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Mobilizing for Tibet: Transnational politics and diaspora culture in the post-cold war era

by

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This dissertation is a multiple-site study of the Tibet Movement, a transnational social movement comprised of diasporic Tibetans and their Western supporters around the world. In order to study the Movement, field research was conducted in a number of sites which reflect the spread of the diaspora and represent important "nodes" in the global Tibet network. Long-term fieldwork was conducted in New York City between 1990 and 1993; additional short-term research was carried out in Los Angeles (1989); Ithaca, New York (March 1991); San Francisco (December 1992), and Washington, D.C. (January 1993). In the summer of 1992, I visited a number of sites in Switzerland where Tibetan refugees have been resettled, including Zurich, Horgen, Rikon, Wintherthur, Flawil, Trogen, Jona, Heitzingen, and Geneva; in addition, I met with Swiss supporters in Lausanne, Bern, and Sargans. Between 1990 and 1993, I had the opportunity to spend time in London where I interviewed Tibetan and English activists. Finally, I spent six weeks in Dharamsala, India, home of the Dalai Lama and seat of the Tibetan government-in-exile, in February and March of 1990.

Obviously a study of this scope would not have been possible without the cooperation of Tibet activists around the world, some of whom would prefer to remain anonymous. In New York City, where the bulk of my research was conducted, I am grateful to Mr. Rinchen Dharlo, the former representative of the Dalai Lama to North America, who smoothed the way for me to participate in

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As noted above, this project took me to several countries, including England, Switzerland, and India. I would like to thank Robert Barnett, Tseten Samdup, Phuntsok Wangyal, and Tsering Shakya who spent time answering

questions and discussing Tibet in London. In Switzerland, the Office of Tibet in Zurich graciously facilitated my research. Dicki Tethong was especially helpful in arranging interviews with Tibetan community leaders. While in Switzerland, I stayed with a number of Tibetan families whose hospitality I greatly appreciated. Rudi Gerber and Antonio Marazzi also opened their homes to me, giving me a break in my work and offering insights into Swiss society from a non-Tibetan perspective. In Dharamsala, India, I would like to thank the Department of Information and International Affairs for providing translators and arranging interviews for me with various Tibetan exile officials and recently arrived refugees. Mrs. Jetsun Pema, the director of the Tibetan Children's Village (TCV), deserves mention for allowing me to videotape the resettlement process of group of newly arrived Tibetan children and for sitting for an interview. I am grateful to the Private Office for making it possible for me to videotape a moving audience between the Dalai Lama and the new arrivals from TCV. Finally, special thanks go to Barbara Banks who travelled with me to Dharamsala in 1990 and whose keen intelligence and unending energy enriched my experience in numerous ways.

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I owe a tremendous intellectual and personal debt to my advisors, especially the head of my committee, Dr. Faye Ginsburg. Her support during the arduous process of transforming my research into a manuscript has been unstinting and invaluable. She has been both a wonderful mentor and a friend and I consider myself extremely privileged to have had the opportunity of knowing and working so closely with a person of her caliber. Fred Myers has also played a crucial role in helping me to see the value and excitement of doing anthropology and to appreciate the contribution the discipline can make to understanding contemporary global social and cultural processes. He allowed me to distract him from his own work to talk about Tibet more than he should have; his intellectual generosity is a rare gift. Others who shaped my research and conclusions include Owen Lynch, whose willingness to offer guidance and encouragement all along the way are deeply appreciated.

I would like express my thanks to dissertation readers T.O. Beidelman, Arjun Appadurai and Steven Gregory for their willingness to take on this unwieldy manuscript and give me feedback. Through NYU I have met many wonderful scholars and friends, including Constance Sutton, whose course on "Transnational

Processes" got me started in a direction that has proved to be quite fruitful, and Patti Sunderland, Maureen Mahon, and Shari Huhndorf, each of whom gave me much needed intellectual and emotional support during the writing process.

