

Being Tibetan

Internet and Public Identity among Tibetan Youth

by

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Abstract

This article focuses on the ways exiled Tibetan youth interact on the Internet. It is argued that the discussions and debates on the Net not only communicate a sense of unity, but that they strive to control the various expressions of Tibetan identity as well. Internet has become an important arena for diasporic communities and must be recognized for its creative potential. The core of the debates on sites like Phayul.com relates to questions such as: What constitutes Tibetan society? What does it mean to be Tibetan? What is acceptable and what is not for contemporary Tibetans? It is argued in this article that the interaction on the Internet should not be seen as only upholding an already existing community, but rather as an arena where the discourse on Tibet shapes the community to come.

Far from being a space confined only to uphold and disseminate a sense of community, Internet is also a creative space. The communication and debates between its participants makes it, in a way, a community in the making. This community is in one sense open to all, and closed, of course, in another. Quite often only a small part of any given society is involved; it might only be the elite who has the opportunity to make use of it and, in addition, it is predominantly the young who do so. Regardless of this, in the Tibetan case, the use of Internet is widely spread among young people of all backgrounds with differing economic possibilities, being as it is cheap and readily available in most areas both in India and abroad.¹ My own impression, both from Dharamsala and the Tibetan community in Delhi, already at the beginning of the new millennia, was that it was cheap enough to visit the Internet cafés for most of those who wanted. The majority of the cafés were quite crowded,

¹ In the southern settlement of Mundgod, where the Internet cafés are “the most obvious and tangible sign of ... progress”, according to the Tibetan journalist Lobsang Wangyal, the “the few cyber cafes do remain full throughout the day”, and “[m]ore such cafes are evidently needed” (Wangyal 2005).

some primarily by Westerners, some by Tibetans, and even those Tibetans who did not master the writing got friends to answer their correspondences. Today, Tibetan websites like *Phayul.com*, show that the use of the Internet since then has grown among Tibetans as for others. It has become a strong device within the Tibetan diaspora, not only for governmental institutions involved in the dissemination of information and education, but also to sustain a sense of unity within the young community. I will in this article, however, concentrate on the more relevant issues concerning Internet “as spaces of communication in which the identity, meaning and boundaries of diasporic community are continually constructed, debated and reimagined” (Mandaville 2003: 135). A short discussion of some of the features defining the Tibetan diaspora is needed though, before turning to the present condition

The Tibetan Predicament

Regarded as an essentially religious culture by Westerners, Tibetan culture has often been considered a living repository of a wisdom lost to the surrounding world. The Western perception of Tibet has varied considerably over the centuries, ranging from descriptions of a feudal hell ruled by a pope-like despot, to a Buddhist nation populated by a happy and content people, living according to Buddha dharma and ruled by a benevolent Bodhisattva (Dodin and R  ther 2001, Lopez 1998a). Since the 1920s and even more so after the Tibetan exodus in 1959, however, Tibet has to an increasing extent become envisioned as a kind of timeless Shangri-la (Bishop 1993, 2000). This image is frequently invoked by Westerners, either as an instrument of cultural critique, or as a way of expressing personal affinity with Buddhist culture. Among Tibetans, on the other hand, this image is mainly used to enforce their claim that the survival of Tibetan culture is, or at least should be, of interest to the rest of the world. Tibetan culture is not only unique, it is argued, but embodies contemporary ideals of living thereby constituting a culture whose existence is of global importance.

Since 1959 and more intensely since the end of the 1980s, the Dalai Lama and the government-in-exile (Central Tibetan Administration, the CTA) have proclaimed the Tibetan nation as being an essentially Buddhist nation, in consonance with the ideals of the international community. The proclamation of a religious, or more specifically Buddhist, nation is no coincidence, given that Tibet in its relations with the surrounding world pre-1959 mostly defined itself in religious terms. Under pressure, however, cultural agents usually select and emphasize certain parts of their culture and history to give validity to their claims of being a unique culture. In Tibet’s case it is a message with global intentions: save the Tibetan culture and thereby save the world. One might say that even if the Tibetan people earlier defined itself primarily in religious terms, the features now defining the Buddhist nation are clearly influenced by its diasporic condition and the need in the world for a pristine culture, pure in its religious motivations and practices (Piltz 2005).

