiple constraints impacting possibilities for self-expression and for experiencing work as a meaningful domain. For Tibetans in Lhasa, challenges to well-being are plentiful. A sense of being unwell due to government work is not uncommon. Similar sentiments as those raised by Yangkyi and Tselha were shared by government workers in the women's ward of Lhasa's Traditional Tibetan Medical Hospital in the 1990s. Many of them were diagnosed with a form of what Tibetan traditional medicine terms "wind disease" (Tib. རྩུང་ནད་), a cluster of illnesses manifesting as imbalances of wind in the body. These imbalances are embodied conditions of suffering that, for patients and doctors alike, were often linked to yearnings for a better life, difficult social conditions, and the emotional and personal conflicts that emerged from working for the state. In some cases, the causes of a "wind disease" were directly conceptualized as the results of political oppression (Adams 1998, Janes 1995).

Scholarly definitions of well-being abound.⁶ One basic definition highlights well-being as "the balance point between an individual's resource pool and the challenges faced" (Dodge et al. 2012: 230). In light of overwhelming personal and wider structural circumstances, striking this balance is a difficult and ongoing project. In his account of well-being in war-torn Sierra Leone, Michael Jackson also addresses finding balance. He writes that, in struggling for well-being, people strive towards "striking a new balance between being an actor and being acted upon" (2011: 59). His words resonate with Yangkyi's and Tselha's experiences. Despite constraints on their self-expression and freedom of movement, unsatisfying jobs, and unfulfilled longings and dreams, both set out to be well in their everyday lives and to find the joy and strength to keep going. Going to the gym—back then and for years to come—has played a central role in this endeavor.

The Happiness Imperative

The opening of "Sunlight Happiness Gym" in the late 2000s and its appeal to Yangkyi and Tselha must be understood against the backdrop of wider socio-economic and political transformations. Since the mid-2000s, Lhasa has seen rapid urbanization and the emergence of a novel beauty and wellness industry. This mirrors a nationwide trend wherein the development of a service-oriented consumer economy serves the state's interest in creating social stability and market development by reframing women as consumers (Yang 2011; 2017). Scholarship on China has been concerned with new modes of subject-making during the country's post-socialist modernity in the light of new moral landscapes, mass unemployment, and the socioeconomic dislocation of millions of people, as well as the emergence of new middle classes (Kleinman et al. 2011). What many anthropologists observe as a stress on individual self-improvement is linked to new "imaginaries of modernity" (Rofel 1999: 31) and the self.⁷

From 2010 onwards, positive psychology, workshops for interpersonal skills, and

therapeutic services—often government-sponsored—were central to reshaping the ways in which the self and well-being are imagined among China’s urban middle classes (Yang 2013, Zhang 2020, Hizi 2021). Jie Yang (2013) argues that the high value the government places on psychotherapy is aimed at political stabilization; by diverting attention from the structural forces that negatively affect people’s lives, such as economic marginalization, it places the responsibility for happiness on the individual. Similarly, Gerda Wielander writes that “raising levels of happiness has become an official government target” (2018: 1). The Chinese Communist Party communicates notions of the “good life” that locate the achievement of happiness in the realm of individual responsibility, linked to the ability to learn correct values and attitudes (*ibid.*: 9). An increase in happiness is targeted through development and its associated public campaigns, state education, and TV shows. These serve to legitimize the Party and turn happiness into a required emotional state for Chinese citizens (*ibid.*: 13).

Tibetans face an even stronger happiness imperative due to their ascribed status as minority citizens. The official state discourse and the popular media portray the TAR, an administrative entity created in 1965, as a frontier requiring the development and progress brought by the guidance and generosity of the Han Chinese. The state expects Tibetans to show gratitude, loyalty, and, importantly, happiness in return (Yeh 2013, Lama 2018). An annual review of happiness, conducted since 2007 by state television broadcaster CCTV, has named Lhasa as China’s happiest city for six of the years since the survey began (Lama 2018). This index, which equates happiness with economic prosperity, belies the lived realities of Lhasa’s Tibetan residents, whose lives are overshadowed by various forms of structural marginalization and violence under settler colonialist conditions. Tibetans are denied fundamental political, religious, and cultural rights, are economically disadvantaged compared to Han Chinese settlers

and live in an everyday atmosphere of suspicion, fear, and surveillance.⁸

Fit bodies created in outdoor fitness parks or indoor gyms do not challenge but rather confirm the state’s narrative regarding the happiness it confers upon its Tibetan population. In Lhasa, “the distribution of bodies,” Emily Yeh notes, “into the secular, developed, and advanced and the dangerous, guilty, backward, and religious is accomplished by practices of disciplinary power that work to further reinforce the production of the state effect” (2013: 38). Understood against this larger political framework, “Sunlight Happiness Gym,” just as the cafes, shopping malls, or spas that have been mushrooming all over the city, emerges as a permissible space of self-making where fit bodies—that can be read as modern, secular, and happy—are crafted.

Temporal Rhythms of Urban Life

The temporal rhythm of Yangkyi’s and Tselha’s work weeks was structured by office hours and three-hour lunch breaks, during which Yangkyi attended English classes as well as working out in the evenings. Yangkyi had first heard about “Sunlight Happiness Gym” from a Tibetan colleague in her work unit. After accompanying her colleague once, a year after becoming a civil servant, Yangkyi purchased an annual membership for a discounted rate of 3300 RMB (430 USD), which amounted to a little less than her month’s salary as a low-level government employee. The prices at “Sunlight Happiness Gym” were steep. The holiday offer Yangkyi got was by far the cheapest option. Tselha remembered calling a hotline to inquire about gyms but was only able to locate two. She took along a friend to check out the facility and registered for a one-year membership.

“Sunlight Happiness Gym” was located in a slightly dated shopping mall in the eastern part of town. It was close enough to the Lingkor, Lhasa’s outermost circumambulation path, that it could be easily reached without much hassle from all over the city. Around one hundred members, men and

women, Tibetans and Han Chinese, arrived in the gym every weekday. After repeatedly meeting them in classes such as body pump, yoga, and dance, I realized that Yangkyi and Tselha were regulars. They visited the gym four to five evenings per week. Tselha even attempted to visit on a daily basis, which included weekends. Going to the gym had become such an integral part of everyday life that she told me laughingly, “Immediately, when the time arrives, I think about going to the gym. When the time arrives and I don’t go, I feel nervous.”

The first of the two daily group classes was scheduled for 7 p.m. This time was convenient for office workers whose work finished at 6 p.m. At times, Yangkyi and Tselha skipped the first class and warmed up on the treadmill instead. Tselha preferred attending the daily mixed-gender spinning class over some of the popular dance and yoga sessions. After the peak hours of 7 to 9 p.m., the gym quickly emptied. Yangkyi and Tselha often continued their workout for another hour or so. They had started their own mixed-gender self-study group for abdominal training. After group classes finished, their male gym friends would come over from the weightlifting and cardiovascular workout room to join a handful of women and exercise together. Easily three hours would pass, after which Yangkyi and Tselha changed their clothes and returned home, which they often did not reach before 10 or 11 p.m.

Apart from experiencing their bodies through new rhythmic movements, going to the gym created a temporal rhythm that afforded both women a new way of using their time and a welcome change in their otherwise monotonous routines. This new temporal rhythm in Tselha’s and Yangkyi’s lives was a self-chosen rhythm linked to a self-understanding of being active and healthy. Once, I shared with Yangkyi my observation that she seemed to be constantly busy. Yangkyi replied that recently a friend had made the same remark, asking her, “Are you not exhausted? You go to work, you go to the

gym, you go to English class. Is this not too much for you?” Her answer was simple: yes, she was busy and outside her home a lot, but she liked it that way. As for Tselha, I believe she appreciated being busy as well. Once, she confided in me that she felt a sense of estrangement from her parents, which she linked to growing up apart from them. “They don’t trust me”, she said, adding that her parents kept her on a “short leash” and she did not feel they treated her as a grown-up, independent woman. Possibly then, going to the gym provided a much-needed, family-approved form of leisure and time spent independently during evenings and weekends outside of the home.

“Sunlight Happiness Gym” was a familiar social space for regular visitors such as Yangkyi and Tselha. Yangkyi’s warmheartedness and the affectionate way she related to others made it easy for her to form friendships. For example, when arranging and putting away workout equipment such as barbells, bench tops, or yoga mats, she was quick to lend others, including me, a helping hand. If we had not seen each other for several days, she would sometimes welcome me with a hug. This was something no one else did. And after a ten-day work trip to Beijing, she returned with cookies that she offered to trainers, staff, and friends. Tselha was also popular in the gym. She was talkative and liked to joke around with everyone. As she attended almost daily and did not limit herself to the usually women-only studio classes, she also knew fellow male gymgoers. She kept convincing friends to join the gym, which not only earned her a month extra on her membership for each person she brought along but also led to her extending the activities she engaged in with them.

Particular spaces in the gym, such as the changing room and the juice bar in the entrance area, and the flow of evening workouts—including short breaks before and after classes as well as Yangkyi’s and Tselha’s informal self-study training group—provided a relaxed atmosphere and opportunities for casual chitchats. Yangkyi

and Tselha often stood around with others in small groups during breaks, exchanging news, talking about the events of the day, or discussing workout and fitness-related ideas. Commenting on one's own and each other's body parts and shapes, discussing favorite classes and teachers, goals for the evening workout, or lifting up T-shirts to pinch the skin and show levels of body fat were common activities. Together with like-minded members, many of whom were office workers in their mid-twenties to early-thirties, both women engaged in and worked toward the mastery of new bodily routines. By doing so, they learned to observe, measure, and experience their bodies in new ways while generating embodied knowledge on the effects working out had on their bodies and minds.

Yangkyi's and Tselha's friendship extended beyond the closed space of the gym where they had first encountered each other. They sometimes met and had lunch in the city together during their working week. Both mentioned to me that they were pleased to have found each other and that this was unlikely to have happened outside of the gym. Although they both worked in government offices, they did not have any friends in common prior to working out. They occasionally gathered for karaoke evenings and weekend hikes to the mountains with members of their informal training group. Yangkyi enjoyed the social aspect of "Sunlight Happiness Gym" a lot. Reflecting on working out, she expressed to me that it not only improved her health but also allowed her to make new friends. For Yangkyi and Tselha, gym-going was a relational experience. Regular meet-ups, chats, and physical activities that involved learning new movements and bodily skills together allowed them to experience their bodies anew. The gym was also a space where a community of practice based on a shared interest in particular notions of a healthy, fit body was brought into existence. This community consisted of members from similar educational and professional backgrounds who had the time and financial means to work toward their ideal bodies in an upscale gym. In this sense, "Sunlight

Happiness Gym" became a "horizon of belonging" (Pfaff-Czarnecka 2011: 10) in Yangkyi's and Tselha's lives; importantly, a horizon of "belonging by choice" (Pfaff-Czarnecka 2013: 16) that contributed positively towards their social well-being.

Transformative Sweat

In conversations with Yangkyi and Tselha, working out emerged as an aspirational pursuit at the intersection of health, well-being, beauty, and self-care. Overall, Yangkyi did not foreground a desire for physical beauty as a major motivation to exercise. However, physical appearance came up in our conversations. Once, she remarked that her mother and brother were fat. And here, she did not mean "fat" (Tib. རྩུགས་པ་) in the flattering way other Tibetans in Lhasa, mainly women over thirty-five, used the term to comment positively on a person as healthy and beautiful. "Fat" for Yangkyi meant "out of shape": Her brother and mother were quickly exhausted when going anywhere and, in her view, did not eat well. Yangkyi was conscious of what she ate and did not, for example, snack in the evenings; she viewed herself as possessing a body consciousness and discipline her brother and mother lacked. In contrast to them, Yangkyi was also slim, something she said she had in common with her father. Fellow gymgoers complimented her on her body. For Yangkyi, however, the main goal was not to be thin. She wanted to transform her body to be muscular and toned. Back then, her profile photo on WeChat (Ch. *Weixin*), a popular social media platform, hinted at her preferred body ideal: The picture showed a sun-tanned female torso with a visible six-pack.

"Why did you choose this picture?" I inquired once. "To have the motivation to work hard!" she replied cheerfully. Yangkyi avoided joining spinning classes, which she said were aimed at weight loss, because her goal was to develop an athletic body. Her favorite class was body pump, a fast-paced barbell-based workout with motivational music aimed at attaining a lean, fit, and muscular body. The group workout, she described, made her feel energetic and

powerful. “I am sweating a lot in this class,” she added. Like other gymgoers, she had learned to appreciate sweat as an indicator of the bodily transformation she desired.

When I interviewed Yangkyi formally, she reflected on the effects the gym had on her life. In her account, the body emerged as a source of relaxation and happiness. She told me, “I like to go to the gym. Sometimes I was blue; I was sad. I think exercise is helping—helping people to improve their emotions. Exercise makes you happy and relaxed.” She went on to remember the time she joined the gym:

I was so busy, and I didn’t have much time to pay attention to my health. But I know health is very important. Because I think health is the basis to do work. So, I think I need to pay money: 3300 RMB... for me, this is money to use for my family and me. But I think health is important, so I chose to go to the gym to exercise, and to be a better human, and to do most things in my future. (Interview, July 2015)

Yangkyi was almost always busy at work and experienced stress. Her workload intensified before big annual festivities such as Losar, the Tibetan New Year, or Lhasa’s summer opera festival (Tib. རྩེད་ཆེན་, lit. yogurt festival). At those times of the year, she had to work overtime and on weekends. Looking after her health, which I understood to include her mental well-being, was important to her. Perhaps she was particularly attentive to her emotional state because of the mental health crisis she had experienced as a student.

Her words also point to the relational quality she saw in going to the gym. If health is achieved by working out in the gym, it forms “the basis to do work,” as Yangkyi put it. Thus, investing in a gym membership directly benefited her family. With unemployed parents and a younger brother who was still a student, it was her work that provided for the family. If she was unwell or unhealthy, something she had experienced, she might lose her ability

to care for them in material, bodily, and affective ways. Therefore, for Yangkyi, going to the gym was not a self-centered pursuit. On the contrary, self-care through gym membership enabled her to care for her dependents. It allowed her to act ethically and respect familial obligations. The sizeable financial investment in her membership served the long-term well-being of her whole family.

Lastly, Yangkyi established a connection between exercise, self-improvement, and imagining possible futures. I did not ask her in that moment what this future might hold for her. However, being and becoming a “better human” implied that exercising was linked to “moral imaginaries of self-improvement” (Archambault 2021), invoking the notion of taking responsibility for one’s life. Taking control over one’s body and one’s life can be intimately entangled, as Jasmijn Rana (2021) shows in her research on young Dutch Muslim kickboxers. Yangkyi understood going to the gym as enhancing her abilities to care for her kin and enabling personal transformation, and thus as a positive course of action. By working out, she hoped to invite a more all-encompassing change, even if this change might have remained vague in that moment.

Tselha recounted that her initial motivation to join the gym was to lose weight, tone her body, and be healthy. She also mentioned that, due to sitting on a computer all day long, her neck and waist needed realignment. However, she soon realized that working out produced other, unforeseen, positive effects in her everyday life. Like Yangkyi, she contrasted feelings produced at work and feelings produced through working out:

We are office workers, aren’t we? Sometimes when our boss asks us to do work, and in our mind comes the wish not to do this work. And when one works—you probably know this—the more we work, the more mistakes we also make, don’t we? That’s why the boss probably scolds us. And in our minds, unhappy feelings arrive. In the gym, we go together with the

music on the bicycle. We sweat a lot, and the mind becomes very happy. If there is unhappiness in the mind, it all probably goes out with the sweat. (Interview, August 2015)

For Tselha, sweat was not only indicative of the physical transformation she desired; she also linked this bodily substance to the production of happiness. Voicing feelings about employment in the context of working out enabled Tselha and Yangkyi to experience and narrate the self as active beyond a merely physical sense. In their own accounts, they emerged as women who took responsibility for their inner states and feelings in the wake of hardship and worked through them with the help of exercise. Importantly, while mirroring the promise of “Sunlight Happiness Gym” that a fit body makes for a happy self, Yangkyi’s and Tselha’s narratives of (temporary) well-being were grounded in actual bodily and affective experiences gained at the gym.

Moreover, for Tselha, working out comprised an orientation towards the future through self-making in the here and now. First, she noticed minor changes in herself that spilled over into other spheres of her life and opened up new possibilities for approaching situations beyond the space of the gym. She expressed this as follows:

Going to the gym it seems like really changes the inside. [...] Isn’t it that we should work hard? If, for example, we ride the bicycle, the teacher says, “Let’s have a short song.” Sometimes it’s very hard, isn’t it? Then the teacher says, “Persist! Try hard! Don’t give up.” And one thinks, “Try hard, try hard, try hard.” Afterwards, when doing one’s work, when I think it won’t work, when I think I don’t know how to do this work, then I think, “Don’t think like this, but instead think: try hard! Persist!” (Interview, August 2015)

Secondly, Tselha believed that her regular attendance at the gym and disciplined approach were key factors in working

towards a healthy future and maintaining wellness in the present. Attending the gym day after day had value in and of itself in that it brought into focus how she acted differently from others who were less conscious. Her daily rhythm, the associated lifestyle, and its future orientation made her feel different from friends of a similar age. Friends who she described as sleeping in late during weekends, skipping breakfast and lunch, drinking beer, consuming meat, gambling, and staying up all night. She added that, like her uncle, a former officer whose retirement was marked by gambling and alcohol problems, these friends did not consider the long-term consequences of a careless and inactive lifestyle. Her uncle’s story, it seems to me, functioned as a cautionary tale wherein irresponsible acts in the wake of challenging circumstances lead to grave consequences. In contrast to him and others like him, Tselha took care of herself.⁹

It was by working out alongside Tselha and Yangkyi and hearing their reflections that I came to understand that their lives, which largely took place under the government rubric, became more bearable and even enjoyable and meaningful through sweaty workouts.¹⁰ In both of their accounts, working out emerged as purposeful and, in some ways, future-oriented. Exercise can serve to achieve broader life goals that move beyond immediately felt benefits (Archambault 2022: 9–10, Rana 2022: 92, Sehlíkoglu 2021: 52–74). It holds the potential to serve as a vehicle to aspire, dream, and imagine. For Tselha and Yangkyi, “Sunlight Happiness Gym” momentarily enabled the opening of “new horizons of being” (Throop 2018: 73). Fitness afforded them a sense of potentiality; it enabled them to think of themselves anew while creating moments of relief within an environment that they otherwise often found suffocating. Thus, working out made it possible for both women to experience themselves as endowed with what Michael Jackson describes as the “capacity for bringing the new into being” (2005: xi). This state of being was harder for them to produce in other spheres of life, such as state work,

(international) travel, or in the context of family. Well-being created in the gym was grounded in embodied experiences for Tselha and Yangkyi, but it extended beyond this immediacy and included orienting the self to possibilities such as new temporal rhythms, friendships, and personal transformation, which emerged from working on the self through sweat and exercise.

Limits of Understanding from a Distance: *WeChat* Fragments

Since leaving Lhasa, despite plans to return, I have not met Yangkyi again. I often wonder how she, Tselha, and other women I met in “Sunlight Happiness Gym” are doing, what old and new hopes and dreams they cherish, and how they continue to strive for well-being for themselves and their families. Worried about the potential consequences of our communication, I have only stayed in touch loosely with Yangkyi and Tselha over recent years via *WeChat*. We occasionally engage with each other’s public posts, send short greetings, and exchange wishes during Losar and other festivals.

In January 2020, I traveled to Chengdu and met up with Tselha, who was staying with her relatives there during the Chinese New Year’s public holidays. In the cold winter months, her family lived in a flat they had purchased in a suburb of Chengdu, where other retired government workers from the TAR also resided. One day, I joined Tselha and her aunt for a visit to a skincare clinic. While we were waiting in the sterile hospital hallway, Tselha’s aunt explained to me that Tselha had too much stress at work, resulting in skin issues. “She works too much, drinks too much coffee, and gets up too early to get all her work done!” Still a civil servant, Tselha had also turned into a “mortgage slave” (Ch. *fangnu*) through buying a flat in Lhasa, her aunt half-jokingly said, potentially adding another layer of pressure to her life. While happy to be with her aging grandparents, Tselha was looking forward to flying back to Lhasa. She planned to take driving lessons and return to the gym. She still worked out with Yangkyi five years after we first met. They had moved to one of several new gyms that

had opened. “Sunlight Happiness Gym,” however, had closed.

Meanwhile, Yangkyi is narrating her life on *WeChat* and *Douyin*, the Chinese version of *TikTok*. In the first six months of 2022 alone, she shared one to four posts a day on *WeChat*’s “Moments” feature, usually in Chinese. It is hard to keep up with the constant flow of images, memes, and texts that she produces. Her posts are concerned with exercise and weight loss, motivational thoughts, selfies, travels, and meetings with friends in fancy coffee houses. Scrolling through them, I catch myself wanting to understand more from these posts than they can tell. Trying to piece together Yangkyi’s life from these tiny, fragmented snippets of news, of course, is impossible. Besides, there is so much that cannot be said or talked about via *WeChat*.

In May 2022, I got in touch with her. We sent voice messages in Tibetan and wrote messages in English and Chinese. I asked her if I could share two of her recent posts during a Tibetan Studies conference. Yangkyi assures me that this is okay. There are funny posts, like a meme depicting a car on a highway right before an exit ramp with a signpost attached to a bridge. Instead of continuing on the highway leading towards “dating” (Ch. *tan lianai*), the car, next to which the character ‘I’ (Ch. *wo*) is written, takes a sharp left turn towards “fitness” (Ch. *jianshen*). Yangkyi personalized the meme by stating in an accompanying text:

Today I change from a normally working woman into a workout girl within seconds.

The ability to switch between/balance these states is trained in daily life.