As a 1995-96 Resident Scholar at the School of American Research in Santa Fe, New Mexico, I had the good fortune to share ideas and many good times with colleagues Robert Alvarez, Françoise Dussart, Alan Swedlund, Nick Spitzer and their families. Their friendship and good humor helped me to lighten up when the going got tough and to see that there is life beyond the dissertation. My analysis and writing have been considerably sharpened by the insights of a number of readers including Robert Alvarez, Robyn Brentano, Dimitra Doukas, Françoise Dussart, Lauran Hartley, Shari Huhndorf, Rebecca Karl, Lisa Keary, Frank Korom, Brian Larkin, and Patti Sunderland.

As anyone who has ever written (or lived with or been close to someone writing) a dissertation can attest, it is a long and difficult task. For figuring out quickly not to ask when it was going to be done, and for their love, patience, and faith in me, I would like to thank my parents, my friend Elaine Charnov, and especially my husband, Brian Larkin.

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Full Tibetan spellings, where appropriate, are given according to the Wylie system (1959). Tibetan words, including proper nouns, which are commonly used in their untranslated form by English speakers are rendered in the popularly romanized form and italicized only when they are not proper nouns. Sanskrit terms are transliterated according to modern conventions.

Chapter 1 Introduction

The Tibetan Predicament

In March of 1990, I travelled to Dharamsala, India, home of Tenzin Gyatso, the 14th Dalai Lama of Tibet (referred to by his followers as "His Holiness"), and the largest concentration of Tibetan refugees outside of Tibet. While there, I attended the "First International Contact Conference of Tibet Supporters," a meeting which brought together 231 enthusiastic Tibet supporters from 26 countries around the world. One day, towards the end of the conference, a cabinet minister from the government-in-exile, known in Tibetan as a *kalon* (*bka'-blon*) stood up to speak. Addressing the Westerners[1] in the audience, he said:

> You think most Tibetans must have qualities of His Holiness, but we are just ordinary humans. Basically we are good natured, but I must warn you, we are very much human beings.

The audience laughed along with their Tibetan hosts at the minister's comments and the conference proceeded. A week or so later, a well-known Tibetan activist made a similar comment to me during a videotaped interview in his office at the Tibet Youth Congress in Dharamsala:

> Sometimes when people speak about Tibetans as though they are some special thing from Shangri-La, you know, we're not special, we're just ordinary human beings; at other times, we're so totally ignored, we're not counted among the peoples of the world!

In many ways, these comments epitomize the contradictory predicament in which Tibetans living in the diaspora find themselves today. Perceived by many of their Western friends as "special beings," diasporic Tibetans at the same time feel they

are not "counted among the peoples of the world," having failed over the last three decades to win recognition from the world community for their claim to be the legitimate rulers of Tibet. This tension between Western fantasy and Tibetan political reality lies at the heart of this dissertation.

When thousands of Tibetans began flooding out of Chinese-occupied Tibet in 1959-1960, following their revered leader into exile, the West knew little about them except what was depicted in travel and adventure books and films such as James Hilton's "Lost Horizon." In these texts, Tibet is usually represented as an otherworldly place, populated by enlightened beings who devote their lives to religious pursuits and who embody a spiritual wisdom entirely lacking in the West. I argue that this history of Western representation has shaped the interaction between non-Tibetans and Tibetan refugees in ways that have had a profound impact on Tibetan life in exile. This dissertation attempts to explore several aspects of this claim and is organized around several interrelated questions: how do Western fantasies and stereotypes enter into processes of cultural and political reproduction in exile? As a diasporic people, Tibetans have had to construct a political identity across national boundaries. How do Western notions of Tibetanness mediate the production of this identity in various host societies? How is this transnational political identity used to mobilize outside support for the Tibetan struggle? In order to answer these questions, this dissertation focuses on an ethnographically rich arena in which these processes are most visible and to

which I had the most access, namely the "Tibet Movement." Comprised of diasporic Tibetans and their non-Tibetan supporters around the world, the Tibet Movement emerged in the late 1980s as a response to changing local and global conditions, most notably heightened Chinese repression in Tibet.

By focusing on the Tibet Movement as the context in which Tibetan identities are produced, this thesis engages Arjun Appadurai's call for anthropologists to study the "cosmopolitan cultural forms of the contemporary world" (1991:192).

