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THE ROLE OF BUDDHIST INSTITUTIONS IN THE TIBETAN DIASPORA

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The purpose of this paper is to examine the socioeconomic impact of Tibetan Buddhist institutions on the Tibetan diasporic community. From monasteries, to the institution of the office of the Dalai Lama¹, to the pervasive system of religious patronage, Buddhism is incorporated into all aspects of Tibetan life and customs. For many Tibetan refugees religion has served as the all-encompassing motivation, foundation, and path, into exile and survival.

The Tibetan refugee community has been viewed as a success story.² This statement naturally begs the question of why have they been so successful? Some of the answers no doubt lie in their strong commitment to cultural preservation. But what is about Tibetan cultural preservation that has produced an exile community committed to education and health, relative gender equality, promotion of democratic principles and human rights? The success of this community, while dependent upon a host of factors, is strongly linked to a Tibetan Buddhist framework coupled with the re-establishment of a monastic and patronage system. These institutions have helped create strong social and political networks within and outside of the Tibetan communities, facilitating community support and growth.

Most clearly manifested in the prevalence of monasteries, Tibetan Buddhism has been an integral part of Tibetan culture and social organization. The leadership of the Dalai Lama, known as both the spiritual and temporal leader of Tibet, has provided institutional structure and continuity for the Tibetan community. These features, which some might describe as anomalous in refugee studies, provide new insights into how communities struggle to recreate national and communal identities in host environments. Any discussion of the role of Tibetan Buddhism in Tibetan refugee lives' will inevitably encounter problems of separating purely political and economic forces from religious ones because of the pervasive and socially-potent nature of Tibetan Buddhism. The relative paucity of materials on the role of Buddhism in Tibetan refugee communities, while not surprising, reflects the larger absence of materials on the role of religion in refugee populations. There are, however, a number of scholars who have advanced general theories on the role of religion in nation-building (Gellner: 1983; Isaacs: 1975). Other social theorists such as Geertz (1966) and Kotabara (1983) describe the role of religion as one that corresponds to the need for interpretability, the need to find something comprehensible in the face of our deepest problems.³ Suffering, alienation, loss, and despair, are all common emotional responses for refugees. How refugees cope with the traumas of departure and arrival in foreign lands is likely to reflect not only basic

¹ "The Dalai Lama is an emanation of the bodhisattva, Avaloketisvara. A bodhisattva is an 'enlightened being' who postpones his final entry into nirvana to work to liberate all sentient creatures from the misery of samsaric existence. Avaloktisvara, the bodhisattva of compassion, thus continually returns to the human form through the line of the Dalai Lamas and the Dalai Lama is not, like the Pope, the representation of a deity, but rather the manifestation of it." Melvyn Goldstein, "The Circulation of Estates in Tibet: Reincarnation, Land and Politics", *Journal of Asian Studies*, Volume 32, Issue 3 May 1973, 446.

² "Tibetan Exiled Community Gets UN Award" *The Tibetan Review* v. 30 October 1995, p. 11.

³ Kenneth Pargament; Crystal Park, "Merely a defense? The variety of religious means and ends" *Journal of Social Issues*, Summer 1995 v51 n2 p13(20)

features of human survival but more subtle and particular aspects of cultural and religious practices.

By examining the role of Tibetan Buddhism in the Tibetan refugee communities we may arrive at a more lucid understanding of how these communities have attempted to not only reconstruct their identities and forms of survival in exile, but how religious institutions have been used to positively *dilute* the potentially destabilizing elements of their presence in host societies.

In order to truly appreciate the depth of devotion and respect that Tibetans have for their teachers, and the extent to which a Buddhist civilization came to be under their aegis, we would also have to understand the tantamount role of the monastic system. It is, as we shall see in this paper, from these two aspects of Tibetan Buddhism—the central role of the teacher and the monastic system—that the Tibetan community has developed strong institutional roots in exile. Hence, it has largely been through these institutions that both secular and non-secular activities have been generated.