The shift from woman (Ch. *xiao jiejie*, “little elder sister”) to girl (Ch. *xiao meimei*, “little younger sister”) conveys that working out makes her feel younger. From these and similar posts, I infer that working out remains important for how Yangkyi narrates who she is and aspires to be on social media. From her voice messages, I understand that working out continues

to be integral to her pursuit of well-being. Striving for well-being, however, is an ongoing struggle; its achievement temporary and porous. Yangkyi told me that life had taken a difficult turn since, in late 2018, she experienced another mental health crisis. This time she gives her disease a name: major depressive disorder (Tib. ཡིད་སྡུག་ན་ཚ་). She suffered for six months before taking medication. During that time, she stopped working out and gained around 25 kg in weight. Once she started with the medication, she began working out again to fight her way back into life as she knew it and life as she imagined it for herself. Yangkyi's main profession remains being a civil servant, someone with an ordinary job, as her meme hints. However, she has also started working as a fitness instructor. Working out seemed to have opened up a small window for new possibilities again, that of teaching, sharing her knowledge, and perhaps bringing joy to other gymgoers. These are the vague contours of Yangkyi's life in the summer of 2022 that I can sketch out from our brief exchanges.¹¹

Just as Yangkyi reflected on going to the gym in 2015, her 2022 posts intertwine fitness and well-being, care for her family, and self-care. Some posts address topics that young, educated people all over China are concerned with. Her more serious posts, I believe, speak directly from a place of personal experience and vulnerability. The following reflection accompanies two gym selfies taken in workout tights and a tank top:

I don't have time to be consumed by internal friction.

I don't care about involution.

I only care about the moment right now.

Cherishing the things that I love.

Taking good care of oneself, mentally and physically.

This is the greatest responsibility to the family,

Which is exactly what it means to be filial and successful/doing well.¹²

Yangkyi addresses involution (Ch. *neijuan*), "rolling inwards," a widely shared sentiment in present-day China. "Involution" describes a condition of feeling hopeless due to intense (peer) pressure and competition. According to Xiang Biao, it leads people into an "endless cycle of self-flagellation" (cited in Wang and Ge 2020). During our exchanges, Yangkyi also shared a PowerPoint presentation. She had prepared it for a book club (Ch. *dushuhui*) that she attends twice a month. The forty-five-page document with the title "The story of losing fat and the changes after doing fitness" details her journey to becoming healthy after her depression, presenting it as a story about overcoming hardship and diligent work. Two slides are dedicated to the accomplishment of weight loss. They list the following: "Being self-disciplined, confident and cheerful, having meaningful days, receiving affirmation from others."

Persistence is evident in Yangkyi's pursuit of well-being through fitness. She joined her first gym in 2014. In May 2023, she and Tselha were still working out together. Yangkyi's desires and ambitions for working out have shifted as she has moved along the path life has taken her. Whereas weight loss was not a major concern earlier, this changed after she gained weight following a mental health crisis. The way she narrates the meaning of fitness on social media, thereby creating a particular image of herself, has also evolved. However, some things remain the same, such as the temporal rhythm of everyday life created by showing up at the gym day after day in a quest for well-being.

Conclusion

What might it mean to strive for well-being and a viable life in Lhasa? Which temporal rhythms does this quest create for young civil servants whose lives are entangled with the state apparatus? In this article, I explored these questions by attuning to the particularities of Yangkyi's and Tselha's lives and bodily practices. Taking fitness seriously, I have demonstrated that routine gym visits and workouts are significant in Yangkyi's and Tselha's attempts to create a sense of well-being that contributes to making their lives enjoyable and viable. Working out emerged as a relational pursuit that brought new friendships into being. It was framed as holding value in and of itself but also as enabling care toward kin.

In Lhasa, where political and religious freedoms are non-existent and state surveillance is crushing, where job satisfaction in government offices is often low and dreams of traveling or studying abroad are impossible to realize for most, working out in the "Sunlight Happiness Gym" generated fleeting opportunities to pause, breathe, and be well. Yangkyi and Tselha were finding moments of joy and relief in the shared movements, chats, togetherness, and their work toward self-improvement. These experiences were regenerating; they helped both women persevere through challenging situations, biographical ruptures, and family responsibilities. The effects of going to the gym shaped the temporal rhythms of their days and weeks, enabling them to deal with stress and find a sense of community with like-minded people. Exercising opened up windows of possibility, allowing experiences of self-renewal and, by extension, facilitating the imagination of future transformations. The fact that there are limits as to how much fitness can do for well-being and making life viable is without question. Nevertheless, through working out with Yangkyi and Tselha and listening to both of them, I learned that dismissing working out as insignificant would gloss over the multiple ways it creates meaningful experiences. In rapidly changing urban Tibet, amidst an ever-expanding landscape of

new leisure, wellness, and consumption, gyms are a social space for examining how ordinary people strive toward a sense of well-being despite the often-overwhelming structural conditions they find themselves in.

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Endnotes

1. All names are pseudonyms to protect friends and research participants. The English name I chose for the gym retains the essence of the original meaning inscribed in its Chinese and Tibetan names. Not all direct quotes are verbatim, since they partially derive from fieldnotes.
2. In contrast to a “just-bearable life,” a life worth living, according to Hage (2019), is characterized by “viability proper,” which comprises aspects such as enjoyment, a sense of moving forward in life, sociality, and ethical orientation. I follow this understanding in my use of the term “viable life.”
3. Tselha shared with me that she began witnessing her aging grandfather sometimes muttering Buddhist mantras. When I visited the family’s home in Chengdu years later, her uncle pointed out various deities of their Buddhist shrine to me. Tselha listened attentively while acknowledging her lack of knowledge. Due to the rules prohibiting civil servants from participating in public Buddhist events, Tselha and Yangkyi are banned from entering certain parts of Lhasa. Nonetheless, Tselha once ventured to the Barkor for circumambulations. She covered herself with a large hat and sunglasses and spoke Chinese with a friend to disguise herself. Overhearing fellow Tibetans asking one another in whispers if the two women were Tibetan or Chinese caused inner turmoil for Tselha. She wanted to scream that she was one of them, but she remained quiet. Hers was an experience of circumambulation marked by feelings of non-belonging.
4. Tselha and I usually spoke in Tibetan. Therefore, her use of English terms stood out.
5. Non-state formal employment options outside of the public sector were rare for university-educated Tibetans living in Lhasa in the early 2010s (Zenz and Fischer 2016).
6. Anthropologists have pointed out that well-being holds different meanings across socio-cultural and historical contexts. For an overview of the rich literature on well-being, see Fischer and Victor (2023).
7. See also Otis (2012), Rofel (2007), Wen (2013), and Yang (2011).
8. See Lama (2018) for a discussion of protests in Tibet since 2008 that challenge state narratives of Tibet as a “happy land.” Yeh (2013) and Roche et al. (2020) describe techniques of colonial governance and dispossession among Tibetans. McGranahan (2019) and Lokyitsang (2020) discuss Chinese settler colonialism.
9. This also included online research as well as purchasing and reading books on health and fitness. Acquiring new knowledge about the body was experiential but also theoretical for Tselha; self-making through fitness was imbued with a sense of being studious and becoming more knowledgeable.
10. This also holds true for other female government employees, in whose accounts of their work life and exercising, the feeling of boredom emerged more prominently than stress and pressure.
11. Exchanging messages in 2018 via WeChat, I learned that Tselha had been trying to reorient herself professionally as well, looking for possibilities elsewhere. Persistently disliking her job, she had ventured into multi-level marketing. After training in Shanghai, she became a part-time agent for a beauty brand that sold products on WeChat and ran a physical store in Lhasa.
12. Writing in Chinese, Yangkyi references the moral imperative of filial piety, a concept found in East Asian societies, including the Chinese. Among Tibetans, taking care of one’s parents is also considered an ethical responsibility that is framed in relation to Tibetan Buddhist values such as compassion (Gill 2022: 170–171).

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Special Issue Artwork

གལ་སྲིད་ང་རང་གཞན་ཡུལ་དུ་ཤི་ན། If I were to die in Exile

Kunchok Rabten

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གལ་སྲིད་ང་རང་གཞན་ཡུལ་དུ་ཤི་ན།

If I were to die in Exile

གལ་སྲིད་ང་རང་གཞན་ནས་པ་ཡུལ་དུ་ལོག་མ་ཐུབ་པར།
གཞན་ཡུལ་དུ་ཤི་བ་ཡིན་ན།
ངའི་ལུས་པོ་བསྐྱེད་པའི་ཐལ་བ་དེ།
པ་ཡུལ་གྱི་ཕྱོགས་སུ་རྒྱ་བའི་བྱར་ལྷོ་རོགས།
མ་མཐར་ཡང་། ང་རང་གི་མཐོའི་བར་སྒྲང་ལ་རྟག་དུ་གཡོ་བའམ།
ས་གཙང་གི་བྱང་གཞུང་ལ་གཞན་དུ་འབྱར་བའི་ས་རྒྱལ་ལྷོ་མོ་ཞིག་
བྱ་འདྲོད།

If I could never return home,
And were to die in Exile,
Scatter my ashes in the wind,
Blowing towards my homeland.
At least, I long to be a speck of dust
that hovers in the sky above the High
Mountains,
Or, clings to the bosom of Pure Earth.



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སྐྱ་ཡིས་?

Who would?

སྐྱ་ཡིས་?

གལ་སྲིད་ངའི་ཆམ་པ་འདི་ཇི་ལྟར་དུ་གྱུར་ནས།
 མཚན་གྲང་ལ་སློང་བྱུང་བའོ་ན།
 སྐྱ་ཡིས་ཆག་སློང་དེ་ཐོག་མར་མཐོང་སྲིད་དམ།
 ག་དུས་ཤིག་ལ་ནང་མི་ཚོས་གཏམ་ངན་དེ་ཐོས་སྲིད་དམ།
 སྐྱ་ཡིས་ལན་དེ་ནང་མིར་སྐྱར་སྲིད་དམ།
 ངས་མི་ཆེད་ཕྱི་ཀ་རྩ་ས་ནས་བསྐྱལ་ན་ཡང་།
 རྩ་ས་དང་རྩ་སར་འཛོལ་བའི་མི་ལ།
 ང་རང་ཡོད་མེད་ཀྱི་ཁྱད་པར་དང་འབྲེལ་བ་མེད།
 ང་རང་འདུག་སའི་ཁང་པའི་བདག་པོ་ལ།
 ཁང་སྒྲ་སྲོད་མཁན་ཞིག་འགྱུར་བ་ཕྱིན་པ་ཙམ་རེད།
 ངས་སྤྱོད་ནས་མི་ཆེད་ཆོས་ཉིད་འདི་རྟོགས་ནས།
 མི་འདོད་ཀྱང་དང་ལེན་བྱས་ཟིན་པས།
 ང་ལ་དམིགས་བསལ་གྱི་སྒྲོག་དུང་མེད།
 མ་རེད། བཤད་སྟངས་དེ་ནི་མོད་པོ་ལ།
 མི་ཞིག་གིས་སྒྲ་བྱིན་ས་ཁྲད་དམར་དུ་འགྱུར་བ་དང་ལེན་བྱེད་
 དགོས་པ་ལྟར།
 ང་རང་སྐྱུར་དུ་མེད་པའི་སྒྲོག་པོ་འདིར་གོམས་ཟིན།

Who Would?

If my cold were to get worse in the middle
 of this night,

And I suddenly took my last breath,

Who would witness this tragedy first?

When would my family hear the terrible
 news?

Who would deliver it to my parents?

Even though I have spent half my life in
 Dhasa,

For this place and its people,

It makes no difference whether I am alive
 or dead.

For my landlord, it would just mean a
 change of tenant.

I have already understood this truth a long
 time ago,

And accepted it with much reluctance.

Hence, I do not feel particularly sad.

No, that is not true!

Just as a person has to accept their receding
 hairline,

I have gotten used to this harsh truth.



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Resistance to Marriage, Family Responsibilities, and Mobility: A Turbulent Life Story from Kyidrong

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Abstract

Tsering, the eldest of three daughters in a sonless household, was designated to perpetuate the family by marrying a matrilocally resident husband. She did not like the chosen man and thus decided, against her family's wishes, to remain single. Tsering was subsequently caught up in the destruction of Tibet's religious institutions and social order during the Cultural Revolution. As border dwellers, her family escaped to Nepal when persecution became too intense, but then returned once the situation stabilized. Because Tsering's mother decided to remain in Nepal, she accepted her duty of caring for an aging parent and never returned to her natal village. Tsering's life story sheds light on the nexus of gender, social status, and mobility among Tibetan commoners during the turbulent mid-twentieth century. It underscores how women in Kyidrong had agency, albeit the consequences of resisting marital expectations could be substantial even in a society where female non-marriage was both common and acceptable.

Keywords

Marriage; gender; family; Cultural Revolution; Tibet

Recommended Citation

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Setting the Scene

Previous efforts to reconstruct the contours of Tibetan village life prior to the 1960s, that is, the life of “ordinary” Tibetans, focused disproportionately on social and economic structures (e.g. Carrasco 1959, Goldstein 1971a; 1971b; 1978, Dargyay 1982, Thargyal 2007, Childs 2008, Bischoff and Mullard 2017), albeit some glimpses into the lives of individuals did emerge (e.g., Aziz 1978, Goldstein 1986). Deeper perspectives on laypeople’s lives have come mostly through biographical and autobiographical writings of people who were anything but ordinary, for example, members of Tibet’s nobility (e.g., Tsarong 2000, Sadutshang 2015),¹ people who attained education and prominence in exile (Norbu 1974), or individuals who told their life stories to foreign scholars (Goldstein et al. 1997; 2004). Women whose biographies have been recorded are mostly religious figures (e.g., Kollmar-Paulenz 1998, Havnevik 1999, Allione 2000, Schaeffer 2004, Diemberger 2014) or members of the ruling classes (Taring 1986, Yuthok 1990, Taklha 2001, Ronis 2011).² Despite growing attention to those who “escaped the historian’s net” (Ramble et al. 2013), significant gaps in knowledge remain.

For this volume the editors have asked contributors to consider the creative potential found in ordinary lives for shaping gender, class, marriage, and other social factors. Anthropologists have a long history of tacking between structural approaches that provide skeletal frameworks of social and cultural life and individual life stories that add flesh to the bones. Structural approaches inform us of rules and prescriptions; individual life stories tell us the myriad means by which people navigate a system in ways that both conform with and depart from normative expectations. This study falls in the latter category by presenting the life story of Tsering, a laywoman from Kyidrong.³ As a member of a taxpayer household subject to *Ganden Podrang* (དགའ་པོ་བླ་མ་པོ་བླ་མ་), the Tibetan government based in Lhasa (1642–1959), Tsering’s family held heritable rights to till land in the 1950s and thus had mid-level

status in Tibetan society. They lived in a geopolitical peripheral zone at the border of Tibet and Nepal, which proved crucial for mobility and security when Tsering’s life was disrupted by events both within and beyond her control. First, Tsering refused to consummate her marriage with a man her parents brought into the household, a steadfast decision that brought strife into the family. Second, her father’s former status as a village leader—a position that he was assigned to and held reluctantly—marked the family for persecution during the 1960s whirlwind of China’s Cultural Revolution. Tsering’s story is part of a broader study of demography and family dynamics based on a household register titled *Earth-Dog Year [1958] Household Contract Being a Census [of Land and People] in the Nine Divisions of Kyidrong District* which was completed, witnessed, and sealed in early July 1958.⁴

The document records the names of 2,845 individuals by village, household, name, age, and relationship within the household. To make better sense of the lives of laypeople, in 1999 and 2000 one of us (GC) interviewed as many people listed therein as possible. Although denied permission to conduct research in Kyidrong, interviewees were not hard to locate; a large proportion of the population was living in exile in Nepal and India.⁵ Aided by the register, most interviewees retained vivid recollections of their family as they were constituted in 1958, presumably because the document was compiled just before the political upheaval of 1959 that led many Kyidrong residents to subsequently depart into exile during the 1960s. Tsering was no exception. Yet in contrast to most interviews that centered primarily on household dynamics, Tsering needed little prompting to launch into a detailed account of her life story. After establishing that she lived with her mother, two sisters, and a man identified as a *magpa* (མག་པ་; matrilocally resident husband), Tsering spoke uninterrupted for over an hour about her family life in Kyidrong, the difficulties she underwent while married to the *magpa*, and her harrowing experiences during the Cultural Revolution (1966–1976) that led to flight

into exile where, decades later, the interview took place. Among the roughly 180 people interviewed for this project nobody went into such extensive personal detail as Tsering. We cannot say what prompted Tsering to divulge to a relative stranger her life's trials and tribulations. Perhaps she felt she had found a sympathetic ear to release emotions pent up for decades in her small, insular community of exiles. And although we verified the most important events we certainly cannot substantiate everything she narrated. Nevertheless, Tsering's recollections provide insight into gender, marriage, and agency under the constraints of family responsibilities during a critical time in Tibet's history.

Tsering's Family Background

Prior to 1959 Kyidrong was a district-level administrative unit (རྫོང་) under Ganden Phodrang. Most of Kyidrong's residents were classified as legally bound subjects (མི་སྡེ་) who were divided into two broad categories. Taxpayers (ཁུ་པ་) held a formal land tenure document referred to as a tax basis (ཁུ་རྟེན་) granting them the heritable right to farm a specified amount of land. Taxpayers could lose that privilege by failing to fulfill tax obligations which included an annual grain payment and corvée labor (Surkhang 1966; 1986, Goldstein 1971a, Dargyay 1982, Travers et al. 2023). Members of the other main category, small householders (སྤྱི་ཆུང་ཁུ་, literally, small smoke) did not hold a tax basis. They had few tax obligations yet lacked the economic security that comes with land tenure. Small householders generally worked for taxpayers in exchange for food and shelter.

The land tenure system provided Kyidrong's taxpayers a strong incentive to practice fraternal polyandry because they had access to set amounts of land that could be inherited but usually not expanded. Through polyandry, taxpayer households adhered to a monomartial norm (Goldstein 1971a; 1978, Fjeld 2022), meaning one marriage within the household per generation. Norms of patrilineal descent and patrilocal marital residence led to a preference for parents

to keep sons at home and send daughters out in marriage. A family with three sons and three daughters would, ideally, find one bride for at least two of the sons (the third could join the marriage or become a monk) while trying to send each daughter to another household in marriage. Those who did not have a male heir could bring in a *magpa* to marry one or more of the daughters. Although polyandry was the preferred form of marriage, monogamy was common in households with only a single son or daughter, and polygyny could occur in households with no sons but several daughters.

Tsering was born into a government taxpayer (ཁུ་བྱང་ཆུ་གྲྲ་) family with a modest landholding. Her maternal grandfather had been a competent and reliable small householder. Tsering explained:

If you leased land, then there were many taxes. Some households found it very difficult to meet all the tax obligations and ran away; I know of at least two households that were abandoned in my village because of the tax obligations.

Tsering's maternal grandfather was raised to taxpayer status when the government granted him one such abandoned land lease. But he was reluctant to take on the new responsibilities. Tsering recalled:

The Kyidrong Dzong asked my grandfather to take over a taxpaying household in our village [one that had been abandoned by others] but he refused because he would incur tax obligations. They told him if he refused, he would have to move to [name of another village in Kyidrong District]. But the tax obligations there were even higher; people would run away because of the heavy tax burdens. So, he decided to stay in our village [as a newly elevated taxpayer]. That is how we ended up as taxpayers.

Tsering's grandfather and his wife had no sons, so they brought in a *magpa* to marry

their daughter, Tsering's mother. She had three daughters—Tsering was the eldest—and no son. The family struggled under the onerous tax burden:

We underwent many hardships. We had heavy tax obligations. For example, if you have a few good cows, you are required to pay butter tax. Then, there is the grain tax, and whatever little money you have they take it away. In the old society, I was very young, and I had to go work on road construction without any pay. This was part of compulsory service (འཁུག་པ།). My parents were old, and my two sisters too young, so they could not go for compulsory service. There were no choices then.

Despite being unable to read or write, Tsering's father was appointed the village *dingpön* (ཁྲིང་དོན་པོ།; local leader), a weighty responsibility that entailed helping resolve disputes, making sure people paid their taxes, and compiling raw data for the household register. Tsering recalls:

When it was time for a *dingpön* to leave his position, he would recommend a name to the *dzongpön* (རྫོང་དོན་པོ།; District Commissioner) who in turn would issue an official letter instructing that person to be the next *dingpön*. You don't have any choice but to follow the order. You cannot refuse it because your plea is not accepted. For example, my father's name was recommended by the previous *dingpön*. But my father did not know how to read or write. He was the only male in our household at that time; we didn't have enough labor in our household. I think other people recommended his name for no other reason than to spite him. My father was not a shrewd person, he was just a simple man. He was very kind, so I think other people thought they could do anything to him and that he would fail in his position.

My mother and father were very concerned because they did not have enough labor force or any other male to help run the household. They approached the District Commissioner and offered a roll of butter as a request to relieve my father of the position. He took the butter but informed my father that there was no way he can refuse to serve. He had no choice but to serve as the *dingpön*.

If my father were a shrewd person, he could have made some money for himself. Instead, my father could not force people to pay their tax obligations. He would borrow money from people to pay the tax obligations to the *dzong*. He got himself into debt because some poor people could not pay their tax obligations and offered him instead a small plot of their land in lieu of tax payments. We did not have a lot of money, so there was no choice. I don't understand how an illiterate person was made *dingpön*.

Tsering's father's status as a government representative would eventually have negative ramifications for the family which, ironically, had been part of the landless class of small householders only one generation earlier.

