

Approaches to Studying Online Communication in Diaspora Groups
The Tibetan Case

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Dedication

This thesis is dedicated to Tibetans – both inside and outside Tibet.

Table of Contents

Chapter One.....	10
Chapter Two.....	31
Chapter Three.....	49
Chapter Four.....	68
Chapter Five.....	87
Chapter Six.....	96
Bibliography.....	99

INTRODUCTION

Tibet is a landlocked Himalayan nation currently under the rule of the People's Republic of China (PRC). The Tibetan Autonomous Region (TAR) has an estimated population of 2.3 million and has a landmass of 471,700 square miles. Though most nations consider Tibet a part of China, it has a highly contentious history, which explains the growing unrest within the country. After a failed uprising against the People's Republic of China in March 1959, the Dalai Lama fled to India with an estimated 100,000 Tibetans and set up unofficial government in the North Indian town of Dharamsala. Since then, Tibetans have continued to fight for the freedom of their homeland, though their efforts toward this goal have met with little success. Regardless, the Dalai Lama's efforts in seeking support for the Tibetan cause have made Tibet an important and much-publicized global issue over the past six decades.

In this study, I plan to place Tibetans in the virtual space in the context of the larger theoretical frame of nationalism and socio-political activism and the construction of "Tibetanness" in the diaspora community. I believe the use of cyberspace for the construction of the virtual nation and for giving a sense of community is an important subject of study as it provides viable insight into the Tibetans' engagement in the transnational construction of Tibetan nationhood and citizenship, as well as in their engagement in activism. My main goal is to show how the Tibetans' engagement with new media either conforms to a general trend in creating a virtual nationalism or it does not, thus making it a unique, stand-alone case amongst all other diasporas. I use multiple

perspectives from communication, memory studies, culture studies and anthropology to problematize the idea of diaspora and its intersection with new media, particularly as it relates to stateless communities. I believe such a multi-dimensional model is necessitated by the uniqueness of the subject, which is complex and variegated, and does not easily fit into one overarching theoretical framework. Placing the Tibetan diaspora into a single conceptual template risks giving a distorted and a simplistic view of what is a highly contentious, dynamic and multi-lingual community.

Generally, most members of diasporic communities have a place to which they belong, a physical nation to which they could return or hope to return, eg. Chinese diaspora, Indian diaspora, and Jewish diaspora. However, there are various types of diasporas, and they are sometimes formed around not just ethnic or national distinctions but also around religious differentiations. The Indian diaspora is often associated with the nation-state while the Sikh diaspora is largely a religious concept. Some diasporic groups are actively involved in homeland politics, such as Somalis, Cubans and Pakistanis; and there are those that are apolitical. Diaspora, a term most frequently used with Jews and Armenians, is generally defined as “permanent political exile,” a condition which has come to be conflated with the phenomenon of unimpeded cross-border mobility so characteristic of the globalized world (Ong, 2006). Some have called it an “expatriate minority community” (Safran, 1992; p. 83). Ang (2001) defines diaspora as “transnational, spatially and temporally sprawling socio-cultural formations of people, creating imagined communities whose blurred and fluctuating boundaries are sustained by real and/or ties to the homeland” (p.44). In short, all diasporas share the same

predicament of having been uprooted from their original homeland, but each is different from the other in why it had been displaced in the first place and its political position and status vis-à-vis its original homeland.

Given the risks of generalizing the concept and the definition of diaspora, it is important to state at the outset: 1) what precisely do I mean by “diaspora”; 2) what sort of diaspora I am interested in looking at; and 3) what aspects of diaspora I am interested in exploring. I differentiate the Tibetan diaspora (which is the exiled Tibet, or the Tibet that now exists outside Tibet), and “transnational Tibet,” which includes both Tibetans inside Tibet and those outside Tibet.

Contrary to popular perception of Tibet as an isolated locale in the Himalayas usually glimpsed in films and documentaries, a small but highly visible and mobile Tibetan diaspora has formed around the world over the past few decades. Often, in the past, it was known as the exiled Tibet. However, given the rapid spread of Tibetans around the world, their online presence has not only increased remarkably but has also led to an unprecedented level of exchange between Tibetans inside Tibet and those living outside the country. Given the political situation inside Tibet, Tibetans have embraced the Internet to construct national identity and form “citizenship” (Ong, 2006). Past research on other diasporas, though different in nature from the Tibetan one, has shown that online sites play an important role in the construction of identity and the formation of community for the members of the diaspora (Mitra, 2000). Other researchers have stressed the Internet’s ability to galvanize support amongst diasporic groups towards perceived injustices and mobilize support for different political causes (Ang, 2001;

Karim, 2003). On the whole, looking at the communication aspects of diaspora is perhaps the most effective way to study how the members of the Tibetan community imagine their homeland, how they are remembering what is a lost past, and how they are creating a space for themselves in what is a very connected world. Seen in this vein, the communication has an advantage – given the dispersed nature of diasporic groups and the critical role of technology-mediated communication – over other disciplinary fields in understanding the nature of stateless communities. In other words, studying communication as a social practice is highly rewarding and fruitful in forming a theoretical framework for studying diasporas.

The term “diaspora” is widely used to describe the Tibetan émigré identity (Anand, 2002; Yeh, 2007), though the Tibetan diaspora is slightly different from others in that it has a more centralized political umbrella under which it operates. Instead of ‘diaspora,’ the term “exile” -- with its slightly politically charged tone – is used by Tibetans to refer to their situation; and the political body located in India, headed by the leader the Dalai Lama, is often called the “Tibetan-government-in-exile.” Dharamsala, the headquarters of the government in exile, is a “temporary home preserving a historical culture in its pure form before an inevitable return to the original homeland” (Anand, 2002, p.19.) What differentiates “exile” from “migration” is the political condition, because the latter has a political connotation while the former does not (Ong, 2006). Under the international law, most of the Tibetans living in South Asia are “refugees” (Anand, 2007). Tibetans in South Asia are generally not citizens of India but live under a

special residency scheme (they carry so-called registration certificates that they renew every year – this had been extended to five years earlier in 2012).

I am interested in looking at diasporas which cannot return home for political reasons and thus can only resort to memory and imagination to remember their homeland; for them a virtual space such as the one provided by the Internet becomes important. Tibetan communities are a good example of this type of diaspora. Another key characteristic of the Tibetan diaspora is its active involvement in homeland politics and the role of memory and nature of dislocation (forced rather than voluntary migration), which makes the diaspora not against the nation state but in favor of it.

My study looks at the role of the Internet in four main areas:

1) how members of diaspora adopt digital media to discursively construct the nation online;

2) how they use social networking sites to create a diasporic public sphere and sometimes challenge the mainstream media;

3) how they use the Internet for political activism on a transnational scale; and

4) how journalists use digital media to create a diasporic media.

The goal of this study is to theorize a conceptual framework for communication practices of the diasporic community.

The thesis will be organized as follows. In chapter one, I will provide the history of the Tibetan diaspora and its historical context, as well as a brief history of media in the Tibetan diasporic communities. In this chapter, I will also set forth my literature review and elaborate on theories of diaspora, transnational studies, post-colonial theory, and

activism and their interaction with new media. I will use each of the following four chapters to answer the four main questions raised in the study. In chapter two, I will use the most prominent Tibetan web-portal www.phayul.com to examine how its creators and contributors construct the nation online. In chapter three, I will study how the members of the diaspora use online networking sites, such as Facebook, to criticize and challenge mainstream media coverage of the events concerning diasporic members or groups. In chapter four, I will study a website www.highpeakspureearth.com (which translates articles and essays and servers as a host for blogs from within Tibet) to provide a glimpse of online activism in a transnational context. In chapter five, I will show how citizen journalists use digital media to write about the diaspora through participant observation I conducted in spring 2012 at a newspaper called, www.TibetSun.com, based in Dharamsala. In the conclusion chapter, I provide my reflections, findings, discussions and suggestions for future students.

CHAPTER ONE

Currently, there are roughly 100,000 Tibetans living outside Tibet, of which 60,000 live in the Indian subcontinent (including Nepal and Bhutan). When the Dalai Lama fled to India in March 1959 following a failed uprising against the Chinese communist forces, the Indian government granted him political asylum. The Dalai Lama's Central Tibetan Administration in the North Indian town of Dharamsala (which is now often called the Tibetan government-in-exile) runs schools and settlements for Tibetans in India, allowing Tibetans to live a parallel existence there, with the hope that they would eventually return to Tibet once it regains its freedom. It must be stated that the Dalai Lama fully devolved his political power in 2011, making way for the first directly elected prime minister (in Tibetan known as Kalon Tripa) Lobsang Sangay, a 44-year old Tibetan who is a graduate of Harvard Law School.

Over the past six decades, the Tibetan government, in addition to running the community in exile, has also spearheaded a campaign against the Chinese rule in Tibet. While the Tibetan exile government and its supporters have had a huge success in terms of gaining international exposure for their homeland, there has been little headway in the Dalai Lama and his representatives' negotiations with the Chinese government. China continues to ratchet up its rhetoric against the Dalai Lama as it channels investment into the country and rebrands Tibet. Yet the Chinese government also has apparently had little success in winning the hearts of Tibetans, if one can judge from the violence that continues to periodically erupt in the Himalayan plateau. (Most recently violence flared up in 2008 in the run up to the Beijing Olympics, which led to much bloodshed and

added insult to the injury of the China's international image; and since March 2011, the country has seen a spate of self-immolations that left more than 30 people dead, most of them young Tibetans, which I will discuss in chapter 5.) In addition, nearly two to three thousand Tibetans cross the border into India every year despite reports of improving economic conditions in Tibet.

Before the 1990s, the number of Tibetans living outside the Indian subcontinent was insignificant, though Switzerland had perhaps the largest concentration of Tibetan immigrants due to a special scheme offered by the Swiss government in the 1960s. Beside that, there were a few odd families in Europe and North America and some monks, who had moved to open up Buddhist centers around the world. However, the landscape of the Tibetan diaspora changed drastically in the 1990s after the U.S. government decided to grant immigration visas to 1,000 Tibetans (quite a significant percentage of whom settled in Minnesota). In addition, the accelerating pace of globalization over the past twenty years has also led to migration of Tibetans from the subcontinent to different parts of the world. Thus with people having moved to disparate locations, something like a "Tibetan diaspora" began to take shape, though compared to other similar communities it is a relatively recent phenomenon. Prior to that, it was more or less a "refugee community" based in India, where they continue to remain without Indian citizenship. Therefore, the migrants who had moved to greener pastures in search of better opportunities for education and employment seemed to belong to the younger generation who are also more literate and more attuned to the workings of technology. For those wanting to keep abreast of the developments within the community and

keeping in touch with their relatives and friends in other parts of the world, the Internet was accessible, quick and inexpensive. Hundreds of websites appeared on the Internet, embedded with representations and symbols related to the Tibetan homeland. News sites also appeared, triggering a small but undeniably powerful trend towards citizen and community journalism, as well as what is known as “advocacy journalism”--in a way, journalism already has an embedded element of activism because its goal is to be discover and excavate truth for a larger public interest. The members of the diaspora became avid consumers of such news and information.

Of course, there were Tibetan media before the Internet. G. Tharchin, an expat Tibetan and Christian missionary, published perhaps the first Tibetan newspaper on Oct. 10, 1925, in the Indian border town of Kalimpong. The paper, *The Mirror – News from Various Regions*, met with great success and received many commendations from readers, including the previous Dalai Lama, the 13th Dalai Lama, who sent Tharchin a letter and a gift of twenty rupees, urging him to “send more news, which would be very helpful for him” (Hackett, 2008). By the 1950s, the paper became a chronicler of Tibetans' fight against the Communist forces and later their occupation. Several newspapers later appeared in Tibetan community including *Tibetan Review* in 1969, which provided a platform for major national debates. The newspaper attracted its share of controversy, most notably in August 1972, when Dawa Norbu, then a young editor of *Tibetan Review*, had to run for his life. As he writes in his internationally acclaimed memoir, *The Red Star Over Tibet (1974)*, that controversy erupted only three months into his editorship when one of his ‘hard-hitting’ commentaries was published.

The piece managed to anger both the Tibetan leaders in exile and the Indian authorities. Tibetan officials, according to Norbu, were unhappy with his criticism of the exile leader who, he wrote in his editorial, were “more interested in spiritual pursuits than in the mundane affairs of the people gasping for national existence” (p.10). He was immediately accused of “criticizing” the Dalai Lama “with its Tibetan connotation of ‘blasphemy.’ This is the first such incident in the Tibetan community at least since they fled into India in 1959. As Norbu wrote: “The innocent and wild Tibetans in India, Nepal and Bhutan were literally, after my blood. Mass meetings were held everywhere in Tibetan colonies to decide how to deal with me. The controversy nearly cost my life, and only the Dalai Lama’s intervention saved me” (Norbu, 1974; p. 11).

Tibetan Review along with *Tibetan Bulletin*, which is published by the Department of the Information and International Relations (DIIR), an official unit of the Dalai Lama’s Central Tibetan Administration (CTA) were the two most important publications in English. Efforts made to introduce investigative and independent journalism did not succeed because any criticism of the establishment is often seen as an assault on the person of the Dalai Lama. Jamyang Norbu, who later became a well-known novelist, joined forces with his friends to start a Tibetan language newspaper under the aegis of their think-tank, Amnye Machen Institute, which is based in Dharamsala, India. Norbu was personally attacked for his articles.¹

The emergence of desktop publishing and the introduction of new font systems

¹ Interview with Lobsang Wangyal, currently a freelance writer for AFP, who then was a junior reporter at the paper. Also based on a talk Jamyang Norbu himself gave at the Tibetan American Foundation of America in Minneapolis on October 12, 2009.

for the Tibetan language made it possible for those interested in public affairs to start Tibetan-language newspapers. Several publications have emerged in the community such as *Tibet Times*, making for a vibrant press environment and providing much information to the members of the diaspora. The Internet became a place where the members of the diaspora can log on and communicate with each other, discuss topics of common interest, and partake of the memories of the shared past. It also became a medium through which all other media can be accessed, such as radio, print media and even television. For instance, the Voice of America's Tibetan Language Service has a weekly television program, Kunleng, which is broadcast live on the Internet and watched by people all over the world. After introduction of the Tibetan media and its history, I would now move to the explain all it all fits into the idea of Tibetan nation using relevant literature about nationalism and nationhood, and media's role in it.

Literature Review

Nation, Diaspora and Globality

Benedict Anderson (1991) was the first to attribute the birth of nations to "print capitalism." Building upon Walter Benjamin's idea of "homogenous empty time," (Benjamin, 1973, p. 33), he argued that newspapers helped define the nation and allow strangers to risk their life to protect compatriots whom they had never met yet imagine as part of a shared communion. Other theorists consider nationalism and national identity as purely a function of modernity or, in other words, engineered and artificially constructed (Gellner, 1983; Hosbawm, 1990), though some believe that national identity has an

essential ethnic and near-mythic core (Smith, 1986). The idea of the myth as a foundation of the nation can be traced to Durkheim (1922, 1914) who pointed out the sacred nature of myths, which allows groups to maintain a social coherence through time. Indeed, in defining the idea of nation, Anderson (1991), following Walter Benjamin, posits that an American supports the national team at Olympics even though he or she does not know all the other citizens of the United States. “He had no idea of what they are up to at any one time. But he has complete confidence in the steady, anonymous, simultaneous, activity” (p.26). Anderson (1991) uses two different temporalities, “messianic time” and “homogenous empty time,” to delineate what he believes is the origin of the idea of nationhood. Without taking into account different conceptions of time, he points out it would be hard to identify the “obscure genesis of nationalism” (p.24). The idea of two conceptions of time was built upon Walter Benjamin, specifically from his late essay, *The Theses on the Philosophy of History*. According to Benjamin, messianic time is different from the empty homogenous time. Messianic time is supposed to “redeem” the past by reinscribing it in the present in a new form. In Thesis 6, Benjamin argues that one should not try to recognise the past “the way it really was,” but rather, to “seize hold of memories as they flash up in moments of danger.” In this way, the experiences of past (failed) revolutions are made in a certain sense present in the new revolution, in a way which escapes from homogeneous, empty time. The understanding of the past is supposed to lead to an experience of “truth.” As Anderson (1991) notes:

What has come to take the place of the medieval conception of simultaneity along time is, to borrow again from Benjamin, an idea of homogenous empty time, in which simultaneity, as it were, transverse cross time, marked not by prefiguring and fulfillment but by temporal co-incidence, and measured by clock and calendar (p.24).

Anderson (1991) believes that the origin of nationhood can be attributed to the development of the idea of "homogeneous, empty time," in which "a sociological organism moving calendrically through [it] is a precise analogue of the idea of the nation, which also is conceived as a solid community moving steadily through history" (p.26). Two events happening simultaneously, though in separate places, can link the people involved in those events by this precise "simultaneity," that is, they share a consciousness of a shared temporal dimension in which they co-exist.

