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A bird without wings: A conversational approach toward heritage preservation among Tibetan New Yorkers

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# A bird without wings

## A conversational approach toward heritage preservation among Tibetan New Yorkers

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### Abstract

**Purpose** – The five-decade-long Chinese colonialization of Tibet has led to a refugee flow. No longer confined to the Tibetan Plateau, Tibetans are scattered over the world, placing deep roots in host nations, in cities stretching from Oslo to New York City. Faced with new ideas, cultures and ways of life, diasporic Tibetans confront the same challenges as countless refugees before them. The purpose of this study is to investigate the efforts of Tibetan New Yorkers to preserve their language and culture. To what extent should they integrate themselves into host countries? What mechanisms could they use to hold onto their native heritage without isolating themselves in a foreign environment? How should they construct new diasporic identities and reconcile such efforts with their ongoing political struggles?

**Design/methodology/approach** – This paper draws on documentary sources and interviews to examine the ways in which diasporic Tibetans understood and portrayed the conventional categories of language, cultural heritage and religion, especially with respect to the Tibetan Government-in-exile in India, and in which they maintained and reinvented their linguistic and cultural heritage in the cosmopolitan environment of New York City.

**Findings** – There is a gradual process of identity formation among Tibetan New Yorkers. While exiled Tibetans are asserting their agency to reinvent a new sense of belonging to America, they still hold onto the regional identity of their family households. Meanwhile, the US-born younger generations strengthen their ties with the larger Tibetan diaspora through community events, socio-cultural activism and electronic media.

**Research limitations/implications** – Despite the small sample size, this study presents the first investigation of the Tibetan New Yorkers, and it provides an insider's perspective on the efforts to preserve their native heritage in a globalized environment.

**Practical implications** – This study is a useful case study of the Tibetan diasporas in comparison with other Chinese diasporas in the West and beyond.

**Originality/value** – This study is the first scholarly investigation of the sociocultural experiences of Tibetan New Yorkers.

**Keywords** Heritage preservation, Activism, Amdo, Kham, Tibetan diaspora, Tibetan New Yorkers

**Paper type** Research paper

### Introduction

As a Tibetan proverb goes, “A child without education is like a bird without wings”. While this axiom underlines the importance of education in a child's upbringing in this globalized world, the word “education” in the proverb can also refer to a child's adherence to his or her heritage, particularly in diasporic communities.

The five-decade-long Chinese colonialization of Tibet has led to a refugee flow. Of six million Tibetans, 1,50,000 are reported to be living in exile. No longer confined to the Tibetan Plateau, Tibetans are scattered over the world, placing deep roots in host nations, in



cities stretching from Oslo to New York City (Houston and Wright, 2003; Hess, 2009). Faced with new ideas, cultures and ways of life, Tibetan diaspora confront the same debate over the balance between integration and multiculturalism as countless refugees before them. To what extent should they integrate themselves into host countries? What mechanisms could they use to hold onto their native heritage without isolating themselves in a foreign environment? How should they construct new diasporic identities and reconcile such efforts with their ongoing political struggles? These are age-old questions for migrants and refugees, but the way people answer them is changing.

Methodologically, research for this article is based on documentary sources and interviews in New York City from January to April 2016. In total, several semi-structured interviews were carried out among six Tibetan New Yorkers, who worked in local Tibetan community organizations. Interviews were arranged through a snowball technique and were conducted in English. One of the interviews was undertaken with the methodology of participant-observation at the Rubin Museum of Art in New York City. The age of interviewees ranges from 30 to 50 years, and they come from an educated, middle-class background. To protect their identity, interviewees have been given pseudonyms.

As with other immigrants in the USA, Tibetans are faced with the danger of losing their native heritage to the “dominant or hegemonic euro-American culture” (Kroskrity, 2012, p. 14). They strive to preserve and adapt traditional practices for the upcoming, semi-integrated generations, and these efforts to transmit and sustain the linguistic, religious and politico-cultural heritage constitute an integral part of the identity formation among Tibetan New Yorkers. According to Paul Kroskrity, “Cultural sovereignty has important community-building functions as well as important political implications in regard to the dominant society” (2012, p. 6). Although Tibetans have lost control of the territorial sovereignty of their ancestral homelands, they are keen to deploy their language, culture and religion to reposition themselves in an increasingly globalized world. Particularly interesting is the complicated relationship between cultural and political expression among diasporic Tibetans. Our interviewees tended to favor cultural identification and linguistic heritage over political activism, partly because political expression has always been contentious in the Tibetan diaspora and partly because the Tibetan Government-in-exile in India has been keen to promote a Lhasa-based dialect as the official Tibetan language, erasing other regional dialects. This complexity calls for the need to contextualize the Tibetan diaspora itself. In this regard, this study draws on the interviews to examine the ways in which diasporic Tibetans understood and portrayed the conventional categories of language, cultural heritage and religion, especially with respect to the language policy of the Tibetan Government-in-exile, and in which they maintained and reinvented their heritage in the cosmopolitan environment of New York City. Beginning with an overview of Tibetan linguistic diversity, the following analysis offers an insider’s perspective on the efforts to revitalize native heritage among Tibetan New Yorkers, and addresses a wide range of societal and cultural challenges that they face.