Resisting Marriage

As noted above, the household struggled to fulfill its tax obligations due to an acute labor shortage. This prompted Tsering's parents to bring a *magpa* into the home when she was only 15 years old. But the marriage went against Tsering's wishes. She lamented:

Our parents decided to bring the *magpa* for us daughters because we were very young and there were no sons to take over the household. But I had no interest [in the marital arrangement] because I felt that the groom was too old for me, 10 or 11 years older than me. I was 15, my

sister Nyima was five years younger, and Sumchog was only seven years old then. I said we don't need a husband who is much older than us. Our parents did not listen to us. They said they need the labor to support the household. They kept the groom.

I did not have any interest [in the marriage]. Despite my disagreement, I had to live with the arrangement. For about six or seven years I had no physical relationship with the groom. My mother used to beat me constantly to make me accept the *magpa* but I had no interest at all. I never liked him and had no feelings of the heart for him. After receiving constant beatings from my mother, I was forced to maintain marital relationship with the groom. However, I did not get pregnant. Later, the *magpa* complained that I don't like him, and it is causing him embarrassment. He told me that I could leave the household. He said he will take my two younger sisters as wives and if they didn't agree, then he said he will bring in a wife of his own choice. He told me that he will stay in my household. So, my younger sisters agreed to be his wives.

According to Tsering's recollection, the *magpa* joined her household in 1956. She remained a reluctant partner in marriage into the 1960s after which the *magpa* took her youngest sisters as his wives. All this coincided with the disintegration of Tibetan society under the onslaught of the Cultural Revolution.

Political Turmoil

According to Tsering:

My father passed away when I was 17 (1957 or 1958). Not long afterward, the Chinese came. They started the reform in our place when I was 24 (1964). The fact that my father had been a *dingpön* adversely affected our family. In our village, there were

some households that had two taxable land units (ཁྱེད་); they had prime land and were wealthy. They were not labeled as feudal lord representatives (མངའ་ཚབ་) but we were because my father had served as a *dingpön*. Although they did not physically torture or imprison us, they did label us as feudal lord representatives. They mistreated us and confiscated our land and property. Our household suffered a lot during the reforms because we were a small, five-member family. I am not exactly sure how they calculated the redistribution but most of our landholding and livestock were taken away. We had 15 *dzomo* (yak-cow hybrid) but were left with seven; eight were taken away for redistribution to the poor households. We had five oxen, and they took away the two healthy ones. We had ten cows, seven calf-bearing and three young ones. They took away five adult cows. In total, they took away 15 head of livestock. They even took away parts of our house including the vegetable plot, leaving us with nowhere to grow vegetables. We endured many hardships.

The social upheaval began in the sixth month of the Horse Year [1966]. Several people were imprisoned. A meeting was called, and people were informed that they must come and watch the punishment. One leader ordered us to sit down and said we don't have to speak. There was the Tibetan leader [a former *dingpön* in Kyirong], a Chinese official, and a woman cadre from our village. I was trembling, I could not speak. They knew that I was very scared. I was told it is okay if I can't speak and was told to sit down. I sat down and I was feeling extremely scared. After lots of lecturing, we were told that the prisoners would be put to a struggle session (འཇམ་འཇིང་). We were told to think very carefully and that if we didn't, we would be arrested and put

to a struggle session as well.⁶ They were very cruel, especially to one lama.

The next day, all the prisoners were dragged by their hands to the struggle session. If one was unable to walk, they just dragged the person like a log. The prisoners were all lined up and kicked. Although we didn't have to speak or partake in the beatings, they watched us to check if anyone dared to shed tears. The woman cadre carried out the interrogation of the lama. When they were beating him, we were told that our faces would be watched to see if anyone sheds tears or expressed sympathy. We would be interrogated if we showed any signs of sympathy. Even if we felt sympathy, we had no choice but to watch it without showing any emotion. They tortured the lama so badly. They would subject him to beatings, and when he fell to the ground, they would pull him up by the ears. There were two persons, Tibetans, standing on either side who would pull him up by the ears every time he slumped to the ground. At the end of the session his ears were hugely swollen and bleeding.

We were deeply disturbed and saddened. They said we should think carefully and behave accordingly. We couldn't help but think what we would do if subjected to such torture and were afraid they might also subject us to torture like they did to the lama. My mother and I were particularly concerned. I believe our *magpa* was not questioned because he came from an ordinary farming family. My mother and I were questioned because my father served as a *dingpön*. My mother was not beaten though, only questioned.

My mother and I talked about jumping into the river, thinking it was better to drown than be subjected to

torture. We went down to the river and vowed to jump in. Two other people had done it, a father and son. But when we saw the river, we could not jump. It was deep and the thought of jumping into it too scary. My mother lamented our situation and said we can only seek protection by putting faith in the precious ones (དཀོན་མཆོག་; Buddha, Dharma, Sangha). We came back home and thought about escaping but the roads were all watched. If we went high into the mountains, the snow was too deep. It was almost impossible to run away. We had no choice but to put our faith in and seek protection from the precious ones.

The situation continued to deteriorate as Tsering bore witness to attacks on the very religious institutions in which she sought solace. She recollects:

When the Chinese came and took over everything, we were not allowed anywhere near the monastery [nearby the village]. The monastery had many religious artifacts, which were all controlled by the new [Tibetan] leader. The monastery was turned into a prison and storehouse for winter fodder. How beautiful the monastery was! It was gleaming like gold from outside. It had many artifacts including ivory, Buddha's relics (རིང་བསྐྱེལ་), statues, and paintings. People had no idea what the leader did with all those artifacts and did not dare ask about it.

Our leader and the cadres spoke out against people's beliefs in gods and spirits, arguing, "If you light up a butter lamp, of course the butter will burn. If your gods can drink water, why is the water still there [in the water offerings at the altar]? If there is really a god, it should drink the water offerings." We used to propitiate water spirits (ལྷ) and have blessed vases (བླ་པ་) in our houses for this purpose. The leader

ordered people to bring the vases; he destroyed them all. He said he will search every corner of the house if anyone dares to hold on to a vase. He further threatened people with beatings and imprisonment if they tried to hide them. Everyone gave their vases away because they were too scared to resist. He destroyed all the vases. The leader was saying all these crazy things and went berserk by ordering everything connected to deities and spirits destroyed. He destroyed all the sites for propitiating water spirits (ཕུ་ཁའ་) and cut down trees where spirits are believed to reside. He said nobody can see these so-called deities and spirits, that this was all fabricated by the Dalai Lama and part of the old society's conservative thinking (ལྗང་གུ་; literally, green-brained).

Then they collected all the scriptures and religious paintings from the monasteries so they could be burned. We were told to help. I went and helped carry a scripture or two, but then slipped away. After a while, they came and asked me where I went. I said I had diarrhea and had to go and defecate [laughing aloud]. They said I was oldbrained and would like to follow the Dalai Lama. I denied it and said I had to go because I had diarrhea. They admonished me for taking a whole day to defecate. Of course, it is true that I was feeling unhappy and didn't want to partake in the burning. But I stuck to my story.

I could not go near the place where everything was being burned. I was too shocked and almost fell unconscious. We were told to come to watch the burning, but I did not go. It was a very scary and disturbing sight; I could not go anywhere near it. They were enjoying and rejoicing in what they were doing. I was scared, distressed, and felt helpless. I was lamenting to myself, "What have we done to see such things? All the

scriptures we have preserved and revered are now being desecrated and burned!"

Because the situation was so dangerous, we thought if we were somehow able to reach the Nepal border, it will be fine even if we have nothing to eat or drink. We ran away in the fourth month of the Sheep Year [May 1967]. We left with the remaining livestock and came to the border. We knew we were going to a foreign country, and we thought the livestock would feed us by providing milk. We left all our possessions behind because we could not carry much on our backs. When we reached the border, we were stopped by the leaders [from the village] who had 21 people armed with swords in their belts and spears in their hands. They confiscated all our livestock. It was our Tibetan leaders who were the worst. When they snatched our livestock, there were no Chinese present. It was our village leaders who came down and took away our livestock. It was the leaders from our own village who mistreated us.

After they drove back the livestock, we continued with our plan to run away. We thought we would manage to survive in a foreign land by finding something to eat. If things went bad, we thought we could resort to begging to survive. We continued to the border. We were all devastated and crying. My mother threw dirt on her head [a way of grieving a loss]. She suffered the most. First, it was the reform period when things were taken away and redistributed, and then the remaining livestock were confiscated.

With only knitted blankets, the clothing on our backs, and a pot or two to cook and eat from, the five of us (Tsering, her mother and two sisters, and the *magma*) came down

and stayed at Thugmon [a village in Rasuwa District, Nepal] for about a year.

Back and Forth

Crossing the border into Nepal to escape undesirable situations was nothing new for the people of Kyidrong. In fact, the 1958 Household Register includes threats of punishment to anyone who harbored notions of fleeing, presumably to evade unpaid tax obligations, debts, or prosecution for crimes. It states:

Similarly, arrangements of marriages, entering into religious life, and exchange of subjects are not permitted without prior permission, [this applies] especially to those ignorant ones who flee to other lands thinking that they will be more secure and have a better life. Such persons making flimsy excuses to flee from the country must be stopped with tight security and the leaders and people have taken oath that such incidents will not be allowed to occur, for which cause the following persons have undertaken the oath: [seals of witnesses] (Childs 2008: 281).

Furthermore, the people of Kyidrong maintained trade relationships and close kinship ties through intermarriage and historical migrations (Lim 2008) with Nepalis in Rasuwa District (Dragpa 1997), and so Tsering and her family were not venturing into unknown territory; they probably had a social network they could rely on for at least a modicum of support. Many former Kyidrong residents interviewed for this project said that some families hedged their bets during the early years of Chinese rule. When news arrived of approaching Chinese soldiers, they moved cattle across the border into Nepal where they remained until word came that the coast was clear. The back-and-forth movement continued for some time until the situation became untenable for many, notably those deemed class enemies and thus subjected to heightened scrutiny and persecution.

Returning to Tsering's story:

My sister Sumchog became pregnant [by the *magpa*, while in Thugmon]. My mother made a big scene about the timing of pregnancy saying, "How can we feed an extra mouth in a foreign land when we have nothing?"

Sumchog decided to go back home without our knowledge. It happened during the summer while we were up in the mountains collecting medicinal herbs. I was worried because Sumchog was pregnant and on her own with no help, and I thought the Chinese would not allow her back into the home. Without informing my mother and the *magpa*, I decided to go back and look for Sumchog. When I returned, I found out that the Chinese would not allow anyone to come back. So, I decided not to go straight to our home but to my aunt's place first. She had also run away but her husband and one son had stayed back in the village.

The next day, my aunt's daughter invited me to her place. My sister Sumchog was there, and the village leader came as well. He said he heard that I arrived yesterday and asked me why I didn't go to my own home. I replied that I wanted to avoid any suspicion and that I don't want to be scolded. The leader said it is okay to return home; he returned the remaining livestock that were confiscated and said there is butter and grain to feed us. When we went back home, the livestock were there but the rest including our grain and possessions had all been taken away. We had a three-story home. The lowest level was for livestock, the middle level had a kitchen where we ate and slept, and the top level was mostly for storage. The leader, my sister and I looked around to check and I told the leader that everything was gone. The leader said he is not sure what happened and that the other officials also had

access to the house. We had left behind all our grain, and it appeared that the officials had distributed it among themselves.

My sister had not given birth yet. I told her that I had come back to get her, and we should run away before she gave birth. She said she didn't want to go now and that she would go only after giving birth, which might be in the twelfth month [of the lunar year]. After she gave birth, she did not leave right away. Instead, my other sister Nyima returned with her child [the *magpa* was the father]. I asked her why she returned when we were trying to leave. I got very frustrated. I said this is not right because our mother is down there, and we are all stuck here. I ended up staying back until Losar. After Losar, I went down. And yes, before I went down, the *magpa* himself returned!

They all stayed while I planned to go back down. I returned home one more time to check on them. They could not leave so easily now because they had very young children and the village leaders were checking on them regularly. But I had to go down to be with my mother in Thugmon. She was alone, became ill, and sent a message asking me to come down.

Meanwhile, I was told to attend a meeting. When I went, there were no other people except for my paternal uncle. We were called into the Chinese office and there was one Chinese leader who speaks Tibetan. He asked if I was scared. I said I was. He said I don't need to be scared of him, but I should be afraid of the laws because I had run away to a foreign country. Although the leaders, including the Chinese officials, said I am not allowed to leave, my mother wanted me to come. So, I requested permission to go to her. But they wouldn't let me go because I did not have children

of my own [implying that children were seen as collateral to assure their parents' return]. They said the *magpa* or one of my sisters could go if they wanted to. I told them that my mother had requested only I come down, and that her other two daughters and the *magpa* should remain. In that case, they said if my mother herself comes back, only then can I leave and said they would give me three days. I said I can't possibly return in three days from Thugmon because my mother is ill so I would have to arrange porters to carry her. I promised to come back with my mother in one week's time, though. The Chinese official told me I can't run away ever again. He said that unlike the past, when the borders were open and people could come and go whenever they wanted, the borders are closed now so you can't come and go as you please. He said I have undergone education programs here and know how things work. If I were to go to a foreign country and talk about things, there is the danger of spreading misinformation and rumors. He said I can't ever run away again and that if I try, they will send people wherever I go to catch me and bring me back. He said if they catch me again, they will not waste time educating me but instead will shoot me down. This really scared me.

I was able to leave after a week or so. I brought some butter, cheese, and a bit of *tsampa* (roasted barley flour). When I arrived in Thugmon, my sick mother was very weak. She couldn't even speak properly. When I called her, she couldn't even respond. I fed her some warm food and she started to get better. She finally regained some strength and asked, "Is this Tsering?" I said yes. Her eyes started to well with tears. She told me I should stay with her and never return home. I told her that the Chinese want me to return with her and that I should arrange porters to carry her

on their backs. My mother said she is not going to return. She said she had already decided to escape and had no intention of returning even if she gets better. She said all the roads are paved with *mani* stones (stones engraved with prayers and sacred images) and she does not dare step on those, that she would prefer death and has sought refuge in the wish fulfilling gem [His Holiness the Dalai Lama]. She said she is never going to return and that she is willing to die in a foreign land. She said she will return home only when it is free. So, I stayed back and took care of my mother. My mother passed away when I was 40 years old [around 1981]. She lived a long life. She passed away at the age of 73.

Remaining in Exile

Unlike her sisters and the *magpa*, Tsering decided to remain in Nepal. When interviewed, she lived in a one-room house in a settlement built for Tibetan refugees during the 1960s. She made a meager living by weaving for others, and with support from the Tibetan Government-in-Exile which administered four camps in the region. At the end of the interview, she explained her reasons for remaining in exile rather than returning home:

After my mother passed away in Thugmon, I came here [the settlement where the interview took place] which is my home now. I met my new partner. It was not a happy relationship because I could not have children. He treated me very badly. He would call me *shiri ma* [a curse word for barren woman?]. He said I can't live with him because I couldn't have children. He said he doesn't understand why I wanted to live with him. He said I should leave if I want to. So, I left him. He used to beat me often. My body became hardened due to constant beatings. I could not take it anymore. I felt helpless, but what could I do?

I came down here promising the officials that I would return in a week with my mother. But I never returned. I ended up staying here and it has been so many years. I came down here when I was 29 and I am 61 now. I have never crossed the bridge [at the border] since then. My sister's son is worried about my situation because I am alone and in poor health. He thinks it is a good idea to go back home to be with my family in Tibet. He is worried about how I can make it here where it is very difficult to find even firewood to cook. He asks me why I want to live here and encourages me to go back.

I don't know what to say or do. I told him if things do not get too bad, I am not too worried about dying here. The thought of going back home is too dreadful for me. I told him living back home feels like sitting on a bed of thorns. You can't even enjoy your food. You live in constant fear of getting arrested. He said I would not be arrested and that the current atmosphere is totally different now, that everything, including the policies and the leaders, has changed. I replied that we are different from other people because of our backgrounds, we were categorized as feudal lord representatives. This makes us vulnerable. I have seen and experienced myself what they did and how they think. They stopped us from practicing our religion, including lighting butter lamps and giving water offerings. They forced us to destroy everything that has to do with religion. Then, they said it is okay to offer butter lamps, practice religion and do meritorious acts. Later, they again said these things are not allowed and imposed restrictions. So, I told my nephew that you can't really believe what they say. They will say one thing today and another thing tomorrow. I follow the Dalai Lama and want to practice religion,

but one is not allowed to keep an image of the Dalai Lama. If I do that, I will be arrested. He told me that the revolution was over a long time ago and that everything including the sky and earth turned upside down (གནས་སུ་མཐོ་སྒྲིབ་ཆེད་ཀྱི་སྐབས་ལོ་ཤིང་།). But I lived through the times when they banned everything that has to do with religion, you couldn't even wear anything that has to do with the old society. They made us look like poor beggars.

I can't think of going back because I have witnessed the things that they did. They persecuted people mercilessly during the reform period. I still recall when I went through interrogation. I still recall how they pulled people by their ears until the ears got bloody and torn off. What will happen if I return home and things change for the worse and I end up being interrogated and persecuted? What can I do at an age when I should be preparing for my death? I dread the thought of going back home because of these memories and thoughts. I don't want to go back because it reminds me of how I felt. It was like living on a bed of thorns.

As her voice tapered off with these final words, Tsering was in tears. Her emotional response decades after witnessing and being forced to participate in violent struggle sessions and the destruction of religious texts and artifacts testifies to the long-lasting trauma inflicted by perpetrators of the Cultural Revolution.

A Life Story

Without starting with such an intention, the conversation with Tsering turned into a life story interview, a methodological approach that allows an interlocutor to narrate the “subjective essence” of their experiences (Atkinson 1998). A life story interview is not meant to gather data to fill qualitative gaps missed by other methodologies. Rather, it is often based on a simple research question: “What is the story this person wants

others to hear and what meaning does this story convey?” (Atkinson 2007: 233). The interview with Tsering started with routine questions to locate her and her household within the 1958 register, and to identify people listed therein. The succinct exchanges went on for about ten minutes until we arrived at a pivotal point. From the transcript:

GC: It says here [in the register] that your mother has three children. You were three sisters?

TK: Yes.

GC: It says here a *magpa* was brought in for the sisters.

TK: Yes.

GC: Where is the *magpa* from?

TK: He is from [name of village]. His father was [name]. When the *magpa* was married into our household, I was 15 then.

GC: 15 years old, you were very young.

Tsering: Yes, I was very young. Our parents decided to bring the *magpa* for us daughters because we were very young and there were no sons to take over the household. But I had no interest [in the marital arrangement] because I felt that the groom was too old for me, 10 or 11 years older than me.

GC: What was the *magpa*'s animal cycle birth year (ལོ་རྒྱུས་)?

TK: Year of the Horse. I think he was ten years older than me.

GC: Okay, when the *magpa* was brought into your household, all of you sisters were very young.

TK: Yes, that is correct. I was 15, my sister Nyima was five years younger,

and Sumchog was only seven years old then. I said we don't need a husband who is much older than us

Tsering then spoke nearly uninterrupted for over an hour. The catalyst that shifted her into life story mode is clearly seen when the topic of her marriage arose. Recollections of being forced by her mother to maintain conjugal relations with a man she reviled came flooding forth, followed by traumas during the Cultural Revolution and hardships of a life in exile. The life story interview allowed Tsering some latitude to make sense of her pathway, highlighting events that she deemed most salient.

Scholars must contend with “historical erasure” (Mortensen 2020) to interpret the “‘unsaid’ of history spoken loudly in implication” (Makley 2005: 40) or the subtle “oppositional practices of time” (Hofer 2018, from Mueggler 2001) when interviewing Tibetans who still live under a government where the Cultural Revolution remains a “forbidden memory” (Woeser 2020). Detailing events in ways that counter official narratives can be hazardous. In contrast, Tsering was living in Nepal at the time of the interview. This does not mean that she freely recounted everything. Tsering spoke haltingly and in a quivering voice about certain incidents—like the torturing of a lama and the desecration of the village temple—and she never provided details of her own interrogation. However, she presumably had fewer constraints than her kin in Kyidrong to narrate events and express her opinions about them. She named perpetrators. For example, a rare instance of levity in the life story came when she recalled a local official who, as detailed above, abused his constituents by confiscating or destroying their devotional objects. Tsering revealed with a sense of irony that the man was subsequently afflicted by a spirit attack (བསེར་རྒྱུ་བ་):

[Name of official] built a toilet right on the spot where a water spirit (ལྷ) is said to reside. He did that just to prove there is no such thing as

spirits. Because of his actions, he, his daughter, and his daughter-in-law all got afflicted [by spirit attacks]. To counteract the spirit attack, he asked a lama to help. The lama recited mantras and performed rites to make healing water and blessed pills to treat the afflicted ones. They got a bit better after the treatment.

A life story like Tsering's should be understood as a subjective narrative—not an objective account of historical events and personages—a miniautobiography with a beginning, some muddled conundrums, and a resolution (Atkinson 1998). The resolution in Tsering's case was never complete, as she remained in Nepal without financial security or kin support yet determined never to return to a place—regardless of how much the situation may have improved—where she had experienced so much suffering.

Tsering's life story illustrates how a person's experiences are shaped but not entirely constrained by social guidelines and gender roles. Notably, Tsering's resistance to marrying a man she abhorred may have been somewhat unusual at the time, especially considering the importance of perpetuating a sonless taxpayer household. However, women's opposition to marriage across the Tibetan Plateau and Himalayan region is well-documented, most commonly in cases of celibate monasticism as a culturally acceptable alternative to matrimony and childbearing (Gutschow 2004, Schneider 2013). For example, Orgyan Chokyi of Dolpo became a respected religious practitioner after recognizing the suffering inherent in worldly existence, especially as it pertains to women (Schaeffer 2004). Divorce prompted at least one nun from Tingri to take up residence in a nunnery (Aziz 1978: 184–85). Saddened by the death of her one-year-old daughter, the princess Chokyi Dronma underwent a long struggle to disentangle from secular life and become a celibate nun (Diemberger 2021). Being sent as a bride to another family, especially in a society that accepts some forms of spousal abuse (Rajan 2018), can be unattractive. Monastic celibacy was one

of the few routes available for women to evade the tensions embedded in the roles of wife and mother (Schneider 2013).