Regardless of its popularity, however, Anderson's theory has little to say in terms of diasporic groups, particularly for those without nation-states but who nonetheless share the same history. Scholars have proposed many frameworks to unravel the more complex global realities where fluidity has become the norm rather than exception and they include Appadurai's (1990) influential theory of "scapes" and Clifford's "cultural borderlands" (1997). Of Appadurai's "scapes", in this particular study his concept of "mediascape" is most useful because it explains how the visual imagery impacts the world and this concept is applicable to this thesis because the Internet serves to illuminate and transmit the idea of Tibet to the world at large. Together, they make up what Appadurai (1990) had called "mediascape" of the Tibetan diaspora, which in turn influences "ideoscapes," the two building blocks of diaspora. Mediascapes are "image-centered, narrative-based accounts of strips of reality while ideoscapes, while being a mix of images, are more political" (p.11).

Though many social scientists have predicted the demise of nation-states in the aftermath of globalization, the actual evidence points to the contrary, and the nation-

building efforts are particularly pronounced amongst the nations which have lost their states. This thesis, at its core, deals with the Internet and nationalism, and how they impact the actual nation state by either helping or dampening the idea of nation. Eriksen (2007) provides five types of Internet nationalism: state-supported (Chile), surrogate (Afrikaner), pre-independence (Kurdish), multiculturalist (Moroccan-Dutch), and anti-government sites such as Laotians. In such transnational nationalism carried out by Internet communities, English is often used as the language, given the writers' "wish to communicate the virtual nation to the outside world" and their interest in "outside world's gaze on itself" (Eriksen, 2007; p.15). This holds particularly for the Tibetan diaspora, even though English language is used to communicate both to the outside world and also within the members of the diaspora itself.

The Question of Memory

One thing that differentiates the Tibetan diaspora from others is memory. Tibetan diaspora is obsessed with memories of a lost nationhood and "the land of Tibet functions as an important symbol for nationalist consciousness" (Power, 2004, p. 148). The fact that the Internet site operators and portals use symbols, images and representations of Tibet to construct a virtual homeland on the Internet reminds one of why Pierre Nora (2002) coined the term "lieu de mémoire" or "sites of memory." Diasporic members hold some "memory, vision, or myth about their original homeland" (p.83) which they consider as a place of eventual return, and they have a commitment towards its restoration as well as a role in the constitution of their consciousness as achieved through their ties to the homeland (Safran, 1992).

Indeed, given the premise of shared history of national identity, one of the powerful ways of theorizing national identity for diasporic groups is through the concept of memory, particularly “collective memory” (Halbwachs, 1992). Collective memory has the capacity to evolve into myths by endowing itself with an element of religiosity, which in turn helps turn historical memory into collective faith (Neal, 1986). Even though the individual is the one that ultimately does the remembering, it would be difficult to ignore the shared aspect of the remembering. Halbwachs (1992), however, takes into account both individual and collective dimensions of memory and stresses the difficulty in completely teasing apart the two. In the world of global migration, collective memory can be deployed to explain the resilience of national identity among stateless diaspora spread across multiple countries, where national identity often trumps citizenship (Castells, 2004). It has the ability to bring the members of diaspora from different locations together. As Ang (2001) noted, “migrant groups are collectively more inclined to see themselves not as minorities within nation-states, but as members of global diasporas which span national boundaries” (p. 76). Media play an important role in the “nations without states” (Castells, 2004, p. 45), yet there is in all diasporic groups, particularly in the Tibetan case, “an idealization of the real or a putative ancestral home and a collective commitment to its maintenance, restoration, safety and prosperity, and even to its creation” (Cohen 1997, p.105). This idealization and the preservation of this ideal through activism lie at the core of the discussion in my study, as the following chapters will reveal. Yet the goal of this section is not so much to point out the role memory plays in the formation of Tibetan diaspora and the construction of nation on the

Internet but more so to point out why at this particular point of time memory has become so important.

In most cases, victims start memorializing what they have lost a few decades after the event. In her book on Hiroshima, Yoneyama (1999) notes that 1989 marked an important event for the city of Hiroshima – it was the year of the city’s official inclusion into the modern regime during the Meiji era. The other event was the quadric-centennial of the construction of Hiroshima Castle. Thirty years marks a generation and the intervening years have provided enough time for the victims, who are still alive, to take stock of what they had gone through, something they might not necessarily be able to do when they were in the thick of things. The British-Indian author Salman Rushdie (1991) published his novel, *The Midnights Children*, in 1980, precisely 33 years after India’s independence, analyzing the history of the post-Independence (post-colonial) India with breathtaking narrative acuity. The publication of the book, which won the Booker Prize, changed the literary landscape of the Indian subcontinent. Many Indian writers have emerged, to engage in a post-colonial catharsis of sorts, by writing about themselves in the language of the colonial, forcing one critic (himself a part of the Indian diaspora) to coin the much-abused phrase “*The Empire Writes Back*” (Iyer, 1993). In other words, it requires time for stories to ferment and to take shape. Marita Sturken (2001) writes in her essay on the re-enactment of the Japanese internment, the passage of fifty years – or half a century – is an important event, when “people who had gone through the event are still alive, reflecting on the meaning of their lives” (p. 33).

She writes that the proverbial tug of war between history and memory reaches its zenith during the anniversaries, or to paraphrase her, “the conflict between the desire for history as a means of closure and memory as a means for personal and cultural catharsis is revealed” (p. 33). She notes, however, that memory and history remain constantly in negotiation, each benefitting from the other.

Thus, whereas the memories of survivors can become part of the texts of history, historical narratives can often reshape personal memories. The process of history making is highly complex, one that takes place in the United States through a variety of cultural arenas, including the media, Hollywood narrative films, and museums in addition to the academy. (p. 33)

This idea of timing is important because it helps explain why Tibetans, rather than forgetting about their past, are in fact remembering it more clearly half a century after the event. If diaspora is against the nation state, then Tibetans should forget their nation and move on in their host nations. Would this have happened if there had been no Internet? As Sherry Turkle (1985) points out, new media, by giving people a way to re-imagine their world, end up uprooting them and retribalizing them, which has to do with the malleability of the people’s identity.

In his essay “Who Needs Identity?,” Hall (1995) offers a novel approach to thinking about identity, which in modern times has become “increasingly fragmented and fractured, never singular but multiply constructed across different, and often intersecting and antagonistic, discourses, practices and positions” (p.4). The process of identification has been complicated by the forces of globalization and migration, which leads Hall (1996) to say that identity is not fixed but something that is always a work in progress, or to use a phrase from Paul Gilroy’s (1994), which Hall quotes, the “changing same.” In other words, the “process of identification does not necessarily entail a return to roots, but

more of a coming to terms with our ‘routes’ (p.4). Yet the identities are not as simple and clear cut in the world as Hall (1995) himself has written, there is always “too much” or “too little” – an over-determination or a lack, but never a proper fit, a totality” (p.3). Hall (1995) introduces a concept of “suturing,” which he defines as a meeting point between discourses that interpellate us and the processes that try to turn us into subjects. “Identities are thus points of temporary attachment to the subject positions which discursive positions construct for us” (p.6). The concept of “hailing” was first introduced by Althusser (1971), through which identities are hailed into existence and are thus constructed as subjects (Hall, 1996).

By definition, diasporic communities are often fleeting and multi-directional associations as members of the communities, particularly in the age of global travel and transnational movement, remain constantly in transition. At the individual level, the Internet helps people become less rooted to the place but also provides them with the objects to think with (Turkle, 1995), or in other words the wherewithal to construct their own world. In the case of Tibet, it helps in creating representations of nation on the Internet. The Internet lends itself as a medium through which such a community, a notion of which already exists in the minds of the people, can be created in a virtual context. The idea is thus reified as what exists on the Internet, which has become so central to people’s lives, seeps back into the real world and becomes part of how human beings live and think. This is particularly true for the politicized diasporic communities such as Tibet.

Moving from memory to media, the role of the media in this act of memorializing is not to be underestimated as it provides agency to the victims to come to terms with

their loss. What do they do with the new media technology? New media technology – characterized by its easy access, fast-pace of dissemination, and inexpensive cost – empowers deterritorialized people in raising awareness for their causes and challenging dominant power structures (Castells, 2004; Accion Zapatista, 1996a; Cleaver, 1998; Downing, 2001; Mouffe, 1992). Often used examples are anti-globalization protesters during the Seattle demonstrations in 1999 and Zapatistas’ use of telecommunications, videos, and of computer-mediated communication to present their cause to the world (Castells, 2004). Therefore, the Internet has been dubbed as the “first global public sphere through which politics could be made truly participatory at both regional and traditional levels,” (Ford & Gil, as cited in Downing 2001, p. 202), though some scholars have also questioned the efficacy of such activism (Ong, 2006) for giving a false sense of satisfaction of having addressed the problems of the world. It is not just the participation, transmission and access--the audience also has a greater degree of control over production, including “testimonials, uncensored freelance journalism, reports by human rights organizations, videos and interactive media, multi-lingual discussion forums, support group meetings, and political strategy sessions are conducted, uploaded, transmitted, circulated, and posted on-line daily” (p.203).

There are two interesting developments occurring in social movements because of new media. The spokespersons of the social movements are increasingly able to speak for themselves through the Internet. This inevitably raises their profile and the ability to communicate and tell their stories to the world unhindered and unmediated, which accords them a certain ‘soft power’ (Nye, 1996). Hamelink (1995) raised questions about

the dilemma media workers face in deciding whether they should give voice to the voiceless and speak on their behalf or allow the social activists to speak for themselves. In Tibetan online media, we see it happening at both levels, leading to the blurring of boundaries between journalists and activists. They not only perform a similar role but also collaborate in terms of knowledge production through a division of labor. Journalists not only give voice to the voiceless but the media directly allows the activists, for example human rights organizations, non-governmental organizations and intellectuals, to directly post their views on the Internet.

The Internet has become a vibrant platform for citizen journalism, a style of reporting and writing, which might have a local and non-institutionalized focus but is more dynamic, nimble and flexible than its mainstream counterparts. Messages left on the Internet sites can be compared to letters to editors, which, by allowing readers to add to the content, dismantle the role of the author and the reader, thus diminishing the very authority of the author (Benjamin, 1969). The diminishing authority of the author is nowhere more pronounced on the Internet than in other genres such as films or novels (Poster, 1990, p.122). Even though there is no reasoned opinion and face-to-face debate, empirical observation shows it serves “the function of a Habermasian public sphere, however reconfigured, without intentionally or even actually being one” (Poster & Aronowitz, 2001: p. 111). As Downing (2001) points out, small alternative media has flourished in the United States, and film and video are made available on the Internet, showing that the technology’s ability to transmit messages is not just limited to text.

Tibetan websites are constantly subject to hackers (some of the websites have most of the visitors from a place listed as Hong Kong, which the operators suspect, with good reason, is China).

The last chapter of this thesis deals with online activism in the case of Tibet. For instance, within the context of the Tibetan Diaspora, the Internet (aside from its obvious community-building functions) has most effectively been used not as a tool of socialization, but more as a medium of activism and resistance. The fact that the Taiwanese use *Facebook* for socialization and the Tibetans use it for resistance, for example, suggests the role of human agency in shaping the extent to which technology affects different aspects of culture. In other words, participatory culture is a highly democratic culture where consumers join together to create what Jenkins calls a “collective intelligence” (Jenkins, 2006) by sharing what each of them know with each other because it is impossible to know everything about any one thing. In other words, in this new media culture, there is much work that is performed by the spectators and the new media culture allows people to seek out information across multiple media channels, thereby giving them agency. Under such conditions, while big corporations still play a role, it also depends on the grassroots organizations to circulate images and stories across the world of new media. This is relevant to my second research question, which explores how the members of diaspora use the social networking site Facebook to resist and challenge the mainstream media coverage of events.

Approaching Online Activism in Tibet

For a broader picture, looking at online activism in China offers as a good

window on the online activism in the case of Tibet because both the Chinese political and Tibetan political activists organize their movements against the Chinese state. The key difference, however, is that the Chinese diaspora is far larger than the Tibetan diaspora (including millions of students living overseas). The Internet has been in China for nearly two decades; some scholars were already using the Internet as early in 1989, though the full function connectivity did not start until 1994 and the average consumer was not able access the Internet until 1996. But once they were able to access the Internet, they embraced it with much enthusiasm, organizing among other things, protest forums during events of national consequence such as tensions over Senkaku Island and the Sichuan earthquake. As the technology became popular, the government also began to regulate it. From 1994 to 1999, the government focused on network security, Internet service provision and institutional restructuring. The policy was marked by expansion and refinement of control from 2000-2002 and government also began to regulate content, filtering and blocking of keywords and licensing BBS (Bulletin Board Services). From 2003 onwards, the regulation has moved from expansion from government, to governance to governmentality. The internet use inside Tibet is said to be highly restricted, however many writers and Tibetan youth do seem to be able to access the Internet (some of the information is routed through Hong Kong, thus escaping the Chinese firewall.)

With this I turn to studies done by sociologist Guobin Yang (2009) on how online cultures are gradually changing the style and modes of social movements in the context of China, using perspectives from sociology and political science as an interpretive

framework. Studies about new media and China abound. Some of them have focused on the form and structure of political control of the Internet in China (Qiu, 1999, 2000) and others have studied the Internet's role in improving governance (Holliday & Yep, 2005). Many scholars have also studied the different aspect of the social, political and cultural uses of the Internet, SMS, blogs in the formation of discourses (Barme, 1999), literary communities (Hockx, 2004), the labor movements (Chu & Yang, 2006), minority nationalism (Zheng, 2008), the rise of cybernationalism (Wu, 2007), and the consequences of political liberalization (Garett, 2006).

Indeed, one of the most controversial thoughts in the Internet and social movement is that new media empower marginalized groups by providing an easy access to powerful technology at low cost. Building upon Raymond William's (1974) work on technology and media, Yang (2009) argues that this view, however, embraces technology merely for the sake of it, and fails to answer what aspects of movement does technology change. Yang's (2009) model includes five different dimensions: (1) State power, (2) Culture, (3) Market, (4) Civil society, and (5) Trans-nationalism. Of these, the last one, trans-nationalism, is most relevant to the case of the Tibetan diaspora, as internet technology helps connect the Tibetans inside Tibet with the Tibetans outside, thus effectively putting them together in the same national eco-system. As Yang (2009) notes: "Civic organizations and online communities, the main force of civil society, strategically use the Internet for social change. Transnationalisation expands the scale and radicalizes the forms of online activism" (p.8). Previously, the most common social movement theory was that of political-process theory (Meyer, 2004; Eisenger, 1973). Scholars,

however, have called for more complex theoretical frameworks, because of the rise of non-state actors, which are now challenging the nation-state (Keohane and Nye, 1989, 1998). Some have adopted more innovative approaches, such as Esherick & Wassertrom (1990) and Perry & Li (1997), who have looked at analyses of rituals, performances and rhetoric. Yang (2009) calls upon students of online activism to pay particular attention to the “culture of contention” because “more than other forms of protest, online activism is for all practical purposes a good example of activism by cultural means. It mobilizes collective action by producing and disseminating symbols, imagery, rhetoric, and sounds. This process is characterized by both innovation and appropriation of cultural conventions” (p.14). Therefore, studying these symbols, rhetoric and imagery allows scholars of online activism to uncover how activists mobilize support for their causes by appealing to people’s emotional and moral sensibilities. Scholars have written extensively on how narratives, music, imagery and performance are adopted in activism and political protests (Tilly, 1978; Polletta, 2006; Jasper, 2007; Everyman, 1998). Taking a cue from Yang (1009), I have studied some of the symbols and rituals as they appeared on the Tibetan blog, www.highpeakspureearth.com.

While the state censors the content of activism, it forces activists to be more creative. In terms of business, the relationship is certainly a positive because online communities do help bringing in business for the operators of the website, even though there are many boycott protests online (Occupy Wall Street, for example.) Transnational activities can often be categorized into two types: Internal and external. The first one is usually carried out by human rights organizations, NGOs, and cybernationalists, while

the latter is carried out by dissidents, overseas students, individuals and overseas Chinese. Inside China, the Internet is used by NGOs, human rights organizations and cyber-nationalists in China to externalize the movements (Tarow, 2005) and often leads to what Keck and Sikkink (1998) has called a ‘boomerang effect.’

Previous research in media studies has shown that online sites help construct identity for the members of the diaspora and they also lead to a rise in political consciousness by fostering unity among them regardless of their geographical location (Anderson, 1991; Appadurai, 1990; Ang, 2001; Ong, 2006). Some scholars have also pointed out that the deterritorialized citizens use web-based platforms to form citizenship and mobilize support for political causes (Ong, 2006). While seemingly scattered and powerless, minorities with agenda often challenge dominant power structures through their “soft power” (Nye, 1994)—something that this thesis suggests happened in the Tibetan diaspora when activists took to Facebook to protest the perceived misleading coverage by Indian media.