### **Unity and diversity in Tibet**

Generations of Westerners have been influenced by an Orientalist misconception that Tibet is a land of cultural and linguistic homogeneity. This mistaken view was periodically reinforced by the Hollywood film industry, which portrayed Tibet as a mystical Shangri-La high in the Himalayas and its Buddhist monasteries as frozen in time, unchanging and separate from the outside world. This Orientalist discourse of Tibet, or the Shangri-La paradigm of Tibet, has been critiqued by scholars like Bishop (1989), Lopez (1998), Dodin and Räther (2001), Yeh and Coggins (2014) who study longstanding linguistic, political and

sociocultural diversities within Tibet. Before the notion of a single Tibetan identity emerged in the Cold War era, Tibetans often adhered to their ethnolinguistic, religious and territorial identities (Wangdi, 2003, p. 185). Broadly speaking, the Tibetan Plateau is composed of the traditional provinces of Ü-Tsang, Amdo and Kham. Ü-Tsang and parts of Kham were turned into a Chinese province-level unit called the Tibet Autonomous Region in 1965, and the whole of Amdo and small parts of Kham were integrated into the neighboring Chinese provinces of Qinghai, Sichuan, Kansu and Yunnan. As the Tibetan cultural heartland, Ü-Tsang is home to the Potala Palace of the successive Dalai Lamas in Lhasa. The Lhasa dialect, also known as the capital language, has been widely used as a lingua franca across Ü-Tsang, and has been adopted by the exiled Tibetan elites as the standard Tibetan language.

Ethnolinguistic and cultural divisions are not new to the Tibetan diaspora. Several dialects exist in Tibet, with the main Tibetic languages in use being Ü-Tsang, Amdo and Khams. While the written language is linguistically conservative, rendering it the same across the linguistic map, the Tibetan dialects are different enough that Sangye was scolded as a child for speaking an incorrect Tibetan dialect when she recited schoolwork using the teacher's Amdo Tibetan rather than her father's Khams (Sangye, 1 April 2016). When talking about her Kham origin in the interview, Sangye remarked that other Lhasa Tibetans expected her to be hot-headed and blunt. Indeed, the obvious stereotyping surrounding Tibetan regional diversity involves the Khampa (i.e., people from Kham), and the word "Khampa" is often associated with banditry in the Tibetan popular imagination (Feigon, 1996, p. 99). The 14th Dalai Lama, a native of Amdo, subscribed to this popular perception, writing that "they [Khampa] were the kind of people to whom a rifle is almost more important than any other possession" (The Dalai Lama, 1997, p. 43). Perhaps there is some truth in these remarks because the Khampa were among the first Tibetans to resist fiercely the Chinese military occupation in 1957 (Feigon, 1996, p. 32; Sam, 2009). However, this stereotyping goes both ways, as was made evident by Sangye (1 April 2016):

Especially in Eastern Tibet, they are very straightforward. Eastern Tibetans such as Khampa are very straightforward. But they are not mean. They say it and then they forget. And then they used to say Western Tibetans, they don't say it, they are very nice in the mouth, but then they go like this [Sangye makes a backstabbing motion].

This sense of regional pride among Eastern Tibetans is largely a response to the dominance of Ü-Tsang cultural forms, which serve as the unmarked category in relation to Amdo and Khampa. It was only after the Chinese invasion that Tibetans looked past their regional and subethnic differences to cultivate a single, cohesive, national "Tibetan" identity (Shakya, 2000). This attitudinal change was reflected in the introduction of a Standard Tibetan (spyi skad), based on the Lhasa dialect (Feigon, 1996, p. 12; Wangdi, 2003). While the standardization of Tibetan language enabled the exiled Tibetan leaders to assert a Lhasa-centric identity, the standardizing process has always been contentious and is greatly influenced by different dialect-speaking groups among the diaspora (Tournadre *et al.*, 2003, p. 16).