A person's journey from family life to monasticism is a common theme in Tibetan societies, one that resonates in a cultural environment that values renunciation as an antidote to the pitfalls of worldly suffering. However, a topic less explored is the life trajectory of laywomen like Tsering who opts out of marriage but remains a member of the laity. It is impossible to determine whether Tsering viewed marriage as an impediment to other ambitions in life, because quite frankly not many alternatives existed for non-elite laywomen in pre-1959 Tibet. What is clear, however, is that resisting gendered expectations did not make Tsering a societal outlier: female non-marriage was common throughout Tibetan societies, including Kyidrong. As a by-product of polyandry, roughly half of Kyidrong's women aged 20-49 were not formally married into taxpayer households. The acceptability of informal unions and relatively permissive attitudes toward out-of-wedlock childbearing meant that single women and women in casual relationships could, and often did, have children—although their total fertility rate (2.2 births per woman) was lower than married women's (6.2 births per woman) (Childs 2008).

Residential options for unmarried women in Kyidrong were limited. While some became nuns, the more common solution was to move into a separate room or dwelling that was still considered a part of the household, thereby creating a twohearth (ཐང་གཉིས་) household, which included the main house and an adjunct house (ཟུར་ཁང་; see Childs 2022). In many instances retired parents preferred to live with an unmarried daughter in the adjunct house if they had a dispute with their son(s) and daughter-in-law, or if they sought a quieter environment for retirement and end-of-life religious activities. Maintaining separate hearths did not prevent unmarried women from participating in the household's productive activities. In fact, retaining them

had tangible benefits; they enhanced the labor force and provided care for aging parents.

Being unmarried and childless gave Tsering more freedom of movement than her sisters, allowing her to choose exile over homeland during the chaotic years of the Cultural Revolution. Yet one can question how much agency she really had when considering an unmarried daughter's social role as primary caretaker for aging parents. In Tsering's life story it is apparent that her choice to live in Nepal's borderlands, in the shadow of the mountains stretching high above her natal village, was influenced by a gendered sense of obligation to care for her mother. One can only speculate whether Tsering would have remained in Kyidrong had her mother passed away before she could get to her or whether she would have returned to Kyidrong had that been her mother's choice. What we can glean from Tsering's life story is that she felt a strong duty to protect and nurture her mother through illness and frailty that comes with age.

By the time her mother passed away, around 1981, Tsering had been living in exile for 14 years, unburdened by marriage and children yet haunted by memories of persecution and the wanton destruction of temples and their sacred accoutrements. She chose to remain in Nepal rather than reside on what she perceived to be "a bed of thorns."

When interviewed in the autumn of 2000 Tsering came across as being a somewhat solitary figure, peripheral even in this close-knit community of exiles. With the passing of her mother, and a union that soured because of her alleged infertility (a common theme in both her marriages), Tsering did not have a strong support network of kin as she crept toward old age. Her sisters worried that she would suffer alone in another country; they even sent their son to ask her to return. But Tsering refused, leery that the authorities would once again turn malevolent.

In the days following the interview I (GC) saw Tsering a few more times, exchanged pleasantries and chatted briefly. The borderland refugee settlement where she lived was saturated with a musty air of decline; most young people had left for education or to seek livelihoods elsewhere, leaving a community of aging individuals. I never saw Tsering after concluding this phase of the research, and suspect that she endured a lament uttered by many elderly exiles at that time, “I will die in a foreign land.”

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Endnotes

1. Treasury of Lives has compiled many biographies of members of the Tibetan royalty (བླ་མ་རྒྱལ་པོ་; <https://treasuryoflives.org/institution/Royalty>) and the Lhasa aristocracy (སྐུ་གྲག་ནང་མི་; <https://treasuryoflives.org/institution/Lhasa-Aristocracy>).
2. These personal recollections are an underutilized resource for research on the lives of commoners. See Melvyn Goldstein’s Tibetan Oral History Archive Project (www.loc.gov/collections/tibetan-oral-history-project/) and the Tibet Oral History Project led by Marcella Adamski (www.tibetoralhistory.org/).
3. Tsering’s name and the names of her family members are pseudonyms.
4. ས་བྱི་ལོ་རྒྱུད་ཐོང་རྒྱུ་དགུའི་སྒོ་ཁྲ་ཐེམ་གན། For a full analysis of the document see Childs 2008. The government was not the only landlord in Kyidrong. Samtenling Monastery also had considerable landholdings and enumerated its taxpaying households in similar documents, two of which, from 1939 and 1949, were published and analyzed by Schuh (1988).
5. Roughly 180 former Kyidrong residents were interviewed for this project in McLeodganj, Forsythganj, and Pandoh in India, and in Kathmandu, Shebrubensi, Bridim, Tanje, and Kanjim in Nepal.
6. For struggle sessions in Tibetan areas during the late 1950s and 1960s, see Norbu 1974, Goldstein et al. 2009, Makley 2005; 2007, Ketsun 2008, Hofer 2018, and Mortensen 2020; and, most notably, the photographs and commentary in Wooser 2020. Descriptions of struggle sessions can also be found in the interviews collected by Melvyn Goldstein and made available as part of the Tibetan Oral History Archive Project (<https://www.loc.gov/collections/tibetan-oral-history-project/about-this-collection/>) and in the Tibet Oral History Project (<https://www.tibetoralhistory.org/>).

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***Thuenlam*: Keeping ‘Harmonious Relations’ Through the Lens of Hosting and Hospitality in Bhutan**

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Abstract

In this article, I introduce selected aspects of the concept and practice of *thuenlam* (མཐུན་ལམ) in Bhutan, the local term for maintaining ‘harmonious relations’. Most Bhutanese consider *thuenlam* an important prerequisite for successful co-existence and co-operation within society. I describe the views and experiences of my three Bhutanese fellow travelers on the way from Shingkhar, a village in Bumthang (Central Bhutan), to Zhongmay, a village in Lhuentse (Eastern Bhutan). While trekking along the ancient footpath that connected both valleys, I explore the different ways my companions keep *thuenlam* with a variety of *neypo* (གནས་པོ hosts) through the exchange of food and drink, gifts, and services. I furthermore draw on my interviews with Bumthap villagers and my field notes resulting from living and traveling with Bhutanese over many years. This account includes my perspective as a researcher who depends on the hospitality framework to establish *thuenlam* in the field. Hence, drawing on four years of dissertation research and over 23 years of familiarity with Bhutan, I focus on the informal etiquette, *beyzhag* (འབད་བཞག) and hosting traditions of day-to-day village life rather than the formalized and codified etiquette of *driglam namzhag* (ཐྱིག་ལམ་རྩམ་གཞག), the official Bhutanese code of conduct. Both nurture various types of *thuenlam* in society: the former, informal practices are organic and transmitted within the family and community; the latter, mandatory during official events and settings are taught at schools and in specialized courses.

Keywords

Bhutan; *thuenlam*; hospitality; sociality; gift exchange

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Introduction

Early in my fieldwork in Bhutan, I came across the popular story of the *thuenpa puenzhi* (མཐུན་པ་ཕུན་མཛོད་), the harmonious four friends. Depictions of the *thuenpa puenzhi* are everywhere in Bhutan and serve as a reminder of the importance of ‘harmony’ and ‘cooperation’ for society: the central role of *thuenlam*, literally the ‘harmonious way’, for a variety of relationships. In Bhutanese schools, the *thuenpa puenzhi* are used to teach students the Buddhist foundation and values on which the concept of *thuenlam* rests. One version tells how four friends want to find out who was the oldest among them. After comparing accounts the bird was nominated the oldest, followed by the rabbit, and then the monkey whilst the elephant was the youngest. Although the elephant was the strongest and largest animal, the highest respect was given to the bird because of its seniority. The story emphasizes communal harmony, cooperation, interdependence, and respect for

family, parents and seniority in general, a hierarchy that should not follow a pecking order but experience and wisdom.

Within numerous hospitality situations in Bhutan, I myself learned how to establish and manage *thuenlam* with Bhutanese. I took part in cultural hospitality practices and rituals at various levels, ceremonial and non-ceremonial, informal and formal. By understanding the importance of hospitality for *thuenlam*, I learned how to manoeuvre in a society where knowing how to create and manage *thuenlam* helps to gain access to people at different levels who are enmeshed in a complicated web of hierarchical relationships. This is reflected in everyday etiquette, *beyzhag* and the type of gifts one has to offer to people of different ranks and status. For my doctoral research on *thuenlam* and hospitality from 2012-2015, my already well-established familiarity with Bhutan and my *thuenlam* with a variety of Bhutanese were invaluable for my ethnographic fieldwork approach: I was a researcher and a guest at the same time and therefore a constitutive part of what I observed.

I explored how *thuenlam* works in everyday life for ordinary people within the hospitality context of the *neypo* system. What does *thuenlam* mean for them and how do they create and manage it in everyday life in the village context? The following is a selected ethnographic account from my doctoral thesis (Čokl 2019).

Due to the limited scope here, I can only briefly touch on transformations of *thuenlam* practices, especially in the wake of the sharply increased rural to urban and outmigration of the very recent past. However, I will say that even though the modalities may have changed and my participants have adjusted to changing technological and socio-economic circumstances, the idea of *thuenlam* as a tacit and explicit cultural practice of relationship fostering continues to be important and meaningful. Furthermore, whilst I confined my research to two valleys in Bhutan, mobility has been an important aspect of Bhutanese life in the places I visited. The

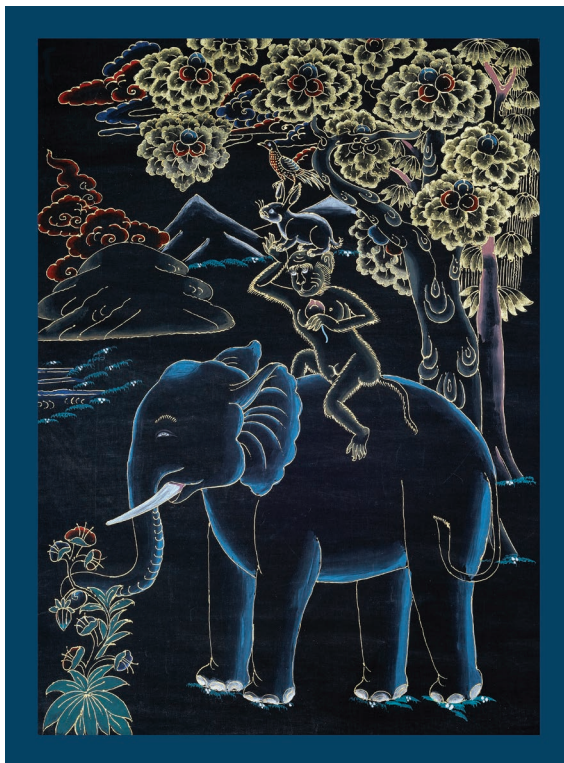


Image 1: The Four Friends symbolize harmony and cooperation in society without a pecking order.

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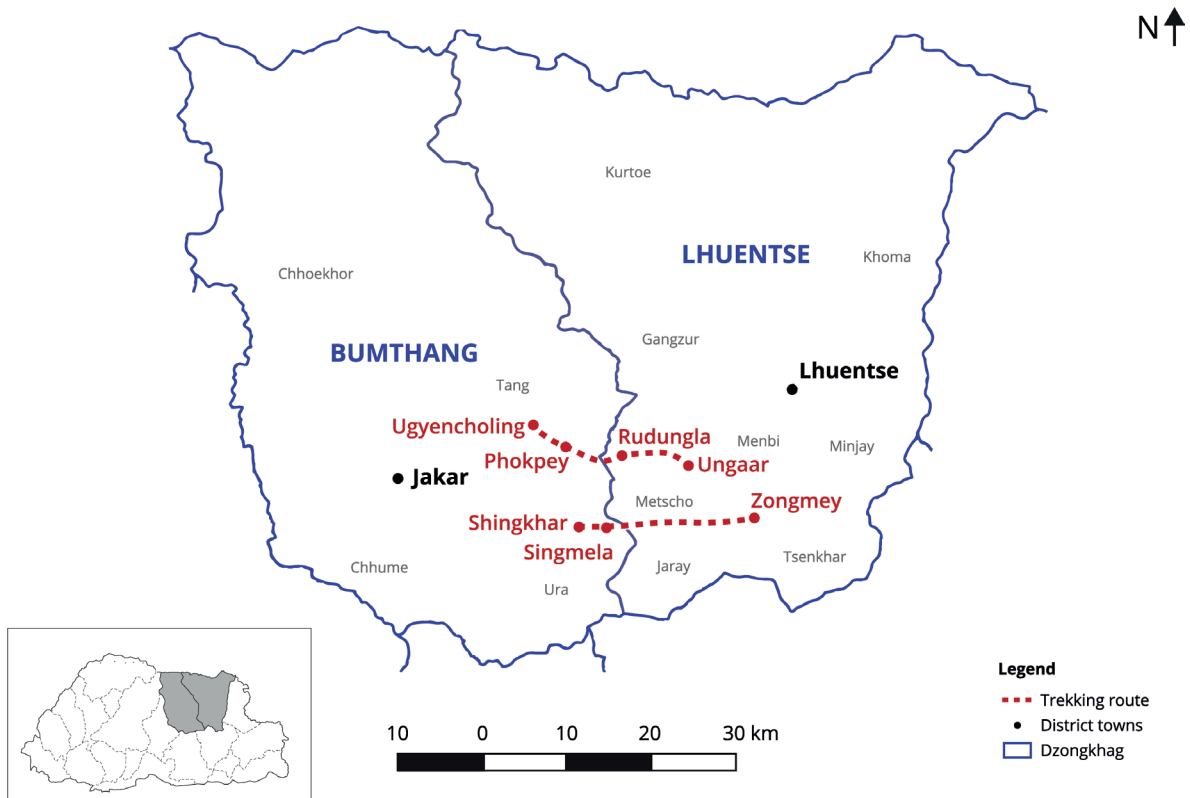


Image 2: The traditional *neypo* footpaths between Bumthang and Lhuentse.
© 2023 Amely Haslauer

composition of the village population in Shingkhār is far from homogenous in terms of origin and language of its members. For instance, there are several households where one spouse is from a different part of Bhutan and being multilingual is the norm rather than the exception.

I embarked on a two-day trek along the old footpath from Shingkhār, a village at approximately 3400 meters elevation in Bumthang (Central Bhutan), to Zhongmay in Lhuentse (Eastern Bhutan) below 2000 meters.

Three village friends accompanied me on this trip: Sonam¹, a middle-aged farmer and married horseman lives in Zhongmay but hails from Shingkhār; Nonola, a young civil servant who at the time of my research lived in the capital Thimphu but has since moved to Australia; he continues to have deep roots in Shingkhār and is a member of various online *tshogpa* (ཚོགས་པ་)—associations from friends and family to community level. Through these chat groups he remains

actively involved in everyday village issues. Lastly I was accompanied by my friend Aum (ཨུམ་) Sangay, a middle aged farmer from Shingkhār with whom I spent many hospitable events and who still lives in Shingkhār. Nonola organized our trip and was in charge of logistics. Sonam was our guide and horseman and Aum Sangay came along to share her memories of this past practice. From the perspectives of my three friends, I will describe how they understand, create, and negotiate *thuenlam* through acts of hospitality in everyday life.

Initially, when I reached Shingkhār and explained the purpose of my research, my village friends were in disbelief that someone would show interest in their ordinary village lives, listening to their experiences as opposed to those of more accomplished scholars and religious experts far away in Thimphu. Indeed, ethnographies of ordinary people and their everyday lives have long been confined to the margins of the academic field of Tibetan and Himalayan Studies.



Image 3: A view of Shingkar village when coming from Ura valley. © 2012 Benjamin Hörbe

This underrepresentation in the literature among other reasons motivated me to pursue the research introduced in this article. I first reached Shingkar in 2005 for my undergraduate research. After that I frequently returned and for my doctoral research I lived in Bhutan from 2012 to 2015 continuously. Each year I spent several months in Bumthang. Most of my participants I consider friends or family.

***Thuenlam*: 'The Source of Harmonious Living'**

Prior to my trip from Bumthang to Lhuentse, I asked my friend Lhendup, a well-educated civil servant from Bumthang who lives in Thimphu, about the meaning of *thuenlam* and he explained:

We usually say *thuenlam ja dang boe yang go* (མཐུན་ལམ་རྒྱ་དང་བོད་ཡང་དགོས), there must be good relations even between China and Tibet. It means that all have to maintain the *thuenlam* spirit between all levels, standards, castes, and even between neighbors

and the spirits. Experiencing peace and happiness in the country, society, and in the community solely depends on how strong our relationships are maintained in society. *Thuenlam* is the source of harmonious living and social cohesion.

The Dzongkha expression *thuenlam* was used by several of my participants and may be a neologism. I chose it as my analytical term when referring to relationship fostering practices in Bhutan. However, people engage in everyday *thuenlam* practices without naming them as such and would not use the term constantly to describe what is considered embodied practice.

According to Lhendup, *thuenlam* permeates Bhutanese ways of life which emphasize a strong sense for collective identity, sociality, and conformity. It is about keeping good relations with a variety of parties, human or non-human, in order to nurture harmony and social cohesion in society at large. He explained further that:

Most Bhutanese live in a joint family situation which is very much based on *thuenlam*. We work with others to achieve a lot of social goals. For instance an annual religious ceremony in a household cannot be a success without having *thuenlam* within the family members, village lama, monks, and fellow villagers. Even farm chores are still carried out by helping one another although this may change rapidly when we become technically more advanced.

Important key characteristics of *thuenlam* as an ideal include: it has a positive connotation, different types of *thuenlam* exist within hierarchical relationships as illustrated by the four friends, and ways of establishing and nurturing *thuenlam* are embedded in moralities based on shared tacit, but not uncontested, cultural assumptions regarding customs and etiquette. However, *thuenlam* should not be misconstrued as a clearly delineated cultural practice consisting of a strict set of rules people act upon, but rather as relating/connecting to others in a certain way that ought to establish mutuality and trust, the important prerequisites for all sorts of tangible and intangible exchange. Different personalities and characters have their own ideas, motives and agendas when it comes to *thuenlam* creation and as I will show, within the hospitality context, there are ways to negotiate one's position and status.

***Thuenlam* with the Lha**

When I reached Shingkhari in Ura valley, I settled into my family's house and started doing my rounds. I had brought gifts to offer to all my friends. Most already knew me from previous stays and I often heard them say, "you are one of us now". This expression should not be taken literally. Rather, it conveys our connectedness, intimacy, and mutual respect, developed over the many years I have worked in the community. After initial refusals to accept gifts, my friends were very happy about the small tokens from abroad. I had been away to Europe for a while and visiting their

homes re-established our connection and was appreciated.

I informed the villagers about my new research interests and in our conversations, just like many times before, they brought up the *neypo* tradition. Prior to the launch of infrastructure development in Bhutan in the 1950s², a vast network of host-guest relationships existed across the kingdom and beyond its borders, the *neypo* network. In *Bumthangkha* (བུམ་ཐང་ཁ་), a host would be called *nadpo*³ or *naspo* and a guest *ngud* or *ngus*, depending on accents. Different communities in Bhutan have their own terms for 'host' and 'guest' depending on the local vernacular. My friends from Shingkhari village in Ura valley, Bumthang, however commonly used the terms *neyp* or *neypo* when talking about their hosts in Lhuentse. Here, I use the term *gyoem* (མཉེན་མོ) for 'guest'.

There were many reasons for the Bumthang to embark on seasonal migrations to adjacent valleys depending on wealth, social class, rank, and status. Some, such as cattle migration, are still practiced. Most of them were about survival and complementing the scarce food stock in Bumthang. Here, my context is largely what was described by my participants as *gren* (Bt), 'begging/asking for food'. While squatting near the wood stove in Aum Sangay's kitchen, drinking hot *ara* (ཨ་རཱ་), she reminded me about the *grendo* practice in the past:

Well, I went to Kurtoe⁴ when I was eleven years old. During those days, it was a little difficult for us to sustain ourselves here in Bumthang. Therefore, during summer, we relied on our agricultural work for sustenance and in winter, we went to Kurtoe to beg. After leaving from here we held our first night at Khan. The next day we travelled from Khan to Zhongmay, and after arriving at Zhongmay we started begging into three directions. In Zhongmay we had our own *neypo*, where we set up base. Today we have about thirty-six households here in Shingkhari, but when I was a child, we had only about

twelve to thirteen households. These twelve or thirteen households each had their own hosts in Zhongmay. In some cases however two households or more from here had one host in Zhongmey.

While listening to her recollections from the past, I realized that in order to fully grasp how *thuenlam* fostering within the *neypo* system works, I needed to understand the recent history of social stratification which continues to linger today. One's status in the social hierarchy determined the purpose and modalities of one's seasonal migrations. The *thuenlam* of different hierarchical relationships also corresponds with associated practices in the hospitality context. How one travels and the reception one receives by the *neypo*, what type of gifts one presents and what one receives in return and in general the kind of hospitality one can expect depends on one's social status and positioning in relation to the host. Just to give an example from the past: the majority of villagers I talked to in Bumthang, including those who accompanied me on my trip to Lhuentse, went for *grendo*, barter or gleaning. They were more or less on equal footing with their *neypo*, regarding status and class, and small gifts would be exchanged upon arrival and departure⁵. However, some villagers perceived themselves as *grenkhang* (Bt. Beggar) and felt that this might have impacted how they were received by hosts at times.