Advocacy and Objectivity Journalism

Last but not the least, the most important question with regards to journalism as it is practiced in the Tibetan diaspora concerns the age-old debate between objectivity journalism and advocacy journalism. While objectivity journalism has now become the industry standard, critics have said such a model of journalism heavily ends up favoring the government and corporations (Herman & Chomsky, 1988). Critics have said that there is no such a thing as objectivity because every decision in journalism--what stories

to write, whom to interview, where and when to publish--involves subjective decisions. Importantly, while proponents of objectivity say journalism should be value-neutral and disinterested, critics charge that that amounts to encouraging lazy journalism. On the other hand, critics of advocacy journalism have criticized it for favoring the “truth” over facts. The debate between advocacy and objective journalism lies the root of what is practiced in the Tibetan diaspora. Online media has often been credited for helping the practitioners of advocacy journalism by giving them a platform and tool to write about things that re usually ignored by the mass media, and to discover a deeper understanding of what is true and what is false. The goal of this thesis is, however, larger, that is the aim is not just to show how Tibetans construct nation online but also to show how they use the virtual world to construct a space for themselves in absence of an actual homeland. It also aims to study how Tibetans, not just those involved in news media, use the Internet to construct a citizenship in a virtual context.

As pointed out earlier, there are four research questions that I would like to answer:

- 1) How do diasporic media construct nation online as seen on www.phayul.com, exiled Tibet’s most prominent website?
- 2) How do members of the diaspora use social networking sites to challenge the mainstream media (for this I will use Facebook)?
- 3) How do blogs engage in political activism at a transnational level in the context of Tibet, using a blog, www.highpeakspureearth.com as a case study?
- 4) How do citizen journalists use digital media in the Tibetan diaspora as in the case of www.tibetsun.com?

Method

I used a mixture of participant observation and textual analysis and finally ethnography in the field in Dharamsala India for the last chapter. I use grounded theory (Lindolf & Taylor, 2002) to read the material that I have gathered on the Internet websites and generate categories for the other three research questions. I first used an open-ended coding generating categories along the way and then coming back to revise my categories based on the material that they gathered. According to Lindolf and Taylor (2002), “theory is grounded in the relationship between data and categories into which they are coded” (p.218), and thus codes and categories are constantly revisable until very late into the research. I used an open-coding at first, making both mental and actual notes on paper depending on what I read and the facts gleaned over from the Internet websites such as www.phayul.com, www.highpeakspureearth.com, www.facebook.com, and www.tibetsun.com. I used three stages of research process: selecting and approaching data, sorting, coding and analyzing data and presentation of the analysis as set out by Tonkiss (2004). I initially coded the news items under broad themes. I coded and categorized using key words and themes (Tonkiss, 2004). For the last chapter, I used “participant observation” by immersing myself in the field and attempted “a thick-description” (Geertz, 1973, p.7) of my observations.

CHAPTER TWO

In order to answer my first research question, dealing with the construction of a virtual national identity by members of the Tibetan diaspora, I used phayul.com, a website based in India.² The website, which was started in the late 1990s by a group of entrepreneurs based in India, has now grown to become one of the most popular news portals in the Tibetan diaspora. The symbolism of the site is evident from its name: phayul means homeland. Most of the audience consists of members of the diaspora and some who are followers of the Tibetan situation, students of Buddhism and international governments and intelligence organizations. The main banner on the top of homepage carries a picture of the Dalai Lama ('spiritual and political leadership') with a Tibetan national flag ('political symbol'), a mandala ('spiritual symbol'), and Potala Palace ('cultural icon') on the background and, on the right hand corner, a group of half-naked protesters ('representation of shared present struggle and collective future'). They create a cultural, religious and political landscape of national identity. Pop-up ads of cultural products, banners and announcements as well as pictures related to and symbolic of political projects are the "webs of signification" (Weber as cited in Geertz, 1973, p.5) associated with the dynamics of a national consciousness. These cultural representations on the website underscore the integral role of religion in Tibetan life and identity (Shakya, 2000; Goldstein, 2007), even within the diaspora.

² As a disclaimer, I am a regular contributor for phayul.com. I had been writing occasional pieces for them for nearly ten years. I have also met Kelsang Rinchen, the editor of phayul.com in India when I was doing research in Dharamsala in 2006.

In this chapter, I would like use phayul to answer the question about construction of nation online. This case study, therefore, is likely to contribute significantly toward understanding the role of new media in the formation of national identity and community formation for diasporic groups, and it should provide new ways of approaching the concept of nationalism and national identity in late liberalism. In phayul.com, news pieces are aggregated mainly from four sources: Agencies and newspapers, own staff, contributions from the audience, and press releases and announcement from other institutions. However, since the site also includes pieces from writers commenting on various issues of the Tibetan diaspora, it is slightly more than just an aggregator.

In this study, narratives of a national culture can be classified into five main dimensions or ‘discursive strategies’ (Hall in Wodak et al., 1999, p.23); 1) narratives of the nation, 2) emphasis on the origins, continuity, tradition and timelessness; 3) invention of tradition mostly of a ritual or symbolic nature; 4) myth of origin; 5) fictitious idea of ‘pure, original people or folk’ (Hall in Wodak et al., 1999, p.26). Kolakowski (in Wodak et al., 1999) has devised five elements of national identity: 1) Vague, substantializing idea of a national spirit; 2) common historical memory; 3) anticipation and future orientation; 4) national body, often used as a metaphor for images and landscape as well as the physical artifacts; 5) nameable beginning (similar to Hall’s ‘foundational myths’).

I tried to see if my data would fit into the above categories. However, I realized that it would be better to come out with new categories to better suit the situation of Tibet. First, based on the aspects of national identity developed by Hall, Kolakowski and Halbwachs, I refined it to four main macro-themes related to the discursive construction

of Tibetan identity and nation. They are: 1) the narrative and construction of common collective memory; 2) the narrative construction of common culture; 3) the narration of a collective present and future and struggle; 4) the narratives of a national body. For common collective political history, Tibetans also share the memory of Tibet as a de facto independent nation before Chinese occupation in 1949, as well as of having fled the country following the entry of the People's Liberation Army (PLA).

As I went to code my stories, I realized that these four categories were not really working for me. The first two categories were overlapping in most stories since it is common collective memory is often a precursor for a common culture. However, I realized that, given the frequency of stories, which tend to deal not just with the common political struggle, it also became quite necessary later that I need to have a category that would include "nation without state" or the government-in-exile as a category. In fact, I realized this is one of the most important categories that differentiates the Tibetan condition from other kinds of diaspora.

Religion was the most important dimension of the common culture, followed by non-religious elements such as contemporary culture and arts. In terms of the construction of a collective political present and future political goals, the most common headlines were autonomy for Tibet, human rights and activism. As for the discursive construction of a national body, I picked up narratives related to physical images of Tibet. There is a fair amount of stories that invoke Tibet as a place, its landscape and its geography. Some stories of protests, which touch upon the geography of Tibet both

inside and outside the Tibetan Autonomous Region (TAR), might have a larger element of Tibet as a landscape.

The period of my research was from March 1 to March 31, 2011. I intentionally timed it to coincide with the couple of important developments. First was the formal announcement by the Dalai Lama that he would devolve political powers to the newly elected leader of the Tibetan government-in-exile. Second, it also coincided with the prime ministerial elections, which were held on April 1. I set out to explore if editors intentionally produce news related to the predetermined representations of national identity. Given the lack of resources, “the news actors are selected for coverage depending on the capacity to produce source text data that meet both the professional requirements and the ideological values” (Van Dijk, 1988, p. 129).

I used an open-coding approach to generate categories and themes related to the construction of national identity and these codes helped further link the data to broader dimensional categories of nationhood. “Low-inference categories” are easily recognizable but “high-inference categories,” as elucidated in Lindlof and Taylor (2002), are more ambiguous and thus warranted more intimate cultural knowledge and demanded to be interpreted within a certain context. For example, news about “Gathering of Tibetans in New York” can be coded under three different categories: Narratives of Nation Without Exile, Narratives of Common Culture and Narratives of Collective Present Struggle. When faced with this dilemma, I opted for the ‘topic’ rather than on the ‘content’ (Tesch as cited in Lindlof & Taylor, 2002, p.215). Topic is often the headline or what the story purports to be but sometimes the content is much different, while

headline are more vague and content gives a clearer idea of what the story is actually about.

I then picked up “exemplars” and “rich points” (Lindolf & Taylor, 2002, p.218) to select key texts, particularly from ”comments” left by readers and in opinion pieces published by Tibetans, which are embedded with special meanings and significance. I then proceeded to the final stage of my research by integrating the news pieces into four main macro areas of national identity, which moved me from the initial process of coding, categorization and, finally, to conceptual development. To make sure that news are indeed real and not fabricated, I searched Google to ensure through the method of ‘triangulation’ (Lindlof & Taylor, 2002, p. 240), that there are other publications that have also published or produced the same news or have covered the same event. Given the amount of data and the repetitive nature of the news, I chose specific examples that provided “the richest source of analytic material” (Tonkiss, p. 253) to better elaborate the insights obtained from the research.

Analysis

Empirical observation indicates that a common political project—that is, the independence of Tibet from China--is the dominant theme of the news published on the website. Representations of religion also feature quite prominently in news production, reflecting Buddhism’s role as a crucial marker of cultural identity amongst Tibetans. Phayul.com published a total of 61 news pieces over a period of the month.

Narratives of Nation-in-Exile

One of the most common narratives that I found in the pieces was what one could call narrative of nation-in-exile, or a nation without a state. It is also in this category that phayul.com plays an important role because of the localized nature of the Tibetan government in exile. Though the existence of a nation-in-exile is very important for the Tibetans, it is less so for others, particularly the non-Tibetans, because it is not officially recognized by any other country, let alone be part of the United Nations, as a legitimate form of government for Tibetans in diaspora. Therefore, what is happening within the diaspora is important for Tibetans but is rarely covered by the mainstream media. In this category, *www.phayul.com*, fills an important role. Out of 61 stories published during the period I observed, the news and information related to the Tibetan government-in-exile accounted for about 26%. This is partly because timing coincided with two very important events. The announcement by the Dalai Lama that he would formally devolve his political power to the elected leadership, and the election of the prime minister of the Tibetan government-in-exile, which is probably one of the biggest news the Tibetan community had seen in recent years. The story was widely covered by the international press as well as the domestic Indian press in much detail.

To convey the narratives created in these stories, I examined the usage of words in the stories. The news media often refers to the head of the Tibetan government-in-exile as the Tibetan “prime minister,” even though it is not the term used in the charter (constitution) of the Central Tibetan Administration (CTA). The word “Tibetan government-in-exile” is also not used in the charter – and the word that is actually used is

Kalon Tripa (or Katri), which in Tibetan means head of the cabinet. In a story published on phayul.com on March 3, 2011, about the head of Tibetan cabinet, Samdhong Rinpoche, responding to China's jasmine revolution, the headline was "Tibetan PM calls for non-violent response to China's provocation." The lead of the story said:

"There is nothing new, the position of China against the Dalai Lama is always the same." Professor Samdhong Rinpoche, Kalon Tripa (Prime Minister) of the Tibetan government-in-exile, said in exclusive interview with AsiaNews commenting on statements by Jia Qinglin, a prominent member of the Chinese Communist Politburo, who on February 25 urged China to "renewed efforts against" influence of the Dalai Lama in Tibet. (AsiaNews, 2011)

The story assumes the Tibetan government-in-exile as a legitimate entity capable of responding to the Chinese government, even though the Tibetan government is not recognized by any nation. This has become a common practice, with phayul.com resorting to such descriptions. On March 10, 2011, phayul.com published a story on the announcement that the Dalai Lama is devolving power to the democratically elected leader. In the story, it described the Dalai Lama as "a semi-retired person, saying that he has already delegated much of the administrative and political decisions to the democratically-elected Prime Minister of the Tibetan Government-in-Exile." It might be expected that the journalist of Tibetan background might be biased in favor of the Tibetans and sympathize of the plight of the people to which he himself belonged. However, the official statement of the Tibetan administration also adopts pretty much the same language, reflecting the importance of the language in defining and describing the reality:

During the forthcoming eleventh session of the fourteenth *Tibetan Parliament in Exile* [emphasis mine], which begins on 14th March, I will formally propose that the necessary amendments be made to the Charter of the Tibetans in Exile, reflecting my decision to devolve my formal authority to the elected leader. (Lama, 2011)

Press Trust of India (PTI) also used the same language describing the head of the Tibetan exile administration, referring to Samdhong Rinpoche as the “Prime Minister of the Tibetan Government-in-Exile.” The Tibetan government in exile is also referred to as Tibetan Parliament, for there is no parliament inside Tibet. Therefore, for instance, in some stories the government is simply referred to as “Tibetan Parliament,” especially in the headline of the story—for example, “Dalai Lama directs Tibetan Parliament to discuss his retirement” (Thinley, 2011). Yet it is worth noting that the Dalai Lama himself does not use the term Tibetan Prime Minister directly in his statements, but rather refers to the “elected leader,” using the Chinese translation of the election word.

In 2001, the Tibetan people elected the Kalon Tripa, the political leader, directly for the first time. Since then, I have been in semi-retirement, no longer involving myself in the day-to-day administration, but able to dedicate more to the general welfare of people. (Dalai Lama, 2011).

However, in a statement, the head of the Tibetan Cabinet calls his body “kashag,” or the Tibetan translation of the word Cabinet. As phayul.com quoted him as saying:

We have been urging His Holiness not to give up the political leadership. With heavy heart, the Kashag is left with no other alternative but to follow His Holiness’ directions. (Thinley, 2011).

Foreign news agencies such as Reuters, AP and AFP also regularly describe the Dalai Lama’s government as Tibetan government-in-exile, and the house of representatives as the Parliament-in-Exile, which further indicates that the existence of such a nation-in-exile is a generally accepted fact. In some instances, the Tibetan

parliament was referred to simply as Tibetan Assembly. In an article on May 23, 2010, the story also reported that the Dalai Lama has suggested changing the title of the Tibetan Government-in-Exile “Ganden Phodrang,” to that of Central Tibetan Administration.

On March 20, exile Tibetans went to the polls to elect a new leader. The election received wide coverage internationally and stories appeared in *Washington Post*, *New York Times* and *Los Angeles Times*. All three major papers referred to the new leader as the Prime Minister of the Tibetan Government-in-Exile. The International Network of Parliamentarians on Tibet (INPaT) also observed polling stations across the world, after which it released a statement expressing its praise for the enthusiasm showed by Tibetans in electing representatives and participating in democracy, albeit without a state.

Narratives of Collective Political History

For Tibetans in exile, a collective political history forms a critical part of national identity and it can also be referred to as “collective memory” (Halbwachs, 1992). The discourse on the Tibetan diaspora will not be existent without the political history. This dimension is the cause of the “deterritorialization” of the Tibetan people and thus it becomes the primary determinant of who actually is a member of the Tibetan diaspora. For the purpose of this study, I define members of the diaspora as those who fled into exile as a consequence of the People’s Liberation Army of Tibet which began in 1949, as well as their descendants, and whose memory, in one way or the other, had somehow been shaped by the political upheaval that ensued in its aftermath. This is also the reason why the narrative of the so-called Tibetan national identity in exile is constructed

primarily on the shared past of its members rather than on the simplistic notions of essentialism based on ethnic, cultural or religious sameness. Over the three weeks period I gathered the news pieces, the narrative of common political history constituted 13% of the total news amount. Even though the second or even the third generation members of the diaspora were born outside their ancestral homeland, there is a sense of a collective struggle. The website often published such pieces from Tibetans because they reflected the dominant ideology prevalent amongst the diaspora, particularly the youth, and it may perhaps even be interpreted as a strategy to appeal to their existing audience with whom such narratives of common national representation are likely to find a deep resonance. Events of the past are often remembered through the people who had lived through the incidents and for the Tibetans, therefore, the Dalai Lama, their leader, has become the main symbol of the diasporic consciousness.

In an article on May 23, 2011, the story also reported that the Dalai Lama had suggested changing the title of the Tibetan Government-in-Exile, “Ganden Phodrang,” to that of the Central Tibetan Administration (CTA), an organization set up to look after the welfare of the Tibetans in India. This move will end the institution of the Dalai Lama dating back to 1642, when the 5th Dalai Lama assumed Tibet’s political leadership. One of the stories that really highlighted the nature of common culture and identity and particularly attempted its preservation was one published on March 02, regarding a meeting held in New York, which was attended by representatives from all the Tibetan associations in North America. The piece was filed from New York. In his inaugural speech, the representative of the Dalai Lama to the Americas, Lobsang Nyandak,

“commented that main responsibilities of the Tibetan Associations are to preserve Tibetan cultural identity, look after the welfare of the Tibetans under their respective jurisdiction, and create better political awareness among the Tibetans as well as others on the Tibetan issue (Phayul, 2011, np.)”