Here one can see a gradual process of identity formation within the diaspora. At the top of the hierarchy is the identity of the host country, in this case, younger Tibetans identifying themselves as American. Next is the regional identity, and this remains for the most part Amdo or Kham. Finally, there is a newly-constructed Tibetan national identity, which binds the different segments of the Tibetan population together.

In the USA, the hegemonic English-speaking environment discourages the sustainable development of other minorities' languages. Today, many Tibetans trying to fit into the

mold of what being an “[English-speaking] American” is deliberately limit the use of their mother tongues at home, and this has the negative effect of undermining the cohesiveness of their native culture. Fabienne Goalabr e emphatically points out that an “inability to maintain the home as an intact domain for the use of their language has often been decisive in language shift” (Goalabr e, 2015, p. 49).

Language loss is a serious issue facing many ethnic groups. For example, most of the Native Americans today reside in urban areas, where English is widely used. The few existing Native American languages are largely spoken by the elderly population. Even attempts to revitalize a minority language face enormous difficulty. The Scottish Government recognized Gaelic as an official language and implemented a program to increase the number of Gaelic speakers in public schools, but Gaelic is still discarded in everyday life for a more convenient, widely spoken English language. The absence of a Gaelic-speaking environment outside the schools shows that “the curriculum cannot do the job which is fulfilled traditionally by a speech community” (Goalabr e, 2015, p. 56).

What does this mean for Tibetan New Yorkers whose speech community is exclusively English? Even in places as cosmopolitan as New York City, lack of English speaking ability can severely compromise one’s socioeconomic opportunities (Foner, 2013, p. 12). New York City likes to claim itself to be either “a melting pot” where a heterogeneous society become more homogeneous or “a tossed salad” in which various communities cling to their ethnolinguistic and cultural heritages. In a nation of immigrants, New York City is the historical epicenter of immigration and its very name evokes the imagery of the Statue of Liberty, welcoming incoming boats bound for Ellis Island. The variety of languages to be found in New York City is different from rural America, with a wide range of local media available in over 36 languages (Foner, 2013, p. 19). In the past, ethnic groups like Italians, Irish and Greeks who arrived in a new country did their best to integrate into the American society. Yet, for Tibetans, who fled their ancestral homeland to protect their culture from the encroaching Chinese influence, complete integration has been eschewed in favor of a strategy of limited acculturation that allows Tibetan diaspora to adhere to their cultural heritage while adjusting to local lifeways (Korom, 1997a, 1997b, p. 2). While younger Tibetans have integrated themselves into the American way of life, they still maintain adequate cultural and linguistic knowledge of their traditional heritage.

### **Tibetan New Yorkers**

The Tibetan diaspora holds linguistic competence as a key to maintaining its ethnic identity. As Nicholas Tournadre explains:

Languages are not neutral. [...] They convey very specific social and cultural behaviors and ways of thinking. So, the extinction of the Tibetan language will have tremendous consequences for the Tibetan culture. The culture cannot be preserved without it” (Tournadre *et al.*, 2003, p. 6).

Some researchers even argue that Tibetan-language skills “are crucial to the experience of feeling a sense of connectedness with the diaspora” (Lauer, 2015, p. 170).

Many Tibetan leaders refer to their mother tongue as the soul of the diasporic communities and emphasize the instrumental role of the Tibetan language in cultural preservation. Dodjee stated clearly: “If we don’t use Tibetan language, we’ll have lost our language” (Dodjee, 2 April 2016). The encouragement of preserving the Tibetan language comes all the way from the Central Tibetan Administration. “His Holiness the Dalai Lama always says that it is very important to preserve the Tibetan language because Buddhism is best kept in the Tibetan language”, explained Diki (30 March 2016). On the whole, my

interviewees found the Tibetan youth to have a fair level of linguistic competence in Tibetan, even though there is some ambiguity on the spoken dialects.

All interviewees speak a few dialects which are mutually intelligible. The Standardized Tibetan is widely taught in community schools and is spoken by younger Tibetans (Dodjee, 2 April 2016). While linguistic competency is being achieved, cultural competency in language is a murkier subject. Several interviewees admitted to a divide between the colloquial language used by the youth and the more formal, traditional language used in Tibetan literature (Diki, 30 March 2016). “But then, sometimes she speaks too much English!” Sangye (1 April 2016) exclaimed in describing her daughter who preferred to talk in English than Tibetan, expressing the frustration shared by many immigrant parents.

