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Embodying Tibet: Negotiating Tibetan- American Youth Identities at the Tibetan Children's Village Summer School Program

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Abstract

My research illuminates the ways that the Tibetan Children's Village Summer School program, despite its positive intentions, does in fact reinforce a fixed Tibetan identity by intertwining authenticity with a specific set of embodied experiences that do not match that of Tibetan youth living in the United States. Drawing on MacPherson's (2011) "Fallacies About Language Sustainability" and recommendations for cultural preservation education, I evaluate the summer program's curriculum as insufficient for promoting new articulations of Tibetan identity that reflects participants' lived experiences in the United States, and argue that the current system in fact is exacerbating the difficulties that these youth experience in formulating their identities while while also keeping them from developing relationships across diasporic divides, a "lost opportunity to forge connections between exile and homeland" (Yeh 2007, p. 666).

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My deepest thanks to my interviewees for their willingness to share their amazing stories with me. Without your insights, this thesis would not have been possible. I hope that I have done your stories justice here- they are testaments to your strength, passion, and brilliance. These stories are how we survive.

I am indebted to the scholars who have written on the topic of Tibetans in America, whose works have been essential to my ideas in this thesis. I particularly would like to extend my gratitude to Nawang Phuntsog la for his invaluable insights into education for Tibetan youth in America and his continuous commitment to Tibetan people. Thank you to everyone at Machik for everything.

I'm grateful as well to my dear friends and my wonderful partner, who have all supported me with care and humor through my four years at Swarthmore.

I would also like to offer my prayers and gratitude to His Holiness the 14th Dalai Lama, for leading the Tibetan people through one of the most difficult times in our history. May your wisdom continue to bless us. I pray for your continued health and long life.

Finally, I would like to thank my community, my ancestors from all parts of the world, and my family. Everything I have done and will do is for you all. May we return home together soon.

A Note to the Reader:

My depression is the axis around which this thesis has revolved. My anger at being stuck in an institution that neither understands nor cares about me is reflected in this writing, my feeling of loss of culture and identity on the days that I am too tired to swim against the currents of professionalization and white supremacy in academia, my exhaustion at negotiating my second-generation immigrant second-generation college student firmly working class self with an institution and body of people that is none of these things. I have found my survival in alcoves, both physically and in the conceptual sense. I navigate the world as a series of these alcoves where I will be understood, where I will be loved, supported and heard. It may sound cowardly or unsustainable, but I know that I would not have survived if I had not found these pockets of people, places, and things that would keep me close to the part of myself that has retreated from this harsh and punishing experience, surveying it all as my physical self is pushed and pulled through this lush and dangerous landscape.

This is for the time I learned that my story was more than just diversity, although people will continue to try to use it this way. This is for every Tibetan person who has been told how interesting they are, when we are really just tired and want to go home. Our stories belong to us, and I have been put in a position where if I tell it, it will be acknowledged.

This thesis is for those parts of ourselves that have to hide to stay alive. In this way, I ask the reader to understand that the framework and content were chosen by me, but the form was predetermined and as such I have had to fit in the pieces that truly matter to me as they were able to match the required form. Academia is not yet ready for me to write only the truths of this topic, so they too have found their alcoves, and they wait there for you, the reader, to join them.

Note: Some sections of this chapter were drawn and adapted from materials submitted for a directed reading on the Tibetan diaspora with Professor Lisa Smulyan during Fall 2014. Some sections of this chapter were drawn and adapted from material previously submitted for History 59: The Black Freedom Struggle in which I was enrolled Spring 2015, taught by Professor Allison Dorsey. Additionally, some sections of this chapter were drawn and adapted from material submitted for the student-run course, LALS 12: Colonization and Survivance in North America, during the Fall 2015 semester, advised by Professor Milton Machuca-Gálvez.

Chapter 1: The Tibetan Diaspora Today

In a globally expanding diaspora, Tibetan youth from the United States, Canada, and Europe travel to Dharamsala, India to attend a summer program at the Tibetan Children's Village school known as Upper TCV. They are immersed in what Dibyesh Anand (2007) has characterized as ““a symbolic nerve center from which articulations of Tibetanness emerge” (p. 110), learning about Tibetan language, history, traditional music and dance, Buddhist philosophy and more. Many of the youth who participate in the program cite it as a strong influence on their identities, a powerful experience which connects them to entirely new parts of the Tibetan diaspora. However, the classes alone do not accomplish this. The youth in the summer program become enmeshed in the daily life of Upper TCV, living with the Tibetan students who board at and attend TCV, becoming part of their lives. Chapter 3 will discuss the setting of the summer program in greater detail.

My research extends Emily Yeh's (2007) investigation of “the varying routes [of Tibetan exiles] to the US diaspora through different national locations, *and the consequent forms of identification with homeland*” (p. 651, emphasis mine). Houston & Wright (2003) also find that Tibetan diasporic identity adapts dependent upon context. I argue that the identities of Tibetan

youth in the United States who attend the the Tibetan Children's Village Summer School Program, despite varying routes of migration, ages, hometowns, etc., are impacted by the version of Tibetan identity that they encounter in the setting of the program. However, this version of Tibetan identity does not match up with the lived experiences of program participants, whose identities have inevitably been influenced by their diasporic location in the United States. This results in Tibetan youth living in the United States being unable to see themselves as "authentic" or "truly" Tibetans, which results in difficulties and conflicts in their ongoing processes of identity creation.

Phuntsog ("Cultural Identity" 1998) argues that "The loss of cultural identity may in the long run be even worse than the physical subjugation forced by the Chinese government. A serious threat to Tibetan identity comes from within: the inability to preserve Tibetan culture for the young people who are the future" (p. 39). Given these threats, I argue that versions of Tibetan identity based on the experiences of Tibetan youth in the United States should be developed in Tibetan educational institutions, so that these youth are prepared and supported to understand themselves as Tibetans in an increasingly widespread diaspora.

History of the Tibetan Diaspora

The Tibetan diaspora is centered in India with Dharamsala as its core. While a small number of Tibetans lived outside Tibet before the Chinese invasion in 1949, When H.H. the Fourteenth Dalai Lama left Tibet for India in 1959, the approximately 30,000 Tibetans who followed him formed the initial Tibetan community in exile (Gamble & Ringpapontsang, 2013, p. 35).

Tibetans now number approximately 95,000 in India (TCRC, 2014). They have established a network of 46 refugee communities in India that have schools, religious centers,

and livelihood opportunities (Gamble & Ringpapontsang, 2013; Samphel, 2009, p.61). They have also established communities numbering about 13,500 in Nepal, 1,300 in Bhutan (TCRC, 2014). These communities, like India's, began with Tibetan refugees fleeing Tibet after the Chinese invasion (Gamble & Ringpapontsang, 2013, p. 35).

In addition to the India-centered Tibetan exile community, the United States has become another central place in the Tibetan diaspora. Before the Chinese invasion, there were a small number of mostly Buddhist scholars in the United States. A few more followed after the invasion, also religious scholars and some representatives (Yeh & Lama, 2006, p. 812).

After H. H. the Dalai Lama won the Nobel Peace Prize in 1989, more Tibetans began to move to the United States (Yeh & Lama, 2006, p. 813). As part of the 1990 Immigration Act, 1,000 Tibetans from India and surrounding countries were able to move to the United States and live as permanent residents (Yeh & Lama, 2006, p. 813). This agreement is known as the Tibetan US Resettlement Project (TUSR) (Yeh & Lama, 2006, p. 813). There are now approximately 10,000 Tibetans in the United States, documented and undocumented (Yeh & Lama, 2006, p. 812). The Office of Tibet counts thirty Tibetan associations in North America (Tibetan Association, 2014).

Pressures on Identity Development in the Diaspora

Tibetans in exile in the United States experience unique pressures around identity and culture. Communities have dealt with this pressure in different ways according to context of host country, number of Tibetans in a community, and other factors. In India, the Tibetan exile community has a well established school system that transmits Tibetan cultural values to youth (Swank, 2014). In the United States, Tibetans often grow up in tight-knit, concentrated communities in which cultural practices, language and Tibetan identity can be passed down

through generations (Swank, 2014; Yeh & Lama, 2006). However, Tibetan cultural preservation in exile does involve many challenges. Tibetan culture is inherently changed by the experience of exile, which also leads to pressure to preserve Tibetan culture and not be overly influenced by the culture of the host country.

According to Yeh & Lama (2006), because of the international network of political support, generally by wealthy white individuals, for the Tibetan cause “Tibetans see themselves as uniquely deserving of white support and thus as more ‘white’ than other Asians” (p. 811). However, Tibetans’ financial situation and experience as immigrants in the United States puts them “positioned economically at the ‘black pole’ of a persistent racial classificatory spectrum” (Yeh & Lama, 2006, p. 811).

Unlike other Asian refugee populations, “Tibetans are rewarded for articulating their Tibetanness” (Yeh & Lama, 2006, p. 818), but only certain articulations are deemed acceptable. As Yeh & Lama (2006) demonstrate, these articulations are often determined by politically expedient presentations of Tibetans as spiritual, nonviolent refugees deserving of sponsorship or support. These articulations are shaped by the material need of many Tibetans for sponsorship to come to the United States as well as framing of Tibetans in the world of Tibet advocacy groups in the United States (Yeh & Lama, 2006).

It is thus clear that Tibetan cultural identity in the United States is influenced by forces of race, class, and political pressure to gain support for the Tibetan cause (Yeh & Lama, 2006). Generational divides in opinion about appropriate versions of Tibetan identity place Tibetan youth in a particularly vulnerable position (Yeh & Lama, 2006). Tibetan youth in exile are under great pressure to be cultural ambassadors but also preservers. These youth “have encountered racial issues through a very different set of structural circumstances than their parents” (Yeh &

Lama, 2006, p. 821). I argue that this issue persists and changes as greater numbers of Tibetans move to the United States.

MacPherson (2011) aptly describes this phenomenon in the following section:

...when a community is accustomed to transmitting culture and language in a monolingual and monocultural environment, there is no need to negotiate language and culture with younger generations by appealing to reason, affection, desire, or individual choice. In pluralistic environments like North America however, dutiful daughters and sons face increased challenges to live up to these norms, established elsewhere but imposed by earnest parents and grandparents unaware of the complexity of realizing them within highly diverse, multicultural, multilingual milieus. Consequently, they learn to mask aspects of their identity, experience, desires, consciousness, or worldview that contradict these norms... *younger generations learn to conform to idealized imaginaries and associated ideologies of homogeneity and consensus as members of diasporas, all the while learning to transgress, subvert, or even undermine that idealized consensus through contradicting its norms in their everyday decisions and choices.* (p. 217, emphasis mine)

Theoretical Framework

There are several theoretical frames through which I approached this research. Yeh's (2007) utilization of Bourdieu's concept of *habitus* explains the concept of a set of embodied social practices which are durable, yet changeable, over time.