Finally, it is also important to know that the notion of *neypo* includes the category of the non-human host, 'numinous inhabitants' (Ura 2001) with whom good relations have to be kept or else it can lead to misfortune and sickness. The Shingkarpa impute meaning to their natural environment. While traveling, for instance, they traverse 'sacred landscapes' (Hirsch and O'Hanlon 1995), believed to be inhabited by a variety of local deities, earth- and water spirits. These numina are associated with places such as groves, crags, cliffs, lakes, and river confluents. Polluting them can cause an imbalance in the relationship with these cosmic dwellers. The *lha* (ལྷ) and spirits are

of different ranks, some benevolent and some malevolent, and they can affect the well-being of travelers and pack animals if their dwelling places are defiled. Numerous legends, myths, and stories underpin such beliefs and emphasize the moral obligation of keeping good relations with the *lha* who, in return, will protect the humans against evil influences.

The tenets of participant observation correspond to my personality since I enjoy being sociable and immersing myself in the field deeply. I believe that it is shared experiences such as joint hospitality events, treks and pilgrimages, and other communal activities that help me better understand the daily lives of my participants. Therefore, I decided to 're-enact' the annual seasonal migrations of the Shingkarpa to the adjacent Lhuentse valley. Together with my friends Nonola, Sonam and Aum Sangay, I planned to trek from Shingkar in Ura valley to Zhongmay in Lhuentse along the old footpath, which nowadays is hardly used. On the way, they would tell me more about the adventures, dangers and joys entailed in the hike and how they were hosted by their *neypo*. After a few days of preparations, we finally started our trek in the early morning and moved towards the mountain pass Singmela at approximately 4000 meters above the village, passing Zhamzur *gonpa* (དཀོན་ལྷ) on the way. Our first aim was to reach Khan, the old camp site of the Shingkarpa. We had five horses along with us to carry our luggage. Sonam had a hard time reining them in because the footpath had not been maintained properly over the past years. He had instructions to return the horses to their owner in Zhongmay. Sonam himself hails from Shingkar but, following the local custom of uxorilocality, moved to his wife's household in Lhuentse after marriage.

Until Singmela it was a steep climb on a footpath that Nonola jokingly called the 'tantric way', because it was not aligned in serpentine but rather straight up the hill like a short cut. Despite his young age of 28 years, Nonola turned out to be a great narrator on everything related to traveling



Image 4: A view of Shingkhar valley en route to Singmela, near Zhamsur gonpa.
© 2013 Yeshey Dorji

past and present. He told us, for instance, that the chirping of a particular bird when heard repeatedly on the way is a sign of good luck. My companions described travelling in the past as tough: summer season entailed the danger of hailstorm, heavy rain, muddy footpaths, landslides, and the constant attacks by leeches. In winter, it was very cold, dry, and the occasional heavy snowfall made it difficult for people and horses to move forward. Aum Sangay narrated an incident from childhood. She did not have sneakers, it was raining and her father didn't allow her to wear even the traditional boots. When I inquired why she said, "The traditional boots will get damaged in the muddy water. When we took rest however, I dried my feet and put them on. After reaching home I could not take them off as they would have shrunk, so I had to wear them until they dried."

Aum Sangay, like many other villagers I interviewed, kept referring to the dangers of evil spirits and local deities. Indeed, when we were about to reach Singmela

pass, she grabbed some thorny twigs and wiped everyone's back with it to chase back the evil spirits to Ura valley where they belonged. She made sure that they would not follow us to Lhuentse where they could harm our hosts. Next, Nonola sprinkled *serkyem* (གསེར་སྒྲིམས་) an alcoholic libation to the local deities inhabiting the landscape at the pass. We drank a cup of *ara*, the *lamchang* (ལམ་ཅང་) for travelers, the alcohol on the way. Upon reaching the *chorten* (མཚོ་རྟེན་) and *labtsa* (ལའ་ཙ་), a pile of stones believed to be the residing place of a local deity, we added a stone, a flower, and some edibles as a gift offering. I was told that by doing so the deity will consider protecting us throughout the journey. In addition, while approaching a pass some travelers shout "*lha gyelo*" (ལྷ་རྒྱལ་ལོ་) which means 'may good win over evil' or 'may the gods be victorious'. We enjoyed the wonderful views of the Himalayan mountain range with its snow peaks, believed to be the residence of mountain deities, protectors such as *yulha* (ཡུལ་ལྷ་) and *kyelha* (རྒྱེས་ལྷ་). I



Image 5: Offering incense to the local deities on a mountaintop.
© 2009 Marina Beck

felt touched when I saw that my fellow travelers were equally in awe of the beauty that surrounded us. We then continued our journey in silence for a while.

When we reached our camp, my friends made a fire, prepared tea and warmed up some leftovers. Aum Sangay instructed me, “We must not spill milk into the fire; it could upset the local deities and cause *drib* (འདྲིབ་ spiritual defilement). We also must not fry meat over open fire because the deities do not like the smell.” This was all part of the ‘dos and don’ts’ in order to keep *thuenlam* with the local deities, respecting their likes and dislikes. While camping, they are considered our *neypo*, and just like with human hosts we should follow the rules and etiquette in their ‘house’, and not do anything that might upset them. My friends referenced a variety of local deities and numina who reside in particular places, mostly *tsan* (འཕགས་) in the mundane and *lu* (ལུ་) in the sub-mundane categories. For example, *neydag* (ལྷ་མོ་འདུག་) are guardians of particular places and travelers must not

anger them while traversing through their territory.

I asked Nonola what young people think about such beliefs and he responded that those who grow up in Thimphu are estranged from village life and practices; they follow the customs during family rituals out of respect for their parents and grandparents but do not understand the deeper meanings. Others see no harm in following the customs because one never knows whether there is something to it or not. Again others take such beliefs seriously. Many Bhutanese abroad request their family members back home via mobile phone to appease the protector deities before an upcoming exam or job interview. Nonola pointed out that even if youth don’t believe in these customs, while teasing their parents and grandparents about them, they will not antagonize them.

After a warm dinner and with hot *ara* in our hands, I suddenly remembered my first arrival in Shingkhari in 2005. I suffer

from chronic headaches and had a terrible migraine that day. I tried to explain my condition to my hosts but they started fumigating my room to appease the local spirit they thought responsible. I asked my friends what the repercussions were, should someone upset the local deities. Aum Sangay explained that in bad cases it can lead to the demise of the horses and people will get sick. She shared the following incident:

During those days if somebody held the night at Khan and if the travelers happened to burn something filthy on the fire, a wild predator like a tiger might come and kill the best horses. It is the *neydag* because it can take any form. I remember one incident with Ap Tashi. His best horse was killed by predators in Khan and we had to carry the entire load on our back, until we reached here. We were lots of people and the whole night we were playing dice and unintentionally some dirty things must have gotten into the fire. Some must have silently roasted beef and when our firewood was finished they fetched some random twigs that we used as our mattresses and threw them into the fire. So while grabbing them the leftover skin of some dried fish we had eaten for dinner was also pulled with it and accidentally burnt. The next morning, when we were about to resume our journey, we couldn't find Ap Tashi's best horse. The local deity had been angered and retaliated.

I remembered what Ap Dendup back in Shingkhar told me. Now an elderly man, he was part of the group Aum Sangay was talking about and, during one of our many evenings in Shingkhar, he had shared the following story:

On the way to Singmela we have a little *gonpa* called Shamzur. Previously we used to lock the *gonpa* and keep the key hidden under a stone so that whoever comes can make offerings, pray for their safe

trip and leave. I still remember my parents praying to the deities: 'Now, deities you know that Kurtoe is a place of cliffs and rivers. So if I encounter a river please build a bridge for me and if I encounter a cliff please build a ladder for me. So that I may be safe until I return back'. We used to hold night at Khan and wherever we stayed our bonfire had to be kept clean. While cooking our dinner we must not burn anything filthy and milk must not boil over into the fire because it will cause heavy snowfall or rainfall with strong winds that will soak the place in no time and extinguish our fire. We should not forget to pray for the help and protection of the local deities. We believe that the deities are just like us and a Bhutanese saying goes: *lha dre mi sum joe lam cig* (ལྷ་འདྲེ་མི་གསུམ་རྩེད་ལམ་གཅིག) 'Gods, demons, and humans share the same conduct!'. If we pray for their help they won't let any harm come to us. If we don't pray to them they will be angered and can cause harm to us. There is a *neydag*, a territorial deity in Khan too. I haven't seen the deity myself, but Ap Tashi had an encounter. He had to go and collect the harvest of his paddy fields in *Zhongmey*. His father in law reminded him to keep his bon fire clean. If not the deities will harm us. Back then, Ap Tashi, being a young man, didn't listen to his father-in-law and roasted dried pork on the fire instead. After dinner, when we all fell asleep, Ap Tashi dozed off near the fire. All his friends were in a deep slumber, but he himself woke up in the middle of the night. As soon as he opened his eyes he saw a very old woman looking at him from the other side of the fire. He quickly closed his eyes and turned his back toward the fire. But when he turned around he saw the old woman's back again with her skin looking like the bark of a tree, very rough. He was really terrified and woke up his friends, telling them

that he is unable to sleep because an old woman kept appearing. His friends didn't see anything, and they all went back to sleep, and the old woman appeared again to Ap Tashi. So, that entire night he could not sleep well.

Musing about Ap Tashi's encounter with the *neydag*, we settled into our blankets around the bonfire. The next day, I was about to meet several traditional Lhuentsep (ལུན་ཅེས་) hosts of my Bumthap (བུམ་ཐམ་) friends who had not met them in years.

We started early morning and after a long downhill hike we finally reached Zhongmay village. By then, I was very exhausted and could barely walk. We went straight to Sonam's house where his family served tea and snacks and prepared hot water for us to wash after the long journey. I handed over my *chom* (ཅོམ་), consisting of typical local gifts: four laundry soaps, four face soaps, one package of sugar, one package of biscuits, some noodles, some sweets, one package of tea bags, and a container of oil. This established my *thuenlam* with Sonam's family and henceforth he would be my *neypo* in Zhongmay. He explained that whenever I came back to Zhongmay in the future I would first have to visit his house.

Hospitality and *Thuenlam*

In order to understand the complexity of Bhutanese hospitality, I started out with Tom Selwyn's (2000) general definition that the basic function of hospitality is to establish or to promote an already established relationship through acts of hospitality within moral frameworks. Acts of hospitality refer to the exchange of goods and services (material and symbolic) between those who give hospitality (hosts) and those who receive it (guests). However, since hospitality is at one end of a continuum with hostility at the other, it is also ambiguous and implies the possibility of danger. Furthermore, hospitality can sometimes be coercive and manipulative and the outcome of mediated exchange as part of hospitality is not always clear (March 1998).

In her ethnography on Sherpa society, Sherry Ortner conceptualizes hospitality as the "central ritual of secular social relations" (Ortner 1978: 62). She locates hospitality as "being on the border between ritual [the latter a special (sacred) context removed and bounded off from everyday life] and everyday life itself, the ongoing flow of work and casual interactions that simply happen as people go about their business" (Ortner 1978: 62). In this regard, Ortner attributes a central role to etiquette:

The ritualism of hospitality is etiquette, a trivial term in our own culture, but a tremendously fruitful domain of analysis for the anthropologist. In etiquette, certain social interactions have been shaped, formalized, and raised, one might say, to the level of statements about the meaning of sociality in the culture. (Ortner 1978: 62)

In Bhutanese society, hospitality is an important mediating framework for managing and negotiating social relationships of all sorts, including challenging social norms by breaching etiquette. Hospitality is associated with commensality but also with exchange and ideas around reciprocity as well as status and hierarchy. Most importantly, hospitality events offer opportunities for 'keeping good relations' and connections, *thuenlam*. Gift-exchange, the basis for the formation of social relations according to Mauss (2002), is an important feature of *thuenlam* in Bhutan. The notion that a gift is not free but embedded in a mode of reciprocity - the obligation to give, to receive and to reciprocate - plays an important role in the hospitality context. Mauss (2002: 7) called these services and counter-services, which social collectivities commit to by presents and gifts, a 'system of total services' since it involves every aspect of society. Hospitality provides the basic condition for commensality and the exchange of gifts and services. In the cosmological worldview of my Bhutanese participants, similar to what Ortner described for the Sherpa, this

includes humans as well as the *lha*, the local deities, and malevolent spirits:

Hospitality also functions as the model for conducting most of the critical instrumental transactions in the society: manipulating neighbours, propitiating gods, pacifying demons, making merit, discharging (and regenerating) mutual obligations. (Ortner 1978: 63)

In the following, I will look briefly at the stages of hospitality within which *thuenlam* is managed through hosting and gift exchange. I broadly identify three phases that characterize the entire hospitality process. I chose Dzongkha terms purely for analytical purpose and to explicate underlying concepts that function in a tacit manner in Bhutanese social relations. Furthermore different regions may have different denominations; in general, such terms tend not to come up in daily conversations about hosting. The three phases are reception or *donglen* (གདོང་ལེན), treating/ managing the guest or *goemgi schongzhag* (མགྱོལ་མེ་གྱི་སྐྱོང་བཞག) and farewell or *dralmoen* (བུལ་སྐོན).

Thuenlam with the Neypo

ལག་སྟོང་གིས་ང་མ་བརྟུང། ཁ་སྟོང་གིས་དོན་མ་གསལ།

La tong gi nga ma dung | kha tong gi doen mase!

“Do not beat the drum with an empty hand. Do not clarify the meaning with an empty talk.”

Prior to our arrival, I was curious about how we would hand over our gifts and wanted to know more about local etiquette. I noticed that gifts in Bhutan indicate status and hierarchy. Common ways of nurturing *thuenlam* in villages are friendly visits, commensality and conviviality as well as the exchange of small gifts and services on a regular basis. Aum Sangay explained that this is part of practicing community *thuenlam*: “For example if I go to my neighbor’s house and she offers me *doma* (རྫོག་མ)

or *ara* and I give something to her, we call it *thuenlam*.”

Chodma (Bt.) suggests a gift within an equal relationship one brings when visiting others. If visiting a person of high status, the gift would be called *djangshey* (ཕྱག་མཇུག). During farewell, the host will offer a *lamju* (ལམ་འཇུག) and a *soera* (གསོལ་རས) is given by a person of higher status to one of lower status, either after a *chodma* or *djangshey* has been received or for received services by a host. Among equals, such remuneration is called *shulzhag* (བཀུལ་བཞག). Exchange between equals in the same village is an on-going expression of *thuenlam* within the village community where mutual assistance was also a matter of survival.

Aum Sangay explained that when guests come and show up with gifts, one has to assess their value and reciprocate accordingly at the end of their stay, sometimes even giving a little more than the value of the received gift. It all depends on the status and background of the giver and receiver and one does not want to be gossiped about or blamed afterwards by not having reciprocated accordingly. I will show later why it is so important to guard against gossip. Nowadays, cash is considered and accepted as a ‘gift’ and in some cases can become a burden because it has replaced in-kind remuneration. This can turn *thuenlam* practice into hardship especially for those Bhutanese returning to their villages from Thimphu. Nonola explained how these changes can become difficult for civil servants in Thimphu due to high expectations on behalf of the relatives back in the villages:

When they reach their home village, all the relatives will come with food and drink to see them. They will have to give *soera* in cash to each of the villagers visiting them. Some will invite them to their houses to eat meals and spend the night there. Again, they have to give *soera*. They have to give Nu (དྲུལ་ཀྲམ) 200 or Nu 300 to each of them. One of my friends went to his village with a total amount of 35,000 Nu and when he

returned, only Nu 250 were left in his pocket!

Expectations are even higher towards relatives living abroad as many villagers assume they earn more. Earning family members are expected to contribute to all sorts of family expenses such as ritual expenses, education fees of relatives, loans for house construction and land purchase. Previously religious specialists were paid in kind, now they charge money for their services. However, cash is not something all rural households have in abundance and those who stay back in the village homes depend on earning family members. This puts high pressure on the latter living in Thimphu or abroad. I heard from many friends, that this is one reason for them not to visit, or delay visiting their villages. Hence, when it comes to hospitality and gifting, a higher earning of family members does not necessarily correlate with more power for them to challenge certain family dynamics and practices as might be the case in other contexts.

***Beyzhag* mindu: Negotiating *Thuenlam* through Gossip**

To successfully foster *thuenlam* during hospitable events requires certain social skills and manners, *beyzhag*. *Beyzhag* “denotes manners without any connotation of formalization” (Phuntsho 2004: 575), unlike *driglam namzhag* which is the result of standardization and formalization of *driglam*, which Phuntsho describes as a former “spontaneous practice and inner appreciation of etiquette as a wholesome conduct” (Phuntsho 2004: 574).

*Beyzhag*⁶ refers to everyday embodied practice of manners and behaviorism. *Beyzhag* is dynamic and offers room for negotiation, intuition and creativity for those who interact, based on ideas of what constitutes good and bad manners. *Beyzhag* is not taught at schools like *driglam namzhag* but is transmitted from generation to generation and embodied through practice within the family and the wider community. Aum Sangay explained to me:

Typical Bhutanese hospitality I learned from my grandmothers. Generosity, sharing, was very important. People visited my grandmothers with or without gifts, but they had to offer something to the guests anyway—a bag of rice, balls of cheese or snacks. They told me to welcome everyone, feed them well and be generous with the butter while cooking! Religious heads would always be given preferential treatment, - the best room, food, and seat in the house. Hosts would always eat at the end, not just as a sign of good manners but to ensure that the guests had enough. I guess generosity and kindness are the main characteristics I can think of.

Breaches against the implicit, albeit negotiated, rules of *beyzhag* are commonly met with gossip. Besnier (2009: 190) recognizes gossip as a prominent feature of sociality and conceptualizes gossip as political action. He argues that in order to understand the ‘everyday production of politics’, the focus needs to be put on sites that are “much less straightforwardly political, including interactions that are woven into the ordinariness of everyday existence” (Besnier 2009: 190). By analyzing gossip Besnier seeks “to expand traditional anthropological ways of thinking about politics as located primarily in public life” (Besnier 2009: 190).

In my research, such sites are hospitable events where transformative substances such as food and drinks are exchanged and where villagers’ political agency unfolds within small-scale informal encounters. Gossip serves as a very important levelling mechanism of power relations and as a tool to convey messages whilst ‘saving one’s face’.

My Bhutanese participants believe that gossip can lead to a drain of vital energies and negatively affect their fortune and luck, or their *wangtha* (དཔལ་ཐང་) and *lungta* (ལྷུང་ཏཱ་). In his recently published ethnography on the persistence of Bon practices and the embeddedness of associated beliefs

in Goleng village social life (Zhemgang District), the Bhutanese anthropologist Kelzang Tashi explains in detail the importance of protecting oneself from hostile influences, of which ‘pernicious gossip’ or *mikha* (མི་ཁྲ་) is the most significant:

Mikha is a gendered phenomenon, with the vast majority of gossip believed to be by women. Some women are even feared, given that gossip can become spiritualized and turn malicious. Regardless of one’s faith, people deem *mikha* malicious, as it is believed to be caused by the evil intent of envious persons. (Tashi 2023: 164)

Tashi distinguishes between different types of *mikha*, of which not all need to be malicious. Malicious gossip however can turn into *kharam* (ཁ་རམ་), a ‘ruinous curse’, far more dangerous than *mikha*, as it can cause physical and mental health issues as well as conflict, altercations and infidelity between couples (Tashi 2023: 165). To guard against *kharam*, the Bhumtap attach “phallic implements on the cardinal corners of houses and sometimes more prominently above doors” (Tashi 2023: 163). In severe cases where gossip is believed to have led to misfortune and sickness, people perform *mikha* rituals which shall avoid and ward off the negative influences of such gossip.

Jealousy and envy were quite frequently brought up as motivators for gossip in Shingkhari. Considering the potential effects of gossip, it seems a potent tool for women in their ‘everyday production of politics’ to challenge, test and level perceived power imbalances and to manipulate *thuenlam* of other people. Women have a central role in hospitality, the main site for seemingly endless cycles of gossip in the village as explained by Aum Sangay:

If other people come to visit us and we serve them food and drink, they might talk nicely to us, but when leaving our house and going to the next one they will talk about us there ‘this guy is doing this and that...’. And

again if the people from that house then come to our house they will again complain about another house. This is human nature and it is very rampant in Bhutan, everybody does it. Sometimes, when two households are too close and are on good terms, another household may feel jealous and their members will come and gossip with the intention to divide us.

Being a woman I had access to the chit chat, *sheytho* (འགྲོ་ཐོ་) and gossip that occurs when men are absent. In one such case in Shingkhari, a neighbor who came to discuss some work with my hosts behaved disrespectfully by not understanding where to rightfully sit, by occupying a seat that inappropriately suggested more intimacy with the family, and a higher status, than was the case. Additionally, his way of speaking was considered rude as it was too blunt and ‘ambitious’. “*Beyzhag mindu* (འབྲུག་མི་འདྲ་བ་) - He doesn’t have manners”, I was told by my host, after said person had left and she gossiped about his behavior. *Beyzhag* also serves as a frame of reference to reinforce hierarchy and status in a social order where one ought to know where to sit and how to speak politely to superiors. However, *beyzhag*, as illustrated in the case above, allows room for negotiations and testing boundaries. After all, villagers do not blindly act out dictates of tradition but exercise their own judgement (Kipnis 1997).

For Aum Sangay the phrase *beyzhag mindu* refers to behavior such as filthy talk, *tsokha* (བཅོམ་ཁྲ་) or not knowing one’s rightful place and where to sit during gatherings, or being too ambitious and impertinent and not showing humility in one’s speech, body expression and intentions where it is due. Aum Sangay confirmed that the reprimand of such behavior is hardly open confrontation:

Our habit is that if, for example, I enter a house and unknowingly take a seat near the window, when actually my seat is near the door, the hosts and other guests will not say anything as

long as I am there but once I have left they will start gossiping about me.