Since the end of the 1980s the Dalai Lama and the CTA have expressed willingness to acquiescence regarding the Tibetan nation's future status, no longer demanding a free Tibet. Most importantly, the CTA now claims that Tibet should remain part of China, as explicitly stated in the Dalai Lamas 10th of March statement in 2005 (Tenzin Gyatso 2005). According to this policy, China should take responsibility for Tibet's foreign political relations while representatives of the Tibetan people should handle cultural and religious concerns. In essence, the CTA appears willing not only to give up their right to independence, but also to any kind of autonomy where the democratic reforms introduced in exile would be of any substance and meaning. According to the 10th of March speech (2005), the Dalai Lama not only considers it more realistic for the Tibetans to stay within China, but also of material benefit to his people (Ibid.).

The main problem with this position is that if the CTA forsake its political status as a Government-in-exile, it simultaneously gives up Tibet's right to independence. As long as it contests China's right to be in Tibet, which it effectively does by the established government-in-exile, it also keeps its legitimate status as the rightful government of Tibet (van Walt van Praag 1987). That is, only by keeping up the fight for *rangzen* (independence) can it rightfully claim *rangzen*. Moreover, by acknowledging China's protectorate status over Tibet, it goes against what seems to be the will of a majority of the Tibetan population, in exile as well as in Tibet.

Through this policy, implying a shift in emphasis from *rangzen* to religion, the formal bond between the people and their perceived nation-state is weakened. Now the primary interest seems to be to preserve Tibetan Buddhism, the "jewel" of Tibetan culture. One problem with this is, of course, that Tibetan Buddhism has managed to survive quite well outside Tibet, a fact effectively undermining the argument that the nation-state needs to be restored for Tibetan culture to survive. Hence the identification of Tibetan Buddhism with Tibetan culture makes the need for a national territory of minor importance. As long as Tibetan Buddhism is strong in the rest of the world, it will not be extinguished. This is most unfortunate for the Tibetan people, of whom the majority seem to long for their lost homeland. Indeed, among young Tibetans nationalistic sentiments generally seem to be a stronger motivating force than the survival of their religion. This does *not* imply that their Buddhist belief is weaker than among older Tibetans. Some, if not many, of the younger generation perceive religion, however, as of lesser importance to solve their present predicament, and are more interested in a truly free Tibet – an independent nation-state – than in the creation of a Buddhist community within China's borders, based on religion and culture, but destitute of political rights.

As the Tibetan scholar Jamyang Norbu has pointed out (Norbu 1994), the creation of this modern Buddhist nation implies a rewriting of history: Tibet before 1949/50 has according to Norbu taken on the flavour of the future Tibet, in consonance with contemporary ideals. This rewriting of

history has had the unfortunate effect that some Tibetan youth have come to believe in the stereotyped and romanticized version of the country their parents once left. Needless to say, reality does not correspond with this notion of the Tibet-that-was, but that only seems to leave them with the unpleasant feeling that they somehow do not correspond with what Tibetans ideally should be like. It should be noted that the image of Tibet as a real world Shangri-la is most widely shared by young people in the margins of Tibetan exile society. Those belonging to the more well-to-do categories often seem to be well aware of its pros and cons, not succumbing to the contemporary image-making.

There are other consequences with the creation of this Buddhist nation. Even if historical Tibet might be said to have been a Buddhist nation, the nation being created today through a rewriting of Tibetan history is modelled on Western or international ideals. The Tibet that is now proclaimed – and proclaimed to have always existed – is a community in which the people conform to these ideals: the people of Tibet is, and has always been, religious and non-violent, respecting all living beings, never fighting or mistreating other humans, animals, or the environment (Barnett 2001, Huber 2001). This can be considered the outcome of identity politics, which involves the creation of a language of similarity, rendering the politics of difference possible (Piltz 2005). That is, by recasting history in contemporary terms of environmental care, gender equality etc., one creates the impression that these ideals were not only existing in Tibet but also that they were conformed to – and thereby constituting a natural part of – the Tibetan people’s life as followers of the true Buddha dharma.