Bourdieu (1999) explains that "the *habitus*... is constituted in practice and is always oriented towards practical functions" (p. 107). He defines *habitus* as "systems of durable, transposable dispositions, ... principles which generate and organize practices and

representations” (1999, p. 108). Yeh’s (2007) definition is also useful: “Sedimentations in the body include the deployment of particular languages and words within a language, as well as taken-for-granted dispositions such as intonation, gestures, and ‘taste,’ appreciation for or reaction against particular styles, such as of dress, food, and staged performances of ‘authentic’ song and dance” (p. 651). In the context of the Tibetan diaspora, the *habitus* defines what behaviors, “dispositions” (Yeh, 2007, p. 651), and practices are seen by other Tibetans as acceptable or “authentic.”

I also utilize Audra Simpson’s (2014) concept and practice of ethnographic refusal: “Within Indigenous contexts, when the people we speak of speak for themselves, their sovereignty interrupts anthropological portraits of timelessness, procedure, and function that dominates their past and, sometimes, their present” (p. 97). While it is important to recognize that Tibetans have not experienced the same atrocities that Indigenous North Americans have faced, the concept of ethnographic refusal is useful to me to frame what I am willing to say about the Tibetan exile community, how I am willing to present my critiques of it, and whose voices, stories, and experiences that I attempt to highlight with my research.

Significance of Research

Phuntsog (1994) argues that “For Tibetans modernity and cultural preservation is not an either-or issue nor does modernity indicate or demand the demise of their culture” (p. 6).

This research is an effort to understand the identity-formation experiences of Tibetan youth living in America, who face unique pressures in terms of identity development. The summer program is an important space of identity formation for many of these youth, including myself, and thus I chose it as the focal point of my research and interviews. I believe that centering the voices of these youth in my research, in addition to (one of) my position(s) as their

peer and my own experiences as a Tibetan-American youth, has permitted me to gain a particular insight into the complexity and importance of their/our identity development processes.

In an age of increased momentum for battles of representation, self-determination, and autonomy in the United States and globally, as well as the transnational struggle for Tibetan political and cultural autonomy, focusing on the voices of Tibetan youth in the United States illuminates the consequences of displacement and diaspora several generations after 1959 as well as possible paths to solutions. And, as Phuntsog (“Cultural Identity” 1998) so beautifully describes, “The loss of cultural identity may in the long run be even worse than the physical subjugation forced by the Chinese government. A serious threat to Tibetan identity comes from within: the inability to preserve Tibetan culture for the young people who are the future” (p. 39).

Critical Race Theory and its Potential for Tibetan Youth

MacPherson (2011) describes the ways that narratives of the “melting pot” and multiculturalism in the United States and Canada mask larger forces of assimilation in education. Exposing Tibetan youth to critical race theory as a way to conceptualize themselves and to make sense of their situations may be a way to counter these negative identity influences- both from within the Tibetan community and the influence of exoticized imagery of Tibetans as spiritual, simple, Others. While intercultural exchange or the “melting pot” are not assimilatory in theory, she writes “... for laypeople negotiating complex lived and media environments, the forces are decidedly stacked in favor of assimilation. So, as useful a concept as intercultural identity may be... when the subject is from non-dominant communities, the ‘inter’ space is hardly a level playing field. To compensate, they need to lean ever-so-slightly over to the side of Indigeneity... *They need more critical awareness of identification processes*” (p. 208, emphasis mine).

Critical race theory evolved out of legal studies that were examining how to better account for the way that race influences all aspects of social life. It takes as its basis that racism is everywhere and is normalized in American society (Ladson-Billings, 1999, p. 12). In terms of its use for education and identity development, it can be a tool for individuals to see their realities as affected by racism and formulate ways to deal with this reality. According to Ladson-Billings (1999), “CRT [critical race theory] becomes an important intellectual and social tool for deconstruction, reconstruction, and construction-- deconstruction of oppressive structures, reconstruction of human agency, and construction of equitable and socially just relations of power” (p. 10), an admirable means of resistance for Tibetan youth in exile.

Tibetans came into the United States facing their own political pressures, but they are affected, individually and communally, by the pressures that occur around them. Particularly for youth who spent most or all of their lives in the United States, addressing and understanding their experiences as racialized minorities is essential to their well-being. As previously demonstrated, the Tibetan community often rejects Tibetan youth identity articulations that do not match the approved articulations (Yeh & Lama, 2006).

Since the narratives of Tibetanness that are presented to Tibetan youth in the United States are usually not controlled by Tibetans, or are controlled by Tibetans but are shaped in response to politically influenced forces- US sponsors or supporters, the Chinese government, etc.- Tibetan youth are particularly vulnerable to “stereotypic images that certain elements of society have constructed” (Ladson-Billings, 1999, p. 16).

Tibetan youth living in exile are clearly formulating new identities already. How can critical race theory be useful for these youth? As Gloria Ladson-Billings (1999) notes, “The story of one’s condition leads to the realization of how one came to be oppressed and subjugated, thus

allowing one to stop inflicting mental violence on oneself” (p. 16). Critical race theory can present a new route for Tibetan youth who are searching for ways to make sense of their complex identities.

Anti-Black Racism in the Tibetan community and Potential for Solidarity

As Yeh & Lama (2006) demonstrate, Tibetan youth in exile have an understanding of the racial inequality that exists in the United States and they are often more willing to address it than their parents’ generations, who feel less secure in the United States as the generation that immigrated to the US- often as adults.

Tibetan lives throughout Tibet and the diaspora have been irrevocably changed by the Chinese invasion and the related trauma is felt throughout the Tibetan community (Blackburn, 2012). Despite the transnational focus of the Tibet movement, Tibetans will have to contend with the circumstances of whatever community in which they find themselves. For a small but growing number of Tibetans who spend most or all of their lives in the United States, Tibet is mostly an idea, and ‘traditional’ Tibetan culture may not fit the realities of their lives, which are shaped by class, race, etc. as they play out in the United States. For these individuals, it will be important to challenge structures that have restricted their own expressions of Tibetanness. White supremacist power structures that designate the discrimination and injustice faced by Tibetans in Tibet a worthy cause also call black men who are killed by police or rioters “thugs,” also erase the stories of black women and black trans people killed by police from the mainstream media.

According to sociologist Aihwa Ong (1996), that immigrant communities of color, including groups that cannot be easily seen as “Black” or “white” (such as Asian people) still get racialized towards one end of the racial spectrum that predates their presence in the United

States. In the case of Tibetan and other, particularly Asian, immigrant communities, this often leads to an internal pressure to reject a construction of their group toward “Blackness” (Yeh & Lama, 2006).

After Daniel Pantaleo, a policeman who was caught on video choking to death Eric Garner, an unarmed Black man, was not indicted by a grand jury in December 2014, the Southeast Asian Freedom Network released a statement and call to action summarizing many of the connections between the experiences of state violence by people in Asian countries and Black communities in the United States:

As Black communities charge genocide, war and state violence on their lives and futures by the forces that are meant to protect them, we know deeply the meaning of these very words and experiences as we carry the weight and history of mass human rights violations against our people from one side of the world to the other... Let us see that the struggle of Black communities against police and state violence directly impacts our community's survival as we face that violence as well. Let us be clear through this understanding that while our oppressions are connected, our oppression is not the same.

--qtd. in Solomon (2014).

Highlighting the parallels of the experience of (racist) state violence in Tibet and against African Americans in the United States has the potential to be a powerful organizing tool. Promoting greater solidarity between Tibetans who live in the United States and Black communities is a necessary aspect of the “rights, privileges, and responsibilities both toward Tibet and toward their new country, the United States” that American citizenship entails (Hess, 226). This potential political alliance also provides opportunities for mutual learning. Black Power was an answer to the graduality and moderation of Civil Rights Movement. Black Power

formulates a radical vision of nationalism and self-empowerment. The ideology and militancy of Black Power has inspired and influenced many other radical movements of people of color and marginalized people in the United States (Ogbar, 2013), and could certainly inform new strands of Tibetan-led organizing both for Tibetan freedom and other social justice issues that affect exile communities.

Reconciling Refugeehood and Settler Colonialism

“Because settler colonialism is build upon an entangled triad structure of settler-native-slave, the decolonial desires of white, non-white, immigrant, postcolonial, and oppressed people, can similarly be entangled in resettlement, reoccupation, and reinhabitation that actually further settler colonialism” (Tuck & Yang, 2012, p. 1). Even as refugees, immigrants, and colonized people, Tibetans remain in the “settler” category in the United States, and are in no way encouraged to interrogate the violent implications of that category. Tuck & Yang (2012) argue that “opportunities for solidarity lie in what is incommensurable rather than what is common” (p. 28) across social justice/liberatory/radical movements. What can Tibetans learn from Indigenous concepts of survivance and conceptualizations of struggle? How can exile Tibetans remain accountable to their settler status and the communities whose lands they occupy while simultaneously struggling for their own independence? I believe that as Tibetans’ struggle for autonomy over land and culture continues, there is not only potential, but necessity, to, where possible, build movements that bind our struggle to Indigenous communities, finding ways to grow towards a just and decolonized world.

Conclusion

This thesis will examine effects of the summer program on the identities of the youth participants, but I attempt to remain fully grounded in the material conditions of Tibet and the

United States and the struggles that are sometimes parallel, sometimes contradictory in each place. The Tibetan-American youth of today is caught somewhere in between, and studying their identities and valuing their insights about themselves and their worlds will be to the benefit of all Tibetans.

Chapter 2 describes the methodology for my research process. Chapter 3 describes in greater detail the environment and day-to-day events of the summer program, explaining the setting into which the program participants arrive. Chapter 3 also provides more historical insight into the development of the Tibetan Children's Villages in India. Chapter 4 explores the experiences of the summer program participants with the negotiation between a hegemonic narrative of authentic Tibetan identity and the more complex reality of life in TCV that the youth experience and observe during their time at the program. Chapter 4 examines possibilities for educational systems and practices that support new articulations of Tibetan identity based on the lived experiences of the summer program participants as Tibetans living in the United States. Chapter 5 further examines the possibilities for expanding articulations of Tibetan identity in exile, as well as the significance of my research, and makes recommendations for further research.

Chapter 2: Methodology

I first heard of the TCV Summer School Program (formerly TCV Summer Camp) in 2010, when a family friend recommended it to me as a way to improve my Tibetan language from the minimal amount that my English monolingual community in Kentucky had permitted me to learn. After discussion with my family, it was decided that I would attend the camp in summer of 2010, shortly after my sixteenth birthday. I was terrified to leave my family for two months and had no idea what to expect since the last time I had been in India was ten years previously, with only a brief stay in Dharamsala, where the camp was located.

The program ended up being a life-changing experience that fundamentally altered my understanding of myself and the world around me. After living with Tibetan identity as an ‘extra’ and relatively estranged part of myself, the camp allowed me to immerse myself in Tibetan culture, language, and community in a completely unprecedented way. I began to retroactively understand my feelings of difference, isolation, and insecurity related to my peers in my home community and to see myself as part of a global community of Tibetan people.