Common Culture and Religion

Given the fact that Buddhism has penetrated deeply into the Tibetan ethos and is inextricably tied to the Tibetan way of living, a clear distinction between religion and politics is not possible within the context of the Tibetan diaspora. Generally, the narratives of common religious culture find their way into the media through three means. First, religion gets its most popular coverage through the Dalai Lama’s activities, performed in his role as the supreme head of Tibetan Buddhism. Second, when the religion becomes a victim of human rights violations, the narratives of spirituality turn into headlines and garner attention. Third, the Dalai Lama is also considered as a Buddhist leader worldwide, including the Himalayan region of Indian bordering Tibet (legally in India but culturally closer to Tibet); and in such places as South Korea, Taiwan and Japan, where he enjoys a high degree of popularity and respect.

Religious news often reveals the more esoteric dimensions of Tibetan Buddhism. Tibetan Buddhism’s important role, often otherwise latent and apolitical, in nationalism and identity and, in creating a bounded space in exile, finds vivid articulation in such episodes. The second part of common culture is the non-religious culture and it is here that the website adds value for the members of the diaspora, particularly for its primary

audience. One of the more interesting features of Tibet's exiled culture is the emergence of a distinctly hybrid culture in exile, as a result of the border crossings and crossovers.

Such syncretism often finds expression in innovative projects, both literary and artistic, particularly as the political movement for the diaspora is seen as having reached an impasse. On the one hand, the beauty pageant can be seen as another example of "soft activism" used to promote awareness for the Tibetan identity and, on the other, as a new form of hybrid sub-culture challenging the traditional religious culture of Tibet that is also an innovative expression of national identity. These incidents, along with other adventures into film-making and artistic pursuits undertaken by the second and even third generation of Tibetans, mark a significant departure from the earlier generation towards a more hybrid construction of Tibetan identity, existing at the interstices of many cultures: Indian, Western and Tibetan. In other words, hybridity has become a byword of Tibetan exile communities (Kraidy, 2005).

For instance, phayul.com published a piece on March 27, which highlighted the importance of Buddha's teachings to this world. It was a summary of the speech delivered at a Buddhist conference in Kathmandu, capital of Nepal. There is nothing in this story, which is related to Tibet, except for a common religious link in Buddhism. On March 2, 2011, it published a piece from *Boston Globe*, on Tibetan New Year and the kind of sweetened rice the Tibetans eat (Venkatraman, 2011). For instance, it also published AFP piece on Japan's earthquake, which was followed by a story about the Dalai Lama's letter to the Japanese prime minister. The common religious bond of Buddhism was stressed, according to the story, quoting a statement posted on the Dalai

Lama's website: "Finally, as a Buddhist monk who recites the Heart Sutra, His Holiness felt it would be very good if Japanese Buddhists were to recite Heart Sutra on this occasion (Lama, 2011)."

Narratives of Collective Present Struggle and Future

Given China's policies inside Tibet, particularly its controversial edicts with regard to indigenous culture and religion, and the intransigence with regard to the Dalai Lama and the exile government, political protest has become a common form of social practice. Exiled Tibetans carry out, on a regular basis and around the globe, myriad forms of political protests, including non-violence demonstrations, peace marches, sit-in and hunger strikes. Based on what is published on the website, it seems there is little group activity in the Tibetan community that is not aimed, in one way or the other, at either raising awareness for Tibet or in preserving the culture and tradition. The website's coverage certainly reflects this reality and political movements were given high priority and the news is often covered in great detail and depth, including stories from the website's own writers. In these instances, the strategy allows the portal to be "nationalistic" and underscores its position as a national media of the diaspora giving priority to its "national interests."

These comments by readers, which are allowed to appear on the text on the same page as the news stories, indicate the disappearance of the role of the writer and the reader. The comments would include anything from criticisms to approval. For instance, some would lambast the writers for having little knowledge about the issues; and

sometimes they would include personal attacks. The technology allows readers to directly challenge the authority of the writer and contribute to the text, which can be read by the later readers. The questions of objectivity also surface when sometimes the portal simply publishes unedited press releases. It reflects the negotiation of the boundaries of editorial discretion when the immediacy of the information takes primacy over accepted standards of journalistic convention. The category of protests is perhaps the most common of all, indicating the highly politicized nature of the Tibetan diaspora.

Phayul.com aggregated news about the Tibetan uprising and also published stories of its own on activities connected with the uprising. One of them was on March 9, a piece that reported on how several protesters had been arrested by the Indian police when they moved to the Chinese embassy, chanting pro-Dalai Lama slogans, such as “Long Live the Dalai Lama.” Another political narrative I have noticed through observations is the common bond with Taiwan. On March 12, a story stressed the common predicament shared by Taiwan (Lin, 2011). During the period I observed, one of the most important developments that happened in terms of Tibetan struggle was the arrest of Tibetans in Ngaba in Tibet, which was also covered in depth on the website.

Narratives of Collective National Body

The narratives of “national body” (Kolakowski in Wodak et al., 1999, p. 26) are physical images, imageries, artifacts and territory associated with the nation, but the “national body” can also be interpreted in a “metaphorical sense” (Wodak et al, 1999, p.26). Since Tibetans in exile had been deterritorialized from the physical land, this is the

weakest of the four main categories associated with the national identity. Some discursive strategies related to the physical construct of the nation included stories about the protests in which the Tibet as a place is invoked. A story on March 3, 2011 from the *Seattle Times*, “Clear View of China from Tibet,” did precisely that. The story was a review of a book, *Tragedy in Crimson*, written by American journalist Tim Johnson. In the piece, the story mentioned:

He describes sitting with a nomad family in a hut warmed by a yak-dung fire, watching DVDs of Tibetan singers on an old TV. The family and their neighbors have a relationship to the land and to their animals is a fundamental part of their identity... In the meantime, younger Tibetans are growing more restless. China encourages the settlement of ethnic Han, the majority of population in China, in Tibet, where they have already transformed the cities. They run the business. They give streets Mandarin names (Large, 2011).

As it is evident, the place of Tibet holds a certain place in readers’ imagination. In contrast, a story written by phayul.com’s reporter Kalsang Rinchen about China’s decision to ban foreigners ahead of the anniversary of the Tibetan uprising described in detail the anti-government protests that occurred in the Tibetan Autonomous Region (TAR) as well as places outside it. The story suggested that Tibetans outside the TAR are equally demanding more autonomy and self-determination as those inside TAR, which has an effect of uniting the whole of Tibet in its resistance against China. There are also stories such as the one published on March, 11, 2011 in which *Times New Network* (TNN) quoted A.K. Antony, India’s defence minister, comments on China’s extensive rail-road networks in Tibet (Pandit, 2011). The story points out that China has built over 58,000 roads inside Tibet. In another story, a piece by Aikesh Sharma (2011) of Indo-American News Agency (IANS) published an interview with ex-political prisoners, in which interviewee Lukar Jam, a former political prisoner, compared the jails in Tibet to

that of Guantanamo. The story, aggregated by phayul.com, discusses in detail different jails inside Tibet, and also the number of political prisoners, suggesting a more concrete rendering of Tibet's physical space.

Conclusion

Though media such as phayul.com play a role as “national media,” it must be noted that phayul.com acts more as an aggregator of news related to the Tibetan diaspora. Yet it also publishes significant amounts of reporting on the Tibetan diaspora, particularly dealing with the Dharamsala-based administration. I decided to chose the website because it is the top website in the diaspora and its quality of journalism in terms of professionalism has increased significantly compared to the past, to something which is much more than a producer of citizen journalism. Importantly, there is very little opinion and citizen journalism. During the period I observed, it published only two opinion pieces, one each from writers Jamyang Norbu and Bhuchung D. Sonam. Both pieces were published in the aftermath of the announcement of the Dalai Lama's retirement.

Examined through the case of the Tibetan diaspora, the findings in this chapter validate the concept of the media's role in providing a platform for members of the communities to imagine each other. This holds particularly true in case of the situation of Tibetans, given their dislocation from the physical space of their homeland. It is clear from observations how they are making up for their lack of territory by celebrating their culture and how the media plays a central role in constructing a “virtual nation.” It is thus no surprise that the theme of the struggle for their homeland and a common political

project lies at the center of the Tibetan exile consciousness. The political struggle and human rights campaigns are a dominant theme running across much of the discourse. Categorized into four dimensions of nationhood, as culled from typologies provided by Hall and Kolakowski, news media such as phayul.com showed how exiled Tibetans create representations of nationhood. “Narrative of Nation without State” was quite dominant during my three weeks of observation. The retirement of the Dalai Lama and the election of a New Prime Minister all show that rather than weakening, the sense of nationhood seems to be strengthening. In addition, studying the category of “Narratives of Struggle,” while there had been very little success in Tibet’s negotiations with China, the Tibetan diaspora, if the frequency of reports published on the topic is seen as an indication, is highly successful in raising awareness in the world. Shared political history and collective political history also play a significant role. The news related to China is published but only as it relates to diaspora’s national identity and is often framed in a negative light. In addition, publication of opinions and articles by the Tibetans themselves on the site also indicates an emergence of a certain Tibetan public sphere on the Internet.

The diasporic media such as phayul.com, however, carries the strongest role in terms of providing local news (usually not available in mainstream media) to the transnational community, thus effectively helping overcome the local/global divide. The evidence also shows, from reading of the messages, that in spite of their hybridity, the second and third generation of Tibetans continues to respond strongly to the idea of a Tibetan nation. Internet technologies provide émigré Tibetans with both the tool and the

platform to construct their identity and build “cultural communes constructed in people’s minds” (Castells, 2004, p.54). The media such as phayul.com constructs such nationalist representations and discursively construct symbols of nation on the Internet, and help sustain the idea of nation in diaspora, or transnationalism through digital diaspora.

CHAPTER THREE

This chapter aims to answer the second research question, concerning how the members of the Tibetan diaspora adopt the Internet and social networking sites in particular to create an alternative space for themselves, especially to resist the discourse in the mainstream media. In this chapter, I will examine an incident, which occurred in January 2011 involving Indian media, Indian authorities and the 17th Karmapa, the second-highest ranking Tibetan monk exiled in India. Nearly 2,000 to 3,000 new Tibetans arrive in India every year, crossing the Himalayas, in search of freedom and better opportunities. The main object of this chapter is to understand the role of social networking as a tool for activism, especially against mainstream media. In 2001, one of the highest-ranking Tibetan lama, the 17th Karmapa, also arrived in India. The flight of 16-year old Karmapa, Ogen Thinley Dorje – who had received the approval of both the Dalai Lama and the Chinese government – was seen as a major blow to Beijing's image and its goal to legitimize its control of Tibet. This incident allows me to problematize the issue of Tibet. I plan to approach the issue through a interpretive lens hitherto not adopted in terms of the Tibetan diaspora, which is that of Tibetans as either being the victim of Chinese oppression, or as Tibetans as the beneficiaries of liberal Hollywood-backed propaganda, which portrayed them as peace-loving, post-child of human rights movement.

When Karmapa fled to India, the Indian government did allow him to stay in India but refused to give him permission to go to Rumtek in the state of Sikkim, bordering Tibet. Rumtek is the venue of a monastic headquarters of the 16th Karmapa,

and the main center of the Karma Kagyu school of Tibetan Buddhism, which has one of the largest network of religious centers around the world. Not only would the Indian government restrict him from returning to Sikkim, it would also place Karmapa under virtual house arrest at a makeshift headquarters in Sidhbari, near Dharamsala. The Indian government would also not approve repeated requests for Karmapa to travel abroad until 2009, when Karmapa made his first trip to the United States (Seattle, Upstate New York, New York City and Colorado).

All of this cannot be contextualized without understanding the fact that behind the façade of this ostensibly straightforward tale exists a protracted battle between two camps of Karmapa within the Karma Kagyu school (one of the four groupings within Tibetan Buddhism), for there also exists a rival 17th Karmapa, Thaye Dorjee, put forth by Shamar Rinpoche, a nephew of the previous Karmapa. As it happens, Shamar Rinpoche, is one of the four regents of the Karma Kagyu School appointed by the 16th Karmapa to find his reincarnation in the event of his death. The other three are Gyaltsab, Jamgon and Situ Rinpoche. Leading the camp, which had discovered the 17th Karmapa, Ogen Thinley Dorjee, is Tai Situ Rinpoche, who has the backing of the other two, Gyaltsab and Jamgon Rinpoche (who later passed away in a car accident). The legal battle between the two camps, one led by Tai Situ Rinpoche and other Shamar, over the ownership of the monastery in Rumtek continues. It is alleged in the media that the Shamar's camp has very good relations with the Indian establishment and intelligence agencies, deduced from the fact the arch-rival Tai Situ Rinpoche was banned from coming to India for his alleged relations with China, though the restriction had since been lifted (Jain, 2011).

Evidently, the Karmapa incident is a complex one, particularly given the fact that 27-year old Ogen Thinley Dorjee, or the 17th Karmapa, is widely been tipped as an heir apparent to the Dalai Lama, who is now 76 years old.

The Controversy over Donation

In January 2010, 17th Karmapa, Ogen Thinley Dorjee, was accused of being a Chinese spy after nearly a million dollars in cash was found at his residential quarters near Gyuto monastery in North India, near Dharamsala. This straightforward incident is loaded with significance. Indian police arrested two of Karmapa's assistants in early January, 2011. They were caught trying to buy land through illegal means in the state of Himachal Pradesh, where they were planning to build a monastery. The police also raided Karmapa's headquarters, where nearly a million dollars worth of cash in different currencies was found. Since it also included Chinese Yuan, the Indian police immediately suspected Karmapa of having links with China. Soon thereafter, the Indian media reported stories about Karmapa being a spy of the Chinese state. But the money was offered by devotees during the large annual festival (called Kagyu Monlam) organized by Kagyu Office in Bodhgaya, India, which had concluded only a few weeks earlier. The 2010 gathering was a particularly successful one, celebrated with great pomp because it was also the 900-year anniversary of the first Karmapa Dhusum Khyenpa (1110-1193), who started the Kagyu Lineage. Karmapas have always had a special place in Tibetan religious history because they were the first to start the practice of reincarnation (in fact, the second Karmapa was the first reincarnation ever recorded in Tibetan history). Kagyu Monlam's festivals attract thousands of disciples from all over

the world from East Asia to Scandinavia. Chinese devotees often offer donations in terms of cash (Namgyal, 2011).

Indian media went wild with widespread stories about Karmapa being a “Chinese spy,” the followers of the Karmapa from China were described as the agents of the Chinese state. This complete conflation of the issue of financial mismanagement with that of a national security led to what one might term the collapse of the Indian civil society. In other words, media, rather than countering the allegations made by the police and intelligence authorities, did exactly the opposite in the name of objectivity and balanced coverage. Soon, the intellectuals began to intervene: They began to write in the national dailies, and supporters took to Facebook, and many took to the streets, asking the Indian media to stop its mis-reporting, and many asked for apology.

In this chapter, I use this episode to explore what roles the Internet, specifically social networking sites, plays in offering an alternative space for discussion for supporters to comment on the media and share their own opinion. Unlike the previous chapters, in this I particularly use the perspectives from post-colonial theory since it involves the issues of nationalism, knowledge/power and truth-making. It also must be noted that the Himachal Pradesh government is under the rule of the opposition Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), while the central government is under the rule of Congress party. BJP is generally seen as more right wing than the Congress party. BJP Chief Minister Prem Kumar Dhumal had been one of the staunchest critics of the Tibetans during the crisis; he constantly made negative comments about the Tibetans in India. For this chapter, I found perspectives from cultural studies useful, and, seeking to contextualize how the Indian

mainstream media failed to report on the truth on the Tibetan community, I also found perspectives from post-colonial theory useful. Broadly speaking, postcolonial theory looks at who speaks for whom, for what purpose, and under what conditions. Because the subaltern cannot speak, social texts must be examined for “what the work cannot say.” While setting up the Buddhists up as subalterns in India can be little tricky, it is quite clear that Buddhists in the Himalayan region bordering Tibet are rarely heard of the Indian media, and they were never part of the mainstream Indian media discourse, even though they are citizens of India. Buddhists in the Himalayan region provide a good epistemological third-space where meaning is not governed by pre-existing interpretive frameworks (most notably, China-Tibet, India-China, Tibet-India relations, as mentioned earlier) but where the condition of aporia forces us to look at other subaltern aspects of Tibetan (Buddhistic) condition. Third-space, a place of hybridity where dominating cultural signs are temporarily displaced, is a concept used by Bhabha (1980) to theorize colonial power and resistance. Buddhists in the Himalayan region occupy a similar space of liminality, a place of ambivalence, hybridity and mixture, an imaginary in-between space in the high Himalayas, often claimed by both China and India as their own. It is somewhat closer to Bhabha’s (1980) attempt to “evoke the ambivalent margins of the nation-state” rather than nation in the European and American sense of the term.