As a consequence of this policy, new opportunities for the Tibetan nuns have arisen. Their new role as symbols for a future Tibet, as well as keepers of the Tibetan tradition, has opened up new doors for education and possibly for a more enhanced religious position in the future. Another outcome of this “positive comparison” is that the people in Dharamsala are indirectly supposed to live more as members of the Sangha than as laypeople with divergent opinions, needs and goals. When a beauty contest was incorporated into Lobsang Wangyals *Free Spirit Festival* it was openly criticised by *Kalon Tripa*, Prime Minister, Samdhong Rinpoche, for being what he called “un-Tibetan”, against the values of Buddhism, and, indeed, against the Tibetan cause. Given the political importance of being the positive Other, Tibetans has to be superior in merit compared to the rest of humanity. From a political point of view, however, this beauty contest might be said, not to work against the cause of Tibet, but rather to question the stereotyped and static culture of Tibet proclaimed by the CTA.

It is generally accepted that the features defining a community in exile is shaped both from remembrance and from forgetfulness. What separates the Tibetan community in exile from other refugee communities, however, is the all pervading myth about Tibet, which has been reinforced in

and through exile. The 14th Dalai Lama is often considered the factor making the difference, and that might be true, but in general our readiness to listen to his religious message is matched only by our reluctance to hear his political counterpart. Donald Lopez showed already in 1998 how the image of Shangri-la obscured the real and important issues within the Tibetan diaspora (Lopez 1998b). Robert Barnett (2001) and Toni Huber (2001) demonstrate how the Tibetan Administration uses these images to establish that Tibet and the Tibetan people always have lived in accordance with global ideals of gender equality, human rights, environmental care etc. Both Clare Harris (1998) and Kiela Diehl (1997, 2002) show how artists are forced either to do what they are expected to do, or quit doing it. Even if Magnusson (2004) questions Kiela Diehl's analysis of the Yakbands dissolution and considers the outcome rather as a natural part of musical bands coming and going, I think it would be a mistake to underestimate the control within the Tibetan society in exile; the hard lines drawn up in the name of cultural and most specifically religious survival. Still, this kind of research seems to be rare. Even though most researchers are well aware of the political implications of Tibet as a real world Shangri-la, they do not, as a rule, consider the Shangri-la image as of any real importance for Tibetans in general. This is quite unfortunate since it is what I would consider the most salient feature among the Tibetan youth, an aspect of their society they constantly have to relate to. Not only does this image foster their conception of right and wrong, it also defines the limits of discourse, effectively drawing lines for acceptable critique and cultural change.

In this article I will use examples from the internal discussions taking place within the global network of the Tibetan website *Phayul.com*. Internet has become one of the main means for the younger generation to uphold a sense of belonging to the Tibetan community and is today not merely a place for sharing information, but a space where the young discuss their predicament, and their future, while debating what constitutes “the Tibetan way”.

Internet studies usually concentrate on the possibility for more open and democratic discussions, and for a less hierarchical and rigid right to opinions, especially when it comes to discussions about religion and its interpretations (e.g. Karim 2003b, Larsson 2002). It is certainly a more open forum for people from all walks of life. And even if it might be said that the percentage having the possibility to use the Internet in general is quite low (Karim et al 2003), this is not the overall case within the Tibetan population, though young men tend to be overrepresented (a quite common phenomena, see Tsaliki 2003: 165).

The examples I have selected arose in one case from a review, published on *Phayul.com* April 22, 2005, of the Tibetan directed movie *We are no Monks: A struggle for Identity*. The review, written by Topten Tsering, had been read no less than 4769 times by March 21 2006, and 55 commentaries had been posted by that time. These commentaries, like those following the article “Rinpoche, where is

the magic?" (my second example in this article), are both interesting and typical of the rhetoric prevalent not only on the Internet, but also in a day-to-day identity discussion within the young community of Dharamsala (though not as explicit and at times vulgar as on the Internet).