> As groups migrate, regroup in new locations, reconstruct their histories, and reconfigure their ethnic "projects," the *ethno* in ethnography takes on a slippery, nonlocalized quality, to which the descriptive practices of anthropology will have to respond. The landscapes of group identity--the ethnoscapes--around the world are no longer familiar anthropological objects, insofar as groups are no longer tightly territorialized, spatially bounded, historically unselfconscious, or culturally homogenous. (ibid.:191)

Studying complex cultural formations, Appadurai argues, is essential if we are to understand the changing nature of contemporary production of identity.

Appadurai's call reflects a growing recognition in the discipline of the new levels of complexity and multiplicity of interactions that are shaping the world around us and the need to address them in our work. Anthropologists have not been the only ones, of course, to notice these transformations. Since the 1980s there has been an explosion of theory about the spread of global capital and its effects (e.g. Featherstone 1990; Giddens 1990; Harvey 1989; Jameson 1991), transnationalism (e.g. Glick Schiller, Basch, and Szanton Blanc 1992; see also

Kearney 1996) and nationalism (e.g. Anderson 1991), across the social sciences and the humanities. This literature argues that we have entered a new historical moment, one characterized by simultaneous displacement and fragmentation and intensified global integration and connectedness, for which there is little historical precedent (see discussion below).

The analytic challenges of making sense of the complex cultural forms of the contemporary moment, such as global grassroots activism for Tibet, are formidable. Although recently there has been much theorizing about the emergence of new transnational forms of political organization, mobilization and practice (Appadurai 1990, 1993; Hegedus 1990; Smith 1994), very little ethnographic work has been done on them. Indeed, as Michael Smith suggests, "we have yet to invent the discursive terms appropriate for representing the agencies and practices currently constituting bifocal subjects, transnational social space, and globalized political space" (1994:15). Frustrated by the lack of anthropological models to explain what I saw "on the ground," I have found myself tacking between several bodies of literature in order to make sense of my data and develop a theoretical framework in which to place them. These include work on migration and transnational processes, cultural studies on identity and representation, writing on diasporas, globalization theory, contemporary cultural theory, and social movements literature. In the last few years, exciting new work by other anthropologists has begun to appear that addresses some of the issues with which I have been preoccupied and that I have struggled to understand since I

began my research. Most of this new work is concerned with similar transnational or global movements that bring activists together across cultural and spatial boundaries, deploy "universal" discourses such as human rights, cultural survival, environmentalism, etc., and create new political spaces for themselves--like Tibet activists have--in the international arena (e.g. Brosius 1995a 1995b; Conklin and Graham 1995; Ramos 1991, 1994a, 1994b).

One example of the analytic challenges we face in exploring phenomena such as Tibet activism is the fact that increasingly the groups with whom we work are involved in complex representational activities similar to our own. Many groups now actively participate in their own objectification, deploying concepts such as "culture" that used to be the sole province of the professional ethnographer and mediating their identities in ever more sophisticated ways. This point is illustrated in chapters 8-10 where we see the centrality of image production and media management to the "Year of Tibet" campaign.

The production of the Movement: Some notes on methods

Examining complex social formations such as the Tibet Movement also presents a number of interesting methodological issues to be addressed or resolved. Obviously, it requires tracing a cultural formation "across and within multiple sites of activity" (Marcus 1995), thereby breaking with the trope of community in the classic sense of shared values, shared identity, and shared culture (Marcus 1992:315)--a trope which for so long has organized anthropological thinking and

practice. At the same time it entails a blurring of boundaries between "us" and "them" in new and interesting ways. In the past, anthropology rested on a dualism between the anthropologist, on the one hand, and the people being described, on the other. Separated by space and culture, professional practice emphasized the distance between the two. Now this distance is being collapsed as anthropologists increasingly participate in the social and political processes they describe. During the course of my research, I was constantly confronted with the inseparability of "us" and "them," finding myself drawn into an advocacy relationship with my "informants" that blurred the boundaries between anthropologist and activist. I played a dual role, participating in demonstrations, marches, and other political activities, all the while watching, taking mental notes, and transforming my experiences into "data." The fact that I was a Western activist and that one of my main interests was the interaction between Tibetan and Western activists further blurred the boundary for me. Constantly shifting between researcher and participant, between outsider and subject, my position was simultaneously an ambiguous, productive, and frustrating one (see discussion below). Negotiating my ambiguous status was never easy. I struggled when asked to identify myself at Tibet Movement meetings, unsure how others sitting around the table would react to being subjects of my study. Some did not appreciate being observed and told me so; others, despite being reminded repeatedly, forgot that I had interests different from theirs.