A number of *Tibetologists* have remarked on the inherent democratic principles of Buddhism. These authors (e.g. Mountcastle, Boyd) have advanced the notion that the monastic system contains important elements of meritocracy, and hence democracy. As Boyd, one sociologist, who spent many years in Tibetan settlements found:

“Equal access to education was a primary belief. Tibetan Buddhists carried this thread of equality into their monastic institutions as well. Although there did exist a hierarchy of lamas in the monasteries, any young man [or woman] regardless of his familial background could aspire to higher scholastic studies through his determination and intellectual persistence.”⁴

The growth in both scholarly and spiritual interest in the Tibetan cause has produced two seemingly contradictory trends. On the one hand, we find a number of academics comparing the Tibetan exile community with the West where Tibetans are generally viewed positively insofar as they appear to uphold principles that are consonant with Western values. Such principles include, as in the aforementioned example, equality, meritocracy, democracy, critical thinking, passive resistance and compassion. On the other hand, Western scholars of Tibet have also portrayed Tibetan culture as unapproachable, unreal, or hyperreal, as a kind of exalted *other* (Klieger: 1997). The contradictions between these two ideals—the former producing the potential for a model, while the latter reducing the Tibetan experience to a kind of cultural image—are a pervasive element of the academic treatment of the Tibetan diaspora.

SETTING THE STAGE

Forty years has translated into two generations of Tibetans in exile, the rise and popularity of Tibetan Buddhism in the West and in pockets of the East, the establishment of over 200 monasteries in exile, and the development of Buddhist centers worldwide. Tibetans in exile have struggled to retain a Buddhist identity and to survive in host communities, most of which are the world’s poorest countries, one of which is, however,

⁴ Boyd, p. 64.

the world's largest democracy⁵. The Tibetan refugee community, some 140,000 located primarily in the Himalayan countries, has exhibited several important developmental differences that on both a general level (comparing other refugees around the world) and a more specific level (compared to other refugee populations located in these Himalayan states) begs the question as to what is the primary cause(s) that can explain these developmental differences.

By examining the constituent parts of Tibetan Buddhism and their respective impact on the lives of Tibetan refugees (i.e. the ubiquity of monastic centers, the role of the Dalai Lama and other influential lamas), we find that several uniquely Tibetan Buddhist features have had a profound impact on the social and political structuring of Tibetan refugees. There are of course other important variables that have influenced this community's development. The most notable, and consistent factor, has been India and Nepal's (and Bhutan, to a lesser extent) support in providing sanctuary for these refugees.

Many Western scholars have emphasized the role and influence of the Dalai Lama, assuming erroneously, however, that his leadership and authority have been a seamless continuum of power from within Tibet to exile. In reality, the locus of power did not lie in the Central government's hands in Lhasa, in fact regional and even feudal powers often remained consciously independent from Lhasa. Less often remarked upon, is the fact that the Dalai Lama's influence over Tibetans has grown considerably in exile. In addition, the concept of a unified *Tibetan people*, while useful in promulgating the cause of Tibet, is a spurious one.⁶

A History of Tibetan Refugees

Prior to China's invasion of Tibet in 1949, Tibet held the world's most vast repertoire of Buddhist works. An estimated twenty-percent of its population were monks or nuns and were housed in one of Tibet's 6000 monasteries. Like nuclei of a community, monasteries represented the center of Tibetan life and were the intellectual repository of Tibet's history, scientific and medical knowledge, philosophical debates, law, and any other form of documented cultural knowledge.

Tibet has since the late sixth century been governed by a Buddhist theocracy. Buddhism has been central to Tibetan history and culture. Within this context, Buddhist monasteries and centers of learning have also played a critical role in the development of society and culture. Monasteries lent religious, cultural, and in turn political structure, to this otherwise largely nomadic and decentralized population.

Arguably it has been the pervasive system of patronage that has facilitated the widespread development of Buddhist monasteries and learning centers in Tibet. Within the Buddhist system of patronage a link between the laity and clergy is established through

⁵ India is the world's largest democracy.

⁶ The five principal regions—Amdo, Tsaidam, Chang Thang, Nagchuka, Ngari

have historically been more useful identifiers than a single concept of being *Tibetan*.

the offering of donations. Ronald Schwartz writes in his acclaimed book, *The Circle of Protest*;

“Universally in Buddhist societies the laity offers support to the monks who, merely by the act of receiving, confer spiritual benefits on the laity. The same logic applies to families staffing monasteries with their own children.”⁷

The role of monasteries has, however, not been uncontroversial in Tibet’s modern history. While the majority of criticisms directed towards the monastic system has in the past fifty years been generated by the Chinese Communist Party, there is historical evidence that some monasteries held a disproportionate amount of power. Like any system dependent upon a high degree of patronage, Tibetan monasteries were also susceptible to human elements of greed and corruption when the higher principles of material unattachment, devotion, and generosity had receded from the institution’s purpose.