It is common that varying degrees of English vocabulary is used alongside Tibetan dialects for the younger generations, “Sometimes I slip. I try not to speak English with her, but sometimes it happens. Because [here] I speak more English than Tibetan so maybe I’m just used to it” (Sangye, 1 April 2016). As children growing up in the USA, the youngest immigrants are inundated with the English language. Diki (30 March 2016) said, “You know, once they start going to school, they automatically speak English. [. . .] Most of the younger kids, they seem to speak more English”. The use of newer vocabulary also encourages the integration of English into Tibetan. “There are some terms in English that you can’t translate into Tibetan”, pointed out Thubten (1 April 2016). Nyima (30 April 2016), a Tibetan American youth, finds her peers frequently using English words when speaking Tibetan to their parents, and notes that they prefer to communicate in English among the peers. As younger Tibetans do not speak, read and write fluently in Tibetan, there is a little hope of popularizing a standard, national Tibetan language (Wangdi, 2003, p. 80).

This trend to speak more English is encouraged by the US education system. Sangye described her experience enrolling her daughter in a kindergarten, in which the teacher told her that her child would have difficulties in school if she did not speak English at home enough. “But then [. . .] we don’t do that, because English-everybody speaks English”, she said, acknowledging that her daughter will pick up English on her own through mediums such as school, friends, and social media (Sangye, 1 April 2016). Other interviewees validated her views. “When you really think about it you spend more time with your class in school than with your own family”, Diki (30 March 2016) pointed out in explaining the increasing use of English among Tibetan youth. “The parents have jobs. They don’t have time to take care of [in this case, teach Tibetan language to] the kids”, added Thubten, mirroring Diki’s thoughts (Thubten, 1 April 2016). The issue can be complicated when the parents of the younger generation are themselves learning English, taking time away from teaching their children Tibetan (Nyima, 30 April 2016). It is indeed hard to balance between adapting to survive in America and mastering English to be successful in the newly adopted host country.

Rinchen, who grew up in India with a formal Tibetan education and recently moved to New York City, has a more dispirited view of the linguistic competency of Tibetan Americans. “The second generation of Tibetans in America know Tibetan, but their first language is English; they have more difficulty speaking Tibetan”, he said. When communicating with other Tibetans, Rinchen tends to speak in English because many Tibetan Americans would likely feel uncomfortable responding to him in Tibetan for fear of making mistakes and embarrassing themselves (Rinchen, 8 February 2016). This view was shared by other interviewees. “I feel reluctant around older Tibetans I don’t know that well, because I feel like my Tibetan isn’t good enough and I kind of fear their judgement” (Nyima, 30 April 2016).

This reluctance to speak a language linked to their cultural heritage because of fear of embarrassment is found in other minority-language communities (Kroskrity, 2012, p. 139). This reluctance notwithstanding, at events where multiple generations of family are present, Tibetan is spoken regardless of one's proficiency or lack thereof. However, others reported a stronger use of Tibetan in daily life. Thubten (1 April 2016) described several places where he would speak:

Home, over here [the Tibetan Community Center of New York and New Jersey], pretty much whenever you see Tibetan people you tend to communicate in Tibetan. A lot of them, they're not able to grasp the foundation [of] two languages, especially Tibetan language, if they're born here in New York.

Aware of the cost of assimilation, steps have been taken to enhance linguistic competence among younger Tibetans. In Queens, New York, these steps have taken the form of a Sunday language school. The Tibetan Community of New York and New Jersey (TCNYNJ) (2017c) is a non-profit organization dedicated to "supporting the survival of Tibetan culture and identity", and to enhance the well-being of all Tibetans. In 1996, it launched a Sunday language school, starting out with seven students, in a rented classroom at PS 199 in Queens. In the years since, the school has become the most successful cultural initiative undertaken by the TCNYNJ (2017a, 2017b). Today, it has a staff of 20 volunteer teachers and an enrollment of almost 250 students. Dodjee (2 April 2016), the school's founder, outlined the basic schedule: "We teach on Sunday morning, ten to one, and we teach Tibetan language, reading and writing. And after that we have teachers for traditional dance and music". These cultural classes continue until three in the afternoon. Using textbooks designed by the Tibetan Government-in-exile in India, the Sunday language courses are offered in a wide range of levels, for students aged 5 to 18 years, in the Lhasa dialect.

The swelling number of students, despite Rinchen and Thubten's pessimistic thoughts on the cultural competence of Tibetan youth in New York, could indicate a steady increase in the proficiency of Tibetan among the youngest generation. There appears to be stronger initiatives to promote the Tibetan language. "We are asking people, especially the youth, to try to get involved with the community", stated Thubten (1 April 2016), "That way they can get in contact with the people who come from a different background of Tibetan and learn together". Nyima (30 April 2016) is enthusiastic about learning Tibetan, enrolling in a Tibetan language course at a nearby university to further her linguistic proficiency.