Showing bad behaviour, *beyzhag mindu*, by breaching and testing implicit rules, for instance customary seating arrangements, will be ‘penalized’ by gossip. Malicious talk, *mikha*, talking behind someone’s back with the intention to disrepute or ‘reprimand’ the person, will be the most common reaction to someone who doesn’t know how to behave. In a country with a population of not even 800,000 and given the close-knit society in Bhutanese villages like Shingkhar, the message will surely reach the person concerned. Those who become too ambitious and bold, testing their role and status in the community are reined in with gossip.

Young Bhutanese like Nonola, who left the village to pursue a career in the capital and later in Australia, have to navigate between the demands of a modern society that expects them to become self-reliant, critical, and entrepreneurial citizens. On the other hand, they are expected to fulfil the expectations of their family and elders, including following customs related to etiquette, hierarchy, and respecting authority. Open confrontation does not seem to be an option according to Nonola who explained to me that “conveying bad news bluntly, speaking harshly and being too critical and opinionated to someone’s face is still not well received today, even less so when dealing with our parents and superiors⁸.”

Thuenlam is established and fostered through modes of reciprocity. Sonam explained to me that

Kadrin samni (ཁ་དྲིན་བསམ་ནི) refers to the feeling of gratefulness to someone, both in mind and expressed in action after a received favor or help. It means showing gratitude, for example by giving a *soera* for received hospitality, mostly food and shelter, when we depart.

Within *kadrin samni*, the return favor is most commonly made within a short time period. Furthermore, he explained to me, such a return favor or expression

of thankfulness does not mean that one will forget the kindness that was shown by merely reciprocating. It does not mean the two parties are ‘squared’. Ideally, the favor/help should be remembered and kept in mind, following the logic of *thuenlam* where a relationship—once established—shall be nurtured over a prolonged period. Hence, *kadrin samni* is neither purely transactional as it involves sentiments, an emotional attachment; nor is it completely disinterested as it involves the possibility to obtain favors and assistance.

Following the logic of *kadrin samni*, gifts during *dralmoen* (འཕྲོལ་མེད་ farewell) can be tokens of gratitude for received favors and help, “return favors” whilst they may also constitute an opening for anticipated help or favors during *donglen*. *Kadrin samni* expresses local notions of the moral obligation to reciprocate or better, being grateful and showing thankfulness. Such reciprocation would initiate or reproduce *thuenlam*. However, there is also always the possibility of non-reciprocation or ulterior motives on behalf of the people involved. The premise seems to be that if one seeks to establish *thuenlam* with another person by offering a gift, there will be a return gift of some sort which can be in kind, a favor or service, as a sign of gratitude and expression of thankfulness. However, depending on the situation, the process can also come to nothing when no return gift or favor follows.

Donglen: The Welcome Phase – From Strangers to Familiars

The reception at Sonam’s house was cordial and his family helped us unpack our horses, escorted us into the house and offered us *ara* first, then tea. Afterwards we offered our *chom*, because as the saying goes in Bumthangkha: “*yag thongpa minla tsamtek*” (‘I have come with a small gift so that I am not empty handed’).

In Shingkhar Nonola had provided a lively description of what according to him still happens during *donglen* while also addressing what makes for a good or bad host:

The host will say ‘jön, jön’ (འཕྱོན་འཕྱོན་). (...) We can make out by the way the host welcomes the guests, whether it is a good host or not, we just know. If the host does not bother about the guest...that is considered a bad host. Good hosts will offer whatever they have and speak kindly, be compassionate and share their feelings by inquiring ‘what brings you here?’ and then they will invite the guests by saying ‘jön, jön, jön la!’ (འཕྱོན་ལགས་), which means ‘come, come’. Once they are in the house they will say ‘shu, shu la!’ (བཞུགས་ལགས་) which means ‘sit, sit, have a seat!’ Then immediately they will serve *ara* and offer *jönchang* (འཕྱོན་ཆང་) or *dongchang* (གདོང་ཆང་) the welcome drink. After that they will offer *dongja* (གདོང་ཇ་ welcome tea), and then they will talk to each other to get to know each other.

For ordinary people like us, receptions were informal with their individual shaping depending on the hosts’ abilities and personalities and the type of *thuenlam* between the parties. Being considered a guest from far away, I was given a slightly preferential treatment by seating me on a softer cushion and serving me first. We were also ushered into the altar room, *choesham* (མཆོད་འཁོར་), instead of the kitchen, and lined up from window to door with me sitting closest to the altar.

As mentioned before, seating arrangements offer opportunities to negotiate *thuenlam*. Ordinary guests would usually be seated in the kitchen, *thabtshang* (ཐབ་ཆང་) according to a seating arrangement based on status⁹. I observed that usually the hosts will direct high-ranking guests to the best, the ‘highest’ place, always on a mattress, carpet or cushion called *dan* (གདན་), or armchairs where available. However, guests from far away or abroad, after a very long strenuous journey, will also be treated a bit ‘higher’ upon arrival and offered a *dan*. While sitting in Sonam’s *choesham*, I remembered how Ap Tashi, my elderly host in Shingkar, had offered his take on seating arrangements in olden days:

Ya, if a lama comes they will directly escort him to the *choesham* and seat him on a thick mattress. In case of an official person, his mattress will be a little thinner than the lama’s but he will also be seated in the *choesham*. And if it is somebody like me, they will sit in the *thabtshang* near the window. That is our culture: lamas and high officials will be seated in the altar room and people like us will be near the window. Regarding those who went for *grendo*, begging for food, if it is a man then they will seat him near the window and in case of a woman they will just sit together casually. *Ya*, in olden days we had that culture of differentiating between men and women according to both religion and worldly life.

I observed that occasionally the seating ritual can lead to humorous negotiations between guests and hosts. When the guest takes a lower seat, the host will prompt them to move to a higher seat. As a rule of thumb, it is appreciated if one shows modesty and refuses the best place. Ultimately however, the guest will be ushered into the rightful seat. These practices are not written in stone and again depend on the personalities involved. My host’s neighbor in Shingkar for example, was considered quite rude for challenging the order. However, he did this frequently and despite the gossip, he seemed unimpressed with the potential consequences. Cultural behavior relating to etiquette may seem ingrained and embodied, but there is always room for challenging the status quo, no matter how subtly this might be achieved.

Sonam and Nonola were busy helping in the kitchen where our dinner was prepared, while Aum Sangay and I rested and enjoyed our beverages. After a while we handed over our gifts. This should be done either inside or outside of the house but never over the threshold as, according to local beliefs, it can turn the giver and receiver into enemies. Handing over a gift in passing over the threshold and empty vessels/



Image 6: Serving welcome *ara* during a hospitality event in Shingkhar.
© 2012 Benjamin Hörbe

containers in general is considered very inauspicious. Back in Shingkhar, my host Ap Tashi, had instructed me carefully about the importance of bringing a *chom*:

If someone goes to another's place without *chom*, empty handed, it is considered impolite. That's the culture that existed also in the past. The reason for taking the *chom*: Firstly, superiors take gifts in acknowledgment of the respect that the *neypo* have for them. Secondly, as a guest, it also ensures that one is not empty-handed. A *chom* is intended as a very auspicious sign.

While receiving the gift, it is polite to show some modesty, which may include initially refusing the gift several times while saying "I have nothing to offer in return!"¹⁰

The *donglen* phase, that is the welcome phase, is especially important when it concerns strangers. I observed how guests and hosts, unbeknownst to each other, kept

inquiring about each other's social background, birthplace and village, family status and relations until they finally reached some common ground which established trust. With strangers, *mi sap* (མི་གསུང་), one has to establish *thuenlam* first in order to know what treatment is appropriate but also to be sure that the guest means no harm. Inquiring about the stranger's professional and family background is a strategy to establish such a connection. Some of my friends use to joke that if you talk to strangers long enough, you will eventually discover that you are related, maybe even close cousins.

The welcome drink, *dongchang*, deserves particular attention for this 'scanning ritual' to establish trust. It is more common in central and east Bhutan and less so in other regions. It is offered upon arrival and at least one refill is mandatory. Sometimes an 'enforcement ritual' can go on and on until the third refill before the guests' refusal is taken seriously. Alcohol, which plays an important role in Bhutanese social life,

helps in the process of loosening up as a popular proverb goes: ཆང་མར་འཕྱུལ། ལྷོ་ཡར་ཐོང། *chang ma zul | lo ya thong* ('Alcohol goes down, chat comes up'). Alcohol increases the sociability of people and the name of the alcoholic beverage corresponds with the occasion, as Dorji (2005) points out in his article on the role of alcohol in Bhutan.

Hosting strangers can be tricky, after all one doesn't know anything about the person and whether there is some danger lurking somewhere. Aum Sangay narrated one incidence that scared her:

Once when I still lived at my mother's house, this *ap* came to our place. He said that he knew my aunt's husband so I let him in. I offered everything, alcohol, food...but suddenly he cracked and went mad. I got very scared! He was shouting and talking a lot of nonsense, like a mad man. By then it was already after midnight. My husband and I went to our neighbor for help. Meanwhile the guest had left, I don't know where to, but our neighbor stayed with us that night. We locked the door and slept. During that time I was much younger and I got very afraid of him. First he spoke very well and after a while he went *chölo* (འཚོལ་ལོང་ psycho) and he also had a *patang* (དཔའ་རྟགས་ sword)!

Donglen is the initial phase to incorporate guests into the fold of the household and to assess strangers and potential danger. *Donglen* turns strangers into familiars and a good host will warmly welcome the guests with kind words, insist that they enter the house and usher them into the kitchen to their rightful place. The virtues of a good host are expressed through the three doors, mind, body, and speech.

Goemgi shongzhag: Managing Guests

ཞག་ཅིག་གི་མཚན་ལྷོ་དང་འདྲ།

zhag chigi goem lha dang dra | "The guest of one night is like a god!"

The introductory phase of *donglen* fades into *goemgi shongzhag*, managing guests throughout their stay, whether only for a meal, for a night or a longer period of time. Already during the *donglen* phase, the host, mostly the *nangi aum* (ནང་གི་ཨུམ་), the woman of the house, will start preparing the first meal for the guests. Our guide turned *neypo*, Sonam, also disappeared in the kitchen and was busy helping his wife, *nangi aum* Karma to prepare our meal.

As soon as the meal was ready, Karma took a seat in front of us, surrounded by pots and kitchen utensils and started distributing the food. We ate with our hands while sitting on the floor and Karma used ladles to scoop the food onto our plates. She was very attentive and readily offered refills as soon as she deemed necessary. Prior to eating, most Bhutanese will offer a tiny portion of their meal to the *kenchosum* (དཀོན་མཆོག་གསུམ་ Buddha, Dharma, Sangha) whilst murmuring a mantra. Etiquette centers on how to sit, how to hold the bowl and how to use one's hand to eat properly. These steps are thoroughly detailed in the manual of the official etiquette *driglam namzhag* (National Library Thimphu 1999) and much more relaxed in the unofficial hospitality settings of rural homes.

Customarily, and out of courtesy, the host family will not eat together with the guests and take their meals only after the guests are done. Our *neypo* Sonam explained that this has to do with etiquette and respect:

Mostly the *nangi aum* receives the guest and serves tea or *ara*. The other family members, especially the kids, may not show themselves or they may even hide in other rooms. That is actually to show respect to the guest. Another way of showing respect is that the guests get served first and neither the host nor family members will eat with them. The host family usually eats at the end. That is because they want to serve the best portion of food to the guest whilst they can have the rest later. Most of the time however, they don't expect to eat the food that is served to the

guests. They cook simple food for themselves.

Being generous and offering the best food relative to one's capacity distinguishes a good host from a stingy one. Whenever I insisted on hearing more about bad hosts or nasty guests, my participants seemed rather skeptical and embarrassed by the thought that a host would be so rude as not to welcome guests into the house appropriately, let alone refuse to offer food. Indeed, in all my 23 years in Bhutan I remember only one incidence where a host forgot to offer me even a welcome drink whilst serving my village friend who had come along with me. My friend, who had noticed it, agreed that it seemed rude but explained that this particular host was "not right in her head" and had mental issues.

While talking about the possibility of bad hosts and guests seemed like an embarrassing affair, Aum Sangay did have some experiences with stingy hosts (Bt. *tregpa*). She reasoned it might have been because she and her friends from Bumthang were considered *grenkhan* (Bt.), beggars. To this Aum Sangay related a rather amusing encounter where unfriendly behavior infuriated an elderly Bumthap, who found a way to retaliate:

There are places in Lhuentse where people locked their doors as soon as the Bumthap were about to enter. That time we were in a group, in line to a particular house. One of us was about to enter when that host family locked the door. Again another person went and the same happened, and again a third person went and the same thing happened. Finally one *agey* (ཡ་ཉལ་, old man) got very angry and so he went and bolted the door from the outside. He also took away the padlock! We went uphill and when we came down again that family's mother came towards us, face to face, and we told her that we had not taken the lock. 'You can check' we said and this woman started checking

our bags. I was really afraid that time because this woman was shouting!

When I asked her why she thought they were treated that way and if that host was poor, she responded:

That woman was very rich! But she didn't feel like giving. Maybe her mind was not good. She didn't know what happiness is and what she will gain when she gives to others. She doesn't know what kindness is.

Being a good host requires many social skills and considerable talent, such as knowing how to speak and express oneself, how to approach people, how to cook, as well as many organizational skills. Similarly, showing a friendly and outgoing personality and accepting food and drink as a guest signifies more than just filling one's stomach. It is about establishing trust and connection with the host. Unless one has very good reasons, not offering food to guests or refusing to accept food when insistently offered by hosts, can be an embarrassing situation as Aum Sangay pointed out: "If you reject my food offering then I may feel sad thinking that you might doubt me as a poison giver."

Households that were assumed to give poison were deprived of the most fundamental element of Bhutanese *thuenlam* practice: *goemgi shongzhag*, sharing food and drinks with others and managing guests. These families were stigmatized and marginalized socially because nobody wanted to accept food from them and their partaking in hosting events was limited. Not accepting food or eating little can also be considered a sign of depression or feeling unwell, as I experienced during my time in Shingkhar. The sheer amount of food was difficult for me to handle and it took quite an effort to explain that I was not sad or homesick but simply couldn't eat so much.



Image 6: A *lamju* for the author: dried mushrooms and roasted rice.
© 2012 Ulrike Čokl

Dralmoen: The Farewell Phase

ལེགས་ཤོམ་སླེ་བྱོན
leyshom bay joen – ‘Travel safely!’

We spent the next three days visiting different houses in Zhongmay following the same ritual. We brought gifts for our hosts; we were offered drinks and later food, exchanged news and had long conversations before returning to Sonam’s house, not before I handed over a *soera* in form of some cash. When the day of our departure from Zhongmay approached, all those we had visited and who had received a *chom* came to bid their farewell by offering a *lamju*, a parting gift, in return. A *lamju*, Aum Sangay had told me, is like a ‘return-gift’ for a received *chom*:

When you visit the village and you have given something to me, then, when you leave, I will also give something to you. We call that *lamju*. But in

case you have not given anything to me, then I will not come and see you off.

During long and short visits alike, where tea and snacks, lunch or a dinner is offered, the guests will give a tip to the *neypo*, called *shulzhag* if it is between equals or *soera* if it is from someone of higher status to someone of lower status. Ap Tashi, my host from Shingkhar, himself of slightly higher status, had explained during one of our many conversations how this usually plays out:

After drinking alcohol and eating food they offer us a *lamju* and it isn’t nice to simply leave by *langma proksay gaimala* (Bt. ‘dusting our butt and go’). Those who have more would give Nu. 100, those who have less would give Nu. 50 and those who have even less would give Nu. 20. It also indicates

respect not to leave without *kadrin samni* and prayers and wishes to see each other again the following year without any misfortune. If the gift is given by a superior, it is considered *soera*. It is considered *tendrel* (རྟོན་འབྲེལ་), an auspicious sign in anticipation of our reunion. When they give us *lamju*, we offer *soera* in return as a sign of our gratitude.

Upon departure, we were also offered a *lamchang*, a farewell drink. Our hosts wished us a happy journey “*lekshom bay joen*”, and gave us some snacks for the way. Nangi aum Karma explained:

When the Bumthap were about to return back home, we used to give them chilli and rice as *lamju*, and some packed lunch. In return, they used to give us some amount of *shulzhag* as sign of *thuenlam*, the good relationship between host and guest.

Now it was my turn to leave some *soera* and thank my host and guide Sonam and his wife Karma for the received hospitality. Nonola, Aum Sangay and I returned to Shingkhari by bus the preferred means of transport these days unless one has a car. Showing emotions and too much attachment publicly is not common among Bhutanese. However, when I, the *chilip* (ཕྱི་ཁྱེད་པ་ foreigner), listen long enough to farewell speeches about how we must have been friends in a past life and that *karma* brought us all together in this life, and will – provided we are still alive – reunite us again in the future, it always makes me feel emotional, especially with people with whom *thuenlam* is strong. The impermanence and contingencies of life are frequently addressed in farewell and welcome speeches alike. While leaving, my elderly friends will say, “If I am still alive, we will meet again”. When I return, they welcome me with, “I have only stayed alive to see you once more before I die”. In between, nowadays by social media, the message conveyed often is, “Return fast because I might be dead if you wait too long”. In the past, without road

infrastructure and when traveling meant traversing dangerous and steep territory, this was indeed a realistic outlook.

Conclusion: The Continued Importance of *Thuenlam* Practices

Thuenlam emerges in my ethnography as a quality that ought to be nurtured in all relationships. *Thuenlam* extends into both human and non-human relationships; in the cosmological realm it is necessary for the relationships with the *lha*, in order to avoid misfortune. *Thuenlam* is not an unchanging cultural essence but is embedded in time and space and, while some *thuenlam* practices are disappearing, new ones are emerging. These days many Shingkhari have left to work and study abroad, but they keep *thuenlam* with their families and the *kyelha* from their village. They make sure to participate in the annual ritual *lochoed* (ལོ་མཚན་), a household ritual where connections within the village community, with the deities and between family members, are renewed. If one cannot be present, contributing financially is another option to keep the connection.

Thuenlam is largely mediated through hospitality where ideas of karma, generosity and compassion are expressed through mind, body and speech in the form of etiquette and acts of hospitality. However, everyday manners, *beyzhag*, as opposed to the highly formalized court etiquette *driglam namzhag*, offer room for testing boundaries and negotiating one’s social and individual status quo, depending on people’s personalities and characters. This might play out within seating arrangements that are being challenged or by gossip. The rural-urban divide is palpable when it comes to changes concerning etiquette. Only in the past two decades many young Bhutanese have been brought up in Thimphu or abroad which contributes to changes of etiquette and mannerism. Children are busy with tablets and smart phones and do not ‘hide’ in the room when guests show up.

Previously establishing *thuenlam* with new hosts within the *neypo*-system could be

more difficult for those who were poor. To show up 'empty handed' made it difficult to establish a durable connection and for the hosts there was not much to gain in hosting *grenkhan*. This also led to sometimes humiliating situations, especially when they had to go from door to door, asking for food, a practice they referred to as '*gren*'. Nowadays the Bumthap live self-sufficiently and generate income from cash crops and jobs, and many receive financial support from family members who work in the capital or abroad.

The increasingly income-based economy has led to a monetarization of certain traditional practices which were previously part of a system of mutual assistance, or *lemi* (ལམ་ལོ་). Some hospitality services that were reciprocated in kind previously, nowadays have to be paid in cash, for example in the tourism domain. As Lhendup explains this has led to a coexistence of old and new *thuenlam* practices:

The most unique and important characteristic of Bhutanese hospitality is that in most cases it is shown to express genuine concern for guests in need of assistance, as an expression of compassion and concern for another human being. You must have noticed in the villages that people are more hospitable and considerate to pilgrims who are poor and far away from home. However, nowadays people have both, business and money based hospitality as well as the reciprocating hospitality from the past like practised by the Urap and Kurtoep.

Within not even a decade the outmigration of young Bhutanese for studies and economic reasons has much increased. Internet, mobile phones and social media have been picked up very fast by young and old generations alike and shape new ways and modes of keeping *thuenlam*. Like many other communities, the Shingharpa have formed various online *tshogpa* and chat groups to keep connected to their families in the village and to the wider community. In fact, social media are being used for a

variety of *thuenlam* fostering, from welfare groups that help community members during death and sickness to planning committees for annual events and rituals. Furthermore WeChat is popular for religious groups in order to receive teachings that would otherwise be hard to obtain and to appease local deities at home through family members (Rinzin 2018).

Thuenlam practices and 'ways of doing things' relating to hospitality and etiquette may change, however, the importance of *thuenlam* as a tacit and explicit cultural idea of relating/connecting to others in a certain way to establish mutuality and trust, remains an important prerequisite for all sorts of tangible and intangible exchanges in Bhutanese society.