Spivak (1988) explores the relationship between the “subject” and the Other and the subaltern’s identity in terms power and discourse. The subaltern subject is unable to “know and speak itself” because it exists only within imperialist histories and is characterized by its unconsciousness of its conditions of existence (Spivak, p. 285).

Tibetan refugees in India face a peculiar situation – their place in the idea of India as a nation is a fragile one and is subject to manipulation. They could come under threat very easily, depending on who defines India as a nation and under what conditions and to what purpose. To marginalize Tibetans, however, Indian media have to resort to tactics often associated with the very colonialism that it had rejected (Spivak, 1988). The dominant formation of nationalism (Chrisman, 2004) promotes the interests of the establishment, or elitist and bourgeois interests, at the cost of the subaltern. In fact, this time it is not the British but China which the Indian mainstream appeared to see as a foreign from which its land must be protected, the physical landmass “taking the land back from foreigners” (Chrisman, 187). In the Karmapa incident, the Indian media continued to report on the imperial design of China to control the Buddhist Himalayan region and Arunachal Pradesh, which had reported several Chinese incursions. They reported that Karmapa had received money from China to control the Buddhists of the Himalayan region. As Chrisman (2004) points out, this appears to be a case in which post-colonial critics could look more closely at the ways in which “particular state agents abuse nationalist rhetoric to serve political and economic ends (p.187).”

Many Tibetans felt that postcolonial Indians and their neo-liberal media were subjecting them to epistemic violence by resorting to the idea of nation-state, a product of colonialism. Ironically, by labeling Tibetans outsiders and by parroting the idea of the nation-state, the Indian media and establishment were in a way indirectly legitimizing China’s rule of Tibet. Calling Karmapa as a Chinese agent meant to paint Tibetan Buddhists as suspect, as not part of the “imagined community” of the Indian nation. By

resorting to such nationalistic tactic, the Indian media is in a way reproducing what it is trying to reject in post-colonial India. The fact that Tibetans consider themselves closer to India than China can also be viewed through the lens of nationalism as an “imagined community” (Anderson, 1982). For Tibetans, Bodhgaya, where Buddha achieved enlightenment in the state of Bihar, and Nalanda, the monastic university where Indian masters taught, are not only part of imagination but also of daily reality. They study and read their texts, pray to the masters of India and even come for pilgrimage. The role of narratives forms a crucial part of Anderson’s conception of nation. The Dalai Lama often calls the Tibet as the holder of the Nalanda tradition and calls Tibet’s relation with India as that of “guru and chela” (PTI, 2011). Homeland is often a country to Tibetans, or a kingdom but not a nation, or let alone a nation-state or what Bhabha (1994) calls “nation-space.” Often analysts fail to take into account the “relatively unspoken tradition of the people of the pagus - colonials, postcolonials, migrants, minorities - wandering peoples who will not be contained within the Heim of the national culture and its unisonant discourse, but are themselves the marks of a shifting boundary that alienates the frontiers of the modern nation” (Bhabha, p.236).

These states such as Sikkim and Ladakh are predominantly Buddhist, yet they are also highly contentious and dot the border hurriedly demarcated by the British. In the past it was Tibet that bordered India, but now it has become China. In fact, the rise of Chinese nationalism and its aggressive stance against its neighbors, including India, had been widely discussed in India in 2010, particularly when the Chinese army made incursions into the Northeastern border state of Arunachal Pradesh. In retaliation, China even

demanded that India call the state a Chinese territory, a verbal tit-for-tat which resulted in the Chinese decision to issue stapled visas to Indian citizens of Jammu & Kashmir (which has a large Buddhist population), thereby questioning the state's status as the part of China. The increasing rivalry between India and China and the rise of two nations as an economic power had implications on Tibetans, particularly Tibetan Buddhists. It is thus imperative that Karmapa incident be analyzed in the context of India's relations with China. Paradoxically, of course, the media's portrayal of Karmapa as a Chinese spy triggered huge rallies of support from Buddhists bordering China, finally forcing the Indian government to pay attention to the matter. Growing resentment toward Indians in the border state might allow China to gain more leverage in India, to make the argument that China would happily fill the vacuum. However, as the Indian media went on with its reporting, Tibetans in Dharamsala organized demonstrations, protesting against what they saw as the media's biased and ill-informed coverage of the news.

Postcolonial Intervention, or, sharing articles on Facebook

According to Chrisman (2004), post-colonial intervention is a way of expressing skepticism toward any form of narrative, which aims to banish difference and promote identity, or impose any unity on heterogeneity. Building on Spivak, Chrisman (2004) points out that "the conditions of possibility of narrative representation are inextricable to imperialism...the task of post-colonial critic is, accordingly, to deconstruct that procedure" (p.193). In a classic post-colonial intervention in the age of new media, historian Dibyesh Anand, associate professor at London's University of Westminster,

created a Facebook page called: *We Oppose the Character Assassination of Karmapa*. Supporters also include other scholars including Tsering Shakya, a noted historian of Tibet at University of British Columbia in Canada.

Anand (2010) wrote a piece in the Indian newspaper *Hindustan Times*, helping to provide some context to the story, by filling in background, history of the Karmapas, its significance in terms of China and India relations, and the strategic importance of Tibet as a buffer against China. The Dalai Lama himself, in what could be called a post-colonial intervention, reminded media to separate “fact” with “belief” and mentioned “Karmapa is an important spiritual leader,” though he said that there might have been some financial mismanagement. In addition, the stories also pointed out, quite mistakenly, that Karmapa only speaks Chinese (Jain, 2011). In reality however, Karmapa’s mother tongue is Tibetan and he also speaks a little English and is learning Hindi and other several other languages, including Sanskrit.

Indeed, Tsering Shakya, in a lengthy article in India’s leading weekly *Outlook*, pointed out the complexity of the issue, filling out what is not written or spoken in the media discourse (Shakya, 2011). As Spivak noted, the role of the post-colonial critic is to fill in what is not written in the social texts about the subaltern. He wrote about the status of the Tibetan refugees, the mismatch between their rights and their duties, the challenges of living as subjects without citizenship, for the voice of subaltern can only be retrieved by reading what is not written in the papers. Few newspapers pointed out at the outset that the Tibetan refugees are not allowed to buy land in India, and that they are not

eligible for foreign currency remittance allowances which enables them to accept foreign currency.

The media discourse did not carry information. Most members of the media apparently had little knowledge of the historical arrangement accorded to Tibetan refugees half a century ago, in a Nehruvian-era. Evidently, even the authorities themselves had little knowledge or were unable to understand the situation of Tibetans in India. The failure of media to inform the public of facts based on independent investigation led to a collapse of the civil society, with rumors running rampant and newspapers replete with fabricated stories. Interestingly, this incident, as discussed below, forced intellectuals, citizen journalists and ordinary people to write articles, particularly through the social networking sites such as *Facebook*, to galvanize support for the Karmapa and criticize the Indian establishment and the media.

India and China

There are two main devices apparent in the media discourse during this incident. First, media often uses the false dichotomy of India-China, setting up the two as monolithic constructions. By so doing, the journalists conflated Chinese people with the Chinese government. If Karmapa is worshipped by the Chinese devotees, then he must be a Chinese spy, or a Chinese mole, or a Chinese plant in India. Said (1978) pointed out that in the Western knowledge production, the East or the Orient is often set up as an oppositional archetype of the West. In a similar fashion, the Indian mainstream media seemed to create China as the Other, or everything that India is not. China is cast as a

negative inversion of India; India and China as oppositional structures antithetical to each other. It also assumes that all Chinese are similar to each other and somehow antagonistic against India, let alone make any distinction between the Chinese people (of which there are about 1.3 billion) and the Chinese government, which does not have the mandate of the people. Going by the same logic, then Karmapa would also likely be a CIA plot because he receives donations from American Buddhists and large amounts of American dollars were also found. Yet the US or the CIA is not seen as much a threat to Indian nation as China is. Such totalizing discourses are the major sites of production of “epistemic violence.” There are three types of violence available to the state 1) instrumental violence (which comes in the forms of police and militia); 2) structural violence (which comes in the form of social organization which disadvantages some and privileges others; 3) epistemic violence which is use of law and language to marginalize or victimize specific people and groups. While the first was not existent in this case, the second form of violence was there in the case of Tibet and the last one is most commonly hurled against the Tibetans in exile. The discourse has negative repercussions because the creation of common sense can have immense consequences, even more so if it is related to the dominating classes. He had been exiled because of China’s rule in Tibet, his predecessor the 16th Karmapa was a subject of India, and finally the Karmapa and his students have a huge presence in China and amongst the Chinese diaspora. In addition, he is the only Tibetan reincarnation – and probably the last Tibetan reincarnation – to be recognized by both the Chinese government and the Dalai Lama. The fact that they found money, some of which contains Chinese currency, is true yet this does not

necessarily equate the Karmapa as being a Chinese spy (they were in total 20 odd currencies). Why would a Tibetan monk spying for his ruler China and why would it make the Indian media so nervous? Would India give asylum to the Dalai Lama and his followers, and even including the Karmapa, if it is not for its geopolitical stake in Tibet. Anand (2009) had noted how China had co-opted the British involvement in Tibet and its “imperial scripting of Tibet” as a part of Britain.

The Regulation of Spiritual and the Politics of Reincarnation

There were two interesting themes at work here is the 1) regulation of the spiritual; and 2) the politics of reincarnation. First, the idea of the fact versus belief in the context of spirituality needs to be analyzed. The fact (which is the discovery of cash) needs to be seen in the context of belief (that followers do offer money to their religious masters). Adams (2003) had noted a similar phenomenon in terms of Tibetan medicine, the practice of which was criminalized in the United States. Just as the success of Tibetan medicine had spawned debates about the idea of “science,” a similar phenomenon can be detected in the media over the criminality of religious acts such as offering donations. As Adams (2003) notes, “discerning between what is scientific/modern is a bio-political function of the modern state.”

Gupta (2002) points out that the reincarnation raises important questions about time and temporality. The idea of reincarnation may seem quite confounding to many, the distinction between childhood and adulthood is “predicated on notion that ‘a life’ has a trajectory, and this trajectory charts a progression from one stage to the next in a whole

series” (p. 42). Just as a historian would require a double consciousness to understand subaltern pasts, it seems the modern concept of the very idea of the life moving forward from birth to death is challenged by the reincarnated children. Such “split inhabitation of time”(p.46) is unique to cases of reincarnation. He thus acknowledges that potential to contribute towards understanding a different and alternative version of time and temporality through the practice of reincarnation.

Coming to the Karmapa incident, the Indian police authorities went live on national television discussing the idea of “reincarnation.” Indian TV stations went as far as to interview law enforcement authorities not about the event, but about the idea of “reincarnation,” forcing one critic to question the Indian authorities’ right to ask question about religious matters (Anand, 2011). Adams (2004) had written how Tibetans use a different analytic in terms of reaching at truth and the correlation between quantification and modernity. Buddhists (all over the world, India and China included) believe in “reincarnation,” and do not ask the Indian government, the Chinese government, to take part in it. It is akin to having BBC and CNN take part in the decision to select the next pope and exceeds the realm of the state or the media but rather is a matter of religious belief. This is precisely what had forced the Chinese government to create a new law, which would require all reincarnations to seek government approval (McCartney, 2007).

The Power of Social Networking

The issue became one of the most debated issues on *Facebook* with regards to Tibet, even perhaps more than the recent prime minister elections. The reason is simply

because it is controversial, sensational and highly polarizing. There were a total of 175 posts from people of all backgrounds, ranging from university professors, graduate students, and everything in between. I made three interesting observations. First, sharing stories on *Facebook* allowed supporters to discuss, comment, point out the mistakes and criticize the news stories. Second, it also allowed the writers themselves to clarify and elaborate on the stories that they might have written in the mainstream press or in which they had been quoted. Third, the community and social networking sites allowed some of the people involved to point out what had been edited out of the stories in the mainstream press. As this comment on a story shared on FB went:

A detailed discussion of the Karmapa reincarnation controversy - the interview with me was focused solely on Indian security discourse and the current issue. I had nothing to say on the sectarian tensions, the politics of Tai Situ and Shamar. All I know is that the sectarian tension is harming Tibetan future in India.

Before the emergence of the social networking sites, it would be difficult to understand the editorial process and the behind-the-scenes workings between the writers and the publishers. However, that is no longer the case. For example, the author of one piece originally slated to appear in the Indian magazine, *Tehelka*, announced later that it was rejected by the magazine, after an edited version of it appeared in *Hindustan Times*. In addition, sometimes a story would be shared by the author himself, and other times readers would leave comments asking the author to provide the whole story on FB as the original publication was only accessible to the subscribers.

For obvious reasons, supporters would leave many congratulatory notes praising the authors for their work. As the publication of his interview in *ZeeNews*, a comment by Phurbu Rigzin:

Autocratic and corrupted Regimes in Tunisia and Egypt needed mass people revolution to kick it out, irresponsible media in India this time needed Dibyesh's simple scribbles to tug its tail back in and learn a lesson!! This interview is a complete knockout punch!!
Enjoyed reading.

The fact that media has lost its credibility is quite clear from this piece which was written by Tenzin Lekmon, who points out that the media's increasingly commercialization means that media has put profits before truth. The writer was asking for some sort of civil society, when she writes that:

Media is too important in a democratic govt. to be left alone under the jurisdiction of the journalists.. therefore the govt. together with a vigilant public should take its role...well...in my opinion having currency of a particular nation doesnt proves that he or she is a spy... And everything that comes in media cannot be true coz medai these days doesnt sustain the reputation that it used to have before and its just a commercial organisation which definitely will go for profit and news which has more masalas.... SPY? Is it the only answer they come up with... Well whateva nonsense the authority speaks or the hungry press speaks or writes at the end truth will win and nothing can come between our faith... bod gyal!

On February 3, *India Today*, India's leading weekly, ran a major cover story on the piece, shared as a link on FB, titled "*Hidden Tiger, Crouching Lama.*" Not all stories were considered negative by Tibetans, however, and the positive ones were showered with positive comments when they appeared, as for example a *Times of India* (TOI) article "*Hindi-Tibti Bhai Bhai?*" An article on February 4, 2011 in *Times of India*, "Karmapa Suspected of Chinese Links," triggered the following discussion, quite emblematic of an alternative public sphere.

Dibyesh Anand: "Can a leopard change its spots? [On Karmapa]... Clearly the HP police are not interested in accounting for foreign currency or land deals but seeking to attack Karmapa's legitimacy. As I noted in a previous post, how is the reincarnation controversy relevant to the financial case? Maybe the police chief wants to become an expert on Tibetan religious affairs.

The link earned one of the most substantive discussions on how the police were conflating the issue of financial irregularity with that of the idea of reincarnation, two entirely separate issues.

Kalsang Wangdu: It seems having been unable to substantiate their earlier accusations, police and intelligence are now diverting the issue to reincarnation controversy. It is business of the Buddhists to decide it, and I think the issue is almost a non-issue now as people who follow the two claimants are given right to believe in their Karmapa.

Kalsang Wangdu: However, I am surprised at the way Govt of India treat HH Karmapa Ogyen Trinley Dorje so shabbily over the last 10 years. He is actually the one who has stronger followers than the other claimant.

Dibyesh Anand: And he is absolutely adored within tibet. the other karmapa is not even known within tibet.

Kalsang Wangdu: Yes, it is absolutely true. When he fled Tibet in 1999, people inside Tibet were so saddened initially that they felt leaderless. In the absence of the Dalai Lama and the Panchen Lama, their faith and hope in Him is complete, regardless of sectarian affiliation.

Phurbu Rigzin: I think the recent mass movement (peaceful) in Sikkim by people of all works of life to pressure the GoI to allow HH Karmapa to visit Rumtek/Sikkim and later on the successful visit of HH Dalai Lama in the state last December, which included HHDL's address in the Sikkim Parliament might have culminated an unprecedented pressure on the GoI to decide one way or other as per the public wishes. This might undoubtedly, on top of its declining in followers and authenticity have put the rival camp of the Karmapa in tight rope. This presents a room to maneuver and breathing space to unbold pressure points on their side. The big is everybody's guess!!

Doma Norbu: personally - i still say that this is not about the battle of the 2 karmapas but something much deeper- the future of tibet.... the ugly outcome of religion and politics entwined...