This elation from my new identity faded quickly as I returned home. I felt transformed through my time in India, but my environment did not reflect my new perspective. I continued to struggle with depression, self-esteem issues, and feelings of isolation from others in my hometown. These feelings continued and were exacerbated when I entered college, losing yet another level of security and leaving me completely untethered from anything familiar.

Only when I began studying education and came across Sonia Nieto’s idea of culturally responsive education (1996) did the pieces begin to fall together. My difficulties in Kentucky and subsequently at Swarthmore College stemmed from not having my cultural identity development supported, both in formal (school) and informal (social settings) learning spaces.

And Nieto (1996) argued that supporting the cultural identities of students was integral to not only their identity development, but their basic academic success as well. I began to wonder, “If I am experiencing these difficulties in my life, maybe others are as well. What are the possibilities for culturally responsive education for people like me? What were the issues that led me to experience depression and anxiety, and how did the camp cause such a drastic transformation in these issues?”

These questions led me to my current research questions and my decision to work with former participants in the TCV Summer School Program. I aimed to examine how “participating in the camp change the ways that participants think about their identities” (from my research proposal) and whether their time at the camp, like in my own case, affected their subsequent levels of involvement with the entangled categories of Tibetan politics, culture, and activism.

Outreach to Research Participants

I did outreach through posting a call for participants through Tibetan Facebook groups that I was a part of, through snowball sampling from Tibetan friends who had also attended the camp, and finally by posting the call for participants on my own Facebook profile. I also did outreach to the North American branch of the Office of Tibet, which coordinates the TCV Summer School Program, but due to a transition in personnel was not able to access the contact information for former participants. Due to having a significant social network of Tibetan people, I was able to connect with a sufficient number of participants for this research.

I ultimately interviewed six research participants who had attended the program in different years, at different ages, and with different migration routes to the United States. Although I intended to extend my research pool to any English-communicative program participant, which included youth from Europe, Canada, and throughout the United States, those

who responded to the call for participants were all from the United States- that is, their families and they were current residents in the United States, they may not have been born there. Each participant had been living in the United States for several years before attending the summer program. Most participants mentioned this as a factor in their/their family's decision for them to attend the summer program.

Interviews

All interviews took place over video chat through Google Hangouts on Air, so I was able to save the recorded interviews to my private YouTube account. I interviewed each participant one time over the fall 2015 semester. Participants were over age 18 at the time of the interview with one exception, for which I received parental permission. I explained the research process and its purpose to both the parent and the participant. I was the only interviewer and spoke with each participant separately. Each interview lasted between 40 and 60 minutes, depending on the length of the participant's answers. After going over protocol for the interview, I asked participants a series of questions about their experience at the camp, their home community, and their Tibetan identity.

I then transcribed each interview and read through each while compiling a list of themes that I noticed among the participants' answers to my questions. These themes ranged from "physical setting and daily life" to "TCV as a new perspective, transformative" and were generated organically through the process of reading the transcripts and sometimes listening to the interviews. Additionally, I noted unique features of each interview in terms of answers to questions, background of participant and how I thought that it influenced their camp experience, and my initial analysis (connections to theories of identity development, broader issues in Tibetan exile community) in individual cover sheets.

After the initial round of coding, I used my finalized list of themes generated from that process to code each interview again, adding in the new themes that emerged or ones that I had missed previously. Several interviews contained contradictions to a theme I'd developed, which I marked as "disconfirming evidence: [theme]" and a brief explanation of how it countered the theme I had encountered in other interviews. For example, for the theme "disconnect from Tibetan identity," which was often part of participants' self-perceptions prior to attending the camp, one participant explicitly said that they were born into Tibetan culture and didn't need the summer program to feel that connection, but saw the program as more of an opportunity to have an adventure or a new experience. In these instances I was able to expand my understanding of the broad range of experiences and perspectives that participants hold, deepening my analysis and making the shared themes that emerged across these differences all the more profound.

I began my research process with the question: *How does participating in the program change the ways that participants think about their identities?* The interview process was a way to engage with Tibetan youth's thoughts about their identities and their place in the world. I was able to direct their responses through my semi-structured interview format, allowing participants to share whatever they felt was important to their interpretation of a question, while being able to ask them for clarification and/or elaboration when necessary.

By asking participants about their experiences of the program, I was inviting them to describe the ways that their experiences changed them. The interview was structured to begin with questions about the participant's family history and route of migration to the United States in order for them to self-reflect and describe their understanding of themselves in relation to the Tibetan diaspora. The tone of self-reflection continued through the questions about the participant's experience of the program, the change(s) in their identities and future actions.

The Participants

This research was by definition restricted to youth who had attended the TCV Summer School Program. In order to attend the program, youth must have Tibetan heritage. Often, people attend the program because they live in Western countries where they are not immersed in a Tibetan community. As I discuss the other chapters, the program is seen as a way to connect with aspects of Tibetan culture that often get lost in the smaller, more dispersed Tibetan communities of the West.

I interviewed former summer program participants ages 16-21, both male and female-identified, from a variety of locations and each with a different route of migration to the United States. Due to the relatively small pool of people eligible to participate in this research, I made an effort to share the research call for participants in a variety of Tibetan spaces by sharing with both my personal network and asking others to distribute the call as well. While these measures were necessary in order to attract a broader range of participants, the goal of this research was not to have a perfectly representative sample of all Tibetan exile youth in Western countries, nor a sample that shared specific characteristics beyond the ones necessary to qualify for participation. My research aimed to understand how the experience of the summer program affected the self-perceptions of the specific participants, to use their specific responses to understand the larger dynamics that influenced these changes, and to connect these to theories of diaspora and cultural identity development.

I selected pseudonyms for each participant. Except Olivia, all of the participants have two Tibetan parents.

1. Olivia Gyatso- Born in the United States. One Tibetan parent, one white American-born parent. She attended the program at age 16. Grew up in a largely non-Tibetan community and feels that this influenced her experience of the summer program.
2. Tara- Attended the program at age 13. Born in Nepal, moved to the United States at age 4. Grew up in a Tibetan community in a large city, attended Tibetan Saturday school and described it as feeling like a “double life.”
3. Thupten- Attended the program at age 15. Grew up in a Tibetan community in a large city, conceptualized Tibetan identity prior to the summer program as being about attending events and other external actions rather than an internal identification.
4. Phuntsok- Attended the program at age 13. Born in refugee community in South India, moved to United States at age 8. Describes herself as very passionate about community organizing and Tibet issues, plans to work on Tibet-related organizing post-college.
5. Yonten- Attended the program at age 18. Born in United States, was very rooted in a close-knit Tibetan community there. Attended Tibetan Saturday school throughout her life, but did not feel comfortable with her Tibetan language skills compared to TCV students.
6. Choden- Attended the program at age 14. Born in Tibetan community in India, moved to United States at age 12. Felt that the program allowed him to become more confident in himself as an individual and that the experience helped to alleviate some of the pressures of assimilation that he experienced upon moving to the United States.

Changes to Research

While I began with the research question: *How does participating in the program change the ways that participants think about their identities?* I found that the camp doesn't have the

same exact effect on every participant- their experience varies depending on their background. Rather than a universal experience of identity transformation for all participants, the experience is flexible and allows participants from different backgrounds to develop their identities from their various starting points.

Positionality

I recognize that my positionality had an unavoidable influence on this research and my analysis. However, my intention was not to create a neutral piece of analysis, if such a thing could exist. I am committed to developing an academic understanding of the particularities of identity development that Tibetan exiles face. It is my intention to bring a politicized analysis of Tibetan-ness into the academic sphere, with the explicit goal of understanding and advocating for Tibetan communities in the here and now, as opposed to the Tibetan communities of the idealized past or future. Without understanding the current issues facing the Tibetan community and how they influence the identit(ies) development of Tibetan people in the diaspora, we will not be able to address the issues facing the Tibetan community at large.

As Nawang Phuntsog argues in “Renewal of Tibetan School Curriculum in Exile: A Tibetan-Centric Approach” (1994), “The indigenous perspectives on Tibetan culture needs [sic] to be heard loud and clear to avoid further misinterpretation of Tibetan culture vis-a-vis Buddhist tradition in the West. *Research by Tibetan scholars may lead to a better understanding of the process of cultural preservation* rather than just promoting its understanding to quench the thirst of curiosity” (emphasis mine, 8). While I do not presume that my research is all encompassing of the diverse experiences of Tibetan youth in exile, I may at least claim honestly that one of my central goals is to serve the Tibetan community with my work.

Chapter 3: Life in TCV

The Tibetan Children's Village (TCV) Summer School Program (formerly known as the "TCV Summer Camp") takes place every summer for approximately six weeks. The program is targeted to Tibetan youth ages 10-18 living in Western countries, including the United States, Europe, and Canada. The camp's website lists the following aims:

"To enable Tibetan children living abroad to join TCV Summer Camp to learn Tibetan language, culture, history and basic principles of Buddhism.

To experience first hand the Tibetan exile community in India through visits and interaction with TCV children.

To enable the children to get a feel of the Tibetan spirit of maintaining their identity in exile and a better sense of understanding and appreciation of the Tibetan cause and aspirations" (TCV Summer School Program).

While these are undoubtedly the program's aims, the program embodies many of the Tibetan exile community's expectations, issues, and needs, doing the fraught, difficult, and important work of bridging the Tibetan communities in the United States (and other Western countries) and India, as well as providing a unique experience of cultural immersion for Tibetan youth in Western countries.

The camp takes place at the TCV Upper Dharamsala (known colloquially as "Upper TCV") in Dharamsala, India. Dharamsala attracts devotees of the Dalai Lama of all cultural backgrounds to this north Indian hill station which Swank (2014) describes "a predominantly Tibetan community that clings... to the side of [a] mountain" and notes that "[m]any of the residents of McLeod Ganj use the name Dharamsala when referring to where they reside" (p. 13). Dharamsala was given to His Holiness the Dalai Lama by the Indian government and

became the seat of the Tibetan government-in-exile, thus arguably marking the beginning of Tibetan cultural identity negotiation in exile (for more on this subject, see Anand, 2007). Dibyesh Anand (2007) characterizes Dharamsala as “a symbolic nerve center from which articulations of Tibetanness emerge” (p. 110), and Upper TCV, as the first of the Tibetan Children’s Village branches, can accordingly be seen as the beginning of Tibetan education and cultural preservation in exile (MacPherson, 2011; Swank, 2014).

TCV was founded in 1959, shortly after His Holiness the Dalai Lama came into exile, first as a care center for Tibetan orphans or children separated from their parents (Historical Background). TCV has developed into a residential school system with multiple branches throughout India, totaling over sixteen thousand Tibetan students from Pre-K to secondary school (Pema). As of August 2013, a total of roughly 1,700 students attended Upper TCV, with roughly 100 day school students and the remaining 1,600 students residential.