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Endnotes

1. I use pseudonyms for reasons of anonymity.
2. After centuries of theocracy, 1907 marked the beginning of the monarchy with the Wangchuck dynasty consolidating as the Royal lineage. In March 2008, the first democratic elections were held and Bhutan transformed to a democratic constitutional monarchy. Currently, the head of state is the fifth king, Jigme Khesar Namgyal Wangchuck, who took over the throne from his father Jigme Singye Wangchuck on December 9th 2006, and was publicly enthroned on November 1st 2008. For statistics see: www.nsb.gov.bt
3. Henceforth I will mark terms in Bumthangkha with (Bt.). Bumthangkha is not a written language and I use phonetic transliterations.
4. My participants use Kurtse synonymously for Lhuentse although it refers to one *gewog* (རྫོང་ཁོང་།), administrative block in Lhuentse.
5. Hierarchy and status inform the manner of hospitality events as well as the gifts offered. One's status in the hierarchy was traditionally defined by social class, wealth, and seniority. Since the abolishment of the class system by the third king in 1958, the level of education or one's rank/position in the civil service have somewhat replaced social class (Phuntsho 2013).
6. My participants used *beyzhag* when referring to everyday embodied mannerism or behaviour. They did not use the term *chazha* (ཅམ་ཅམ་ཅམ་) which they consider to be a synonym of *beyzhag*. However, the phrase *beyzhag chazha* indicates customary and normative expectations, albeit not codified like *driglam namzhag*.
7. For more details on the role of *sheytho* in Bhutanese society, see Pedey (2023).
8. While it is acceptable for superiors to openly scold subordinates, the reverse still is rather unimaginable. This reflects the lingering of traditional configurations of hierarchy and power relations and can be difficult for youth, who have to reconcile modern expectations, being critical thinking adults, with expectations by superiors and elders to be humble, well behaved and not express criticism too openly.
9. The point of reference is always the highest-ranking person present.
10. Not wanting to accept what seems a large gift could also be interpreted as a refusal to engage in a relationship where one would be obliged to reciprocate with a gift of equal or higher value. Such obligation can become a burden.

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Special Issue Research Article

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, Tsering¹ 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 སྐར་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.

...

[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’s⁴ phayul cikpa (ཕ་ཡུལ་གྱི་ཅག་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 alternately 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* (ཕུབ) and *pangden* (པང་དྭགས) 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 བ་ཡུལ་གཅིག་པུ.” 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 (མ་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. རྟན་ཅིང་འབྲེལ་བར་འབྱེད་པ་), 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 “independent/authentic self” but an *interdependent/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 Tibetan-ness 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 (ཡུལ་པ་ཞེས་པ་), 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 (ཇོ་ཇོ)” 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 Tibetan-ness, 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 deceptively 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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Special Issue Artwork

Cotton Singers

Tsering Wangmo Dhompa

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1

The music from the cotton-guitarists
drew women to their gates, quilts in arms.
They might have added straw, or wool,
to suture their mattresses every summer. Feathers
came later, after the border opened. My people
are rarely on time, except when they go to pray
at the stupa, when they wake dogs guarding
gates, paws up like Pasang passed
out on some bench.

Winters I knew, those clouds with the tendency
to shape themselves into symbols, are gone.
The first ancestors stepped down
from the sky on a rope. You can find a portal
or a loophole in every story - trees to
untangle in a plot. In winter I covet what I do
not see. I cannot remember
what leaves do.



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Words alter to carry to term memory
of a clan. I wish I could tell you where it all started.
Under the yak's hoof? The beating of a heart dulled
into duty. Elders shuffle in shoes a size too large,
their heads swollen like juicy lychees. Where
I come from a sentence can attach to a name; a lie
as truth. Where I come from, stories are reasons.

2

She was always in her 40s, her fantasies limited to the men
we saw on the television screen. The ones who flirted
with their feet, their polyester shirts sliding out from their belted
trousers. Back then, songs were what the women had to choose from.
Their days divided into tasks, their fingers serrated
by the wool they spun or built into rugs, their knees
knocking the stove or the loom. Meanwhile, the monks
were all flesh, like ripe pimples. I was a keen collector
of secrets. Even then I understood that hearts shrink.
A month ago, he left me a message on WhatsApp.
*I knew you as a child, he said. You were always around
your mother.* I thought of the photo he had meant to show
my mother but I had been quicker. His arms had been around
an oar, the girl had sat across from him. His torn socks, toes
like mushrooms. She had disappeared on their wedding
day. He is wearing a beret in the photograph, now older
than 40. Older than my mother will ever be. He too has crossed
a pool of water to get to the present. As a child I'd never
imagined he'd cover his head. That he would have hair
to part like the body of peas or river fish.

Tsering Wangmo Dhompa is the author of three poetry books: *My Rice Tastes Like the Lake*, *In the Absent Everyday* and *Rules of the House* (all published by Apogee Press, Berkeley) as well as three chapbooks. Dhompa's first non-fiction book, *Coming Home to Tibet*, was published in the US by Shambhala Publications in 2016 and by Penguin, India in 2014. Her monograph *Politics of Sorrow* is forthcoming with Columbia University Press.

Special Issue Photo Essay

Old Tibetan Hands

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Abstract

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 Choedak, 94



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

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).



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

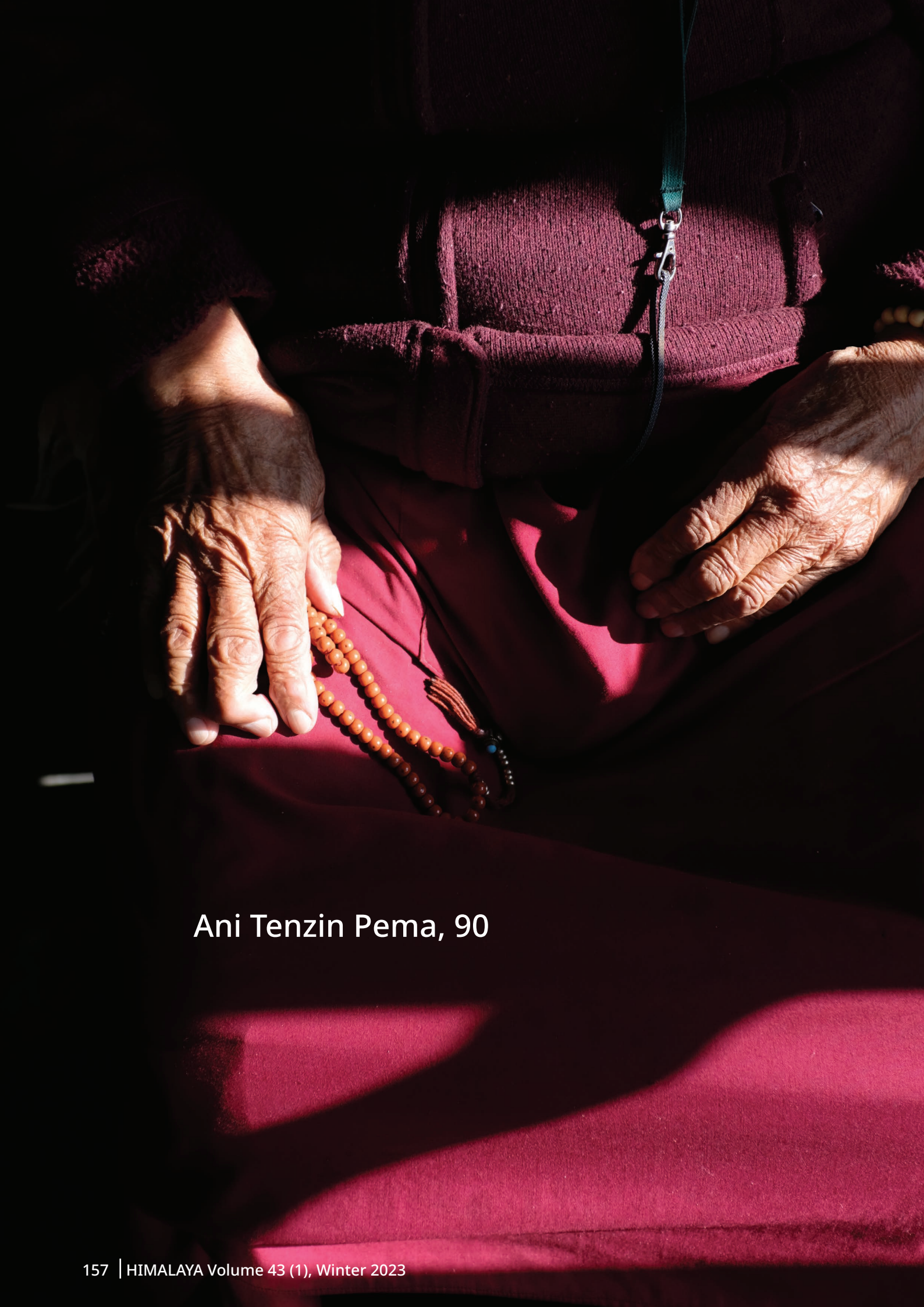
was stationed in Ladakh for three years. It is still with him, even though its ability to receive signals has diminished greatly. After 18 years of military service, Genla left for the TCV school in Dharamsala, where he took up work in the school kitchen from 1982 until 1995. In 2016, the TCV school

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



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་ཞི།).

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 (བྱིས་ཚང་མ་མ་ལག་པོ།) 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་མ་གྱི་པོ་བླ་མ་; 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.

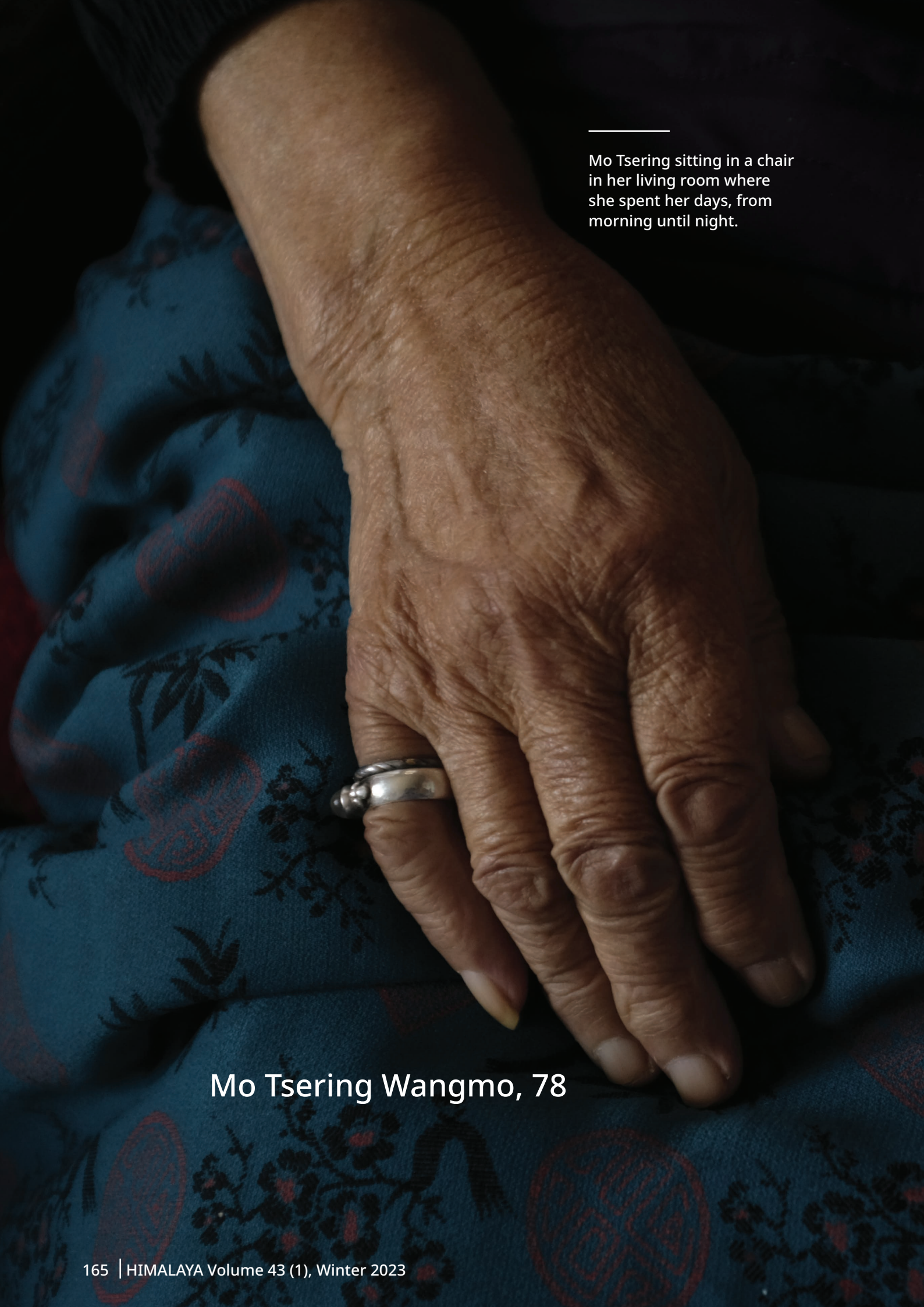
Mo Dickyi sitting in front of the kitchen window, which is how she spent a large part of her days.

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་ཆང།) 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-Kagyü 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.



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

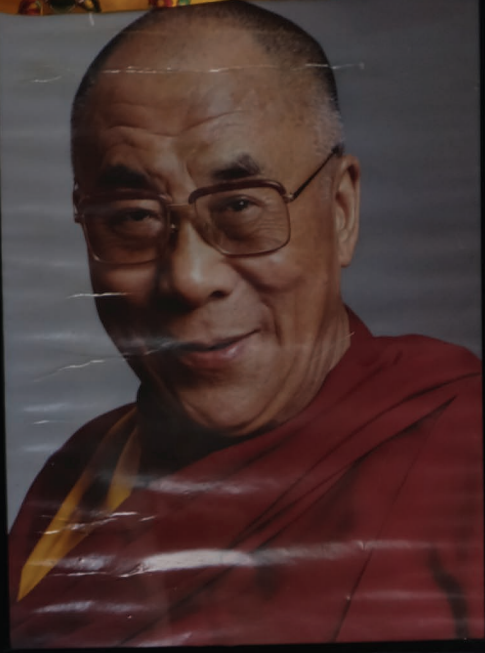
later in Mustang in Nepal for 14 years. Like some of the men in the guerrilla army, Pola began a relationship with a local woman from Mustang. After the Chushi Gangdrug operations had to be ended in Mustang in 1974, he moved to India, taking with him his wife and their two children. In India, Pola built 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

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 (མོང་; 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.

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.

Special Issue Afterword

Stories are Reasons

Sienna R. Craig

Dartmouth College

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Two years have passed since I drafted the miniatures with which I opened my Foreword. The toddler can now ride a scooter. She can sing “Old MacDonald Had a Farm” and mimic the tone of that ubiquitous *om mani padme hum* chant heard around the Boudha *stupa*, even though she has never been there. She has a sister now. Life unfolds.

What you have now read in this collection also bespeaks the unfolding of lives. Each of these pieces presents an intimate life story nestled within a sweeping social history. The pieces move from birth to death, across mountain ranges and migratory ranges, from village to city, and beyond. They amplify what are often quiet voices, especially those of lay women and children. This collection of works is more than the sum of its parts. With both care and precision, with gentleness but also a form of analytical force that I admire, this edited volume compiled by Harmandeep Kaur Gill and Theresia Hofer helps us to feel, sense, and visualize a shift away from overtly “extraordinary” voices and lives toward a deep recognition of the value of everyday lived experience. Building on their training in anthropological method, a feminist stance, an ethics of radical inclusivity, and a commitment to the “decolonizing” turn, Gill and Hofer offer a way to connect these other streams of social theory and political action with the at once beautiful and at times antiquated circles of Tibetan studies.

This is a huge accomplishment—a form of momentum rather than a fixed result.

More than a year has passed since I first heard versions of these articles, as conference presentations, and it is a privilege to reflect on them in this form. Heidi Fjeld and Inger Vasstveit bring us to Mugum—a place on the margins of both Nepal and the Tibetan regions of China, a place that is “half empty” but home, still. In their treatment of amulets, particularly as a form of guardianship for the most vulnerable among us—young children—we are invited to consider how objects become “infrastructures of protection” in both the material and affective sense. Tashi’s story leaves me thinking about the forces that remain hidden but that hold people up, nonetheless. This study in *srung* and their variants is a portrait of precarity and the weight our bodies carry as well as the “second skins” (Garrett 2013) we fashion, the “waves of blessing” (*jinlab*) we create to carry us through.

From Mugum we move to the Lhasa Special School in Theresia Hofer’s contribution focusing on the lives of deaf young adults. In the words of Tashi and Yangzom we hear voices that are literally unheard but also, often, *unheard of* in contemporary Tibet: social critique, political dissent. In these margins, we learn from a space of erasure and invisibility about what strategic perseverance can look like. The mundane quality of the medium—one WeChat post,

one response—is about as “ordinary” you can get. And yet. And yet. In her careful treatment, Hofer amplifies this call and response to soundings of social theory. This is a story not only of speaking truth to power and rejecting labels placed on us but also of refusing to be the keeper of open secrets—about the failure of education, the hollow “gift” of Tibet’s development, and the burdens of silence. I’m left contemplating what it means to be “profoundly” deaf. The weight of this. Yangzom says it all: “Since I have a mouth and hands I am part of humanity.”

While Hofer’s piece brings forms of risk and bravery in the face of marginalization to the fore, Anne Kukuczka’s meditation on women’s bodies and minds, wellness, hope, and other “gendered, embodied, material entanglements” sheds light on the oppressiveness of the Chinese state’s “happiness imperative”—its unmet inner promises, its unrealized dreams. Both articles ask questions about what it means to live a meaningful life and be of service to society.

Consider the dissonance between a devotion to secular fitness as a form of practice and not being allowed to walk *kora* around the Barkhor as a civil servant—and what each means for wellness or dis-ease. While the gym might become a temporal ritual that makes visible a “horizon of belonging” (Pfaff-Czarnecka 2011: 10), we are still left with big questions about the differences between surviving and thriving.

Such questions are echoed in the work of Kunchok Rabten, a poet and translator who makes us sit with what it means to conjure home. His poems evoke deep questions about what constitutes care, what we notice, how we come to accept “harsh truth,” and where, then, this leads us: within Tibet, in exile.

Diaspora runs like blood, like the body of a river spilling down from plateau to plain. It is a current that pulses through the contributions from Geoff Childs and, later, Cameron David Warner—both of whom circle around women named “Tsering.” This name, which means “long life,” reverberates through these two life histories. Each leaves us asking: What does it mean to live a long life? How many lives might one live within this one human lifetime? Each is also a parable about the dance between structure and agency as it relates to gender, social status, mobility, choices, identities. In both contributions we are let into a confounding intimacy between an anthropologist and their interlocutor. In Childs’s case this is unexpected. In Warner’s case this is a rehearsed retelling in the context of an old friendship but also a novel way of being with each other.

We are invited to consider experiments in point of view and to wrestle with the mutability of identity as these women cross borders and, in the process, experience transformation—in how they are seen, in how they see themselves. The

stakes feel high in both instances: we stand under a waterfall of words and are left drenched in detail—saturated by forms of suffering—but also awash in gratitude. Ethnographic practice can be a wellspring of mutuality, of trust, even when the nature of this interdependence rests on shifting and uncertain ground. In the lives of both Tserings, we are confronted with the fraught nature of kinship, marriage, family life, and with unvarnished portraits of “old” Tibet, Chinese occupation, and diasporic Tibetanness. *“I don’t want to go back because it reminds me of how I felt. It was like living on a bed of thorns.” “I put a bit of turmeric on my face to look like a Nepali. I wore a Nepali dress and went over the bridge.”* In each Tsering story, a commitment to empiricism becomes a form of care. Specters of trauma haunt the edges of each frame.

Whereas Childs and Warner take us into spaces of fracture, fissure, and reinvention across social worlds, Ulrike Čokl’s reflections on practices of hospitality in Bumthang, Bhutan, allow us to consider what “society” is for and how it is reproduced: in the pouring of libations, in the choreography of expectations that we gloss as etiquette. Her detailed explorations of *thuenlam* loop back to questions raised by Fjeld and Vasstveit about protection and nurturance and about what it means to maintain harmony between the human and more-than-human worlds. There are rules here, but also forms of flexibility and

adaptation—both in the service of wellbeing and as a way of guarding against harm. In the lives of Mugum children such harm might be a demon; in Bumthang the culprit might be gossip. In both instances we’re asked to consider the costs of not abiding by convention. What is dangerous about pushing certain boundaries rather than sticking with the comfort that comes from reaffirming one’s place—in the lifecycle, in social formations?

Finally, we are gifted with Tsering Wangmo Dhompa’s poems and Harmandeep Kaur Gill’s arresting photographs and accompanying essay. Each considers the themes of this volume in subtle yet exacting ways. “Where I come from, stories are reasons,” Dhompa writes. Yes. Each of these contributions teaches us why. In her sharp-edged musings on nature, culture, openings and closures, and affective truth, Dhompa shows us pathways into and through ordinary lives with extraordinary precision. “You can find a portal or a loophole in every story—trees to untangle in plot.” Consider elder Tibetan hands as such portals. Consider how skin carries memory; how fear clings to death and its specters despite practice to the contrary; how virtuous acts and disappointments, acts of compassion and atmospherics of dispossession are captured by shadow and light. Sense the tenderness here.

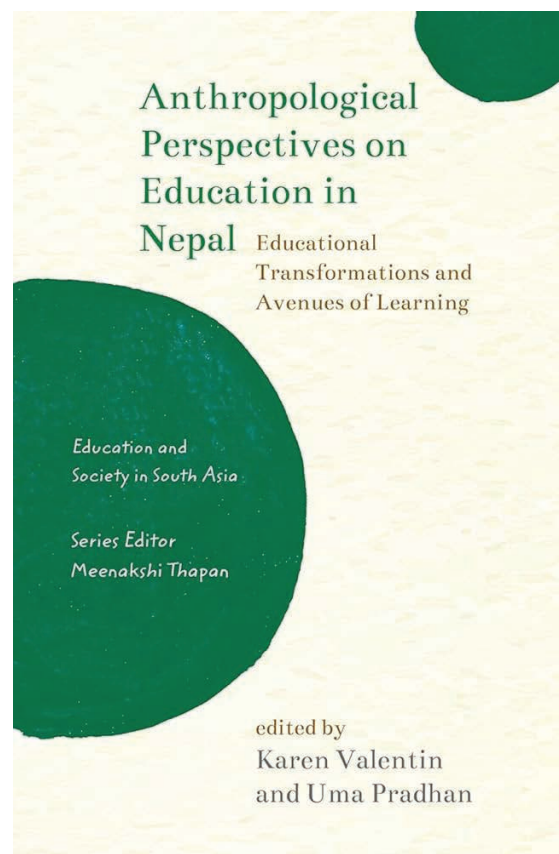
Book Review

Review of *Anthropological Perspectives on Education in Nepal: Educational Transformations and Avenues of Learning* edited by Karen Valentin and Uma Pradhan

Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2023. 336 p. ISBN: 9780192884756

Reviewed by Mark Condra

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This collection of essays marks a new beginning for anthropological studies of education in Nepal. While there have been, and will continue to be, many studies on education in Nepal, this book establishes the ethnographic scholarship of education in Nepal as a coherent field. It is part of a book series on education and society in South Asia that seeks to further understand how education is socially produced. The book is co-edited by Karen Valentin and Uma Pradhan who are known scholars of education practices in Nepal. The introduction offers an overview of the discipline of educational anthropology and outlines the contributions such an approach will bring to the understanding of education in Nepal, followed by ten chapters illustrating the social construct of education in Nepal.