Social networking sites really became a place for citizen journalists to report their own story, rather than relying on mainstream media. The idea of gatekeeping, professionalism, judgment and news ethics, which supposedly characterize mainstream media organization, seem to have temporarily been suspended, leading to people to look elsewhere for news and discussions. Still, some supporters toyed with the idea of taking

legal action against these media, arguing that the fear of a punitive threat might allow them become more cautious in their reportage.

Yet criticisms and letters to the editors from average readers would not get into the publications, forcing some to publish and share the letter to editors verbatim on the FB pages. Tenzin Tsundue, one of the top Tibetan activists and a writer, for instance, shared a letter he had written for the *Hindustan Times* on the FB page on January 29, 2011. During the controversy, a form of citizen journalism also appeared on the FB page, when the supporters updated what was happening in Dharamsala during the investigation. Tenzin Dase, for example, updated information about the investigation happening inside Dharamsala.

The Indian media completely blacked out a protest by the Buddhists of the Himalayan region. In posting the story “*Media Blacks out protests from the people of Sikkim*” by an online site, iSikkim.com, the supporter A commented:

My comment on it: The nationalist-corporatist Indian media strategy of dealing with protests from 'integral' parts of the country inhabited by people who are 'different'. (1) Kashmiri protests - only cover it if it fits into the 'violent Muslims' paradigm. (2) NorthEast protests - never cover them except as 'inter-ethnic violence'. (3) Tibetan Buddhist protests - they are too docile/nonviolent to be newsworthy.

Once the Indian government said the investigation was over and it had cleared the Karmapa, the supporter A wrote this on February 11:

All of us did it! I am not talking about Egypt here (though am thrilled about it). But pressuring the Indian government to sort this mess immediately and not let the circus go on. Congratulations to all of us.

Then some supporters also discussed the possibility of whether the Indian government and the police would ever apologize for their misjudgment.

Analysis

This incident revealed how the refugees and people without citizenship but subject to laws could land in trouble, with apparent help of a profit-centered and commercialized media industry in late liberalism. It became in the media's interests to take the authorities at their word, and with little skepticism they reported what turned out to be gross fabrications. It also shows how Tibetans used Facebook to challenge what they thought was fabricated coverage. On May 2, 2011, exactly three months after the incident unfolded, Karmapa held a press conference in New Delhi during which he categorically denied that he is a Chinese spy. It was widely reported by the Indian media. He said that he came to India because there is no religious freedom in China. In addition, he had to receive all the teachings of his lineage from the masters almost all of whom in India. The Indian media's indiscriminate portrayal of the monk as a Chinese spy is without any evidence but under the pretext of its status a watchdog and a fourth estate brought into question not only the idea of objectivity in journalism but also in other areas such as post-colonial construction of truth, fact-making, fact versus belief, and religion and media. The liberalization of the media industry had led to a highly competitive media industry with numerous news channels competing for viewers. However, such practices have consequences, since, as Edward Said (1992) had noted, media not only "describes" but "defines" the reality; thus the Indian media's repeated use of the word "Chinese spy" when describing the Tibetan monk is quite telling, leading to post-colonial critic to step up and speak on behalf of the Tibetans. In reality, it accepts nearly three thousand

Tibetan refugees of China, reflection of India's role as a responsible member of the human society.

Post-colonial critique entails providing "alternative national visions of collective, identity, culture and power," (Chrisman, 2004; p.196). Scholars such as Tsering Shakya and Dibyesh Anand did precisely that as evidenced in this case. This study provides much food for thought when it comes to nationalism in India, the predicament of Tibetan refugees, their precarious and marginal position, the larger scheme of Indian nationalism, and India-China relations. The incident also highlighted what conditions often forces Westernized intellectual speak on behalf of people. But as Spivak (1988) has noted, the importance of questioning the assumption of a cultural and political solidarity amongst a heterogenous people and reliance on Western or Westernized intellectuals to speak on their behalf, rather than they speaking for themselves. Yet does an attempt to reclaim a cultural solidarity amongst a very heterogenous group of people only lead to reaffirming their positions as subalterns? This is but one of the questions worth exploring. Most importantly, this chapter attempts to show how the citizens of the diaspora effectively use social networking sites such as Facebook to challenge the mainstream and create an alternative space of discourse.

CHAPTER FOUR

In this chapter, I will examine how social networking sites and the Internet can be used to raise awareness for human rights and how they can help assert national identity in a connected and networked world. This study looks at narratives, rhetoric, symbols and imagery which have emerged on online blogs within Tibet, as published on the website highpeakspurearth.com, and how it spread from inside Tibet through the rest of the world, achieving a “boomerang effect” (Keck & Sikkink, 1998), that is bringing much international recognition for the online activists and awareness to the cause they represent. I used this particular blog because it acts as a bridge and medium not just within the diaspora, but between Tibetans in diaspora and the homeland (or what could be called “transnational Tibet”). It is useful to differentiate diaspora, which existed outside Tibet (often known as the exiled Tibet) and the Tibetans living inside Tibet. Rather than merely being an important tool to communicate among the members of the diaspora living in the free world, the Internet has also helped facilitate an exchange between the two Tibets, one living outside and one inside. Since this website deals mostly with what is published within the Chinese-controlled Tibet, I decided to choose this as a subject of my study. It also explains why I used the perspectives related to online activism in China as an interpretive framework.

Since the protests erupted in Tibet in 2008 and 2009, there had been an upsurge in the assertion of Tibetan identity, particularly amongst the younger generation and those who are educated inside China (Pemba, 2010). On December 9, 2009, a video was

released on the Internet in which many Tibetans, from all walks of life and all ages, declared their “Tibetan-ness” by saying that “I am Tibetan” and stating reason why they are who they are. The release of the video represented the ways in which technology can help spread political messages. As soon as the video travelled outside Tibet, exiled Tibetans in places such as Toronto, New York and Dharamsala, also released their own videos, proclaiming their national identity, standing in solidarity with their counterparts inside Tibet. On February 9, 2010, Tibetan poet Woenser published a piece known as “I am Tibetan” on a website, www.highpeakspureearth.com, marking perhaps a defining moment in the rise of Tibetan identity and how the youth inside Tibet were finally speaking against the Chinese rule and proclaiming that they are Tibetan, despite the government’s policies to assimilate them into the dominant Han Chinese culture. This paper will examine the images and narratives related to national identity and human rights by Tibetans, both in exile and inside Tibet, and the interaction and communication between the two as facilitated by the Internet technology.

Virtual Gateway into Tibet

One of the most authoritative sources of information about the Tibetans inside Tibet is provided by the website, *highpeakspureearth.com*, which provides English translations of narratives, information on the developments inside Tibet. The website initially was run as a voluntary organization but later received two grants that pay for translations and web hosting.³ The site is being upgraded to become a blog in

³ Interview with Dechen Pemba.

English/Tibetan/Chinese. The website had an “overwhelmingly positive” feedback especially for the young Tibetans in the diaspora who are not able to read blogs either in Tibetan or in Chinese but have this window into what is happening inside Tibet. They also get feedback from those within Tibet who think that making their work available outside Tibet helps “contribute to their safety and raise awareness for human rights causes” (Pemba, 2010). For those inside Tibet, it provides a reliable medium through which to raise awareness to human rights issues.

The website published a series of pieces (in verse, prose and video) called “I am Tibetan” beginning from December 2009 to July 2010, beginning with an essay on the topic by the Beijing-based Tibetan writer and poet Woenser. The publication of video had led the Tibetans in exile creating their own videos on the Internet, articulating and proclaiming their ethnic and national identity and also designed banners and T-shirts, proclaiming: “I am Tibetan.” Clearly, despite the fact that most of the youth are educated in China, there is a resurgence of Tibetan national identity.⁴ This has an effect of encouraging the exiled Tibetans outside Tibet, who as a result of their exposure to these narratives and images immediately feel closer to their ancestral culture.

The website (which derives its name from a book by Hugh Richardson, a former British diplomat and Tibetologist) was started in 2008 by Dechen Pemba, a Tibetan student born in the United Kingdom.⁵ There are several blog-hosting sites, both Tibetan

⁴ Interview with Dechen Pemba, the editor and founder of [highpeakspureearth.com](http://www.highpeakspureearth.com), who had lived in China, September 26, 2010 over Facebook.

<http://www.highpeakspureearth.com/2010/02/i-am-tibetan.html>

and Chinese, that are favored by Tibetans in the People's Republic of China (PRC) today. Most of the articles on the website are translated from the Chinese language website, the most popular of which is called TibetCultureNet or TibetCul, started by two brothers, Wangchuk Tseten and Tsewang Norbu, and their head offices in Lanzhou, capital of Gansu Province. TibetCul receives over 400,000 hits every month, according to Alexa, the web information company. TibetCul is mainly a news and blog-hosting site but there are many different sections on the site dedicated to various aspects of Tibetan culture (which includes Tibetan music, literature, films and travel.) There is a BBS forum (bulletin board) and there is even a section dedicated to "overseas Tibetans". For all Tibet related news, blogs and cultural activities, TibetCul is an invaluable resource and source of information. Many posts translated into English by highpeakspureearth.com come from TibetCul.

"I am Tibetan" Campaign:

It is unquestionable that feelings of national identity had been on the surge over the past decades in Tibet. However, they reached an apogee in the run up to the Beijing Olympics, an incident that can not be fully explained through the political process theory, even though the protests fulfilled all the three main conditions of the theory: insurgent

⁵ She had spent several years working in Beijing as an English teacher before being thrown out of China in the wake of the 2008 protests for "alleged crimes against the state." She was told that she was not allowed to return for five years. She was put on a plane to London. She later enrolled at the School of Oriental and African Studies (SOAS) in London, where she set up www.highpeakspureearth.com, with the guidance from her uncle Tsering Shakya, a historian of contemporary Tibet, who is the first Tibetan to hold a chair in Tibetan studies (at the University of British Columbia.)

consciousness or deprivation theory, organizational strength and political opportunities. True, Tibetans inside Tibet were feeling mistreated and discriminated against under the Chinese rule where Han population has become a majority. However, there were no signs of effective and strong leadership and against the Chinese rule, nor there are any indications of political opportunities such as division within the elites, or increased pluralization within China, which provides the inadequacy of the traditional political process theory in explaining the social movement inside Tibet. And Tibetan civil society has been under stress as many writers had been imprisoned, such as blogger Kunga Tseyang and journalist Jamyang Kyi, both of whom were arrested by Chinese authorities.

On December 19, 2009, a video titled “I am Tibetan” was first posted on a Chinese video-hosting website and began to circulate widely, finally ending up on Youtube.⁶ Tibetans disseminated the video through social networking sites, such as *Facebook*. In a commentary on the video, editors of www.highpeakspureearth.com wrote that though the video does not really make much sense to those who did not understand Tibetan, “once you understand what the people are saying, it is one of the most powerful and creative videos we have seen from Tibet. The camera focuses on random Tibetans, each statement begins with “I am Tibetan” and the next speaker goes onto the describe the reason.”

Indeed, as a form of transnationalism, it radicalizes the nature of online activism. The background music, the traditional dress and overall presentation of the media allows

⁶ It is available here <http://vimeo.com/9203330>

us to analyze as called for by Yang (2009), which is to take a cultural approach to study the ritual and performance of the popular forms of protests. In response to the “I am Tibetan” fervor which swept the Tibetan blogosphere, writer Wooser also contributed an essay titled “I am Tibetan” originally written for *Radio Free Asia* (RFA) on February 9, 2010 and posted on her website on February 14, 2010.

In her piece, she calls the video “strongest and the most creative video from Tibet.” She also comments on another video, which also appeared online, urging the Tibetans to speak pure Tibetan as a part of the resurgence of Tibetan identity. One of the main reasons the Tibetans are indeed feeling the need to get back their own language, she wrote, is a result of their frustration at China’s patriotic education and brainwashing. Just as it had been an age-old tradition in China, one of the most common forms of popular protests is that of literature. Tibetan youth inside Tibet have often resorted to poetry and essays to express their feelings and sentiments about living and growing up under the Chinese rule. The tone of their writings is both playful and serious; they can be satirical yet carry important messages. On May 3, 2010, highpeakspurearth.com posted two other “I am Tibetan” essays published online, one of which was written by Dechen Hengme and other written by Khampa Snow. The writers of these postings and blogs constantly emphasize the importance of preserving Tibetan spirituality and Tibetan language, both of which they claim had been severely jeopardized under the policies of the People’s Republic of China. The following poem by Khampa Snow, is a good example:

I am Tibetan
By "Khampa Snow"

I am Tibetan
A black-haired and ochre-faced Tibetan
My feet have trod countless snowy peaks
In our proud realm of snowy extremes
Sincere smiles
Remain through summer rains and winter snows
Our will and grit shine yet through bitter cold and cruel heat

I am Tibetan
A compassionate-hearted Tibetan
Prayer wheels and beads have flown in my hand since time eternal
Our piety was cast in Shambala's pure lands
The six-syllable mantra is muttered
Under the discriminatory gaze of others and the ridicule of misunderstanding
We pray as ever for harmony and well-being for all living things

I am Tibetan
A Tibetan who can sing and dance
The seven colours of the rainbow are woven into my long flowing sleeves
And our jubilant dances raise the Yangtze and Yellow Rivers
Our innocent dances and
Songs of praise sound out in the golden era, delight dances through the soul

I am Tibetan
A dream-cherishing Tibetan
The wisdom and glory in the 30 letters of the Tibetan alphabet
Shine on the path of our progress
The milk of ten bright cultures
Fortifies our minds and bodies
With the blessings of our ancestors' culture we stagger out with leaps and bounds into the
ranks of the world

I am Tibetan
The agitated blood in my veins is a constant reminder
I am Tibetan
In my lilting mother tongue I want to say loudly
"I am Tibetan"

On May 17, 2010, the website published another passionately written poem

known as “I am Tibetan” followed by one by Son of Snow Dhondup on June 8, one on July 1, by Gade Tsering and 15, July, 2010 by Mu Di. Amongst them, Gade Tsering is already quite well-known within China, and according to the website, he was amongst the “top ten minority poets of 2009.” The website published two of his poems, one of which is dedicated to exiled Tibetan poet and activist Tenzin Tsundue⁷. In addition, various signs related to Tibetan identity also flourished on the Internet, and were disseminated through social networking sites. Tibetan online activists have at their disposal a repertoire of tools that are otherwise not available before the advent of the Internet. Though digital technologies are not created for protests, the Internet lends itself to activism. China has a long history of popular protest and contention. Tibetan students, most of them educated in China such as Woenser and Gade Tsering, are also somewhat expert at appropriating state rituals and official rhetoric. As Yang (2009) notes, contentious rituals can take both verbal and non-verbal forms, though the Internet often lends itself naturally for verbal forms. Slogans and posters are also replicated online such as the “I love Tibet” signs. The use of video images, poetry and symbols all indicate how the Tibetan online activists use the technology to mobilize support and advertise their cause and assert their identity through innovative means.

⁷ Tenzin Tsundue, born in India, is perhaps the most famous activist and poet in exile. He has won India’s highest award for non-fiction for one of his essays, “My Kind of Exile,” and has been arrested many times for protesting against visiting Chinese dignitaries. During Chinese Premier Wen Jia-bao’s visit to India, he wrote an open letter to the Chinese Premier in India’s national daily, the Hindustan Times. (<http://www.hindustantimes.com/specials/coverage/jiabaovisit/An-open-letter-to-Wen-Jiabao-from-a-well-wisher/editorials/SP-Article10-638878.aspx>)



Styles of Online Protest: Both Playful and Somber

Yang (2009) analyzes the online activism in China into two broad categories, which is serious and somber, and the other fun and lighthearted. He points out that though protests in China were dominated by the serious side (most prominently during the Tiananmen demonstrations of 1989), Chinese cyber-activism is gradually evolving toward a more playful and parochial style in keeping with the larger online landscape. Looking at the Tibetan sites, however, indicates a combination of both. The style of contention contains elements of myth and nobility and references to history and the dream of seeing Tibet as a free land which are peppered with a certain degree of satire and appropriation of official rhetoric (making mockery of “patriotic education” while dreaming of a Free Tibet in all its seriousness of purpose and determination.). In China, however, the transition to a style of mockery and irony rather than seriousness and grand sloganeering, which had characterized past revolutions, is attributed to the loss of innocence following the Tiananmen incident and the rise of consumerism in modern

China (Barne, 1999 and Wang, 1996).

Indeed, just as the ritual, style and language are in the process of formation in the Chinese cyberspace, so it is with Tibetans. One of the most significant consequences of the development of the Internet is on the idea of nationalism. Scholars have convincingly argued the role of the media in the formation of imagined communities, most famously Benedict Anderson (1981). If the print media were able to form nations, then digital media, far more powerful both in its reach and speed, should have similar if not more powerful community-building effects. As the Internet occupies an increasingly central role in human lives, it would have far greater significance for people in search of communities, or nations like Tibetans. Technology is often used to carry old jobs and existing routines. Therefore, Tibetans in exile who were active politically also turned out to be very enthusiastic users of the Internet and social networking sites (which they use primarily for political mobilization rather than socialization). In other words, it is “not technology but people that produce the culture” (Yang, 2009; p.98).