Tibetan is not just limited to domestic households and Sunday schools. Other venues for using Tibetan have become available over time, and technology plays a crucial role in advocating Tibetan language and culture. Many Tibetan news media and Tibetan cultural organizations worldwide strive to promote the Lhasa dialect as a national language (Wangdi, 2003, p. 81). In 2014, a Tibetan newspaper, *Ari Bodyig Sarshog* was launched in New York City. Since 1990, the Voice of America (VOA) has featured Tibetan radio and television programs, with media coverage in the Lhasa dialect in the morning, afternoon and evening, as well as special sections dedicated to Tibetan current affairs, Buddhism and traditional music. Notable among VOA's programs is "Reconstructing the 1950s", in which personal histories of the events leading up to the Tibetan diaspora are shared. This program is sure to instill memories of what can only be described as a traumatic, terrible time, but nevertheless reframes the historical tragedy under the larger framework of a transnational Tibetan experience. The VOA continues to serve as a major media outlet for both young and old Tibetans. Equally important is the creation of Tibetan fonts for computer keyboards. This has drastically increased the use of Tibetan in the digital world. Thubten (1 April 2016), in particular, stated that this technology has permitted the continuance of the Tibetan

language in the Internet age. [Nyima \(30 April 2016\)](#) referred to a Tibetan App that she frequently uses. A VOA Tibetan program, “Cyber Tibet”, even explores the new ways in which social media technologies have allowed the Tibetan identity to flourish online, giving rise to various Tibetan blogs.

### Religious dimension of cultural preservation

The meshing of religious practices and cultural identity in Tibetan Buddhism, especially through the patronage of the Dalai Lama, gives Tibetans a solid basis for popular expression ([Wangdi, 2003](#), p. 195). “Our culture is actually mixed with our religion”, [Sangye \(1 April 2016\)](#) stated early on in her interview. And certainly, if it was difficult to extricate history and culture from the Tibetan Buddhist religion before the diaspora, it is impossible now. The 14th Dalai Lama has become a symbol not only of Tibetan Buddhism, but the face of the Tibetan cause as well, fostering a sense of connection between diasporic Tibetans and the country many of them have been born outside of ([Lauer, 2015](#), p. 182). The idea of Tibetan Buddhism acting as a key component in the Tibetan identity is presented in an article by Franz Michael, wherein he states, “Religion has thus remained the all-permeating cohesive factor of Tibetan life in India” ([Michael, 1985](#), p. 742).

However, this theory does not necessarily characterize the younger generations living abroad. A study delving into the sense of identity among Swiss Tibetans revealed considerable tensions between the younger generations raised in a nation upholding the principle of church-state separation, and the older generations who still believe the Dalai Lama to be infallible. Growing up in an environment where religious expression in the public sphere is discouraged, few of the second-generation Swiss Tibetans practice Tibetan Buddhism regularly. One Swiss Tibetan even criticized the hyper-cultural atmosphere of Tibetan settlements in India as a “Buddhisneyland” in which refugees adhere to a traditional lifestyle to cater to the curiosity of Western tourists ([Lauer, 2015](#), p. 173 and p. 181). By comparison, in America, where religious freedom and diversity are celebrated in public, Tibetan New Yorkers are adamant in their belief that they are retaining their religion. All interviewees confessed to be practicing Buddhists. Some of them take annual religious retreats to the Palyul Retreat Center in Upstate New York, and others frequent temples regularly. [Diki \(30 March 2016\)](#) works in the Rubin Museum of Art, much of its holdings being religious artifacts from Tibetan monasteries in the Himalayas. Recently, she has noticed more Tibetans visiting the museum:

In fact, in the Tibetan lunar calendar, the fourth month of the lunar calendar, it's called Saka Dawa, two words, which is a very auspicious month of the year, and so traditionally Tibetans go to different monasteries for pilgrimage, and I've seen Tibetan families, those who know about [the Museum], I've seen a bunch of them coming especially during that period. So I often call [the Museum] as the modern day pilgrimage. Those who know about it, they do come. And they love it.