The role of monasteries in Tibet, while formally purely religious centers of learning and training, informally provided Tibet with coalesced forms of political and economic power. Networks between monasteries naturally developed over time, as Lamas and monks would travel across Tibet to receive teachings from other great masters or to engage in philosophical debates. These social and political networks would later provide a critical form of cohesion for the exile community.

In 1949 the Peoples Republic of China’s army invaded Tibet. After ten years of unsuccessful negotiations, in 1959, the Dalai Lama and over 85,000 Tibetans fled for India, Nepal, and Bhutan. During the period between initial occupation and the departure of the Dalai Lama and 85,000 refugees, Tibet had faced increasingly restrictive religious and economic policies.

The Cultural Revolution is unquestionably one of China’s most bleak periods. The forceful introduction of a socialist system devastated Tibetan culture and people. The razing of all but a handful of Tibet’s 6000 monasteries and the systematic attempt to eradicate Buddhism and its adherents were for Tibetans a violent awakening to the so-called ‘modern’ world. In a series of bloody and hopeless battles, Tibetans attempted to fight back against the Red Guards, but were outnumbered and lacked the necessary weaponry. The deaths of over 1.2 million Tibetans, or over twenty percent of Tibet’s entire population, during the Cultural Revolution forever altered the course of history between these two nations.

Monasteries, cultural centers, printing houses, libraries, and other institutions dedicated to cultural preservation were set up in exile to not only ensure the perpetuity of Tibet’s unique Buddhist culture but to create a foundation for an exile’s identity and a nations’ nationalism.

In order to appreciate the tremendous amount of energy that Tibetans in diaspora have devoted to cultural preservation we would have to understand the extent to which the monastic system influenced Tibetan society. Through a myriad of social relations,

⁷ Schwartz, p. 67.

between a community and a local monastery, between the head lama and the community, and between monks and nuns and their family's, monasteries coalesced the nation's most treasured forms of knowledge. From exquisite art in the forms of thangkas and bronze statues, to language and literature, history and myth, law and moral conduct, and rituals and rites, monasteries represented the cultural heart of Tibet. Those refugees who successfully fled Tibet during the early years of occupation described the priorities of their escape as being limited to physical and cultural survival. Many Tibetans, who had either been a part of the monastic system or somehow related to it, attempted to carry out the few precious religious objects that had not been destroyed by the invading Red Guards. Refugees often chose to carry sacred texts over food and other material needs, indicating poignantly that the preservation of the Dharma (or teachings) was a principal measure of survival. Survival was conceived in spiritual terms even in the most life-threatening circumstances.

Settlements and Institutional Reform in Exile

Tibetan refugees within the context of newly formed institutions, such as settlements, reformed institutions such as the Tibetan Government in exile, and recreated institutions such as monasteries and nunneries. Each of these institutions while influenced to varying degrees by Buddhist principles and traditions also demonstrate a high degree of social capital, manifested in the increasing number of informal and formal networks. The system of religious patronage, while a traditional part of Tibetan culture, has been also used in exile to support the development of monasteries and by extension an identification with an *authentic* Tibetan culture.

These institutions while embodying important conceptual principles such as democracy, human rights, cultural preservation, etc., are also concrete representations of the exile community's efforts to promote a national awareness within the exile community. The influence of Buddhism on these political institutions is at once direct, through the charismatic leadership of the Dalai Lama, and less direct, through the financial support of Western Buddhists or foreign donors who sympathizing with the Tibetan cause lend financial, moral and political influence to the exile Tibetan community.

The majority of people who fled Tibet had arrived in Assam, the northern most state of India. There the Government of India quickly set up transit camps to accommodate the refugee flow. These transit camps being temporary, and unsustainable, prompted the Government of India and the Dalai Lama to appeal to state governments to donate land for refugee resettlement.⁸

There have been three major types of refugee resettlement schemes available for Tibetan refugees: agricultural, handicraft, and business oriented. Because the majority of the refugees had either been farmers or nomads, the Dalai Lama and the Central Administration requested that the Government of India resettle Tibetans in agricultural-based settlements. Land for such settlement had to be requested from various state governments by the Central Government, and as there was not enough land available for agricultural settlements, agro-industrial settlements were also started, most of which are located in the north-west of India in the State of Himachal Pradesh⁹. Thus with the

⁸Strom, p. 80.