The residential students are organized into homes with roughly thirty other students of all ages, which are referred to as *kyimtsangs*, the Tibetan word for “family.” There are roughly forty *kyimtsangs* in Upper TCV. Each one is presided over by an “*amala*,” the Tibetan word for mother. Occasionally men live in the *kyimtsangs* with their wives and are known as the *kyimtsang “pala”* (Tibetan for father), but this is not consistent throughout the *kyimtsangs*. The *amala* is responsible for taking care of the children which can include everything from waking students up in the morning to enforcing rules, ensuring good behavior, and handing out punishments.

Each *kyimtsang* generally has one bedroom for all the boys and another for all the girls, with bunk beds and storage space for the students’ belongings, but little decoration or adornment. There is a bathroom with squatting toilets and another room for bathing. There is a kitchen and

another large room used for eating, prayers, studying, and other group gatherings. The amala has a separate small bedroom and sitting room for her personal use.

Kyimitsang life involves many chores, including cooking, cleaning, laundry, caring for younger children, managing schedules, and more. Responsibilities are shared between all students, with older students taking on more work and making sure that younger children behave and participate. Students cook the meals on rotating schedules, clean the bedrooms, wash their own uniforms and bedclothes, and any other chores that need to be done. However, girls are often expected to do more than boys. Older students lead daily prayers before meals.

In the following sections and throughout the thesis, I will refer to TCV students as “TCV students” or “students” for brevity, while I will call the summer program attendees “program participants,” “program attendees” or “participants.”

While some TCV students get outside sponsors who send them everything from toys, money, clothing, or other gifts and support their education (see Prost, 2006 for an in-depth discussion of the politics of sponsorship in the Tibetan exile community), most students have very little money. Thus life in the kyimitsangs does not center on material goods, although students are always happy to borrow and play with a cell phone or other technological device from visitors. When students are not studying, they spend their free time playing sports, singing and dancing together, buying snacks from the canteen on TCV’s grounds, and other socially oriented activities. Even going to the campus “cyber” to use the only student-accessible internet was often done in groups. While differences in privilege and culture do result in divides between TCV students and summer program participants, program participants do often take part in these same activities with their TCV student peers or with other summer program youth.

Students are generally well behaved, often due to the threat of physical punishment (being hit, etc) by older students or the amala. Rules are strict about attendance of classes, cleanliness, and individual responsibilities. Students are not allowed to have their own technological devices- cell phones, mP3 players, etc, and they would be taken away from students if they were to be discovered. These rules were never explained to me during my time living in the kyimtsang, but they were clearly understood. However, as will be discussed further in the next chapter, summer program participants were not always subject to the same rules as TCV students.

Unsurprisingly, these rules were often bent by TCV students. Students have music devices, cell phones, and more, which they manage to keep hidden despite the communal nature of their space and lives in the kyimtsang. In particular, many students have a passion for Bollywood music and videos and soccer, known as “football.” I have a memory of many of the students in my kyimtsang crowding into the amala’s room to watch a Bollywood movie on a grainy television one evening that the amala was away, and quickly dispersing once they heard the amala returning.

This is the background into which the summer program participants arrive. The Summer Program’s website states that they “try to accommodate not more than two participants in one home” in order to “facilitate students to improve their spoken Tibetan language” (TCV Summer School Program). Tibetan is the primary language used by TCV students and staff, and is the first language of all the Tibetan students in the schools, although after a certain school year many classes are taught in English. The summer program participants are often addressed in Tibetan by their kyimtsang amalas and other staff in the school, but the application for the program

allows students to indicate their level of Tibetan speaking proficiency, showing a cognizance of varying levels of Tibetan fluency within the participants.

Camp participants follow a different schedule than regular TCV students. However, in order both to accommodate the participants' schedule and to promote interaction with the residential students, with the school's longest break (the equivalent of a summer vacation) happening during the cold winter months, the program takes place during the summer at the height of monsoon season. Camp participants arrive in late June or in the first days of July and will stay through the first week of August with an optional trip for several days at the end of the program.

The program is kicked off by several welcome ceremonies with school leaders, conducted primarily in Tibetan, and classes start relatively soon after the arrival of participants, although many arrive a few days early. The main way that summer program participants spend their time is in a variety of classes. The specific class schedule varies somewhat from year to year, but the main areas of focus remain the same: Tibetan language classes in speaking, reading and writing, traditional music and dance, Tibetan history, and Buddhism among other subjects are all taught in some capacity. As the program's web page states, one of the primary aims of the program is to expose Tibetan youth who have spent the majority of their lives in the West to Tibetan culture and life in a TCV school, which is an almost entirely Tibetan location.

The classes are taught much in the way that MacPherson (2011) describes: based on the colonial Anglo-Indian model, and, per MacPherson's description, the content is not particularly well-received by program participants. Many students skip their classes, which during my time there was seen as related to our lack of discipline due to our Westernization, rather than a lack of connection to the material. Whether due to lack of access to teacher training or other under-

resourcing of the Tibetan education system in India, the formal curriculum of the summer program unfortunately falls into MacPherson's (2011) descriptions of a transmission model.

The summer program participants have classes six days a week with a free day on Sundays. The day begins around 7:30 AM with morning prayers for half an hour led by a Tibetan Buddhist monk, and then goes into classes until the afternoon at around 4:30 PM, with short breaks as well as a break for lunch. There is also a Tibetan dance class that happens in the evenings that culminates in a performance in front of school officials and students. The program also involves some short trips, traveled by bus, to other TCV schools or to see other Tibetan institutions, such as the buildings of the Tibetan government-in-exile, in order for students to become familiar with Tibetan life and meet Tibetan people in these places.

Classes are formatted with a teacher or speaker lecturing at the front of the room, with participants seated at desks taking notes, occasionally asking questions, but largely are supposed to be focused on the teacher rather than interacting with one another, using technological devices, sleeping, or other "off-task" behaviors. There are no explicit punishments for not participating or being attentive, although a teacher or other staff person may ask a student to be quiet or behave more respectfully, these are more requests than rules that will be strictly enforced. It is largely up to the individual participant whether they engage with the material being presented or not and how they will participate in classes.

The teachers are from a range of backgrounds. Many are current TCV staff, although the arts classes (music, dance, etc.) are taught by students from the Tibetan Institute of Performing Arts (TIPA) in Dharamsala or others with knowledge of Tibetan traditional music, and the Buddhist philosophy class was taught by a Tibetan Buddhist *geshe*, which is the highest degree attainable in Tibetan Buddhism. Aside from the *geshe*, the qualifications of the teachers varied,

with some who worked as administrative staff and not trained in teaching. However, all of the teachers were Tibetan, fluent in Tibetan language, with at least some communicative ability in English.

Classes are conducted in a mix of Tibetan and English, with more Tibetan used overall. Notable exceptions were the beginning-level language classes. During the year I attended the program, the Buddhist philosophy class was taught in English as well, and we were told explicitly that it was in order to ensure that everyone, despite Tibetan language proficiency, would be able to understand. However, throughout the program, considerations for language proficiency are inconsistent and students make use of a number of strategies to navigate this issue- asking other students to translate, using limited Tibetan to communicate, simply using English, etc. Further research on this summer program could reveal insights about the significance of the linguistic navigation strategies.

Daily Schedule

The official program from the TCV Summer School web page is as follows:

PROGRAMMES

I. Weekday Programs:

This will be of two types-beginners & advanced as below:

A. Tibetan language

Tibetan calligraphy classes for beginners and advanced

Tibetan Grammar & composition for beginners/advanced

B. Tibetan History

Tibetan history: Highlighting some of the great kings

Gaden Podrang Government and the Dalai Lamas

Chinese Invasion and 1959 Uprising and aftermath

C. Buddhism and Values

Basic Principles of Tibetan Buddhism

Tibetan Religious festivals

D. Tibetan Culture and Traditions

Tibetan dress - regional differences and types

Tibetan cuisine and how to make some of them

Tibetan way of life and experiencing some of them

Tibetan performing arts - learning songs, dances and instruments

E. Current Tibetan Situation

Tibetan Government-in-Exile: Visits & study sessions

Tibetan communities in exile: visits and discussions

The Tibetan issues in International arena: Study & discussions

H.H the Dalai Lama's Middle Way Approach: Study & discussions

II. Weekend Programs:

Site visits around Dharamsala

Group discussions and doing projects

Camping in TCV branches and interaction with TCV students

Fortunately, while the classes reflected the issues prevalent in cultural sustainability efforts in the Tibetan diaspora and beyond (MacPherson, 2011) the informal curriculum (MacPherson, 2011) and extra-curricular experiences served for participants to learn a great deal about Tibetan culture, community, and themselves. For example, *kyimtsang* life, as previously described, features largely as a base from which the summer program participants' experiences

are shaped. Another important feature of the summer program for many participants is spending time in surrounding areas and in “extra-curricular” (interpreted broadly) activities.

Participants spend free/unstructured in a variety of ways. Some of the most popular activities include:

- going to buy snacks or meals to supplement the often relatively unappetizing selection of food provided by the school and (sometimes clumsily) cooked by the TCV residential students, either on campus or in McLeod Ganj. There are many Tibetan restaurants in McLeod Ganj as well as restaurants with other cuisines such as Italian that can be difficult to find in India, aimed to attract the Western tourists who frequent Dharamsala.
- shopping for Tibetan crafts, traditional clothing, jewelry, religious items such as prayer beads and incense, and Free Tibet-related items such as clothing, accessories, stickers/badges, etc, of which there is a large selection due to the high levels of tourists. India in general is known for having cheaper prices than Western countries for most of these items, so Tibetans who visit India from the West are often asked to bring back items for relatives. Additionally, Tibetan culture is highly focused on gift-giving, so gifts must be purchased for relatives and friends, especially after such a big trip.
- Spending time hiking or exploring the forest and mountains that surround Upper TCV’s campus.
- Visiting “cyber cafes” in McLeod Ganj to catch up on computer and internet use for a small hourly fee. Aside from the on-campus “cyber cafe” there is no unrestricted internet access for TCV students of summer program participants.

On campus, summer program participants take part in many activities as well. These include:

- Participating in informally organized summer program sports teams, which then competed with the TCV students in basketball and “football” (soccer) at Upper TCV and on trips to other TCV schools.
- Exploring the grounds of TCV- the campus has several libraries, a temple area for prayers, a wide range of kyimtsangs, and more, which can be explored in program participants’ free time.
- Some participants have family or friends in the surrounding area and spend free time meeting with them, even traveling to their homes for overnight stays during weekends.
- Interacting with TCV students: although there is somewhat of a language barrier for program participants who are not fluent in Tibetan, all the older students in TCV have some communicative ability in English, as well as many of the younger students. In all cases, the participants and TCV students are generally curious about each other and want to know one another. Participants may be asked to sing and dance, especially American pop songs, a common pastime for TCV students due to limited internet and recorded music access. Students play a number of games that do not rely on technology, ranging from games with balls, cards, or even a game known as “apdo” which involves tossing and doing tricks with pebbles.

In addition to these activities, participants sometimes “skip” classes in favor of other pursuits available in the area surrounding the school- spending time in the surrounding mountains and forests, shopping or spending time in cafes and restaurants in McLeod Ganj, playing video games in shops that have them available for a small fee, and drinking alcohol which can be much more easily acquired than in the United States. These activities are

obviously not sanctioned by the summer program, but they make up a significant part of the experience of the time spent at the program for those students who chose to participate in them.