The book is organized under three sections: (1) Inequalities and processes of social differentiation, (2) Mobilities and expanding educational landscapes, (3) Institutions and transformation of education sites. While chapters are arranged according to these broad themes, the essays expand beyond their subsections, mutually reinforcing each other to contribute to a deeper understanding of the social construction of education in Nepal. The authors offer a collection of ethnographies of Nepali education that they believe will provide copious opportunities for comparison, such as “competing sites of mass socialization, education-related migration, privatization and commodification of education, the changing role of religious education, educational infrastructures, and intergenerational transfer of skills and knowledge” (p. 12).

While not all of the authors are trained anthropologists, they all employ field-based ethnographic research methods. A few of the studies integrate the use of large-scale surveys, and some utilize methods, such as intergenerational analysis, participatory drawing, longitudinal studies, and a focus on emotions. There is a keen integration of theories from different disciplines investigating inequalities, social boundaries and belonging, and the study of global childhoods. The application of these methods

and theories unveils new perspectives and new voices. The most remarkable of these voices are those of children, Dalits, and the *sukambasi* (landless squatters). One particularly novel research method is participatory drawing, by which children draw out their experiences of migration and discuss them. This provides new insight on the perspective of children that has been absent in previous studies. While the majority of the researchers that contribute to this collection come from outside of Nepal, each section has at least one chapter either authored or co-authored by a Nepalese scholar. The inclusion of these Nepalese authors, and the new voices that they eloquently illustrate, provides a much-needed insider’s view.

The book’s research sites are located in accessible regions in or around Kathmandu, and the Kaski, Jhapa, and Morang districts. Research locations include public schools, private schools, and universities, with special attention given to the wider socially imagined contexts to reveal the overarching features that influence education. While Kathmandu and Pokhara can rightly be said to be the centers for education in the country, other notable areas such as the Mid-Western and Far Western Development Regions and much of the Mountain Region of Nepal are unaccounted for in this collection.

The first section of the book consists of four chapters that present ethnologies of inequalities and social differentiation in education. The first chapter provides an inside look into an elite private school to demonstrate how new economic capital has reshaped Nepal’s elite class and how that class consumes private education to self-construct their identity. The following two chapters illustrate the ways that the poor are navigating education. First of all, the poor also view and use education as a way to increase one’s economic and social standing. Rather than seeing education as inherently good, the poor especially view it as having a “positional good” with the means to increase economic gain and social status. The studies in this section reveal the difficulty and harm that accompanies

this view of education. As more people gain education only those with powerful social connections are likely to gain any economic advantage. The fourth chapter in this section presents the Dalits as vivid examples of a section of society that has not had their knowledge production sanctioned as legitimate and, consequently, remain without any forms of capital.

The second section of the book provides cases of educational migration and change. It begins with the case of a Buddhist monastery's dilemma to adapt curriculum to Nepal's current socio-political context and, in the process, merged "modern education" with traditional Tibetan Buddhist education. The next chapter presents tender insights on the understudied and underappreciated perspective of children who are experiencing a sense of abandonment when migrating to cities for education. This is followed by an ethnography of young, Kathmandu adults navigating social and geographical routes to fulfill their aspirations of gaining higher social standing through education. These studies emphasize how Nepal's existential uncertainty and socio-economic instability have pushed institutions and families to attain status through education. However, they also confront development discourses that promise national employment as the goal of education.

The final section of the book examines socio-political influences in education settings and the effect they have on community identity construction. It presents the attempts of Dalits to enter careers in academia amongst social forces that support and oppress them. Another ethnography demonstrates the construction of student and community aspirations through material infrastructure and how unequal provision of infrastructure perpetuates unequal education. The final chapter contributes to understanding the way geographical localities of languages contribute to arguments of mother tongue based

multilingual language education and language planning and policy. Narratives of local and global influences are ubiquitous in this book, but this section provides examples of their aftermath inside educational institutions. The diversity of caste, the appearance of buildings, and the choice of language instruction both shape and are shaped by student identities.

This collection of essays does indeed meet the intended mark of the editors. By expounding on inequalities in education, narratives of education migration, and the influence of socio-politics in education, this volume contributes to understanding the social practice of education and the cultural production of the educated person. As a comparative

"Through the emphasis on rich and thick description, it communicates the depth of social production of education at work in Nepal."

- Mark Condra on *Anthropological Perspectives on Education in Nepal*

anthropology, the book largely succeeds in presenting studies within the conceptual categories of the Nepalese people. These remarks withstanding, there do remain a few blemishes in the book. In the forward to the series by Meenakshi Thapan, the emphasis on the perspective of children felt overpromised. While more than half of the articles did include the voices of children, with one exception, children's voices were only a small part of the overall contributions. Additionally, some of the ethnographic presentations felt disconnected, as if they were cut down for space. This resulted in truncated presentations of the situations they were depicting. Also, while Dalits were significantly represented in this series, there were only cursory mentions of gender studies among lower castes. Lastly, current literature on education in Nepal has emphasized the role of School Management Committees, but their presence was never acknowledged as playing a socio-political role in these studies.

This book will become a useful resource for all those engaging in education in Nepal. Through the emphasis on rich and thick description, it communicates the depth of social production of education at work in Nepal.

Mark Condra is a linguist and anthropologist working among ethnic Himalayan communities in Nepal. His primary focus is the documentation and preservation of Naawa, a Tibetic language whose natal villages are located in Sankhuwasabha, Nepal. Mark holds a master's degree in Intercultural Communication from Biola University and is currently affiliated with the Linguistic Department at Tribhuvan University.

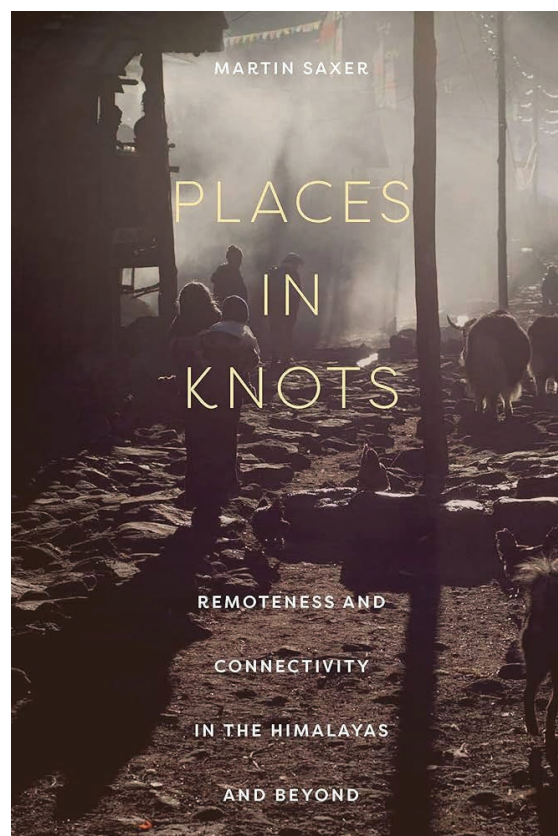
Book Review

Review of *Places in Knots: Remoteness and Connectivity in the Himalayas and Beyond* by Martin Saxer

Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 2022. 252 p. ISBN: 9781501766879

Reviewed by Abhimanyu Pandey

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Places in Knots is the result of Martin Saxer's decade-long engagement with communities originally hailing from Walung and Humla, two Himalayan regions in northern Nepal that border Tibet (China). In this book, the Swiss anthropologist brings together several themes he has worked on with these communities since the late 2000s – including remoteness, connectivity, Himalayan routes, and evolving trans-border and transnational relations – into a richly insightful and concise volume. He notes that it has been common, both historically and today, for the communities dwelling in these regions to spend most of their lives outside their village of origin – for business, foraging expeditions, trans-humant herding, monastic activities, and studies. And yet, these communities have a strong sense of place and belonging. In Saxer's words, this sense is 'based neither on a sedentary life in one locality, nor does it stem from a nostalgic imaginary of a homeland fostered in a global diaspora; it is rather derived from the shared experience of repeated movement between a limited number of localities.' (p. 8). These places are tied into knots.

"Saxer's approach of intricately weaving together wide-ranging places, times, people, and institutions provides a refreshing and effective form of narrative that helps amplify its message of continuities between the local, national, and global – even in the 'remote' Himalayas."

- Abhimanyu Pandey on *Places in Knots*

The book is divided into three parts. Part 1, 'Locality and Community', focuses on the making and maintaining of communities between the Himalayan villages (of Walung in eastern Nepal and Humla in western Nepal) and neighborhoods in Kathmandu and New York City. Over the three chapters in this part, Saxer shows that global Himalayan ventures for these people are ways to spatially expand their community which, unlike out-migration, do not necessarily sever bonds with their

village of origin. Chapter 1 follows a few individuals originally from Walung – whom Saxer earlier met in New York – in Walung, as Saxer explores the kinds of intimate ties and conflicts that come up in the tying and retying of places into a knot. Chapter 2 gives historical context and depth to tracing the shifting configurations of remoteness and connectivity in Walung through an engagement with the biographies of elders from Walung. Chapter 3 moves to Humla, where Saxer follows a story emerging from the tension between the opportunities available across the border in the Tibetan town of Purang, and the traditional ties to the village through strict village rule, polyandry, and monastic obligations.

Part 2, 'Pathways', examines relations between the journeys made between the places in knots, the routes these journeys take place along, and the stories, both shaping and evolving from these journeys. In Chapter 4, Saxer conceptualizes Himalayan routes as 'pathways' as a meandering linear site shaped in certain enduring ways by topographical forces, along which life unfolds, and along which exchange, movement, and ambition inter-

mingles. He refutes the Ingoldian distinction between 'wayfaring' (a mode of movement in which the path compels the traveler to pay distinct attention to the land that opens along the path) and 'transport' (a

mode of movement in which the path and the landscape along it become secondary to the logistics of moving people and goods from place to place). Instead, Saxer argues that along Himalayan pathways, wayfaring has always been at the service of transport. Chapter 5 examines the role of the Himalayan roads built from the Chinese border into Humla and Walung in how they reconfigure present-day wayfaring, aspirations, and marginalization. Through the example of the transportation and

distribution of state-subsidized rice and salt in Humla, Chapter 6 analyses distribution as an issue that is simultaneously a logistic problem and a matter of distributive justice in the Himalayas. Through a focus on the relations between distribution, evolving Himalayan pathways, and places in knots, Saxer brings attention to an important facet of contemporary life in the Himalayas that has strangely received little academic engagement.

Part 3, 'Curation at Large', takes a critical look at interventions made in the name of development and conservation in Himalayan regions by the international development industry. Saxer uses the word 'curation' in the sense of its original Latin root, which means 'to cure', to signify the impulse that has guided developmental interventions over the long term across the Himalayas (p. 139). This impulse seeks 'to heal, to remedy, to make better', and at the same time 'to cleanse and preserve' (ibid). Over the first three chapters in this part, he interrogates curation and its fissures in the Kailash Sacred Landscape Conservation and Development Initiative (KSLCDI), a transboundary project (2012-17) managed by ICIMOD, a Kathmandu-based intergovernmental organization. KSLCDI involved border regions of western Nepal (including Humla), western Tibet (China; including Purang), and north-eastern Uttarakhand (India), and interventions therein by ICIMOD's partner institutions (state scientific institutions, NGOs, universities, and the private sector). Chapter 7 unearths substantially different curatorial ambitions of and frictions between the Chinese, Indian, and Nepali delegations at a KSLCDI planning workshop. Chapter 8 shows how the global approaches to development and conservation used in KSLCDI, for all their purported benefits, obscure and partially erase the histories, livelihood strategies, dreams, and ambitions of those they seek to help in the Himalayan borderlands. Chapter 9 highlights how cartographic practices—GIS mapping in the case of KSLCDI—are themselves creative of the reality which they seek to describe. Chapter 10, the final chapter, addresses the representation of Himalayan worlds for distinct audiences as acts of 'translation' which necessarily involve collaboration, in one way or the other.

Translation and collaboration are as much a part of the curatorial practices of the development industry (including a KSLCDI framework I drafted as the lead author at ICIMOD, which Saxer discusses earlier in this book), as they are of the Himalayan communities tying new places and ambitions into their knots, and of scholars such as Saxer who interpret Himalayan worlds for academic audiences.

Overall, *Places in Knots* contains valuable conceptual contributions to the study of not only the Himalayas but also any region deemed 'remote' in today's world. Given the trans-local and trans-national nature of the issues discussed, Saxer's approach of intricately weaving together wide-ranging places, times, people, and institutions provides a refreshing and effective form of narrative that helps amplify its message of continuities between the local, national, and global – even in the 'remote' Himalayas.

Abhimanyu Pandey is a PhD researcher at Heidelberg University, Germany. His research examines the ways in which roads shape notions of remoteness and connectivity as well as contemporary livelihoods and identity issues in the Indian Himalayan border region of Spiti. Abhimanyu has an MPhil in Development Studies from Cambridge University and an MA in Sociology from the Delhi School of Economics. He also worked at ICIMOD, Kathmandu, from 2014 to 2017.

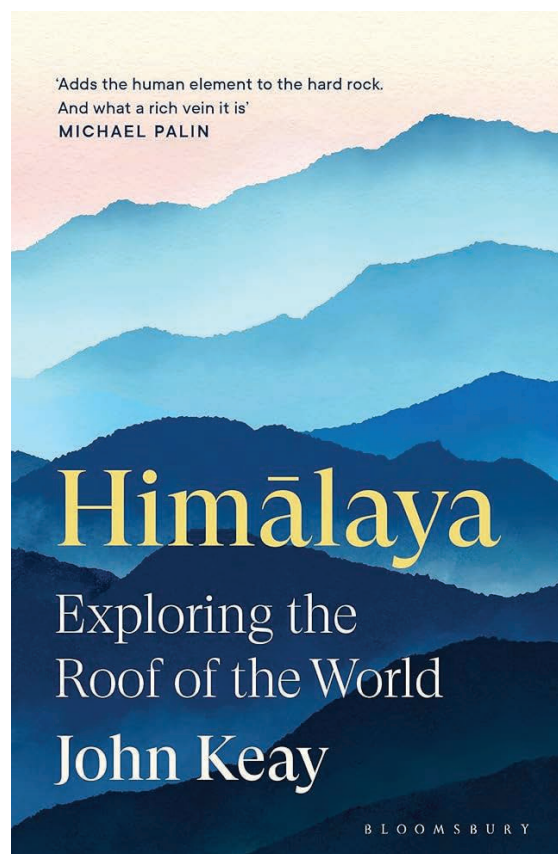
Book Review

Review of *Himālaya: Exploring the Roof of the World* by John Keay

London: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2022. 432 p. ISBN: 9781408891155

Reviewed by Vineet Gairola

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John Keay, a notable Scottish historian, is renowned for his extensive writings on the Himalayan world. Keay traveled to India's Kashmir region for the first time in the mid-1960s. *Himalaya: Exploring the Roof of the World* is an awe-inspiring literary expedition based on long-term ethnographic experience that takes readers on an extraordinary journey through the majestic Himalayan range. This comprehensive and meticulously researched book, released by Bloomsbury Publishing in 2022, offers a captivating blend of history, geography, culture, and adventure, leaving an indelible mark on all interested in this iconic mountain region. With a deep understanding and evident passion for the area, Keay effortlessly makes the reader feel like a fellow companion accompanying him on his explorative quest. For example, Keay's striking observation on the Zaskar Valley in India's far north reiterates research in the geosciences, highlighting how its breathtaking landscape and fossil patterns still offer glimpses of an ancient connection to the African subcontinent. This insight resonates strongly with anyone who has experienced the region and provides a tangible context to earth's subterranean movements and plate tectonics.

Within the pages of this extraordinary book, the rich tapestry of history is intertwined with vivid hues of biography. Keay's creativity takes the reader on a mesmerizing journey through the enigmatic realms of the Himalaya, where the echoes of colonial expeditions reverberate and the mystiques of Tibet unravel like a captivating tale. Through this unique and, at times, romanticizing lens, Keay breathes life into the forgotten whispers of those who dared to conquer the untamed heights of the Himalaya in earlier times.

“Keay fearlessly addresses contemporary environmental challenges faced in the Himalayan region, including climate change, glacier melting, and the impact of tourism on a fragile mountain environment.”

- Vineet Gairola on *Himālaya: Exploring the Roof of the World*

In his work, Keay combines a variety of disciplines, encompassing geology, politics, biology, and religion, each contributing to a comprehensive understanding of the Himalayan mountain range. Based on thorough research, Keay sheds light on a fascinating array of individuals whose lives intertwine with the mountains, adding a human dimension to the splendor of the Himalaya. Among these personalities were Englishmen strategically positioned due to their empire's colonial rule over India. Notably, figures like Francis Younghusband and Cecil Godfrey Rawling, who served as army officers, ventured into uncharted territories, participating in the Great Game rivalry between the British Empire and Tsarist Russia. This high-stakes competition aimed to redefine territorial boundaries and regulate trade within vast expanses of land. Originally intended as a diplomatic mission, Francis Younghusband's expedition took a violent turn when Tibetans resisted British incursion. Despite being ill-equipped with matchlock rifles, Tibetan defenders faced difficulties against British forces armed with machine guns and cannons. As a result, British troops advanced to Lhasa, leaving behind a tragic trail of hundreds of slain Tibetans. This violent campaign notwithstanding, the British achieved minimal advantages beyond securing trading rights and preventing Russian encroachment, thus reconsidering their own ambitions in Tibet.

Despite the Himalaya's challenging landscape and relatively modest economic importance (centered on wool, salt, and musk deer scent glands as primary export products), the region has long been a battleground for clashes between empires. Various invaders, from Mongols to Maoists, have been drawn to the mountain range throughout the ages. As a crucial strategic

crossroads between India, China, and the Islamic world, disputed areas within the Himalaya remain hotspots for ongoing conflicts today, elevating the region's

significance as a focal point for (geo)political tension. The fertile valleys attracted the attention of researchers like Frank Kingdon-Ward, a botanist seeking to deepen his knowledge of the region's plant life. Similarly, a cultural historian, John Vincent Bellezza traveled extensively in Tibet, compiling a comprehensive database of heritage sites. Keay also draws attention to the impacts of the increasing numbers of mountain climbers and trekking tourists on the sensitive ecosystems of the Himalaya, where base camps have turned into dumping grounds and waste pollution has tainted once-clear rivers. Scaling peaks of high mountains, like Mount Everest in Nepal and K2 and Nanga Parbat in Pakistan, have become focal points of nationalistic pride for the British, Italians, and Germans respectively, leading to triumphs and tragedies on their slopes.

Keay does not promise his book to be smooth and polished: "Transitioning from geology and paleontology to mysticism and mountaineering by way of archaeology, monastic warfare and exotic commodities cannot be expected to be seamless." His work is not shaped like an academic monograph. Despite this caveat, Keay's multidisciplinary approach creates a captivating narrative that offers readers a comprehensive understanding of the Himalayan landscape, its people, and the various forces that have shaped its remarkable history. The book incorporates quotes from colonial sources which, while being informative, must be approached with some skepticism, as they tend to present the history of the Himalaya from a colonial perspective. Although the book's vast scope may seem overwhelming to newcomers, it presents an enriching experience for those familiar with the subject matter, revealing new dimensions in each chapter. Additionally, it serves as a powerful call to protect the sensitive balance of high alpine ecosystems. Keay fearlessly addresses contemporary environmental challenges faced in the Himalayan region, including climate change, glacier melting, and the impact of tourism on a fragile mountain environment. His balanced approach leaves readers with a sense of urgency to appreciate and safeguard the natural beauty of the Himalaya for generations to come.

In conclusion, *Himalaya: Exploring the Roof of the World* is a remarkable work that attempts to explore various facets of a grand mountain range. John Keay's passion and expertise shine vividly, taking readers on an unforgettable journey filled with history, culture, and awe-inspiring landscapes. This enthralling and informative book is a must-read for anyone seeking to grasp the importance of the Himalayan region as a symbol of natural beauty and a testament to various human endeavors. It will be of interest to scholars, students, and readers of Himalayan studies and South Asian religion alike. Rather than focusing on conflicts and atrocities, I hope that the Himalaya continues to be a region where spirituality and transcendence greet all things living with a much-needed stillness in today's times.

Vineet Gairola is a Ph.D. Candidate in Psychology at the Indian Institute of Technology, Hyderabad. His research focuses on ritual practices and processional journeys of devī-devtās (Hindu deities) in India's Garhwal Himalaya. Most recently, Vineet Gairola received the 2023 APS Student Grant from the Association for Psychological Science, the 2023 Student Diversity Award of the American Psychological Association, the Psychoanalytic Research Exceptional Contribution Award of the IPA, and the Student Research Award from the Division 36 of the American Psychological Association.