

Special Section Research Article

Another Day at the Airport

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Abstract

Traveling is a complicated endeavor. For some, it is as simple as picking up one's passport and heading to the nearest airport. For others, it is a harrowing experience, one marked by uncertainty. For tourists, traveling represents a temporary detachment from the mundanity of everyday life. For many migrants, it is an incredibly significant decision that can define their very futures. Drawing from a personal encounter at the airport, this flash ethnographic piece illustrates the dichotomy of traveling i.e. ease and pleasure for some, and the uncertainty of refusal for others.

Keywords

Flash ethnography; Tibet; migration; refugees; documents

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Qatar flight QR737 from Doha lands at San Francisco International Airport. Walking towards the Immigration Counter, I hold my Identity Certificate (I.C.), its bright yellow cover screaming anomaly in contrast to the blue passport of India possessed by most of my fellow travelers.

I notice a woman in front of me, marked by the same yellow scar. I tap her shoulder and ask in Tibetan, “Are you Tibetan?”. Recognizing a fellow stateless alien, a wave of relief spreads across her face.

“Yes! Yes! I am. I got separated from my husband who is in the other line for US citizens. I don’t know what to do.”

“ཨ་ལེ་ (a le)!¹ Don’t worry. Do you have your I.C. and immigration documents?”

“I have them here, but I don’t know what they will ask me. I didn’t think I would be in a separate line from my husband.”

“ཨ་ལྷ་ལག་ལས་ (A Chak Lak)²” I say, “Just have your documents ready and slide them under the window when the officer asks you to show them. He will ask about your husband, where will you be staying in San Francisco, and your family. Just general questions. Don’t worry. Make sure you answer exactly what he asks you and nothing else, OK?”

“ལ་སོ་ (La so).³ My friend told me that the མེ་སེར་ (Go Ser) officers are stricter,” she says, referring, as most Tibetans do, to white people as those with ‘yellow hair’. “I hope I don’t get him.” Modern migration is defined by documents and the gatekeepers that validate them. Her concerns about the Go Ser gatekeeper reflect this reality, from the Indian officials who grant Tibetan refugees their residential permits, to the Embassy and Immigration officers who determine their entry into the West.

“A Chak Lak. It doesn’t matter. You have your documents, so you will be fine.”

The queue of aliens moves forward. I look around to check where a Chak Lak ends up, but I can’t find her amid the row of glass cubicles. I stand in front of the uniform assigned to me, and smile, offering a

cheerful “Good Afternoon!”. The uniform asks for my passport.

“Is this your passport?”

“Yes, Sir. It is my travel document.”

“I have never seen a yellow passport. What is this?”

“Sir. This is a Travel Document that the Indian Government provides for Tibetans who live in India. I am a Tibetan living in India.”

I offer this rehearsed answer that I have used across immigration counters in the US, Canada, and Europe over the past six years. For exiled Tibetans, legal belonging is defined by the uncertainty of movement. From the generation who trudged across the Himalayas to those who were born in exile, one has to move between rehearsed multiple positions as foreigners under Indian law, refugees in the Indian imagination, and/or holders of strange yellow documents for immigration officers.

“You’re not an Indian citizen?”

“No, Sir. I am a stateless Tibetan living in India.”

The uniform finds the US visa stamped in the middle of my I.C. He asks me to wait and walks to another room with my document while others with regular passports hurry by, relieved to have been allowed on American soil.

The uniform returns and asks me to place my fingers on a scanner.

“Where is your final destination?”

“Sir, I have a connecting flight to Irvine, California. I will be starting my Ph.D. in Anthropology at the University of California Irvine.”

After stamping it, the uniform hands me back the yellow oddity, acknowledging my presence.

“Best of luck with your Ph.D. You can go in and pick up your bags.”

“Thank you so much! Have a good day, Sir!”

I collect my documents and walk towards the baggage claim area. My muscles relax and I take a deep breath. I look around for *a Chak Lak*, but I don't see her. She must have reunited with her husband. I imagine she shares my sense of relief and wonder if she is now beginning her journey toward citizenship. Tens of thousands of Tibetans have already made this journey: from people of a lost country to refugees and finally to holders of a national passport.

I collect my bags, a white ཁ་བྱུག་ (kha btags)⁴ tied around each of them for easy identification. This is an old Tibetan trick to identify personal belongings during long travels. My grandparents did this during their exodus from Tibet. I do this in my travels from India to the US. The trepidation of rejection binds us, across generations. For many, it is just another day at the airport and the bothersome routine of going through Immigration. For *a Chak Lak*, me, and others, these are sites of scrutiny, trial, and performances of identity.

I walk out of the airport, my yellow document now out of sight, having fulfilled its role in this everyday yet exceptional ritual of stateless identification.

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Endnotes

1. ཨ་ལེ་ is a Tibetan colloquial term, which roughly translates to “Ah Okay!”
2. ཨ་ལྷན་ལྷན་ means elder sister while ལགས་ is a Tibetan honorific.
3. ལ་སོ་ is a Tibetan term that, loosely translated, means, “Okay”
4. ཁ་བྱུག་ is a traditional scarf used by Tibetans to greet each other or as an offering.