While it may appear that participants who are skipping classes in favor of more “Western” activities have no interest in gaining a “feel of the Tibetan spirit of maintaining their identity in exile” or developing a “sense of understanding and appreciation of the Tibetan cause and aspirations” (TCV Summer School Program), exposure to some version of Tibetan culture is unavoidable in McLeod Ganj and TCV. Dibyesh Anand (2007) writes that Dharamsala is “a symbolic nerve center from which articulations of Tibetanness emerge” (p. 110) and Swank (2014) notes that Dharamsala is conceptualized, by Tibetan and non-Tibetan visitors alike, through “utopic notions of Tibetanness that place McLeod Ganj, as the seat of the Dalai Lama’s government, as the best viable alternative to being in pre-1950s Tibet” (p. 6). Swank (2014) goes on to quote Emily Yeh : “some Tibetans have begun to see [McLeod Ganj], rather than Lhasa, as the center of Tibetan symbolic geography and as the locus of authentic Tibetan culture” (Yeh qtd. in Swank, 6).

Given the many interesting facets and interactions that occur, both formally and informally, during summer program participants’ experience of the TCV Summer School Program, it will be important to note the ways that the environment of the program contributes to or influences their experiences of identity.

Chapter 4: Embodying Tibetanness in TCV

“Tibetanness is as much a process as it is a product”

(Anand, 2007, p. 88).

Through my interviews with past TCV Summer School Program participants, I gained understanding of the various ideas about Tibetan identity both of the participants themselves and their wider community in the United States and during the program. The program provides a space for youth to explore their Tibetan identity and often to reconnect to it after a long stint in the United States. This goal is both admirable and successful and all the participants reported that the camp was a very worthwhile experience. Additionally, youth are often catalyzed to serve the Tibetan community in a variety of ways, motivated by the Tibetan individuals they met and the stories they heard in TCV. However, many of the participants’ struggles with continuity of their identities and commitment to Tibetan cultural and political activities resurfaced after their returns to the United States.

These struggles cannot simply be blamed on the failure of the participants, partly because there are simply too many cases of this discontinuity occurring for it to be a failure of the individual. I argue that the program contains a “hidden curriculum” (see MacPherson, 2011) that ties Tibetan authenticity to the neediness and specific trauma of the refugee experience. I believe that this articulation of Tibetan identity has made sense for earlier generations of Tibetans, including these youths’ parents, most of whom grew up in India and attended TCV schools, as well as the TCV students the youth met during the program, who share these experiences as well. However, it does not reflect the reality of the lives of the summer program participants. In the United States they face new pressures, problems, contexts, as well as opportunities than previous generations of Tibetan exiles. While their navigation of their identities are brilliant and creative,

they are unable to see themselves in the forms of Tibetan identity that have been presented to them, and thus understand their own actions, behaviors, ideas, etc. as “Americanized” or “Western.” This will be described more in depth later in the chapter, however Phuntsok succinctly described her experience of being a “Tibetan-American” vs. an “American-Tibetan” depending on whether she is in India or the United States, and continued that “for the summer [of the program] I was just a Tibetan.”

The program is in fact serving the need for cultural preservation and the reinforcement of a sense of political responsibility in Tibetan youth growing up in Western countries. Facing unprecedented cultural preservation and negotiation problems as a generation of Tibetan youth grows up immersed in American culture, often unfamiliar to their parents’ generation, Tibetans in the West send their children to the program not only to impart traditional cultural knowledge them, but also to spur a transformation in their behavior to that which is seen as “more Tibetan.” Yeh (2007) uses Bourdieu’s concept of *habitus* to gain insight into how “the ‘authenticity’ of Tibetan identities is both inscribed on and read off of bodies” (p. 651). This version of “Tibetanness” is defined by a *habitus* more similar to that of Tibetan youth in India, where most of these youths’ parents themselves grew up.

Tibetan Identity

The question central to the work of this thesis and to the increasingly complex, transnational, and diverse Tibetan diaspora is “What does it mean to be ‘just a Tibetan?’” and where, if anywhere, can I/we be one/them?

Hess (2011) explains that “The Dalai Lama, the first generations of Tibetan exiles, and the transnational generation are together producing an ever-evolving Tibetan ideoscape that incorporates more and more ways to be Tibetan as the diaspora expands, and at the same time

reflects complex cosmopolitan or global forms of being Tibetan” (p. 60). Hess’s description accurately describes the broader trend of cultural syncretism and creativity among Tibetan youth in exile, specifically looking at hip-hop music as a mode of expression for Tibetan youth. However, in my research, participants still are not completely able to claim their own authenticity as Tibetans despite these creative new articulations that are happening in exile. More research into divides of social class in Tibetan exile communities may reveal more about why some Tibetan-American youth gravitate to certain raced and classed modes of cultural expression such as hip-hop (Yeh & Lama, 2006) and others largely do not.

Yeh & Lama (2006) argue that this limited access to authenticity is the result of “[t]he authorized articulation of only one authentic Tibetan identity-- one which has worked successfully as a rallying point in the transnational struggle for Tibetan independence--” which “has the unintended consequence of acting as a constraint, and even as an instrument of oppression” (812) for potential expressions of Tibetan identity. Anand (2007) describes the origin of this single authentic Tibetan identity: “When the Tibetans went into exile they found that ‘Tibet’ already existed in the Western imagination, and given their limited options, they conformed to that image in order to gain support” (p. 99).

Anand (2007) elaborates that “the lack of recognition of Tibetan statehood by any existing state, has forced the Tibetans to seek support through nonconventional means-cultural politics” (p. 103) and that “because of Exotica Tibet and a desire to gain Western support, the exile elite has tended to favor certain strands of Tibetan culture as more authentic and therefore worthy of patronage” (p. 117).

Thus, the "needy refugee" archetype has in some cases been over-emphasized to the detriment of people in the Tibetan community. For example, some people claim that the Tibetan

government in exile has discouraged refugees from getting Indian citizenship in order to maintain a sense of political purity (Gamble & Ringpapontsang, 2013). These kinds of actions are usually in response to pressure to maintain sponsors and support from the West, where the conception of Tibetans as spiritually pure, morally flawless beings has greatly contributed to our political and moral weight and the Free Tibet movement.

Given the emphasis of need and struggle as tied to morality and authenticity in the Tibetan political discourse, it is unsurprising that participants arrived at similar conclusions about their authenticity as Tibetans given their relative privilege due to living in the United States.

Literature

The phenomena of identity negotiation and cultural belonging at the TCV Summer School Program can be analyzed through several conceptual frameworks. These frameworks not only clarify the influences that lead to summer program participants feeling unable to claim their “authenticity” as Tibetans, but also point to frameworks and practices that would promote these identifications among these youth.

MacPherson’s (2011) utilization of the concept “the hidden curriculum” helps to illuminate the messages and signals about “authentic” Tibetan identity that the summer program imparts to participants. According to MacPherson (2011), “The hidden curriculum refers to the *unintentional* socialization and cultural reproductive function of schools, as opposed to the explicit contents of the formal curricula” (p. 112).

In the case of the TCV Summer Program, that includes the dismissive comments about program participants from TCV students that question the “true Tibetanness” of the program participants, as well as the difficult circumstances of the TCV students that the program

participants described in their interviews, which teach participants about what is seen as an “authentic” Tibetan life. Both of these experiences promote a conceptualization of authentic Tibetan identity as having specific cultural knowledge and sets of experiences. Summer program participants are unable to claim an “authentic” Tibetan identity in the same way as TCV student peers, who can embody this “authentic” ideal through their more proficient grasp of Tibetan language, Buddhist prayers, or traditional songs, as well as through their less privileged refugee status.

Many scholars examine Tibetan identity in diaspora and the pressures that influence its negotiation. Anand’s (2007) concept of “Exotica Tibet” and its restrictive influence on Tibetan self-representation in exile and Yeh & Lama’s (2006) examination of the influence of the black-white racial spectrum and generational divides on identity in Tibetan communities in the United States both demonstrate the pressures that the Tibetan community has faced when developing a representation in exile. These authors also demonstrate how the summer program is not alone in reinforcing these particular narratives of Tibetan identity.

Swank’s (2014) exploration of divides among Tibetan exiles in Dharamsala based on migration pattern, Yeh’s (2007) discussion of habitus as a framework for understanding Tibetan authenticity in the diaspora, and Houston & Wright’s (2003) discussion of context-dependent, adaptive Tibetan identity all illustrate that “Tibetanness” is in many ways contested and constantly under negotiation.

Additionally, these authors demonstrate how participants’ difficulties in reconciling their lived experiences with these notions of “authentic” Tibetanness are a common experience in the diaspora, particularly in the context of the United States, and even more so for Tibetan youth. Suárez-Orozco (2004) and Way, Santos, Niwa, & Kim-Gervey (2008) have demonstrated the

detrimental effects of these pressures for minority youth in both a broad and specifically educational context. Phuntsog (1994; “Cultural Identity” 1998) emphasizes the importance of cultural survival for Tibetan youth in exile through Tibetan-centric curriculum.

The Summer Program’s Effects on Participants

Several participants described developing close relationships with both TCV students and fellow program participants. In many instances, these relationships were based in part on shared Tibetan identity. Tara described feeling as though the younger children in her *kyimtsang* were like her sister at home, and “got to get really close to them.” Olivia Gyatso described hearing the phrase “we are all Tibetan” from authority figures but realizing “Hey, we are all Tibetan... It was really nice.”

Participants emphasized over and over that building relationships with and learning about the lives of their TCV student peers was an eye-opening experience. Meeting individuals who had experienced of the disadvantage and suffering of refugeehood (separation from family or orphanhood, fleeing Tibet for their lives, lack of opportunity in exile) was a catalyst for personal change and self-reflection for participants. In a particularly poignant realization, several participants reported that not only were these students their peers, in different circumstances they may have experienced the same struggle and suffering in their own lives.

Thupten reported that he “understood [the Tibetan refugee experience, the Tibetan struggle] but it wasn’t real to me... And then once I did the camp I realized ‘Ok, this is real’ and it’s actually affecting me in a sense... I kinda had to think about all these kids [and that] I was lucky enough to be one of the few kids who came to America and get a chance to study here and get some opportunities.” He points out that TCV is a site in which exile Tibetans, particularly those who have gone to Western countries, can meet other Tibetans that “could have been you.”

He described “so many different people, so many different experiences that if you just talk to them a little bit you’d find out all these different worlds that were out there and these are all stories that could have been you though. There are other Tibetan people and if my family decided not to go to America... then I might have ended up as one of these kids in TCV.”

Olivia Gyatso experienced a similar revelation regarding her position relative to the TCV students that she met: “I think that was one of the hardest things of my time in India, seeing how much these kids who are so much younger than me missed their parents and weren’t able to contact them either, you know? And it made me think about why do I have the privilege that I do?” Olivia Gyatso recognizes both the profound difficulties faced by the refugee experience of the TCV students and identifies that, in many respects, she is no different from them except that her life circumstances have given her greater opportunities and privilege.