⁹<http://www.tibet.com/Govt/into-tib.html>

assistance of the Governments of India and Nepal, and also the Government of Bhutan, the United Nations High Commission for Refugees (UNHCR), foreign donor agencies and the work, the faith and tenacity of the Tibetan refugees themselves, 54 refugee settlements have been established in India, Nepal, and Bhutan since 1959, comprising 26 agricultural, 17 agro-industrial and 11 handicraft-based settlements.¹⁰

The degree to which settlement cultures vary (in economic, political, and social organization) will be addressed only briefly in this section. For an excellent overview of Tibetan settlements, I would draw attention to Margaret Novak's pioneering work entitled, *Tibetan Refugees*.

In looking at how Tibetan refugees have coped with the process of exile, the role of the Dalai Lama, both in the initial years of settlement and until the present, has been central. Novak effectively conveys this point in the following passage:

“In comparison with other displaced ethnic groups studied by social scientists, the situation of Tibetan refugees is probably somewhat exceptional in this respect: because of the inimitable figure and prior international reputation of the Dalai Lama, a considerable amount of international aid and attention was directed right from the start toward the goal of preserving and continuing Tibetan knowledge.”¹¹

From its inception in exile, the leadership of the Dalai Lama (and by extension the institutional structures that grew out of his political office) provided direction and cohesion for the Tibetan refugee community. In a letter written in the first year of exile, the Dalai Lama addressed Tibetan refugees in their settlements and made the following statement:

“Now we have come to the land of another people. Do not lose your heart. Do not be discouraged. Hope, hope is there. Keep good relations with the local people wherever you are. We may face some problems with communication—but try your best. Be friendly with your neighbors and, most importantly, stay with your Tibetan community.”¹²

Settlements were thus inaugurated with this cautious principle, tempered between establishing amicable relations with locals and maintaining a separate identity. Ironically, the implicit message of not taking jobs away from the local indigent populations, paved way for the exile's most lucrative industries:¹³ carpet weaving and sweater production. These two industries, with special emphasis on the former, created an economic boom for Nepal, and certain areas of India. The carpet industry within a decade of its humble settlement beginnings became Nepal's second largest earner of foreign currency.¹⁴

¹⁰ *ibid.*

¹¹ Novak, p. 43.

¹² Forbes, p. 36.

¹³ Handicraft production is one of the chief sources of income for the Tibetan refugee community and is the largest contributor of funds to the Central Tibetan Authority. See Tibetan Government in Exile' web site at <http://tibetnews.com/bulletin/98issue1>

On the whole, settlements have been very successful: to a great extent they have achieved their objectives, as envisaged when the rehabilitation program was initially conceived. While a number of positive factors, such as the availability of land and asylum, have contributed to the relative success of Tibetan refugee communities, the one underlying feature responsible for their phenomenal success in exile can be explained by their adherence to Buddhist values which have, in most cases, produced communities which have tended to emphasize social harmony over discord, education over materialism, coherence and perpetuity of the family unit and the perpetuation of a traditional learning and socialization structure.

Settlements, whilst still remaining the most populated institution for refugees (some 70,000 Tibetans remain refugees in settlements), continue to absorb relatively less and less Tibetan refugees. In the past four decades of exile, the government's emphasis on rehabilitation, as opposed to repatriation, has clearly indicated the remote likelihood of returning to Tibet or restoring its freedom¹⁵. It is thus in light of the latter fact that cultural preservation in exile has assumed such importance in the administration's objectives.

Monasteries

The recreation of the monastic system is the most conspicuous element of the Tibetan community's relative success in exile. It has been primarily through these institutions that the dissemination of Tibetan culture has been possible. The reemergence of monasteries in exile has thus ensured a cultural and political continuity for Tibetans. Paradoxically, however, these *traditional* institutions have often been at the source of significant social and economic change in the community.

The Tibetan monastic system, through its dependence upon a patronage system, has helped create a complex network of social capital in Tibetan refugee communities. Despite the lack of rigorous empirical studies on this subject, anecdotal evidence suggests not only the potency of these institutions in creating internal social and political networks but also in creating networks between monasteries and foreign Buddhist centers, the majority located in the West.

The concept of social capital helps elucidate the importance of monasteries to the Tibetan community in exile because it serves as a powerful explanatory variable of the importance of networks and trust in establishing sustainable communities. It also helps account for how a 'traditional' institution—with its established networks and channels—may be used (at times) for progressive purposes (e.g. computer archiving of texts, community treatment of tuberculosis, and women's literacy).