The second point that needs to be introduced here is related to the contents of contention. Is the new citizen activism more down to earth or equally daring and grandiose as in the past? On February 2010, a new video was released on the Internet, which serves as a classic example of the playful style of protest. Tibetan hip-hop song “New Generation” by Green Dragon that was first featured on the group’s TibetCul blog in February 2010 in which a gang of Amdo rappers boldly proclaimed:

The new generation has a resource called youth
The new generation has a pride called confidence
The new generation has an appearance called playfulness
The new generation has a temptation called freedom

Evidently, though citizen activism continues to be very idealistic, there is a trend towards a more pragmatic approach. Particularly following the Dalai Lama's proposition of the "middle way approach," there has been a change in the tone and tenor of resistance movement. The goal is to exercise "soft power" (Nye, 2004), which is not necessarily derived out of military or economic means but of moral and cultural capital to persuade and inspire others. Indeed, reading poetry, listening to video and looking at essays, there is no call for "independence" nor a "separation from China." They are very much within what might be termed as "rightful resistance," asking for rights as guaranteed under China's own constitution. Yang (2009) argues that the polyphony of voices, styles, genres and languages on the Internet combined works to fight against the hegemony of the Chinese state. This is particularly relevant when one considers the ways in which the Internet is changing the way people think and live.

Recent Protests over Language Policy: "Rightful Resistance"

In addition, on October 1, 2010, hundreds of Tibetan students in Tongren (Rebkong) region of China protested against the Chinese government's plan to replace Tibetan by Chinese as a medium of instruction. The protests spread all over Tibet and then to Beijing, where nearly four hundred students at Minorities University participated in a solidarity march. Soon the pictures of the protesting students, carrying banners, "*Freedom of Language, Equality of People*" appeared on the social networking site, *Facebook*. *The New York Times* did a report on the event and so did CNN, BBC and VOA, amongst other. The picture of the event with students protesting on the street

asking for the right to study and be taught in their own language captivated observers, particularly the members of the Tibetan diaspora. Writers, intellectuals and journalists, and other young Tibetans, immediately felt the extent to which their language and identity was endangered, leading them to express their views on the issue, many of them, intentionally adopting Tibetan language, even on *Facebook*. Many made the picture of Tibetan students as their profile picture on *Facebook* of Tibetans and Tibet supporters all over the world.

For instance, during recent protests in Tibet by students against China's language policies, they held banners, which said: "*Protect Ethnic Languages, Promote Chinese Civilization.*" The content of the slogans and their meanings were quite close to that of the students in Tibet, which was "*Equality to People, Freedom of Language.*"

In both cases, it is easy to sense the way the students were following the tradition of protesting without challenging the sovereignty of China's rule over Tibet. On Nov 8, Wooser, wrote a piece on the new language policy and the protests. She first points that the Cantonese people in the Southern China have also protested against China's attempt at cultural homogenization, in which the Cantonese have proclaimed: "I am willing to speak Mandarin, but do not force me to speak Mandarin." She believes that is fundamental human rights. As Wooser (2010) points out:

Of course, placing the recent attempts of Tibetans fighting for their language on a par with the Cantonese case stems from some kind of deep apprehension. Let's be honest, we are afraid that those children, teenagers and adolescents trying to fight for the ignoble existence of their innate but scarred mother tongue, will be suppressed, one by one, by those in power adopting their usual arbitrary and boorish methods, resulting in the buds of life of those young people being nipped before they have even blossomed. In fact, the slogans, which they advocate, asking for common values of "ethnic equality and freedom of language", should be regarded as the most fundamental human rights and are by no means unreasonable requests.

In addition, Wooser points out that if the Tibetan protesters framed their protest along the same lines as the Cantonese people, asking them not to force them to speak Mandarin, Tibetans will certainly be framed as “splittists,” or separatists. She also points out that the new language policy is aimed at reeducating the young Tibetans many who participated in the protests in 2008. China thus plans to stamp out the issue by bringing them into the fold by getting rid of their mother tongue and thus stamp out once and for all one of the main origins of their identity. On November 15, highpeakspureearth.com posted a blogpost on the loss of Tibetan language, written in form a verse by a Tibetan, titled “Sorry:”

"Sorry"

Using the 30 letters of the alphabet
You string a necklace of history for me

But I, due to the ravages of time
Lost my principles
Lost my necklace

Thonmi Sambhota, sorry
Father and Mother, sorry
Forefathers, sorry
Teachers, friends and family, sorry

What you carved on stone
I am unable to understand
Tsangyang Gyatso's poems
I cannot read out loud

I have no tsampa

I have no Buddhist lamp
I have no mala
I have no khata
Today, I have also lost my voice

From today onwards, there are no pastoral songs
There is no Achi Lhamo
There is no kyi kyi suo suo
There is also no Mani and sounds of nature

It's not that I don't love you, sorry
It's not that I want to abandon you, sorry
I am powerless, sorry

The recent protests soon elicited much response from writers and intellectuals in the Tibetan diaspora. Bhuchung Sonam (2010), a writer and blogger living in Dharamsala in India, published an essay in which he wrote that the crackdown on the Tibetan language is a cultural crackdown and is clearly aimed at eradicating the root of the Tibetan identity. He also suggested that this is part of China's policy of frontier assimilation of all the minorities into China. Like Tsundue, her writings are read all over the world by thousands and it is often been translated into English through www.highpeakspureearth.com.

On March 23, 2010, the website published a piece by Woenser titled "*Happiness Under Gunpoint*." She starts with a reference to a piece in, of all publications, the *Economist* (2009) magazine, which has called the March "the cruellest month" (in Tibet), the traditional season for doomed protests against the Chinese rule." She is strident in her description of the reality on the ground in Lhasa, of the climate of fear in the police state, and the "grief" that people internalize despite the government's proclamation to the contrary. Chinese officials often claim that Tibetan people are happy, their material

grievances have been attended to, and China has brought development and prosperity to the region, yet the people are still deeply unhappy. They fail to understand and fathom the melancholy of the “racialized minority” and the “deep sadness of their denied subjectivity” (Langford, nd: p. 3).

In the essay, Woesser describes, in her vivid prose, the reason behind the melancholy and the sense of helplessness that Tibetans suffer:

However, the strongest catchphrase is of course “happiness”, asking everybody to unanimously praise a previously never experienced life of happiness. Yet, if people are really happy, their backs wouldn’t have to continuously be pressed against guns held by that imperceptible hand, Lhasa wouldn’t be turned into a militarized city guarded by guns day and night. When I asked a retired cadre who used to hold a post in a provincial government department and who now enjoys a comfortable life if he was really happy, he first turned off his mobile phone, took out the battery and only then answered “How can one live in happiness when one is guarded by a gun every day? People living in prison, are they happy? We live in a place which is just like a giant prison. We cannot even speak a sentence of truth without having to be afraid of being bugged; only the apathetic might feel happiness.” (“Happiness under Gunpoint”, n.p.)

It seems from her writing that with the growing resentment against the Chinese rule, Tibetans are likely to continue to protest and the unrest is unlikely to end. Tibetan writer Jamyang Norbu, an essayist and a novelist now living in the United States, writing on the eve of the March 10 ceremony, predicted “with confidence” that there will be more uprisings in the future. He thus in a way agrees with Cheng’s (2001) view that the grief should be maintained and the Tibetans should not resist the closure of events to keep alive its political possibilities.

In his popular blog on www.shadowtibet.org, Norbu (2009) indeed points out that remembering the past should not be just be an academic or a literary task. “It should rather be an occasion for us to renew our commitment to fight for freedom and justice,

and to prepare for that day in the near future when the final uprising, the rangzen (italics mine) revolution, will surely come” (“March Winds”, n.p.). Rangzen, a popular word used by many Tibetans who seek “independence,” means complete independence from China. And indeed it can be inferred that it would not be possible to regain independence without keeping the memories alive or as Norbu (2009) points out, an “occasion for us to renew our commitment” (Norbu, 2009; np) until the much coveted day of the deliverance.

Online Activism and Transnationalism

Clearly, with its ability to connect two communities, one inside Tibet and one outside, highpeakspureearth.com is a medium of transnational activism par excellence. Online activism helps in the externalization of transnational movements. Tibetan writers and poets use the Internet to diffuse and channel information abroad, seek the authority of international authorities to turn domestic claims into rules and also directly challenge authorities. It seems that the Tibetan online activists are quite keen on doing that. NGOs prefer the first, cyber-nationalists prefer the second and the third, and human rights combine all three (Guo, 2009). The spread of information outside China inevitably helps intensify the scale and the reach of online activism. For instance, the translation of Woesser’s blogs, made available on the www.highpeakspureearth.com, has made her highly popular in the outside world, giving a boost to her literary career as a poet. Interestingly, Woesser’s international fame has translated into her rising profile inside Tibet and China,

where she is closely watched, though not yet arrested, by the authorities. This is quite close to ‘boomerang effect’ of transnational activism (Keck & Sikkink, 1998).

Young activists sympathetic to the Tibetan cause read her poems in London and New York. Her books are published in translation. Wooser was recently awarded the International Women’s Media Foundation Courage in Journalism Award, 2010. Apart from writers mentioned earlier, many writers work were published on www.highpeakspureearth.com. They include Kunga Tseyang (pen name is Gangnyi or ‘*Sun of the Snow*’), an environmental activist and writer, who was arrested and in March 2009 for one of his essays and was later sentenced to five years in prison in November 2009; Dolkar Tso, wife of a businessman and environmentalist Karma Samdrup, who has been writing since the arrest of her husband; Jamyang Kyi, a women’s rights activist, who was detained from 1 April to 20 May 2008.

Analysis

Indeed, as people outside Tibet see the writings and images coming from Tibet, it naturally has the effect of galvanizing the ethnic Tibetans living outside Tibet. Members of the diaspora, particularly the more politically conscious ones, also claim that they are affected by information that they receive, particularly from the Internet. Such a flow of information was not possible before the emergence of the Internet, which is particularly powerful in its ability to disseminate audio and visual images.⁸ In this section, I examined

⁸ Tenzin Jigme, the head of Minneapolis-based music band Melong (or *Mirror*) says he was particularly affected by the music videos that he sees from Tibet. Even though they

online activism and particularly chose one event, the release of the video “*I am Tibetan*” and discourse surrounding it, to analyze the emergence and assertion of identity inside Tibet, particularly in the run up to the Olympics. Despite China’s attempt at assimilating Tibetan identity inside Tibet, there is growing awareness among Tibetans about maintaining their own identity, religion and languages. While it does not suit the traditional models of social movement, the evidence gathered in this chapter on the Internet show that Tibetan netizens and bloggers continue to respond to the government’s censorship through innovative means. In addition, literary and public forums on the Internet, such as www.highpeakspureearth.com, are highly reflective of the civil society on the ground. Bloggers and writers are predominantly poets, writers and intellectuals such as Woenser and Gade Tsering.

Meanwhile, websites such as highpeakspureearth.com occupy an important and critical space in the transnational movement in support of Tibet (Castells, 2004). In the end, the Internet websites help Tibetans to create representations of nation with the help of digital technology (Anderson, 1991) and also continue the propagation of Tibet’s soft-power (Nye, 1994) by allowing the activists to challenge the dominant structures and bring their narratives and images into the world at the click of a mouse. It has become an avenue through which news and information about Tibet are disseminated into the real world. It has become a window into Tibet for the transnational actors set to echo and respond, as it was in the case of “I am Tibet” movement. The slogan was quickly co-

may not have overt political messages, these inevitably can communicate shared aspirations. He also said his video performance are also watched by Tibetans inside Tibet on youtube and had received comments from them.

opted and amplified through similar performances in places as disparate as Dharamsala, New York and Toronto, within a matter of days.⁹ Technology has no doubt bridged the gap between the two Tibets, each learning something from the other, creating a transnational community which is uniquely Tibetan yet also hybrid and multilingual, speaking in the tongues of China, India and Tibet and well-versed in the culture and the places where they had been brought up. As pointed out earlier, the chapter explains how Tibetans inside Tibet and Tibetans in the diaspora communicate with each other and engage in activism (albeit online and otherwise) through the Internet. This had been true particularly in the cases of self-immolation where much had been written on this blog by the Tibetans inside Tibet and pictures had been posted there of burning Tibetans. In addition, this site shows how the intellectuals on the two sides of the world, by using the Internet as a space for literature (poetry, music, books and essays), forge a rootless yet authentic intelligentsia, creating a room outside the monolithic structures of such powers as China, India and the West.

⁹Two leading members of a student group, the Students for a Free Tibet, responding with their own statement. <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RyAPiZx2ErE>

CHAPTER FIVE

In this last chapter, I would like to present, through my own fieldwork in Dharamsla, how Tibetan journalists use digital media to create a unique and original form of journalistic practice, which amounts to a mixture of advocacy and community journalism. Ever since Mohammed Bouzizi burned himself up in Tunisia and triggered a series of cataclysmic events in the Middle East, now better known as Arab Spring, many Tibetans have also resorted to self-immolation. As of May 2012, more than 30 people have burnt themselves inside Tibet, and one of them in India, the first time in eight years a Tibetan has self-immolated outside Tibet¹⁰. In 1994, a former monk, Thupten Ngodup immolated himself in New Delhi, protesting against the Chinese rule. In this section, I would like to study how one news website, *Tibet Sun*, covered the self-immolations in Tibet. *Tibet Sun* is based in Dharamsla, India. It is owned and founded by Lobsang Wangyal, a photographer for *Agence France Presse (AFP)*. The online magazine is a good example of how Internet and citizen journalism merge in the Tibetan diaspora. For a one-man operation, it is quite productive.

Mr. Wangyal's office is also a very popular place for Tibetans from all walks of life: he gets visits from local tourists, artists and taxi drivers. Apart from running the website, he complements his income by organizing Miss Tibet beauty pageants, Tibetan Music Festival, and he had even organized Tibetan Olympics in 1998, a parody of the

¹⁰ For the list of self-immolators please see <http://www.savetibet.org/resource-center/maps-data-fact-sheets/self-immolation-fact-sheet>

Beijing Olympics. (This year, he had decided to forgo the Miss Tibet contests to show his solidarity with the Tibetan self-immolations.) Tall and dark with this long hair reaching to his lower back, he is a difficult man to ignore. He was the former president of the Tibetan Journalists Association and is also one of the most entrepreneurial of journalists and quite unconventional for a Tibetan. He holds a BA from Himachal Pradesh University in Shimla (to give some perspective, the alma mater of Afghan president Hamid Karzai) and attended the Central School for Tibetans, Mussoorie.¹¹ *Tibet Sun* works mainly as a web aggregator with some stories done by Mr. Wangyal himself. He is also a web designer. He chooses stories, news analyses and opinion pieces from around the world (including India).

I knew Lobsang since high school but we did not become friends until the early 2000s, when I began to spend more time in Dharamsala. I spent several weeks at the office of *Tibet Sun* between the ends of March to mid-May, 2012. My visit to his office coincided with self-immolations in Tibet, which were obviously the most important topic of discussion in India. While people on the surface did not know the reason behind self-immolation, much of the discourse was quite superficial. There is little analysis of why the Tibetans have chosen to self-immolate in such large numbers and why at this time. Even the specialists seem quite confounded by the sheer scale of the self-immolations

¹¹ In early March I received a call from worried Lobsang and he told me that the earlier in the day, while taking a picture of the Dalai Lama, the Tibetan leader, apparently not in his best mood, turned back and told him: “You are sometimes a bit too much.” However, the next day, during a public gathering, the Dalai Lama was smiling at him and making a thumbs-up gesture towards him; apparently, the reporter and his famous subject (and a big source of his livelihood, the picture of the Dalai Lama accounts for much of his assignment for AFP) had mended the relationship.

(The first academic conference was held in Paris in May 2012: *Self-Immolation in Tibet: Ritual, or a Political Protest?*). Another popular question concerns how self-immolation can be explained in Buddhism. Does not Buddhist reject all violence, including violence inflicted against the self? Or are there any exceptions? Are there any references to self-immolation in the Tibetan history? It needs to be stressed that the participation of monks and nuns in freedom movements is not new—the peaceful ‘Shangri-La’ image of Tibetan monks belies a history of many armed struggles, often aimed at the “enemies of Buddhism.” Monks not only fought in the 1950s as members of the famed guerilla organization, *Chushi Gangdruk* (Four River and Six Ranges) against the People’s Liberation Army; some of the monks served as key commanders. More recently, a significant number of monks took part in the much-reported demonstrations against Chinese rule in 2008 and 2009 in the run-up to the Beijing Olympics. We have seen it not only in Tibet but also in countries like Burma, where monks led large-scale protests against the ruling junta in 2007.