Several teachers of dharma practices take their American students to examine the religious objects of their Buddhist lineage. For decades, Americans and Europeans have been simultaneously enchanted and confused by Tibetan Buddhist arts. It is through the personal appeal of the 14th Dalai Lama that the West becomes fascinated by Tibetan Buddhism and creates its imagination of a timeless Shangri-La. The exiled Tibetan elites also tapped into this popular sentiment and deployed many traditional religious symbols to appeal to the wider world, but [McLagan \(1997, 2002\)](#) warns that museums and shrines filled with numerous “traditional” religious objects risked the danger of essentializing Tibetan

Buddhism as the sole element of Tibetan culture and depoliticizing the Tibet Question. Such simplistic representations trapped Tibet “into a discourse of “Otherness” that can deny social actors their historical agency and contemporaneity”, discouraging the public from taking the exiled Tibetan government and refugees seriously (McLagan, 2002, p. 91). As a cultural program coordinator at the museum, Diki is aware of the multi-faceted aspect of the religious objects on display: “Traditionally, this art is in a monastery, right? So here it’s hung on a blank wall, and it’s called art. So it’s [a little-] it’s not the same as traditionally, but it’s here” (Ibid.). Whether the objects are found in a museum or a home, religious practice seems to be alive among Tibetan New Yorkers.

The growing interest in Tibetan Buddhism has spread to the younger generation. Sangye (1 April 2016), the mother of a primary school-aged daughter, reported that religion is part of her child’s everyday life as well: “She knows Om Mani Peme Hum [a mantra], Padmasambhava’s mantra, and another one, for prostrations”, she confirmed, “The basics [I’ve taught] her”. This statement highlights a number of resilient features of Tibetan culture. The first is that inter-generational transmission of cultural practices such as religion are continuously practiced in the New York Tibetan community. Second, if the child in question represents the norm, Tibetan youth in New York City are growing up with a solid religious foundation inextricably linked to their culture, indicating that their cultural heritage is being transmitted and preserved. Thubten (1 April 2016) confirmed the unbreakable link between Tibetan culture and religion:

Tibetan events are mostly mixed. It could be a fundraising but it will have a ritual, or praying, together. [But] sometimes it can be only religious too; like praying for His Holiness— that would just be religious. But a lot of them are just mixed.

### **Civic activism among the diaspora**

Tibetan New Yorkers have been one of the most politically active Tibetan diasporic communities. Community-based organizations such as the TCNYNJ coordinate many demonstrations against China’s colonization of Tibet. A well-known event is the annual Tibetan National Uprising Day on March 10, when diasporic groups show up to display their solidarity in remembrance of the 1959 Tibetan Uprising (Lauer, 2015, p. 181). In 2016, the TCNYNJ, the Regional Tibetan Women’s Congress, the Regional Tibetan Youth Congress and Students for a Free Tibet came together to mobilize hundreds of Tibetan New Yorkers. The day-long protest started from Foley Square in Downtown and ended at the Chinese Consulate in Midtown. These organizations also launch public forums and panels to engage the youth. Diki (30 March 2016) referred to the Himalayan Heritage Meetup at the Rubin Museum, a gathering for Himalayan communities to socialize, navigate their life in New York City and strengthen ties to their shared history and culture.

Moreover, there are less publicized political events in support of linguistic and cultural preservation. In March 2016, there were the elections for the Leader of the Central Tibetan Administration (*Sikyong*; also known as the Prime Minister of the Tibetan Government-in-exile) and the North American Political Leader (*Chitue*). The Tibetan voter turnout in New York City was lower than expected, with 2,600 out of over 9,000 registered voters going to the polls. Despite the low turnout, TCNYNJ noted that the elections spurred the launching of new policy debates and forums by the Regional Tibetan Youth Congress of New York and New Jersey (RTYCNYNJ), and Tibetan College Students of New York and New Jersey. The elections inspired young Tibetan New Yorkers as political participants in the global diaspora. “They are really interested in getting into the community, even though they can’t speak Tibetan that good”, Thubten (1 April 2016) commented on the political passion and

active involvement of the Tibetan youth, a view that Nyima (30 April 2016) was quick to confirm: “I am the president of my college’s Students for A Free Tibet chapter. Most young Tibetans I know are very involved in Tibetan politics, or are becoming more involved”.

The civic culture of host countries has largely shaped the political orientation of younger Tibetans. Civic engagement and community outreach activities have provided a safe space for debating the Tibet Question in the USA, and served as “a vehicle for identifying with their Tibetan origins” (Lauer, 2015, p. 181). The elections in March 2016 witnessed a significant shift of power from the elderly statesmen to the young leaders within the Tibetan Government-in-exile. Rinchen (8 February 2016) considered this change to be a result of the strong participation of younger Tibetans. While the older generation still support the Dalai Lama’s Middle Way (*Umaylam*), fighting for a peaceful coexistence with China, the younger generation is less enthusiastic about the peaceful negotiation with Beijing and call for the complete independence of Tibet (*Rangzen*). The latter believes that inaction leads nowhere, and only through a more dramatic path will positive change be effected among the diaspora (Nyima, 30 April 2016).