This realization was difficult to reconcile, so many participants used this eye-opening experience as motivation to take advantage of the opportunities available to them in the US. Tara reported that her experiences “made me take my studies in school a lot more seriously” after seeing “how hard they [the TCV students] were trying to work ... it was really interesting to see that they were working so hard to go to college and have a good life because they were doing it for their parents, you know? It just made me think that I was very privileged to go to a school that had higher education basically... I felt like I had to represent them in a way.”

She continued that the program was “a catalyst of me trying to work in the US government and figuring out how to help these Tibetan refugees around the world... now I’m studying government and economics and I’m trying to do that.” Phuntsok reports that she “always wanted to do something when I was older that’s Tibetan related... I can’t really think of anything else I would see myself doing other than doing something Tibetan related.”

Divides between Program Participants and TCV Students

The relationships that program participants developed positively impacted their experience of the program and their subsequent understanding of themselves as they developed bonds based on culture, shared experience, and even shared struggle. Unfortunately, instances of divides, either externally enforced or internally imposed, between summer program participants and TCV students affected these relationships. Divides in knowledge of culture and language between the program participants and TCV reinforced the tie between Tibetan authenticity and a refugee experience.

While the link between these types of cultural knowledge and the “needy refugee” archetype are not immediately clear, further analysis clarifies the connection. Knowledge of prayers, traditional songs and dance, and a “pure” version of the native language all contribute to a refugee’s capital by increasing their potential to be seen by wealthy Western sponsors as unique, special, particularly spiritual, etc. Yeh & Lama (2006) quote Diehl (2002) to describe conflicts between Tibetan refugees in the United States and their Western sponsors when the Tibetans they sponsored turned out to be “ordinary and fallible human beings” as opposed to meeting the sponsor’s “expectations of enlightened behavior and nonmaterialist lifestyles” (p. 817).

As Olivia Gyatso described, “the [TCV] kids would sing Tibetan songs a lot versus American kids singing pop type songs. ... I guess that’s a difference too between students there and me, I didn’t do that very much when growing up because I didn’t know about the songs or the dances.” Her cultural knowledge was limited by her limited access to Tibetan culture growing up, and those cultural markers were seen by her as indicating a version of authenticity to which she could not belong. Tara reported a similar experience with knowledge of prayers: “in

the mornings they had prayer sessions and I could read Tibetan but very slowly, and when I saw that even these little girls knew these prayers I was kind of ashamed of myself that I didn't know it."

Finally, language played an important role in defining cultural belonging as well. Yonten described herself as not "that amazing at Tibetan," said that she was "more comfortable speaking English" and explained that "if you're a true Tibetan like the kids in TCV are they can tell" the difference between her language abilities and a more fluent speaker. Yonten's definition of a "true Tibetan" requires a strong knowledge and capability for Tibetan language. Olivia Gyatso adds that knowing Tibetan songs is an important component, while Tara draws on her experience of knowing less about the prayers than the "little girls" to define a certain ideal of knowledge for Tibetan authenticity. Like many of the characteristics that participants attributed to a "true Tibetan," these markers of cultural knowledge are related to the immersion in a Tibetan community. This immersion is infinitely more possible in India, particularly in a place like TCV, while the American experience presents numerous challenges in helping Tibetan youth access their culture as fully.

Interestingly, as cultural knowledge and knowledge of the refugee experience were seen by Choden's parents as equally important and valuable. As per the program's aims, he could recite more prayers, could speak more fluently in Tibetan language, and could perform traditional songs and dances. Choden reported that "I came back and I spoke more Tibetan than I ever had in my life and I knew all these prayers, and [my parents] were very impressed and their expectation about me learning about the lives of students in TCV was fulfilled too... because I would tell about my stories [about the TCV students I'd met]."

Additionally, differential privilege within the program context, divides in cultural and linguistic knowledge, and the short-term nature of program participants' presence at the school contributed greatly to these divides. All of these divisions are results of the complex factors that result in different diasporic locations and, subsequently, differential access to traditional culture, language, and forms of capital for exile Tibetans. This phenomenon is documented by several authors that study the Tibetan diaspora. Yeh (2007) describes divides in versions of authentic Tibetan identity between Tibetans in the United States "who differ in their relationships to the homeland" (p. 648).

Differential Privilege

Olivia Gyatso noted "there's also that weird thing where you get treated better because you're from the US." Phuntsok expanded on this thought, noting that "no one really treated us like TCV kids. We were still considered the people that came from the United States or Europe or wherever. And that was kind of hard because there was always such a strict line between us and the actual TCV students and I was able to recognize that obviously and we didn't get treated the same as them and that was kind of hard because in some ways that's just how it is, we're so different from them. It just made me kind of sad."

While Tibetan youth are able to experience connection to the TCV students, they are unable to overcome their place of origin and be seen as "the same" as the students, driving a divide between them both socially and in their self-definition. Yeh & Lama (2006) explain that "migration to the USA has come to be seen as a sign of success, highly desirable... through the accumulation of social capital" (p. 814) and thus the Tibetan youth from the United States are seen as more materially advantaged and having more opportunities.

Cultural and Linguistic Knowledge Divides

The -not incorrect- perception of Tibetans from the United States as more privileged impacts how their knowledge of culture and language abilities are perceived in the school. Tara said of her first days living in the kyimtsang: “I think that not just us had expectations, they also had expectations like ‘Oh these Westerners, they don’t even know any Tibetan,’ so when my brother and I came into the house they assumed that we didn’t speak any Tibetan.” Tara and her brother were in fact quite fluent in Tibetan and able to use the more sophisticated honorific form with the kyimtsang amala in order to show her respect.

According to Phuntsok, “the difference was clear for the students as well, for the TCV students. Even they would treat us different, or make snarky comments like ‘oh they can’t speak Tibetan,” just stuff like that that also makes you sad.” Clearly the TCV students were aware of the distance between themselves and the program participants, and perhaps were expressing this seemingly incommensurable divide through comments like these. Whatever their intentions, the impact on the program participants was to feel less able to identify as an authentic Tibetan than their TCV peers.

Temporary Presence in TCV

Thupten reported that the kyimtsang amala would use him as a bad example to juxtapose against the ideal behavior for the TCV students: “they’re like Westerners... in a month they’re gonna be gone.” Thus, in yet another example of divides being emphasized between the two groups, the program participants were unable to identify with the TCV students due to the short duration of time that they would be in India. Once again, this is a factor out of the control of the program participants. They cannot cause their families to return to India in the same way that the TCV students are unable to control if or when they might receive a visa to the United States.

The displacement of Tibetans from Tibet and the resulting diaspora are factors beyond the control of anyone involved in these interactions, yet they play a profound role in shaping them.

Divides as Eye-Opening for Program Participants

These divides were painful for participants. Often for the first time in their lives, they were witnessing firsthand the difficulties that accompany refugee life in India. Thupten reports “it was something you wouldn’t associate yourself with, like watching tv, like ‘oh look at those kids in Africa or something’ that kind of experience, but these are like my people though, we’re going through the same experience, it was kind of eye-opening in that sense.”

Thupten recognized that he had “understood [the Tibetan refugee experience, the Tibetan struggle] but it wasn’t real to me,” made clear by his description of “something you wouldn’t associate yourself with... ‘look at those kids in Africa or something.’” He succinctly illustrated his perceived distance from the TCV students by comparing them to “those kids in Africa,” demonstrating how narratives of the ‘needy other’ distanced him from both African children, so often ‘othered’ and seen as un-agentically needy by the Western gaze, and people whose lives he could have easily had: “I might have ended up as one of these kids in TCV.”

Yonten reported two strands of learning, one of culture-- “what I learned in those 5 weeks surprised me... even in that short of time I was able to learn about my culture”-- and one of an eye-opening experience of Tibetan exiles’ lives in India: “that’s what our focus was in India, the life you know? ...we lived there and we experienced what the kids had gone through.”

Phuntsok connected her experience of learning about the lives of TCV students to her own experience as a participant: “I got back so much experience and so many stories and just a better understanding of our country’s struggle from being there and talking with the kids and

seeing what they had to say was very powerful. And being part of it for... two and a half months.”

Fixed Idea of Tibetan Identity Based on TCV Students' Lives

Throughout the interviews participants qualified their self-identification as Tibetans by using loaded terms like “Tibetan-American” versus “American-Tibetan” (Phuntsok) and “true Tibetan” (Yonten). Summer program participants often saw themselves as “less Tibetan” than the TCV students but this was inseparable from their realization of their relative privilege. This reinforces divides that have political repercussions throughout diaspora, since Tibetan youth living in the US will not be able to participate in or maintain cultural practices if they do not self-identity as “authentic” Tibetans.

Participants who reported a strong and active Tibetan community in their homes somewhat contradicted their reports of their experiences at the camp: nearly all of them referred to getting to see the “other side” of Tibetan life, having the “Dharamsala” or “TCV experience,” also making references to “true Tibetans like the kids in TCV are” (Yonten). Two participants (Olivia Gyatso, Phuntsok) described a “Tibetan self” and an “American self” and the navigations between them. Dharamsala and the program were the place in which participants were able to be fully Tibetan.

Choden reported of his experience of the summer program “as a Tibetan after that... I felt more complete, getting the Dharamsala experience, meeting the Dalai Lama, going to all those temples, Norbulingka, eating dre and dal [rice and lentils, a typical dish in India and in TCV] for thirty days, yeah I felt more complete.” Choden describes the embodied experience of living in TCV and “the Dharamsala experience” which can be interpreted as more thorough immersion in

Tibetan culture along with experiencing, if only “for thirty days,” the neediness of the refugee community there.

While all participants identified themselves as Tibetan, some identified as part of Tibetan communities, and several had even spent a significant part of their childhood in India, the experience of being at the summer program felt to most participants as an experience of “true Tibetanness.” Phuntsok talked about being a “Tibetan-American” vs. an “American-Tibetan,” and says that “for the summer [of the program] I was just a Tibetan.”

All of these distinctions that participants described about their experience in the program indicate that the TCV students are more truly or authentically Tibetan than they are. However, most of the factors that the youth attribute to authenticity and their lack of it are based on factors of migration and influences of the dominant culture that are beyond their control. Choden explains that he does not speak Tibetan but knows that this does not make him less of a Tibetan. He recognizes that “Tibetan culture even in exile it’s not like a unified thing you know, different regions have different ways, different cultures, it’s not something that we chose and it’s not something that we’re ashamed of either because we were born in different regions.” Choden was also the participant who spent the most time in India, perhaps indicating that his closer connection to India resulted in a stronger sense of security in his Tibetan identity despite not embodying the same markers of authenticity that other participants associated with a “true Tibetan,” such as language ability.