In devising this study, I wanted to use a multiple-site method that addresses

the Movement's global organization without sacrificing ethnography of a local community. I adopted a two-track approach which involved long-term participant observation in the local community of Tibet activists based in New York City as well as shorter-term research in a number of other sites which reflect the spread of the Tibetan diaspora and represent important "nodes" in the global Tibet network. One of the advantages of doing research in this way is that it has enabled me to compare how Tibetans reconstitute their lives in different host societies and to see how transnational networks are established among the different diaspora communities in an effort to constitute a Tibetan identity that transcends local difference. At the same time, it has allowed me to embed the New York community in the larger transnational web of Tibet activism.

When I began spending time with Tibet activists in Manhattan, I remember being struck by two things. The first was the intense identification some Americans had with their Tibetan colleagues and/or with Tibetan culture. This observation is summed up by the same cabinet minister cited above in a speech at another Tibet support conference held in 1993:

> Sometimes people ask, why is the Tibet Movement so successful? My answer is that...for all of you, it is part of your life. You don't only live with it, but you dream about it...everyone of you makes tremendous sacrifices. You all came to the conference and paid your own expenses...We have not lost a single friend, and I know all of you will stay with us until the day we go back to Tibet.

Alternately fascinated and puzzled by this phenomenon, I sought to understand it by eliciting what I call "Tibet narratives" from non-Tibetan supporters.

The other aspect of Tibet activism that I immediately found striking was the amount of "work" that went into it. Having had little experience with other grassroots political movements prior to starting the project, much of the work seemed pointless or to have little chance of effecting dramatic change in Tibet. I soon realized, however, that this "work" was the means through which the Movement was constituted. As a result, I became interested in the daily experiences of activists and the daily production of the Movement. One part of this interest in the quotidian centered on intercultural interactions and negotiations among participants. I paid particular attention to the arenas where activists come together, such as Movement meetings, where the pragmatics of the collaboration are most visible. Through this method, I gathered useful data on how Tibetans and Americans construct each other in the process of co-producing the Movement.

In addition to participating in and observing Movement activities, I attended a number of Tibetan community events such as parties, receptions, picnics, as well as tantric initiations (see chapter 9). It is important to note that not every Tibetan living in New York was an activist; in fact the number of Tibetan activists was small and limited mainly to a group that had lived in the U.S. for a long time and were comfortable interacting with non-Tibetans (see chapter 6). Given the small number of refugees living in New York, community activities and Movement activities often overlapped. I also volunteered my services and worked for several organizations once a week in 1991-92 which enabled me to observe daily activities and help out with tasks around the office. I videotaped demonstrations,

celebrations, visits by the Dalai Lama, and Buddhist teachings, copies of which I made available to anyone interested.

Although my research took place in New York City, I carried out short-term fieldwork in San Francisco and Washington, D.C., other key sites of Tibet activism in the U.S. Their significance lies in the fact that each is home to a well-funded organization whose work on behalf of Tibet has been quite professional and effective, though in very different domains of political action. One, an organization of lawyers for Tibet, has focused on helping Tibetans assert (and insert) themselves in various legal arenas, notably those associated with the United Nations, while the other focused its energies on Capitol Hill and the U.S. administration where it has met with considerable success (see chapter 7).[2]

I conducted short-term research in a number of sites around the world, including Switzerland, England, and India. This enabled me to think comparatively about how Tibetans reconstitute their lives in different host societies, and to "map" the Movement's larger structure. In mapping the Movement I traced the ways in which organizations in various "nodes" of the transnational Tibet network interact with one another (see Marcus 1995 on "mapping" in multi-site ethnography) which in turn helped me to explore about the shape Tibet activism takes in different national contexts. While in Switzerland, where more than 2,000 Tibetans were resettled in the 1960s and 1970s, I visited towns and cities including Zurich, Horgen, Rikon, Winterthur, Flawil, Trogen, Jona, Heitzingen, and Geneva. I interviewed Swiss Tibetan activists as well as several individuals who