Intergenerational tensions over political issues are not new to the diaspora, though Margaret Nowak states that the primacy of the 14th Dalai Lama in the exiled government has made it hard for any dissenting voices to emerge (Nowak, 1984, p. 143). Almost since its inception, the Tibetan Youth Congress (2017) has butted heads with the Tibetan Government-in-exile over various policies (Boyd, 2004, p. 92).

In the light of the growing political disagreement, one interviewee refused to take side and distanced herself from the political sphere, maintaining her commitment to cultural preservation over political activism (Diki, 30 March 2016). Sangye (1 April 2016) mentioned her recent withdrawal from political events due to an aversion of exposing her young daughter to political disputes before she was ready. Like Sangye, many parents find it difficult to explain the Tibetan sovereignty debate to their children. Sangye explained that she had initially planned to wait until her daughter was old enough to understand why her grandparents had fled Tibet, but her daughter found out about the Chinese invasion from other children. “The kids, they talk a lot about our country”, Sangye confirmed, “If we are talking, [they] hear it”, backing up her statement with an anecdote about her daughter:

Last year, my sister-in-law went to Nepal, and she brought her a Tibetan dress, a *chuba*, that’s [sic] color was red, and silver embroidered with gold, and it was beautiful. [. . .] Before last year, on Tibetan New Year I ask her “I think by now it will fit on you, it was too long for you last time, and she said “I’m not going to wear that” and I said “Why?” “That’s a Chinese color. I’m Tibetan” (Ibid.).

Another Tibetan co-worker’s son, upon finding out about the Chinese invasion, initiated a fight with his Chinese American friend and declared that his friend’s people were the ones “who had taken his country” (Ibid.). The reactions of these children are representative of the sense of identity among the youngest Tibetan immigrants in the USA. The tension that erupted between the Tibetan-American boy and his Chinese-American friend shows the internalized Tibetan identity of the co-worker’s son. The encounter also illustrates the challenges that Tibetan-American parents are faced with in explaining the Chinese invasion to their children. According to Sangye, “Right now they are not [in] that position- if they think Chinese, they think all of the Chinese [. . .] they don’t know how to separate it” (Ibid.). Nevertheless, the anecdotes regarding these children only reinforce the idea that politics play a large part in the Tibetan diasporic identity in New York City.

Different interviewees mentioned different ways of keeping their culture alive outside Tibet. In addition to language lessons, the Sunday schools for Tibetan youth offer cultural activities. Traditional music and dance programs are available, although some interviewees are reluctant to send their children to Tibetan classes all day.

Other options for cultural transmission and immersion do exist. Just as there is a Sunday school for Tibetan language, there is a Tibetan summer camp. The New York Tibetan Service Center runs courses in Tibetan language as well as in numerous areas of Tibetan culture, including *thangka* (painting on cotton) classes. The TCNYNJ is renovating one of its buildings into a cultural center. It hosts several cultural events annually, such as a *Losar* (Tibetan New Year) festival, with up to 12 such events a year (Dodjee, 2 April 2016). The Rubin Museum in particular, besides being a place for many Tibetan-Americans to connect with their religion, hosts a regular program geared toward sharing cultural practices with immigrants from the Himalayas, at which a range of age groups are present, suggesting intergenerational transmission of cultural heritage.

Political organizations dedicated to the Tibetan diaspora also display a commitment to the preservation of Tibet's culture, the Tibetan Youth Congress going so far as to name one of their objectives as the desire "to work for the preservation and promotion of religion and Tibet's unique culture and tradition" (Boyd, 2004, p. 92). The same efforts made to preserve language are used for the transmission of culture. Apart from the previously mentioned program "Reconstructing The 1950s", the VOA Tibetan covers cultural topics on radio and TV programs such as "Buddhism and Culture", "Cyber Tibet", "Soyaka: Contemporary Tibetan Music" and "First Dawn: Traditional Music". Several programs deal with current events in Tibet, maintaining a connection to Tibet for the geographically scattered diaspora.