Two Lives

Through the experience of the TCV Summer School Program, participants negotiate their cultural belonging in the fraught space of diasporic identity politics. Participants are able to draw motivation to serve the Tibetan community from their realizations about the difficulties

endured by their TCV student peers. Despite their creativity and insightfulness into their identities, many continue to struggle with the idea of a double self or double life. Phuntsok described the program as a “nice dream” of being Tibetan that was separate from her regular life. Olivia Gyatso and Phuntsok both express their sadness and sense of loss at being unable to be in two places-- physical and perhaps also cultural-- at once.

Tibetan youth are facing these issues of cultural belonging and identity development in a politically fraught diaspora and need more support to navigate the cultural complexities that arise in their lives in the United States. The articulations of Tibetans as refugees, as highly traditional, as, to paraphrase Yeh & Lama (2006), pure, spiritual, and utopic, do somewhat reflect the experiences of some Tibetans in exile. However, this does not reflect even the reality of the Tibetan communities in places like India, where Tibetans grow up navigating the cultural influences of a host country that is, for many, the only home they have ever known.

Unfortunately, as more generations of exile Tibetans grow up in the United States, Europe, and Canada, this issue will only become exacerbated. Tibetan youth living in the United States must navigate new cultural influences and develop Tibetan identities in the places where they live.

My research indicates that these youth need support in this identity development process:

Tibetan youth growing up in the United States have begun to see themselves and their lives as opposing the “true Tibetans like the kids in TCV are” (Yonten).

MacPherson summarizes this conflict of identity development by arguing that:

when a community is accustomed to transmitting culture and language in a monolingual and monocultural environment, there is no need to negotiate language and culture with younger generations by appealing to reason, affection, desire, or individual choice. In pluralistic environments like North America however, dutiful daughters and sons face

increased challenges to live up to these norms, established elsewhere but imposed by earnest parents and grandparents unaware of the complexity of realizing them within highly diverse, multicultural, multilingual milieus. Consequently, they learn to mask aspects of their identity, experience, desires, consciousness, or worldview that contradict these norms... younger generations learn to conform to idealized imaginaries and associated ideologies of homogeneity and consensus as members of diasporas, all the while learning to transgress, subvert, or even undermine that idealized consensus through contradicting its norms in their everyday decisions and choices. (p. 217)

MacPherson continues that “[n]o child or family should have to choose between education and opportunities and participating in their familial and community languages, cultures, and histories” (p. 199).

MacPherson (2011) & Phuntsog (“Cultural Identity” 1998) make many recommendations for how to integrate traditional culture and identity development into curricula for Tibetan exile youth. This leads to the importance of programs like the TCV Summer School Program. The program attempts to transmit Tibetan cultural knowledge, values, and political legacy to generations who are continually further removed from the physical location of Tibet, the cultural centers of India and Nepal, and the 1949-59 struggle and subsequent exodus. My research as well as other authors’ research shows that Tibetan culture in North America is indeed facing new challenges due to exile and the evolving diaspora. The summer program was borne out of this issue and specifically attempts:

“To enable Tibetan children living abroad to join TCV Summer Camp to learn Tibetan language, culture, history and basic principles of Buddhism.

To experience first hand the Tibetan exile community in India through visits and interaction with TCV children.

To enable the children to get a feel of the Tibetan spirit of maintaining their identity in exile and a better sense of understanding and appreciation of the Tibetan cause and aspirations.” (Summer School Program)

While these are all admirable goals which the program undoubtedly accomplishes, there is more to do to develop the identities of Tibetan youth in the United States. The next two sections will examine new potential articulations of Tibetan identity for Tibetan youth in Western countries and potential for curricula and educational practices that accomplish this goal.

De-Sedimenting Conceptions of Tibetan Identity

MacPherson (2011) argues that despite residual “historical identifications, romanticized identities, and language practices,” “North America’s actual multicultural policies and practices” are “black holes in which linguistic and cultural vitality and true diversity vanish” (p. 165). It is unsurprising, then, that Tibetan youth face the difficulties that they do in maintaining cultural and linguistic proficiency. In fact, it is a testament to their individual will and the commitment of their families that they have maintained as much knowledge as they have. Phuntsog (“Cultural Identity” 1998) argues “[t]he loss of cultural identity may in the long run be even worse than the physical subjugation forced by the Chinese government. A serious threat to Tibetan identity comes from within: the inability to preserve Tibetan culture for the young people who are the future” (p. 39).

As Anand (2007) argues, “recognition of the contingent nature of identity does not delegitimize identity claims marshaled by Tibetans for their cause” (p. 123). The Tibetan exile

community may continue to articulate the “needy refugee” archetype, and capitalizing on its political utility does not negate our agency or our authenticity as Tibetan people.

Brief Recommendations for Tibetan-Centric Curricula

Using MacPherson’s (2011) “Fallacies About Language Sustainability” (p. 173) framework for a Tibetan-centric curriculum, I will examine possibilities for the summer program's potential for supporting participants to develop positive Tibetan identities and simultaneously be an agentic force in improving life for Tibetans everywhere.

My research and the literature illuminate the fact that Tibetan youth living in the United States are at an important intersection of cultures, identities, and ideas. How can Tibetan communities along with their educators and allies support these youth to create new versions of Tibetan identity based in their lived experiences, so that they too can claim their histories and ancestry, so that they too can see themselves as the “true Tibetans” that they are?

Instead of encouraging Western Tibetans to come and ‘experience’ TCV and simply be motivated/touched by the difficulties of TCV students, why not facilitate service projects, pen pal programs, or other programs that would allow the Western Tibetans and India Tibetans to learn from one another and collaborate to solve some of these problems? It is important to see and understand the problems, but without providing support for Tibetan youth to imagine and create solutions, education for Tibetan youth in exile is missing an entire range of potential. The “needy refugee” archetype could disappear entirely, replaced with the more accurate picture of dynamic, creative, flexible, and surviving people who have continually created solutions to our problems no matter the situation or its seeming impossibility.

MacPherson (2011) explains that “as with most minority and Indigenous peoples, the Tibetan diaspora has to date focused education for sustainability within informal and non-formal

curricula” (p. 109). Thus, a final recommendation is to develop formalized curricula that will support cultural and linguistic preservation particularly for Tibetan youth in the United States. This will allow them to have access to and agency over in-depth cultural knowledge that will help them to develop their identities as “Tibetan-Americans” who can belong in either the Tibetan or the American world.

In terms of preserving language in diaspora, MacPherson (2011) outlines six “fallacies,” commonly held notions about language learning. The fallacies that apply to my research are as follows:

1. “Family is Sufficient”: MacPherson argues that “the reduced uses and context entails a significant loss of register and cultural knowledge, and hence linguistic vitality” (173), leading into the second fallacy.
2. “Live-in Grandparents are Sufficient”: MacPherson acknowledges the value of grandparents in both the traditional structure of Tibetan society, as cultural bridges in the newer context of North America, and as contributors to the language environment of a home. She argues that they are insufficient for maintaining language because “this resource weakened as children entered school” (174).
3. “Community-based Education is Sufficient”: Programs like the TCV Summer School Program often use “very teacher-centered transmission-oriented pedagogies which don’t allow youths to form bridges between the North American culture in which they are immersed and the ‘traditional’ knowledge and language they encounter in” community education programs (MacPherson 175).
4. “Sustainability is a Personal, not a Public, Responsibility”: MacPherson describes the “pervasive view in North America that the public domain is somehow culturally and

linguistically neutral and that any desire to sustain languages and cultures above this neutral level is a personal familial or community responsibility” (177).

Given these fallacies, we can work to envision formalized, community-centered curricula for Tibetan youth in exile that move the responsibility of cultural and linguistic preservation (and thus identity support) from the community alone to trained educators and well-resourced schools.

MacPherson (2011) argues that “... for laypeople negotiating complex lived and media environments, the forces are decidedly stacked in favor of assimilation. So, as useful a concept as intercultural identity may be... when the subject is from non-dominant communities, the ‘inter’ space is hardly a level playing field. To compensate, they need to lean ever-so-slightly over to the side of Indigeneity... *They need more critical awareness of identification processes*” (p. 208, emphasis mine). Supporting Tibetan youth to develop this critical awareness is an urgent project as they encounter more complex identification processes and contexts within which to identify themselves. Phuntsog (1994) cogently argues that “[i]t is essential to scrutinize objectively [Tibetan education’s] structure and function in order to make changes that will effectively prepare Tibetan children to face both the challenges of life in exile and of creating a new nation” (p. 3).

Chapter 5: Conclusion

The purpose of my research was to investigate how Tibetan youth living in the United States understand their identities in the context of the growing Tibetan diaspora, specifically as they experience the TCV Summer School Program. As the newest generation of Tibetans face the challenges of creating a cohesive Tibetan identity in the diaspora, in the United States and other countries, it is increasingly important to understand how these youth are develop their identities. Using the literature (MacPherson, 2011; Phuntsog, 1994; Yeh & Lama, 2006), I argue that Tibetan-American youth are vulnerable to racist and assimilatory cultural forces in the United States that would distance them both from their cultural heritage/identities and their potential as political leaders/changemakers in the diaspora. Thus, supporting their development of new versions of Tibetan identity based on their lived experiences becomes crucial to not only their well-being but to the thriving of Tibetan culture and political struggle in exile (Phuntsog, 1994).

Phuntsog (1994) argues that “[i]t is essential to scrutinize objectively [Tibetan education’s] structure and function in order to make changes that will effectively prepare Tibetan children to face both the challenges of life in exile and of creating a new nation” (p. 3).

Additionally, I agree with his argument that “[l]earning environments that are responsive to childrens’ personal and academic needs must be created in classrooms so that children have the opportunity to validate or invalidate different aspects of Tibetan culture as they reassess, reaffirm, or reject their experiences” (p. 8).

Overview of Findings

Through my research, I conclude that, predicated on the archetype of the “needy refugee” that developed in as a response to Western conceptions of Tibet, the TCV Summer Program

reinforces a version of Tibetan identity that intertwines authenticity with embodied experiences of suffering and economic need. This version mirrors the experiences of Tibetan youth in Dharamsala as well as other Tibetan refugees (Swank, 2014), but I find that new versions are needed to reflect the increased opportunities and different political contexts of Tibetan youth living in the West.

The Tibetan youth who attend the summer program have a range of backgrounds, though all of the participants in this study did live in the United States. Their observations about the summer program range from the mundane: the physical discomforts of life in TCV and the small joys of their time in India, to profound observations about identity and a sense of connection among Tibetans: Thupten explained that after experiencing the summer program “You realize that there are people out there struggling and that’s also what it means to be a Tibetan. It’s a part of you that you knew existed, you understand it in your head but not in your body.” Thupten’s statement is exemplary of the new, embodied understanding of Tibetan identity that program participants develop through their experience at the summer program. One of the primary ways that participants gain this new understanding is through the relationships they build with TCV students and other Tibetans that they meet during the program.

