



# Journal of Buddhist Ethics

ISSN 1076-9005  
Volume 5 1998: 339-346  
Publication date: 26 June 1998

*Tibetan Culture in the Diaspora*, Papers Presented at a Panel of the 7th Seminar of the International Association for Tibetan Studies, Graz 1995. Edited by Frank J. Korom. Vienna: Verlag der österreichischen Akademie der Wissenschaften, 1997. Pp. 119. ISBN 3-7001-2659-X. \$56.80.

*Reviewed by*

Christian von Somm  
*Freie Universität*  
*Berlin, Germany*  
cvsomm@zedat.fu-berlin.de

© 1998 Christian von Somm

*Copyright Notice*

Digital copies of this work may be made and distributed provided no charge is made and no alteration is made to the content. Reproduction in any other format with the exception of a single copy for private study requires the written permission of the author. All enquiries to jbe-ed@psu.edu.

This volume, edited by Frank J. Korom, who also recently edited a paperback entitled *Constructing Tibetan Culture* (1997), comprises a very interesting collection of papers dealing with the impact of the diaspora situation on Tibetan exile culture. The present volume's main target is to understand the construction of a Tibetan identity and a concept of "Tibetaness" as a reaction to the situation of diaspora and under the influence of both diasporic and host cultures. The introduction and most of the eight papers in the book focus on the Tibetan part of the construction work, although they also deal with the influence exerted by and on Indian, European, and North American host cultures.

In his introduction, Frank J. Korom, curator at the Museum of International Folk Art at Santa Fe, emphasizes the disproportionate number of Tibetan refugees in relation to global population figures and in relation to the attention the Tibetan situation has received in the West. He argues that Tibet and its people have played an important role in the Western *imaginaire*, seen as an "exotic image, based on early travel literature and ethnic stereotypes" (p. 1). Strangely enough, despite this attention the Tibetan diaspora has for a long time managed to escape scholarly research on diaspora and exile. "There has been little attempt to look at the interactive dynamics of the Tibetans' emergent culture in their new homes," as Korom states, although "the dire need to theorize about population movements across national boundaries is extremely relevant to life in the modern world" (p. 2). This observation similarly applies to other Buddhist migrant groups who fled their Asian home countries to settle in Australia, the United States, Canada, and Europe. Korom's volume appears to be the first study to make a heuristic, analytical application of the term "diaspora" to an Asian Buddhist group in a non-Asian environment.

While the Tibetan government-in-exile has tried to project a homogenous, traditional, and self-contained culture by means of language, religion, traditional arts, crafts and performing traditions, it has had to adapt and to acculturate to the culture and economy of the exiles' host countries. In effect, Tibetans have had to negotiate new models of identity, of which "pure Tibetan tradition" is one. Attempts to revive the "pure Tibetan tradition" -- partially in order to cohere with Western expectations -- have encouraged a kind of "proto-nationalism." Faith in Buddhism and in the Dalai Lama, and the establishment of centres and schools for Tibetan culture, arts, language, and religious practises in Tibetan settlements worldwide can be seen as part of such an attempt. On a closer look, however, one can detect changes to, for example, Tibetan artwork or ritual performances: carpets are being produced according to Western taste, and ritual dances and music are shaped and shortened to fit Western standards of entertain-

ment. In their quest for foreign sponsors, "Tibetans constantly and consciously redefine themselves according to the expectations of their new patrons" (p. 5). A result of the experience and self-concept of being displaced is an emphasis on the notion of place and origin. What counts as distorted or as real tradition, as authentic "Tibetaness," is a matter of negotiation and a product of mutual influence.