Social capital¹⁶, in Putnam's *Making Democracy Work*, "refers to features of social organization, such as trust, norms, and networks, that can improve the efficiency of

¹⁵ According to Thomas Methefessel, in his essay "Socioeconomic Adaptation of Tibetan Refugees in South Asia Over 35 Years in Exile", the invasion of Chinese troops in Indian territory, in 1962, had an important impact on the perceptions of Tibetans over the decreased likelihood of repatriation.

¹⁶ Shirley Ardener, "The Comparative Study of Rotating Credit Associations," *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute of Great Britain and Ireland* 94 (1964): 201, writes the

society by facilitating coordinated actions.”¹⁷ The high level of trust and network linkages that figure prominently in Tibetan culture is no doubt rooted in their physical environment—where the majority of Tibetans lived a nomadic life over sparsely populated land—and in religious principles that (in the ideal) uphold the value of the ‘other’ over the conception of the self.

Many of the monasteries that were established in exile created social and economic linkages between not only their own communities, but cross-communally. In an increasing number of monasteries networks are being established with foreign Buddhist centers and patrons. The institutional support that is provided for these monasteries, while ranging from small local donations to the (rare) large multi-million dollar donations, signifies the wide-spectrum of public support.

On a microcosmic level we are able to see how trust and the system of patronage have helped create a dynamic nexus of social capital for Tibetans. The role of public ritual and ceremonies, in addition to the more formal aspects of the monastic system, have also contributed to an expansion of an exile’s social and political network.

Because monasteries were the primary centers of learning in Tibet (pre-1950 invasion), where monks and nuns could study philosophy, history, art, science, astrology, and medicine, Tibetans have carried over this heritage into the modern era and have tended to view Buddhist monasteries as indigenous and authentic institutions. Thus it is not particularly surprising that both the well-spring of Tibet’s contemporary internal struggle for rights and independence has fomented within monastic walls, but that we should find in exile a parallel number of innovative uses for the monastic system (i.e. the provision of health care and education, the diffusion of cultural values, etc.).

The question of how does an exile population manage to survive when approximately fifteen-twenty percent of its potential labor force is assumed into an institution that prohibits paid labor, is a critical question to our discussion of the positive role in which monasteries have played in these communities. The obvious answer is that the monasteries themselves are a principal generator of income in the Tibetan exile economy. Examining the specific ways monasteries generate income is critical: 1) There is a strong incentive, rather an assumed responsibility, for the families to work to support their sons or daughters in monasteries; 2) There is an incentive to maintain the community’s local monastery as it demonstrates both the community’s economic development, as well as the prestige of the Head Lama; 3) The selling of Tibetan ritual arts, such as statues, *thangkas* or paintings, and musical instruments, are a critical source of income for the Tibetan communities that have developed around the nucleus of their local monasteries;

following to explain social capital: “Like other forms of capital, social capital is productive, making possible the achievement of certain ends that would not be attainable in its absence...For example, a group whose members manifest trustworthiness and place extensive trust in one another will be able to accomplish much more than a comparable group lacking that trustworthiness and trust...In a farming community ...where one farmer got his hay baled by another and where farm tools are extensively borrowed and lent, the social capital allows each farmer to get his work done with less physical capital in the form of tools and equipment.”

¹⁷ Robert Putnam, “Making Democracy Work: Civic Traditions in Modern Italy”, Princeton University Press, 1993, p. 167

and 4) Well-established monasteries will often send monk representatives to teach the dharma in other traditionally Buddhist countries or to Western centers that follow a pattern of monastic or *sangha* (religious community) patronage and return with considerable income to support their monasteries. In turn, their home monasteries will expand the development not just into their own monasteries, but will be extended to other institutions such as *shedras* (religious colleges), centers for lay teaching, religious ceremonies, and retreat centers.

The role of Tibetan monasteries in the Tibetan refugee community has only of late been accorded Western academic interest. Monasteries are in many ways at the crossroads of Tibetan society and change. While not all monasteries have developed contacts with the *outside* world, most monasteries have recognized the importance of establishing relationships with other monasteries in the region and with Buddhist centers and patrons globally.