The grisly pictures of charred bodies of Tibetan monks immediately recalled the iconic photo of Vietnamese monk Thich Quang Duc who burnt himself in Saigon in 1963 to protest against persecution by a Catholic regime (the photographer Malcolm Browne got a Pulitzer Prize for the image). The media coverage of burning Tibetans, however, was relatively muted. Initially, the coverage was eclipsed by the reports of the war in the Middle East, and the protests on Wall Street. However, as pointed earlier, the practice of self-immolation is not without precedent in recent Tibetan history. Thubten Ngodup, a

50-year-old exiled Tibetan living in India, died in the Indian capital, New Delhi, in April 1998 after he burnt himself to protest against the Chinese rule.

The radicalization of Tibetan youth certainly raises a lot of important questions. Does the trend underscore the view that nonviolence does not mean a mere absence of violence, but a commitment to action? Does the Tibetan movement have the potential, like other recent movements, to manifest itself in more aggressive forms? Or, has self-immolation become a new modus operandi of the Tibetan movement? Most importantly, the self-immolation, rather than being a sign of desperation, is perhaps in fact a sign of hope, that people are finally seeing some light at the end of the tunnel. It also must be said that it is not a suicide but rather self-immolation (sometimes, known in Tibetan circles, as the “offering of the body” to the Gods.) The sensational media coverage and the speed with which the news spread over the Internet and how it triggered protests around the world make self-immolation one of the acts which is closely correlated to media or ‘mediascape’ as Appadurai would have called it. The most critical is how the graphic images of self-immolation travel over the Internet: the pictures have a powerful ability to mobilize support and win sympathy. Would there have been such a series of self-immolations without the Internet?¹² While I was in Dharamsala, almost everyday the graphic images of the self-immolators were put in key locations around the town, literally moments after the act. A group of people gathering around those pictures, watching in

¹² A write-up about a conference on Tibetan self-immolation, *Tibet Self-Immolations: Rituals, or Political Protest?*, a conference held 14-15 May, 2012 in Paris provides an excellent analysis on the issue: <http://himalayas.hypotheses.org/1045> Accessed May 24, 2012.

awe, was a common sight, making it impossible to underestimate the influence of the Internet in Tibet's freedom struggle.

The most common case of self-immolation was in India by Jampal Yeshe, a young Tibetan who self-immolated on 26 March 2012 during the BRICS (Brazil Russia India and South Africa) economic conference in New Delhi, the Indian capital. I was writing at the scenic *Common Ground* café (incidentally, a shop set up by a Chinese American from Minneapolis, a graduate of U of M's Department of Comparative Literature!) when Wangyal, who was covering a cultural festival in Dharamsala, told me that a Tibetan had burnt himself.

During my participant observation at the *Tibet Sun* office, located on the top floor of a beautiful building facing the Himalayas, I realized he informs the writers directly – most of them he knows, they mostly specialize in Tibetan affairs – that he wishes to add them on his website. He then downloads pictures of the authors available on the Internet (which include everything from Foreign Policy magazine, to ESPN, to Hindustan Times) and adds their bio data at the end of the story. For instance, one of the editorials on the self-immolation involved one written on the Jampel Yeshe incident in *Times of India's* Sunday edition by Shobhan Saxena. On March 28, the website used a story from *IBN Live*, an Indian TV channel to report that the self-immolator breathed his last. On March 29, the online paper reported a story carrying the byline of Wangyal himself that Yeshe's funeral would be held on March 29, 2011 in Dharamsala. He quoted the organizers of the funeral, the Tibetan Youth Congress, that they would organize a “funeral deserving of a

martyr.” The article also carried the translation of a letter left by Yeshe in which he elaborated the motivation behind his act.

On March 29, Wangyal told me that he received a letter from a half Tibetan and half Sikkimese student in Delhi by the name of Hissey P Bhutia, a moving meditation and a first hand account of the self-immolation. She writes she had met the self-immolator while on her visits to do ethnography research in Majnu Ka Tilla, part of Delhi where Tibetan refugees live, often known as *Little Tibet*. The article is written in a very personal and a long-winded style. Wangyal had the article edited by an American computer engineer and website expert who uses his office to give classes to local Tibetans. James, an erstwhile English major from Berkeley who had dropped out of the college during Vietnam, has a very good command of the language. He often helps Lobsang edit stories; and Lobsang is very impressed with his editing skills. I also helped edit some of his stories (I did that regularly in the past even when I was studying at Iowa. He would mail me the stories and I would send them back to him). On the following day, another story was published about two self-immolations inside Tibet, written by Lobsang based on information provided by Dharamsala-based Tibetan Center for Human Rights and Democracy (TCHRD).

He also publishes opinion pieces on the issue of self-immolation by both Tibetan writers in Dharamsala, Chinese dissidents and Indian journalists. On April 3, 2012, he published an article by Indian writer and journalist Vijay Kranti, titled: *Tibet Self-Immolations: Why the World is not Listening?* For instance on April 12, the online journal also published an interview written by Harry Wu, a Chinese activist and former

political prisoner based in Dharamsala. On April 8, in another related incident, a Tibetan youth jumped off the Howrah bridge in the Indian city of Kolkata. He did not do any stories on the issue except uploading two stories, one from the *Times of India* on the piece and the other by *Hindustan Times* on a memorial organized for Dhondup in Darjeeling, in the Indian state of West Bengal. He also published a piece by Dhondup Gyalpo, a Tibetan based in Dharamsala on March 31, rebutting a Chinese government statement comparing the Dalai Lama to “Nazi.” The story was titled *“Lies, Damned Lies and Chinese Propaganda”*

Wangyal often covers his own stories. On March 30, 2012, Jampal Yeshe’s body was brought from Delhi to Dharamsala for cremation. Hundreds of residents of Dharamsala lined on both sides of the street holding white scarves (*khata*). I also attended the event along with Wangyal. As his body arrived at the main temple (*tsuglagkhang*) in Dharamsala, many journalists were there. We gradually went through the crowd and up to the temple, even though we were encouraged to stand on the two sides of the street. Since he was also the correspondent for *Agence France Presse* (AFP), he had to take pictures. He took pictures of the body draped in Tibetan flag being put in the courtyard (one of the pictures appeared the following day in many publications around the world courtesy AFP).

As the body lay on the courtyard, a Tibetan national anthem was sung, followed by prayers and then speeches by the leaders of the diaspora. Many Indian policemen had come to the event, keeping a vigilant eye on the Tibetans (some had feared that the event might trigger copycat self-immolations by the youth and thus bringing the body to the

capital of the exiled Tibet was not a very good idea.) Fortunately, no major untoward incidents happened and the event was by and large peaceful. It was a very moving event. After the speeches and the prayers, the body was gradually taken to the cremation ground near the St. John's in the Wilderness, an old church built during the British area. Thousands of Tibetans walked alongside the body draped in Tibetan flag. However, they were not shouting slogans but chanting Buddhist prayers. I saw many of them crying, specially old ladies dressed in Ladakhi costume (which technically makes them Indian nationals, as if proving the artificiality of the idea of "nation-state"!)). Mr. Wangyal, myself and Dawa, another Tibetan who was based in England, went there together. I went ahead as Mr. Wangyal and Dawa – both of whom were taking pictures – needed more time. I walked with several Tibetans and a Western academic, a well-known specialist on ancient Tibet (who was carrying a Tibetan flag). I waited for them at the cremation ground.

Mr. Wangyal wrote an article on the cremation ceremony of Jampal Yeshe, painting a picture of the atmospheric, emotion and on the number of Tibetans who attended the event. Based on above articles, it is quite evident *Tibet Sun* combines the role of news aggregator and citizen journalism. *Tibet Sun* achieves its journalistic objectivity by mainly using stories published by other news agencies such as AP, AFP and Reuters. "I think this is the best way of achieving objectivity," says Wangyal. "I publish a lot of what others write on Tibet, including self-immolation." The online news portal also publishes editorials on self-immolation, not just by Indian and Western news organizations, which are generally critical of China, but also from state-sponsored

Chinese media organizations such as *China Daily*. This distinguishes it from other portals such as www.phayul.com.

During a few weeks that I spent *TibetSun.com*, I learned much about citizen journalism particularly in a diasporic context and how the Internet has leveled the playing field. For instance, Lobsang is not just interested in Tibetan news, he also publishes major world news (eg. the victory of Francois Hollande, the news he had been following through the night.) In fact, it is on the Hollande story that he got the maximum number of hits, since he had first established the site. It is not because the story is great but just because the Internet is democratic and the since the news is big, he simply has gotten more hits on the story. For a revenue source, he has advertisements from a few local Tibetan businesses, as well as *Google*. *TibetSun.com* serves as a good model of journalism for other entrepreneurial journalists working in the diasporic context, adopting the Internet as a news aggregator and platform for highly resourceful and effective citizen journalism.

The key questions here is whether or not self-immolations challenge the activism online or whether they feed into each other, reinforcing the way Tibetans rally against the Chinese state and fight for their country and freedom. Without the Internet, images of burning people would not be so easily transported to India and the rest of the world, because of the Chinese state's censorship of the media and the mainstream media's very little coverage of the events.

CHAPTER SIX

In this thesis, I analyzed ways in which the Tibetan diaspora uses digital media to fulfill various communicative functions. As can be seen from the chapters, the Tibetan media is dominated by concerns about Tibetans' political status, relations with China, the culture and politics of the Tibetan life in exile. For instance, in chapter two, the most dominant discourses are about the Tibetan struggle for self-determination, human rights in Tibet, democracy in exile, the Dalai Lama and China. As the Internet allows the operators of the websites to serve as an aggregator of news, they invariably create representations of nationhood. In addition, despite the lack of coverage in the mainstream media, the Internet provides diasporic media the means to create an alternative space of citizenship and resistance. I also showed the role of memory and how the websites become sites of collective memory.

The coverage of Tibet by large media organizations is quite small, which is not surprising given the size of the population (about six million in total, out of which around 120,000 live overseas). That allows room for smaller media organizations to exist and survive. Within the larger framework of citizen journalism, the websites do an admirable job by combining several methods: 1) by publishing dispatches from around the world by stringers; 2) by using staff reporters to cover stories which might have been missed or overlooked by mainstream media; 3) by doing stories based on reliable and credible sources within the community with contacts inside Tibet; and 4) by posting stories originally published in other papers or wire services. As evident in chapter two, this is precisely what happened on March 20, 2011 when Tibetan exiles went to elect their own

prime minister, who will be the political head of the Tibetan government-in-exile. In this discursive milieu, the role of the readers in participating in the debate cannot be underestimated. Tibetans in exile participated vigorously during the elections and expressed an unprecedented appetite for news regarding politics.

Regardless of whether one considers www.phayul.com www.tibetsun.com and www.highpeakspureearth.com as news site, they are inevitably embedded within a particular social movement. It fulfills a need of a marginalized group of people engaged in a collective struggle of nation building, of which both the media and the journalists are but a part. This position makes the idea of journalism and activism quite inseparable, thus forming a unique form of journalism that is part advocacy journalism and part community journalism.

It needs to be said that since the websites are in English, they become a platform for elite discourse, only accessible to those who write and read and are comfortable in the language. Whilst the advantage is that it is helpful in terms of their global reach, the choice of language inevitably leaves out some sections of the community, particularly the older generation, though Anderson (1991) had noted that nationalist consciousness can be ignited regardless of the language. Articles are all written in English – a “world language” which can be understood by all the Tibetans regardless of where they are born or raised, for the “invitation card” to participate in the forum has to be written in the language they understand. While vernacular languages are important for nationalism, natives, especially those living in former colonies, find it not difficult in imagining their nation in English (or in Chinese, as in the case of Tibetans inside China) as they do in

their own native language (Anderson, 1991). Quite uniquely, Tibetans inside Tibet tend to write in Chinese while Tibetans outside tend to write in English, therefore there is a need for a translation of what is being written on two sides (www.highpeakspurearth.com therefore serves a purpose because it translates writings in Tibetan and Chinese into English.) Recently, there had been a news website, www.tibetdigest.com, which also translates articles and essays from Tibetan into English. On the positive side, the younger generation (who are more technology-savvy) become more active participants in the political process (Norris, 1997), and can communicate with the outside world the notion of a virtual nation. Just like other marginalized groups in the world, the information about the Tibetan diaspora is being increasingly represented on the Internet, allowing members of the diaspora to create a virtual and symbolic homeland for themselves on the web.

In the third chapter, I tried to show how members of the diaspora use social networking sites to challenge to the media organizations which they believe fabricate news coverage (Herman and Chomsky, 1988; McChesney, 2000). However, there is no real public sphere in the Habermasian sense but just a marketplace of ideas. For this chapter, I used perspectives from both the post-colonial theory and journalism to analyze why the mainstream media ended up doing what it did. (I used post-colonial theory because of the milieu in which it occurred is both fundamentally non-Western and subaltern). By providing an alternative space, the social networking sites provide a public forum for debate and discussion of ideas where Tibetans, some of them well-known writers and intellectuals, can comment upon the Tibetan issue. Intellectuals and writers

often spearhead such movements thanks to what Appadurai (1990) has called the “fluidity” of ideoscapes” (p. 11).

In the fourth chapter, we see how for the first time perhaps Tibetans around the world could read what their counterparts inside Tibet were writing (their music, art and poetry), to move along, to quote Walter Benjamin, the “homogenous empty time.” For the nation to be materialized, the citizens have to move in synch with their counterparts in the other parts of the world even though they are complete strangers to each other. For this chapter, I used studies of online activism on China because Chinese diaspora and Tibetan diaspora are virtually in the same situation in this case, which is that they are both resisting the narratives of the Chinese nation-state. As can be seen such online activism on a transnational level does take place thanks to the power of the Internet to disseminate information, images and knowledge across national borders, particularly in a situation where the media is heavily censored and press freedom, as we understand in the Western sense, is minimal. This study might find resonance with other similar collectives fighting for freedom in their original homelands (say, North Koreans, Burmese, Syrians etc.)

In the fifth and the final chapter, my fieldwork in Dharamsala shows how citizen journalists in the Tibetan community actually use the Internet on the ground to create a viable news media. The example of www.Tibetsun.com shows how a website can survive and create room for itself in a market dominated by large media organizations on very little resources. Though such a form of journalism is almost either advocacy-oriented or

too localized, in a connected and a globalized world they somehow manage to survive and find a niche for themselves.

This study is of course limited by language, as I only studied the English language websites. While language plays an important role in national identity and identity construction, my focus on the English language was by no means a debilitating shortcoming, for the Tibetan diaspora had become transnational and English had indeed become the lingua franca and the primary language of communication on the Internet. There are, however, important websites in languages other than English, such as the highly-influential Tibetan language websites www.TibetCult.net, and www.kahbda.org. Another major limitation of this study is that it is hard to determine the actual effect of discourse on actual audience behavior or attitudes. For example, do the images of self-immolation actually lead people to action? Suffice it to say that the discourse shapes reality, however it is hard to determine how it affects audience behavior. Consequently, one future area of study is audience behavior, where scholars could look at chat rooms, content analysis of comments left on the stories, and interviews. A quantitative analysis of how many hits certain types of stories get could also yield interesting insights as would an analysis of Internet traffic.

Another fruitful area of focus could be in the area of journalism. What is the fine line between advocacy journalism and objective journalism as it is practiced in diasporas? Did the women gain same coverage as the male actors? Do mainstream papers pick up on the community websites? Is politics and human rights a characteristic of all diasporic news organizations, or only of that media in countries where people were displaced from

their original homelands? What are the differences in the style of online activism between different diasporic groups? Are the modes of resistance similar? Most importantly, does the Internet radicalize the members of the diaspora?

I used theoretical frameworks provided by a range of interdisciplinary scholars to analyze the text and context of online communication in the Tibetan diaspora. While it might seem somewhat lacking in focus, it was necessitated by the uniqueness and the complexity of the topic, which is at once local and global (as is the case with most diasporas). Merely placing theoretical templates from communication and journalism on a situation so drastically different from the world we see on CNN and BBC would have easily led to a distorted and simplistic view. Therefore, to gain a deeper understanding of the phenomenon, I chose to adopt, along with the works in media studies, perspectives in anthropology, cultural studies, memory studies and China studies wherever I deemed applicable. To further supplement my work and to give a more rounded and complex picture, I personally went on the ground and spent time in Dharamsala, India, to see how “shoe-leather” journalism is practiced in the Tibetan community.

Lastly, given the fascination of diasporic groups towards online communication and importance of communication as a social practice within displaced and geographically dispersed ethnic minorities, “communication” is central to any understanding of diasporic groups. My work, however, is only a preliminary attempt to answer the complex questions and bring attention to and point out areas for future scholars to examine, explore and investigate.

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