We are no Monks

The movie by the Tibetan director Pema Dhondup follows the daily life of four young Tibetan men's life in Dharamsala at the beginning of the new century. It concentrates on the relations within the exile community in Dharamsala and on the predicament of being refugees. It also brings to the fore the violence prevalent in most refugee communities, although seldom spoken of in the Tibetan case; between Tibetan youth and their Indian hosts as well as the violence within families and as an undercurrent within society as a whole. That is, the wish for vengeance and the need of attention (that the world's attention usually goes to terrorists, not to those practicing non-violence) officially held in place by Buddhist culture.

The reviewer of the movie is quite positive and he writes approvingly about the concept of putting focus on Dharamsala of today as well as on the violence existing within the Tibetan society. As the title reveals, this movie is not about monks but about ordinary Tibetan youths in Dharamsala: "It's not about behaving like monks or being perceived to be like monks, or any other version to the Tibetan stereotype there is in between. The film tips on its end the fragile kaleidoscope of Tibet's political tragedy, more particularly the exile experience, and asks of the audience these important questions: will the Tibetan freedom struggle turn violent? Will there be Tibetan suicide bombers?" (Tsering 2005).

Regardless of the movie's message and substance, what seems to have upset some of the commentators on *Phayul.com* is not the subject as such, but the title. One commentator writes under the subject "Bad title":

Please do not demonise the 'monks' by giving such 'title' to a movie. The director maybe making his big career and business move by 'misusing' the noble name of the Tibetan monks. Think about big directors who are very sensitive in using and picking titles? I never heard a movie name which demean or demonise other part of their society. Even Spielberg or Michael Moore wouldn't take this liberty!! (posted by Drapa May 7, 2005. 03.10 AM).²

On May 4 someone posted his or her views regarding the title, or rather, regarding monks. Possibly the same author as the above, but under a different name ("monk fan") writes:

² I have chosen throughout this article to correct misspelled words, though not the grammar (unless stated). I have also changed this and the following quote from "monk fan" from capitals to lowercase letters.

The movie title itself is derogatory to the monks and it's unfair to the majority of the Tibetan monks. 'We are no monks' shouldn't be the title as it reads as it means young Tibetan hate to be monks or monkhood is something that we hated. The director should have thought from the both side before picking this title of the movie. Our leader is a monk, our history is dominated by monks, our present political leadership involves monks and there are thousands of monks in Tibet and in exile and in monasteries all over the world. By the way, what monks is the director talking about? (posted by "monk fan" May 4, 2005 01.52 AM).

Namling from Boston, USA, manages to upset some readers when he states that monks are "doing what the lay people [do] as [a] whole [...] lots of monks do unbelievable and intolerable things", ending with "[the] whole world knows that" (posted May 4 04.43 PM). One response he gets states that "Namling, you are a disgrace if you are Tibetan and you must be an atheist or anti-buddhist or [anti-]Tibetan" (posted by Bhoypa, May 4, 2005 10.51 PM). Another says simply "You [Namling] don't fit in the Tibetan society", and that he should go live with *injis* (Westerners) and "lick their kuup!" (tib. for "behind"). In Tibetan society it is "not acceptable to insult their [monks] name for somebodys movie business or promotion" (posted by xyz May 4 2005, 10.58 AM).

Aku from USA even considers the movie as working against the Dalai Lama's vision of Tibet. He writes under the subject heading "Stop! 'VR no Monks'":

Folks out there, if you have not watch the documentary "VR No Monks", better not watch if you are follower and strong supporter of His Holiness the Dalai Lama's vision of Tibet. For me this absolutely a waste of my time and energy watching and thinking about this documentary. For Pema Dhondup La, I give a big Applause! for his hard work and being a Tibetan director. But I am not at all happy for the film. The film is totally opposite to what His Holiness vision of Tibet is. The world supports His Holiness for his non-violent way of saving Tibet. If we even think of resorting to violence, we will lost everything what His Holiness has worked so hard so far on regards to Tibet. So folks, in my opinion I am totally against this film. To save Tibet and to save our brothers and sisters in Tibet, continue to follow and support His Holiness the Dalai Lama's approach. LONG LIVE HIS HOLINESS THE DALAI LAMA. No matter what, I am for His Holiness the Dalai Lama. Nothing can bring Tibet to world table other than His Holiness the Dalai Lama. He is only thing we have (posted by Aku June 7, 2005 12.01 AM).