The concomitant increase of monasteries in exile and the tightening controls over religious practice in Tibet has dramatically changed the composition of the Tibetan refugee flow. Interviews at both the Kathmandu Reception Center and statistics gathered from the Dharamsala Refugee Center, confirm the dramatic increase of monks and nuns arriving in India and Nepal. From 1989 to 1993 almost 45 percent of all new refugees were monks and nuns escaping religious persecution. The Department of Religion and Culture is currently giving support to over 5000 monks and nuns who have arrived as new refugees since 1980. The monastic population has more than doubled since 1980. The new refugee monks and nuns represent one-third of the new entrants in monasteries.

The Chinese “Strike Hard” campaign that was launched in April of 1996 marked an even more intensive return to restrictive religious policies aimed at monks and nuns within Tibet. The dramatic increase of Tibetan monks and nuns fleeing religious persecution altered the demographic composition of the Tibetan refugee population. Since 1996, 70-80% of Tibetan refugees are monks and nuns¹⁸. Most of the monks and nuns that have been expelled from their monasteries in Tibet, under this new campaign, have come to India with the hopes of enrolling in a monastery. For those monks and nuns who do not have family members in India or connections in exile monasteries are an attractive option. Pull factors have led to the expanding membership of monasteries, which has in turn been equated with an increase in the prestige (and power) of monasteries in the communities. The emerging trend, however, of increasingly powerful monasteries (with many Western and some Eastern sponsors) has also led to an increase in tensions amongst the local population. Another development, and one in which most Tibetans are reticent to speak of, is the increasing discrimination against the new Tibetan refugees and the old established communities. In a somewhat classical discriminatory response by an existing group, Tibetans have become increasingly reluctant to take in new refugees as they see them as having become corrupted by Chinese and communist values, and in some cases, as being free-riders on their community.

The increasing role of exogenous patronage (from the West and, to an increasing extent, from sponsors in Taiwan, Malaysia, Hong Kong, and Singapore) is changing the religious

¹⁸ Interview at Tibetan Reception Center. Kathmandu, Nepal. Summer 1999

landscape of Tibetan Buddhism. Some have argued that a symbiotic relationship has developed between Tibetan religious persons and the West.

“Whereas the West is associated with material wealth, it is, on the other hand, associated with spiritual poverty. It constitutes the opposite of Tibetan society, which is materially poor and spiritually rich. The dichotomy thus forms a complementary pair. This dual aspect of the West emerges most clearly in the monastic context.”¹⁹

Others, primarily Tibetan traditionalists, are skeptical of the putatively symbiotic relationship between Tibetan lamas and Western Buddhists. They argue, in contrast, that Tibetan Buddhism has become corrupted by Western patronage.

That monasteries and religious communities are beginning to take on an increasing number of social functions, many of which Westerners have introduced, is largely a product of the more benign influences of the West on Tibetan Buddhism. A number of monasteries are now, for example, addressing health needs within the monastery and trying to serve the larger community. In Kathmandu, several monasteries have developed clinics to treat minor health concerns to more long-term treatments such as tuberculosis and leprosy.

These efforts represent a new shift in community development and help in easing tensions between Tibetans and the local communities in which they are hosted. Some argue, however, that the ‘mandate’ of the monastic community is not to serve the public in such secular ways. The purpose of monastic communities, as these traditionalist argue, is to benefit sentient beings through prayers and blessings. The secularization of monastic institutions represents a shift, not only of focus, but also the degree to which monasteries have been required to be more responsive to local needs.

The widening scope of social activities in the monastic system is, however, largely dependent upon the continued support of wealthy patrons. The receptivity for new monks and nuns in the monasteries in exile is thus likely to continue as long as they receive sufficient financial support from a sustained patronage system. In some well-endowed monasteries there is an internal push to increase monk and nun membership because they equate success with the ability to accommodate an ever-increasing monk population.

These seemingly contradictory forces yield new perspectives on established concepts, such as social capital, as well questions regarding the relationship between traditional (monasteries) and new political bodies (e.g. Tibetan parliament). The linkages that have been created through the establishment of monasteries in the Himalayan region and Buddhist centers located around the world, coupled with the dynamic relationship between patrons (increasingly exogenous) and head lamas, has created in effect a Buddhist form of social capital. These networks may also facilitate other forms of civil participation. Monasteries act as both a symbol of tradition and a beacon of modernity. These institutions represent the possibilities for both social and political achievement, as well as the potential for increased resentment amongst local populations.

¹⁹ Tibetan Culture in Diaspora, p. 39

Identity in Exile

Many Tibetans, regardless of the time spent in host countries thus willfully call themselves refugees. The lack of distinction between refugees and those born in exile is institutionalized by the fact most Tibetan refugee agencies do not make any distinction between Tibetans who have been born in exile and those who are refugees.