Thomas Methfessel (Marburg) gives a detailed account of the *Socio-economic Adaptation of Tibetan Refugees in South Asia over 35 Years in Exile*, accompanied by informative maps, diagrams and figures. According to Methfessel, flight from occupied Tibet was determined not by position in a specific social strata but by geographical proximity to the Indian border. This explains why in refugee settlements in India and the neighbouring Himalayan kingdoms one will mostly find refugees from the same area. The hope that they would soon return to Tibet determined the migrants' economic behaviour as well as their choice of settlement. These changed when that hope proved unsustainable. The establishment of a Tibetan government-in-exile was an important step towards a self-administered community, and allowed Tibetans direct access to Western aid and funding. Schools, kindergartens, health and craft centres, and monasteries were built (almost 200 monasteries since 1959 -- an average of five per year!), mostly funded by Western aid organizations. Three major types of refugee settlements can be distinguished. Most of the Tibetan refugees live in agricultural settlements; roughly ten percent in handicraft centres, with carpet weaving as the main source of income; and twenty-five percent belong to self-settled business communities, independent of rehabilitation programs. Methfessel proposes three stages of socioeconomic adaptation. The stage of physical survival is dominated by a strong "in group" orientation, separation from the host society's social environment, and dependence on aid programs. In the second stage of ethnic survival, refugees take part in an active process of adaptation (mostly economic) while trying to maintain their traditional ethnic identity by rejecting certain forms of acculturation. With a new generation growing up in exile, the third stage of economic and social integration begins. The second generation exiles' knowledge of their homeland is based on the stories of their elders, or sometimes on more formal learning in institutionalized settings. In the case of the Tibetans in exile, however, socioeconomic success, partially achieved through an impressive economic adaptation, has not yet led to a great deal of cultural assimilation in Southeast Asia. Rather, it is used to maintain their national identity and to promote their political goal of a free Tibet. Methfessel observes a relatively high degree of adaptation and flexibility in comparison to other diaspora communities. His explanation that "Bud-

dhist tenets proved to be very helpful in enabling them to participate fully in the economic activities of their host societies" (p. 19), however, needs further elaboration.

*Is there a process of secularisation among the Tibetans in exile* is a question Rinzin Thargyal (Osteras) tries to answer by applying traditional Tibetan terminology and concepts. The Tibetans in exile clearly prefer to retain the traditional combination of politics and religion. *Chos*, a term Tibetans use to designate Buddhism, also refers, according to Thargyal, to any specific religious faith. "*Chos* is considered as the only source of Tibetan identity, culture and otherness" (p. 26). Furthermore, it constitutes an indispensable part of Tibetan nationalism. There is, however, a widespread idea that social changes are a threat to the purity of *chos* and tradition. With it goes the argument that *chos* must be saved from deterioration by keeping it away from mundane affairs. Thargyal proposes to view the putative dichotomy of *chos* and secularisation in analogy to the notion of absolute and relative truth, a classical concept of Mahāyāna philosophy. As there is no access to absolute truth without relative truth (*saṃsāra*) *chos* cannot be realised without the mundane world. As the author argues, there is no real contradiction between Buddhism and democracy, because the notion of a totality outweighing its parts is compatible with both. In my opinion, arguments like these rest on deceptive ground. While Thargyal presents viable arguments from a Buddhist point of view, he neglects their opposites, which could be equally viable Buddhist arguments. Buddhist philosophical tradition is rich, to say the least (and thus it has been adaptable to many social and historical constellations), and gaining exclusive clear-cut deductions for or against the priority of a totality over its parts is no easy task. Thargyal's argument that, because of its concept of the inherent Buddha nature, Buddhism is incompatible with social inequality, and his blaming "many myopic politicians" and the lack of "farsighted leaders" (p. 27) for Tibet's despotic past seems clearly apologetic, and furthermore appears as a selective apologia only valid for certain schools of Buddhism. The author's working thesis is "that Buddhism has a secularising property that has the ability to render societies equal and viable" (p. 29). He diagnoses an increasing secularisation process among the Tibetan diaspora in the above mentioned sense of compatibility with the tenets of Buddhism: some traditional clerical institutions have not been reinstated and most officials are members of the laity; striving for gender neutrality is something radically new to Tibetan society. While at the private level *chos* hasn't changed much, its political implications are subject to ongoing modification.