Embodying “Ideal Tibetan-ness”

In this way, the summer program serves as a bridge between Tibetan communities in the United States and in India. For the participants, the program provides access to a new aspect of the Tibetan exile experience and thus a new lens through which to view their own lives and selves. For their parents and their communities, the program is a place in which their children can learn more about Tibetan culture, religion, and language in an immersive setting. The program is also intended to expose students to what Thupten describes as “a part of you that you

knew existed,” the part of Tibetan-ness that is “people out there struggling.” Participants reported that gaining awareness of the difficulties faced by other Tibetans led to changes in their behavior even after the program ended, namely being more respectful, grateful, and obedient- all behavior patterns associated with, in Tibetan society, the ideal Tibetan child, particularly for those who attend TCV schools.

These new behaviors are apparently associated with “Tibetan-ness” by the participants themselves, as well as by their parents and communities. Several participants reported that their parents were also pleased when their children return home transformed, because as first-generation immigrants their expectations for their children clashed with their children’s behavior as cultural and generational divides pushed the children’s behavior towards more Western norms. Participants gave specific examples of being more willing to do housework/chores, which is a large part of TCV students’ lives. They also shared that skill in Tibetan language and knowledge of prayers were seen as markers of difference between them and TCV students, and their improvement post-summer program in these areas was also met with approval by parents.

Tibetan parents in the United States face difficulties in navigating culture as well, but have generally come from a refugee community within India or Nepal similar to Dharamsala. Their expectations for their children are informed by the same articulation of “Tibetan-ness” that originated in the refugee camps, and thus does not match the experiences of their children who are growing up in the United States, which requires a very different set of cultural competencies.

While the knowledge that participants gain during the summer program is important, even crucial, to maintaining Tibetan identity in exile, it has caused participants to distance themselves from Tibetan identity in subtle ways. Many participants spoke about experiencing a “double life” between a Tibetan self and an American self, as well as referring exclusively to the

TCV students or other Tibetans living in India as “true Tibetans.” Their conceptualization of authentic “Tibetan-ness” is intertwined with a specific set of experiences that does not include their own in the United States, and thus they do not get to be “just a Tibetan” (Phuntsok) or “a true Tibetan like the kids in TCV are” (Yonten).

Literature

I argue that the hidden curriculum of the summer program transmits and reproduces a specific articulation of what is seen as “acceptable” Tibetan identity. As several researchers (Houston & Wright 2003; Yeh 2007) have demonstrated, Tibetan identity is constantly being remade (find a quote). As Yeh & Lama (2006) and Anand (2007) demonstrate, a specific version of Tibetan exile identity has been developed in response to pressures that oversimplify the complexity and nuance of Tibetan history and culture in order to gain political support (find a quote).

My research extends Swank’s (2014) finding that “[i]n Tibetan exile schools, historical data on Tibet presented through the curriculum paint a picture of Tibet as something of a utopia” (p. 92). As Anand (2007) and other scholars have argued, this portrait of Tibet as a mystical utopia has contributed greatly to a hegemonic, ahistorical notion of Tibetan identity. I find that while this articulation of Tibetan identity has been informed by, and, in some cases, reflects, the lived experiences of Tibetan refugees in India, particularly in TCV, the summer program is ultimately unsuccessful in transmitting this articulation to Tibetan youth living in the United States. The youth in the summer program do not share the embodied experiences that make this version of identity salient for their peers living in India, and thus the program’s version of identity ultimately causes them to distance themselves from what they believe is an “authentic”

Tibetan identity, without ever realizing that this version of identity itself has been intentionally constructed through influences beyond their control.

Why Tibetan-American Identity Matters

Yeh (2007) asks, “Why are these issues of cultural authenticity so contentious? Part of the reason is that the diasporic problem of maintaining a distinctive cultural identity faces new challenges in the USA” (p. 663). The participants I interviewed are not, despite the wealth of new understanding and cultural experience that they gain through the program, identifying themselves as true Tibetans. As more Tibetans move to and establish communities in the United States, the urgency of cultural preservation and forming context-specific Tibetan identities only increases.

Conversations around identity, authenticity, and purity are alive and well in the Tibetan community in exile already. In a post on popular Tibetan blog LhakarDiaries.com, Lokyitsang (2014) explains that heightened sensitivity around “these purity conversations” can be seen “as taking place in reaction to the growing awareness in the Tibetan diaspora of the rising number of Tibetan youth (of both mixed and non-mixed heritage) born and/or raised in non-Tibetan spaces in the west that was previously not seen in the Tibetan experience” (para. 4).

An anonymous Tibetan-American author writes in an article titled “Tibetan Fundamentalism” for SkinDeep.com that they are troubled by “the defining of Tibetanness based on an assumption that a pure expression of it exists, that one can categorize Tibetanness based on a set of obscure qualifications,” (para. 3) and that they “desire[] a more diverse group of voices to represent the Tibetan plight” (para. 8). They conclude on an ominous note, and one that echoes my findings of authenticity regulation in the Tibetan exile community:

Tibetan Buddhism and the Tibetan national identity are being simplified to fulfill the romantic expectations of homogeneity and the supposed moral and spiritual superiority of the Tibetan people. However, these expectations are adversary to the goals they seek to achieve, which are peace and unity. They work only to accommodate people who are neither in exile nor under occupation, people like Robert Thurman: White, privileged, and with rudimentary knowledge of the Tibetan experience” (para. 11)

Challenges & Possibilities for Change

Phuntsog (1994) argues that “[i]t is essential to scrutinize objectively [Tibetan education’s] structure and function in order to make changes that will effectively prepare Tibetan children to face both the challenges of life in exile and of creating a new nation” (p. 3).

Additionally, I agree with his argument that “[l]earning environments that are responsive to childrens’ personal and academic needs must be created in classrooms so that children have the opportunity to validate or invalidate different aspects of Tibetan culture as they reassess, reaffirm, or reject their experiences” (p. 8).

While the summer program does not currently purport to serve the exact purpose that Phuntsog describes above, my findings indicate that doing so would be highly beneficial to the youth who attend the program. This model would allow them to reflect critically on the experiences of Tibetan culture that they have during the summer program and to begin to integrate these experiences into their identities as Tibetan-Americans in a way that this process does not currently happen.

There are many obstacles to implementing a new curriculum that allows for “the opportunity to validate or invalidate different aspects of Tibetan culture” (Phuntsog 1994, p. 8) in the TCV Summer School Program. First of all, the financial resources of the program are

modest. The staff of the program often have other responsibilities within the school. The kyimtsang amalas are already caring for upwards of thirty children each, and everyone in the school has more pressing concerns than facilitating critical identity development for the already relatively privileged summer program attendees.

However, altering the structure of the program to allow both TCV students and summer program participants to engage more deeply with one another is not only possible, but necessary. Instead of having program participants learn about culture through transmission-based classrooms, why not promote more substantive interaction with the TCV students, who are already closer to the conceptual “ideal” Tibetan? Thus the program participants can learn about the experiences of TCV students but will be able to critically engage with the hegemony of the “needy refugee” narrative, even coming to understand the nuances within the refugee experience.

Inhibiting or Supporting Tibetan Youth's Identity Development

MacPherson (2011) describes how minority students who do well academically are often distanced from their culture and heritage as a result, either explicitly or through marginalization of minority cultures, narratives, and experiences in formal education spaces. She argues that “[no] child or family should have to choose between education and opportunities and participating in their familial and community languages, cultures, and histories” (p. 199), and Phuntsog (1994) affirms this, arguing that “[f]or Tibetans modernity and cultural preservation is not an either-or issue nor does modernity indicate or demand the demise of their culture” (p. 6). Providing educational spaces that are affirming and supportive of Tibetan youths’ experiences and identities becomes essential to the survival of the Tibetan community throughout the world.

Thus, the necessity to challenge a hegemonic, single expression of authentic Tibetan identity is clear. Supporting Tibetan youth in exile to develop strong and critical identities will

lead to increased agency... Instead of struggling to integrate fixed understandings of “Tibetan-ness” into their lives, youth will be more likely to: a) be more successful academically (Phuntsog 2000), and subsequently b) become agents of cultural preservation and community advocates.

Tara reports that her experience in India “was a catalyst of me trying to work in the US government and figuring out how to help these Tibetan refugees around the world... now I’m studying government and economics and I’m trying to do that.” Phuntsok explained that at the program “I realized how much fun I had being immersed into the Tibetan culture.. I’ve always wanted to do something when I was older that’s Tibet related... I can’t really think of anything else I would see myself doing.” She plans to pursue a major in college that will allow her to continue this passion for community service.

Suggestions for Further Research

The majority of the research on the Tibetan diaspora explores the constructed and contested nature of identity for Tibetans in exile. Like discourse(s) on identity within the diaspora itself, the focus of much of this research sediments Tibet as a place far removed from the physical and mental reality of exile life, a place to which exile Tibetans can only look towards while never truly approaching. While this is certainly accurate to an extent, particularly for refugees born in India or Nepal, the situation has always contained another story. There are Tibetans living in the United States who were born in Tibet and who are able to return. Some Tibetans born in the United States are able to take advantage of U.S. citizenship and obtain Chinese visas to travel into Tibet. As Yeh (2007) has demonstrated, the stalwart anti-China feelings in exile sometimes cause as many problems as they solve, creating more divides among Tibetans who share the same goals and feelings.

In order to further understandings of Tibetan identity development in the diaspora, it will first of all be necessary to continue unpacking the ways that it has been impacted by political pressures to conform to Western conceptualizations of Tibet, as well as other pressures (cultural preservation in exile, diasporic change, etc.). It will also be useful to investigate the ways that these “diversions” from acceptable versions of Tibetan identity reveal other stories, other realities, and other political potentialities. Beyond the marginalization of these “deviant” Tibetan identities, what do these stories teach us? Yeh & Lama (2006) and Hess (2011) begin this by investigating the development of Tibetan hip-hop in exile.

Research on Tibet, Tibetans, and the diaspora should not shy away from taking a political stance, because their work will be politicized by someone if not by them. As my research attempts to demonstrate, Tibet and Tibetans, in the current political epoch, will always be in conversation with the political reality of Tibet’s occupation. Whether researchers choose to acknowledge this or not is their decision, but engagement with this reality must take place.

Finally, I believe it is imperative that Tibetan researchers or avowed allies must take the lead on investigating further issues within the Tibetan diaspora. As Audra Simpson (2014) reminds us, “when the people we speak of speak for themselves, their sovereignty interrupts anthropological portraits of timelessness, procedure, and function that dominates their past and, sometimes, their present” (p. 97). Phuntsog (1994) similarly argues that “[r]esearch by Tibetan scholars may lead to a better understanding of the process of cultural preservation rather than just promoting its understanding to quench the thirst of curiosity” (emphasis mine, 8)

The issues at hand have material effects on those being researched, and it is essential that researchers remain committed to the well-being of the Tibetan community while simultaneously being critical of issues within it. Anand (2007) reminds us that “the entire category of culture

has to be understood as political” (p. 121), particularly in this instance. There is always the pressure of Chinese assimilation within Tibet and Western assimilation within the United States and Canada, and thus a commitment to telling the truths, or, where necessary, protecting the truths (Simpson, 2014), of the Tibetan community throughout the world is essential in further research.

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