The politicized ambiguity of a refugee identity has been useful to the diasporic community in at least two ways: first it retains the political definition of Tibetans as a people without a homeland; secondly, by way of the first reason, it consciously directs development of nationhood by evoking (and re-invoking) the shared image and experience of refugeehood.

One could argue that the so-called “problem of incorporation” within a host community has not for the most part been a significant issue for Tibetans in exile. The reasons for this are relatively straightforward. The primary reason why Tibetans have not chosen incorporation can be attributed to their successful adaptation of traditional forms of Tibetan culture, most notable in the ubiquitous monastic development projects. In addition to their efforts to recreate Tibetan society in exile, Tibetans have been particularly successful in innovating new markets—religious/cultural and economic.

Innovation in industry, as in the aforementioned example of the booming carpet and sweater industry, to the development of tourism in the Kathmandu valley, and to proliferation of Buddhist centers, has allowed Tibetans to create opportunities for economic and political independence, thus largely side-stepping the need for political or cultural integration in host countries.

The development of a Tibetan identity was a deliberate policy for of the Tibetan government. Some critics of the Dalai Lama have viewed this process of nation building with greater suspicion. In fact, they argue that the dissolution of regional differences in exile has contributed directly to the augmentation of political power by the Central Tibetan Government, and hence the Dalai Lama. Whether a regionally-based Tibetan identity would have emerged in the absence of the Dalai Lama’s intervention, is of course a debatable subject. Of perhaps greater significance than the concentration of power and allegiance to the Central Government has been the linguistic changes in the Tibetan exile community. Most Tibetans in exile now speak a combination of Tibetan dialects with pronounced emphasis on the Lhasa dialect. In Kathmandu, for example, Tibetans will frequently weave different dialects into conversations, creating what some have argued is a degraded form of the Tibetan language.

The process by which a Tibetan nation has been born in exile has been strongly influenced by the leadership of the Dalai Lama and by the re-creation of traditional institutions in exile. These institutions have provided access to Western concepts of human rights and democracy through direct forms of patronage and contact. Westerners travelling to Nepal, India, and even Bhutan, often seek out the *authentic* Tibetan, hoping to recreate their cherished image of an untainted personal form of *Shangri-la*. Tibetans in exile are thus caught in this precarious balance between tradition and modernity, where the influence of foreign definitions of authenticity loom heavily on the construction of their identity. The nostalgic longing for the traditional Tibetan past, juxtaposed against

the strangely *modern* backdrop of China's occupation, represents the two most powerful contrasting images of Tibetan life. The latter image however more real than the former is invoked primarily in political discussions. For most Tibetans the image of traditional Tibet—a vast, untouched, spiritual, and mystical world—represents the core of their nation and the source of their profound motivation to preserve their culture.

Conclusion

In this paper I have argued that the role of Tibetan Buddhism, as refracted through both Western perceptions' and instituted through monastic centers, has been central to the adaptation of Tibetans in exile. Leadership exercised in both the Office of the Dalai Lama and through a number of influential lamas has also played a significant role in creating links between the West and this small refugee population of 140,000. The formation of a Tibetan identity has lent further legitimacy to the cause of Tibet's independence.

Often, however, when one presents a 'success' story, the reader is led to believe that the *strategy* is worth replicating: that is not the intended purpose here. Tibetan Buddhism is a unique form of Buddhism. Its institutions and practices are also unique. What sets the Tibetan community apart from other diasporic or refugee communities is not only its remarkable ability to recreate traditional institutions in exile without significant social or political resistance, but the role of Western spiritualists in conferring a high cultural status upon the Tibetans. Most refugees, of course, are not received in this way.

In weighing the relative importance of leadership, asylum, social capital as expressed through monasteries and investment in education, and Western spiritualism, I find that these factors contributed to the successful adaptation of Tibetans in mutually reinforcing ways. The Buddhist framework is, however, the overarching system in which this group's sense of agency set itself apart from other refugee communities.

In recognizing the remarkable progress in which Tibetans have steadfastly worked for cultural survival in exile, one must remember the tragic cause for their impassioned determination. Genocide and the subsequent exodus of its government and people left only a shadow of hope for those who stayed behind. Cultural survival may in the end bear greater meaning in exile than in occupied Tibet.

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