The critique as such does not really consider the movie, or the review, but the implicit statement made by the director when he chose to name the movie "We are no Monks". Monks, and thereby Buddhism, are for many Tibetans Tibetan-ness *per se*, and considered their only way to survival: both their culture as such, and the recipe for its survival. Their public identity is strongly linked to them being Buddhists, and it is considered a threat to their situation, should they become "like everybody else" (i.e. stripped of their religion).

The divide between those who advocate cultural change or put focus on problems within the community – and thereby offering critique of the pervading belief that religion will solve their situation – and those whose sense of being Tibetan reside deep within the sphere of the religious leadership is obvious. Monks, of whom the most prominent of course being the Dalai Lama, have become sacred in a more extended sense than before since religion has officially been identified as their only way to survival. Responses to critique of the exile community often ends with the statement that it is implicitly a critique of their leader; a heresy even avoided by the most hard-headed intellectuals. This divide is even more explicit in the discussion following the article “Rinpoche, where is the magic?” which resulted in a heated debate about monks, religion, and the future of Tibet.

Rinpoche, where is the magic?

Posted in October 2005 by the Tibetan writer Thupten N. Chakrishar, the article “Rinpoche, where is the magic?” is highly critical of the “Tibetan way” of putting “others before self”, the Tibetan people’s passivity, and their tendency to put their lives in the hands of religion. By August 2006 it had been read 9108 times, and 373 comments had been written. Chakrishar, a Tibetan poet and activist among other things, based in New York, writes:

Sometimes, I think we are so blinded by religious faith, that we consult Gods for everything. His Holiness, realizing the effect of religion on our life, gave us a chance to select our political leader, one who could think freely outside the box and lead us into this competitive, challenging, manipulative and sometime dirty political world, but ah! We chose another Rinpoche to lead us.³

Chakrishar then turns to one of the most problematic issues among youth in exile; the question of freedom, *rangzen*, versus autonomy.⁴

My grandmother was tortured and killed by the Chinese. About 1.5 million Tibetans have sacrificed their lives for Tibet’s independence and still they expect me to say that Tibet is a part of China.

I feel we are like a handful of sheep in a wild jungle filled with ferocious wolves, expecting them to understand and be compassionate to us, believing we shouldn’t fight.

We spend hours before Chinese embassies shouting “Free Tibet” and “Chinese Go Home”, while our delegates visit Lhasa and Beijing with smiles on their faces and the “Middle Way” mantra on their lips. And we still expect the Chinese leaders to trust us.

³ Samdhong Rinpoche, from the Gelug order, was recently (June 2006) re-elected as the Tibetan *Kalon Tripa*, or Prime Minister, in exile.

⁴ Tenzin Tsundue, a young author and activists, has earlier expressed the same confusion as Chakrishar does in this article. See Tsundue 2004.

It hurt, when our leaders requested all Tibetans and supporters not to protest because there was a dialogue going on.⁵ I was shocked and angry. First of all, I wasn't protesting because anyone told me to. I was fighting for the rights of my people. That moment somehow broke me down. It was like cheating our brave men and women who fought for 'OUR' freedom. All of a sudden I felt stupid.

As an argument for the more violent activist stand, he interestingly selects a quote by the revered Mahatma Gandhi. Gandhi is often used within the exiled community to emphasize the necessity of non-violence, not only from a religious perspective:

I do believe that, where there is only a choice between cowardice and violence, I would advise violence. I would rather have India resort to arms in order to defend her honor than that she should, in a cowardly manner, become or remain a helpless witness to her own dishonor. (M. K. Gandhi quoted in Chakritsar 2005).

He blames the Tibetan leadership for betraying the Tibetans inside Tibet, “judging our own fight impractical”, and ends his article stating: “Now I am 25 yrs old, and have come to the conclusion that Rinpoche and Trulkus don't have any supernatural powers. They never had any. Such was the world I lived in. That was what I thought”.