Axel Kristian Stroem (Oslo) presents some closer insights into the

modern institutionalisation of Buddhism in his paper *Between Tibet and the West: On Traditionality, Modernity and the Development of Monastic Institutions in the Tibetan Diaspora*. He finds a remarkable degree of cultural continuity in the refugee communities. Besides creating new institutions like the parliament and the modern school system, the Central Tibetan Administration (CTA) has successfully integrated traditional institutions into the refugee organization. The Tibetan exile political organization seems largely founded on traditional customs wrapped in a modern clothing. A self-conscious reflexive approach to one's own culture, identity and society -- an essential characteristic of modernity, as Stroem believes -- is only marginally developed in Tibetan diaspora. However, he observes that Tibetan life in India is dominated by the counterpoised concepts of "modern" and "traditional." Social customs, religious rituals, arts, and crafts belong to the latter, as well as to Tibet itself. Tibet is a mental concept, standing for an imagined community and history, which constitutes a national identity. Stroem finds different conceptualizations in the diaspora community depending on whether the refugees have been brought up in Tibet or have been born in India. The former have mainly tried to perpetuate their way of life in India. The new environment has been domesticated by creating a sacred geography marked with classical Tibetan religious objects. The monasteries, mostly built in a traditional style, serve as focal points in this religious landscape. Thus Tibet is to a certain extent recreated in India to guarantee a continuity in space and time. Continuity is a core concept in the monastic traditions; *brgyd* (lineage, descent) and *rgyd* (Tantra, psychic continuum) are of central importance as they imply the transmission of religious knowledge from the guru to the disciple which in turn guarantees the validity and authenticity of doctrines and ritual practice. The ritual schedule of Tibetan monastic life in India has hardly changed. Memorisation of ritual texts as well as the performance of rituals (often commissioned) are still the main occupations of monks and novices. Their life is highly structured and they are usually not encouraged to concentrate on social or political issues. "For these reasons few develop a reflexive or critical attitude towards monastic traditions" (p.36). The case is quite different with Tibetan lay youth brought up in India. According to Stroem, they have a less experiential, less embodied, and often ambivalent relationship to tradition. They visit secular schools and many of them feel alienated from certain aspects of their religious tradition. However, they are familiar with the concept of Tibet and the imagined community, since they start every school day by singing the Tibetan national anthem. But it is important to notice that the image of Tibet has two conflicting sides: on the one hand it is the paradisiac, sacred land of the elders' memories, almost

unchanged for more than a thousand years. Since restrictions on crossing the Indo-Tibetan border have been loosened by the Chinese, Tibet has become a more concrete social reality, with new refugees and new reports on the situation in Tibet arriving in India. Testimonies of Chinese oppression strengthen identification with the idealized image of Tibet. Interaction with "native" Tibetans, on the other hand, challenges this idealized notion of a pure, unchanged and traditional sacred country. Although there is a relative consensus that the old social order is to be replaced by democratic principles, according to Stroem this has had little impact so far on the school system and monastic institutions. He reports a significant division within the monastic community. "Newcomers" from rural areas of Tibet who have not been to school before entering a monastery in India, and older monks from the first wave of emigration – now often occupying teaching positions in monasteries – make up one fraction of the monastic population, while younger monks from India who have experienced secular education make up the other. The former fraction is growing constantly; Stroem estimates that sixty to sixty-five percent of all Tibetan monks in India and Nepal are newcomers. Young monks from India who, because of their secular education and, often, urban experiences, could develop a reflexive stance in relation to tradition, are in the minority. Many of them leave the monastery to study elsewhere or to disrobe. Stroem closes his very informative paper with an outline of the monastic education system in regard to the four different Buddhist Tibetan traditions.