At a time when cultural appropriation is being denounced, the reaction of Tibetans to the large number of Westerners taking an interest in Tibetan Buddhism is surprisingly calm. In fact, many of the interviewees were happy with the attention that Tibetan Buddhism attracts from American mainstream society. "I think it's strengthening Buddhism", stated Thubten (1 April 2016), his sentiments echoed by Diki (30 March 2016): "I think it's really nice to have groups of non-Tibetans interested in this, because then you can actually spread the importance of being compassionate [sic] and kind and generous and treat others as you want to be treated", she said, before adding, "And the more people know about Tibetan Buddhism, the more they'll be aware of Tibetan culture".

These statements hold an important aspect of the relationship that Tibet and Tibetans have with foreigners. Tibet enjoys a certain elevation in the minds of Westerners, characterized by an exoticism and a "hyper-positive image" (Lauer, 2015, p. 172). The exoticizing of Tibet has led to a large amount of financial aid donated from the West to the Tibetan communities in India, leading to a situation where the interests of Westerners – evident in donations to Tibetan causes – has a significant influence on Tibetan cultural life (Lauer, 2015, p. 173). Nonetheless, Nyima's (30 April 2016) interview showed that the perception of Western interest by Tibetans might be changing. When asked about non-Tibetans using traditional Tibetan culture, she showed a very different opinion than previous interviewees:

I personally find it annoying and offensive, especially when it's very privileged white people. It's very easy to see their fetish and the fantasy of the "Magical Tibet" that they adore, and many tend to act condescending. [...] I think it's situational and depends on what type of interest. There are many people who were originally interested in culture but were so shocked by the political situation that they felt very passionate about Tibetan rights, and I think that really helps the community and raises awareness about Tibetan oppression. But on the other side, there are many people who think that their fetishization of Tibetan culture and religion should have absolutely no association with current events, so they look the other way and do not care about Tibetan welfare. That to me this selective interest extremely hypocritical and harmful [sic].

While Nyima cannot speak for the entire Tibetan diaspora, as the youngest of the interviewees, her testimony may throw light on a changing perception about what is

acceptable for non-Tibetans to portray in literature and media. Several Tibetan bloggers posted on this issue, particularly over the 2016 Marvel movie *Doctor Strange*, which cast British actress Tilda Swinton as a Tibetan monk to appease Chinese censor and film audience.

### Conclusion

“It’s because of my daughter. I want her to keep the culture”, Sangye (1 April 2016) explained of her consistent efforts to bring Tibetan culture and language into her life in the USA. Her decision is indicative of the strong cultural and linguistic ties that Tibetan New Yorkers display. This process of identity formation among the Tibetans reveals the confluence of concerns about cultural and religious expressions, political identification and economic survival. While many exiled Tibetans are asserting their agency to reinvent a new sense of belonging to the USA, they still hold onto the regional identity of their family households (Nyima, 30 April 2016). And with the help of social media technologies and grassroots community organizations, systematic efforts have been taken to transmit language, religion and ritual practices to young Tibetan Americans. The Tibetans construct their sense of belonging to the larger Tibetan diaspora through community events, civic activism and electronic media. It is in this dynamic process that a more cosmopolitan Tibetan identity has emerged, juxtaposing tradition and modernity, local and global forces, religious heritage and secular lifestyles.

With the Chinese power growing and Western support fading, there has been a little hope of a solution to the Tibet Question. Despite a variety of efforts by the exiled Tibetan leaders to enmesh politics in a discourse of cultural and linguistic preservation, most interviewees expressed a slight dissatisfaction with the increasingly contentious politics among the diasporic communities. They would rather choose cultural expression over political activism, and sought to improve the linguistic proficiency of the younger generation. This is particularly important because of the inseparable ties between language and culture. David Germano asserted, “By losing the Tibetan language, the specifically Tibetan identity and world, the culture, insights, values, and behaviors, is essentially consigned to the past” (Tournadre, Germano, and Rabgey, 2003, p. 11). Young Tibetans abroad still face many challenges in maintaining their language and culture, and the older generation admit that the youth grow up, “not like us; because we were born in the whole (i.e., predominantly Tibetan refugee camps). [But] I have everything a Tibetan needs to have. I have an altar and everything we used to have in Nepal, so that she [her daughter] will know that this is Tibetan” (Sangye, 1 April 2016). Nevertheless, the youth have chosen to assert their Tibetan identity through participation in transnational cultural activities. Behind these endeavors, there is still a hope for the preservation of Tibetan culture and language. The bottom-up efforts initiated by the Tibetans themselves exemplify a strong, multi-generational commitment to holding onto their ancestral heritage. As Thubten (1 April 2016) remarked, “New York is such a big city, with so many cultures, and we are seeing other cultures surviving as well. I think we can survive too”.

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