*Shangri-La and Hyperreality: A Collision in Tibetan Refugee Expression*, P. Christiaan Klieger's paper (Honolulu), deals with a similar question. "To what extent is the acute, reflexive self-consciousness of Tibetan refugees expressed in contemporary material culture?" (p.60) The attempt to preserve an endangered identity often triggers a self-defensive, self-conscious, and deliberate expression and may lead to a hyperreality in material culture. Klieger is interested in observing the differences between idealized Tibetan self-presentation and the Western myth of Shangri-La. In order to gain access to financial and political help, Tibetans have felt the need to satisfy Western ideas of Tibetan culture. The modern concept of Tibetaness is mediated between Tibetan refugees and Western supporters. "A collision has occurred between the Occidental paradigm of an Eastern paradise, Shangri-La, and an indigenous utopia which constructs a distanced, sacred Tibetan homeland on established Shambala, Mt. Meru, Mt. Potala, and divine rule mythology" (p.61). Klieger rejects the idea of a mere coincidence or one-way influence from the West, yet emphasizes that the creation of an idealized Tibet has different historical origins in the West and among refugees. After an excursion into the history of the Western

image of the East, the creation of Shangri-La and its function as an anti-structure, he turns to Tibetan hyperreality. The Tibetan flight in the late 1950s coincided with liberal movements in the West. The West was becoming interested in suppressed peoples and in the Third World. This interest opened a marketing potential for ethnic-inspired arts and crafts. Tibetans started to manufacture carpets and thangkas according to Western taste. An active, hyperreal style was developed to promote a special message: Tibet has its own history, distinctively different and independent from that of China and other countries; Tibet possesses a unique culture and is the repository of the full complement of Buddhist teachings; as such, it is of a special relevance to the whole world and can solve the problems of modernity; both Tibet and Tibetans still exist and must be restored to their rightful place. In such a hyperreal state, time and change are suspended and "the indigenous hyperreal model of Tibet as homeland comes to resemble the ossified Western model of Tibet as Shangri-La" (p. 66) to such an extent that it is difficult to discriminate between the two models. However, "it is ironic that in the West, the formerly feared and distanced Asian is now considered one of Us, while the Tibetan refugee *raison d'être* is to remain the exotic Other" (p.66). While Klieger concentrates on the structural background of the modelling of Tibet, one might wish to see some further elaboration on its actual material expression.

Toni Huber (Christchurch) analyzes Tibetans "going green" in *GreenTibetans: A Brief Social History*, showing by a comparison of pre and post mid-1980s Tibetan self-representations how a few exile institutions reacted deliberately to the Western discourse of environmental issues by invoking an image of a "green" Buddhist-Tibetan identity.

Meg McLagan (New York) examines the role of the West in constructing Tibet and Tibetaness (*Mystical Visions in Manhattan: Deploying Culture in the Year of Tibet*). She describes occurrences during and around the International Year of Tibet (March 10, 1991 to March 10, 1992), when American pro-Tibet activists tried to mobilize political support. She is interested in showing how "Tibetans work within the problematic categories created about them" (p. 69) and self-consciously participate in their own objectification. One of the effects worth noting is the lack of interest and acknowledgement aroused by Tibetan lay people, as opposed to clergy.

Marcia S. Calkowski (Regina) in *The Tibetan Diaspora and the Politics of Performance* and Mona Schrempf (Berlin) in *From "Devil Dance" to "World Healing": Some Representations, Perceptions and Innovations of Contemporary Tibetan Ritual Dances* both write about the material expression of remodelling Tibet. Both Chinese-Tibetan as well as Tibetan exile performance groups (for example, in opera or dance) try to convince

their Western or Indian audience that they present traditional Tibetan art (Buddhist as well as Bonpo). Both alter traditional patterns, especially their duration and their temporal and spatial ritual embedding, to fit Western standards of entertainment. *'Cham* performances are inserted into jazz concerts. Even in Tibet and in the exile communities the troupes enhance the tempo of their dances to correspond to a changing taste. Since the mid 1980s, performances of Tibetan rituals in the West are presented in connection with the themes of world peace and global healing. Rituals which used to be exclusively higher tantric initiations -- for example the Great Kālacakra Initiation -- are reinterpreted and displayed to an open public.

*Tibetan Culture in the Diaspora* is an interesting account of the shaping and changing of Tibetan culture through the diaspora and of the interdependencies and mutual influences of the factors involved. Yet it also counteracts the impression that Tibetan culture before experiencing diaspora was a homogenous solid block without a history. Finally, the volume also indicates that much additional work on this topic has to be done. A detailed, well-researched start has been made, which is recommendable to a wider academic audience.