The frustration that runs through his article is obvious and his need for something to happen is shared by most of the young people I have met. That he explicitly accuses the religious leadership of failure and of putting focus on questions that keep themselves in safe positions while sacrificing what should be of outmost importance (*rangzen*), though, has enraged many of those young who feel it is essential to follow their leaders and to keep a sense of unity within the community. This unity is considered very important in the public sphere, in front of the eyes of the world. Tenzin from Dhasa (Dharamsala) writes “I think the owner of the website mr. norsang la needs to be careful while choosing articles to publish. this kind of essay simply shows disunity among Tibetans which i feel you should avoid publishing” (posted on October 8, 2005 11.18 AM).

The argument that they should remain united in front of the world is hardly new, and most of the young are perfectly aware of the need to live up to the world's expectations to be able not only to get political support in a long term perspective, but in a short term perspective to be able to live in exile with the help of financial aid and sympathetic surroundings.

As with the movie “We are no Monks”, the discussion that sprung from Chakrishar's article soon turns to the issue of religion. Since he so boldly accuses their religion and its religious leader-

⁵ The request Chakrishar is referring to is probably the statement made by the *Kashag* (Council of Ministers) in March 2005, or a request to that effect published afterwards, where they appealed to all Tibetans not to do anything that might go against the “Middle way policy”, which of course includes any activities calling for *rangzen*. See “Statement of the Kashag on the 46th Anniversary of the Tibetan National Uprising day” 2005.

ship for prolonging their predicament, the debate turns to the question of religious knowledge. The same writer as above, Tenzin, in his/her comment, chooses as one of his/her arguments against Chakrishar, the latter's "shallow knowledge of buddhism". That the author, or opponent, has no knowledge of Buddhism and/or Tibetan culture, or at least not enough - for if they did they would not write or say what they did - is actually the most frequently used accusation from Tibetan youth when they dislike or disagree with others. As T. Tashi from Kathmandu puts it in his comment: "Well... well... Mr. Chakrishar, here is my comments, it seems that your article might be thought provoking only to those one sided and to frustrated ones with a limited knowledge on our history, culture, and on our precious religion based on Buddha's wisdom" (posted October 9, 2005. 04.03 PM). He even compares Chakrishar's article with the Chinese slogans during their torture of the Tibetans, yelling "call your lama and protector for protection".

Tashi Tsering from Kathmandu writes again, a couple of hours later, and then uses the same rhetoric as before, writing under the subject heading "the writer is dead meat": "...in this article you are destroying our culture more than the Chinese. so stop this nonsense and do something useful for the protection of our culture and the people. you have responsibilities on your shoulders being a writer so think before you do this kind [of] shit." (Posted October 9, 2005 07.53 PM)

In some cases the "warnings", or threats, aimed at people with unwelcome opinions are even more explicit. A few of those sympathetic to Chakrishar's article also connect these "warnings" to what happened, for example, to the Tibetan author Jamyang Norbu, who suffered a beating in Dharamsala for publishing controversial and critical views of the Tibetan leadership. Chodhar, a monk from Bylakuppe (India), considers it a better way to use words rather than physical violence, commenting though that the "languages of some of the commentators suggest there is still no room for democracy in exile". Chodhar concludes this statement with: "He [Chakrishar] could have kept quiet⁶ and live happily and peacefully [...] but he has braved himself into raising an issue which I think is welcome. [...] as a monk [I] think he is right because my faith with Renpochy collides with my democratic expression and as a good Buddhist, I like to keep quiet" (Posted by Chodhar October 9, 2005. 12.32 PM). Dolma Tsering from Toronto, Canada, likewise brings up Jamyang Norbu, and writes "Thupten; there will always be people to discourage you, our community is all rotten. Look what happened to Jamyang Norbu, Lhasang Tsering etc. There is so much dirt into our heads" (posted October 8, 2005 07.45 PM).

Another topic raised is that of Tibetans in the West versus Tibetans in Asia, living for the most part in India and Nepal. What is worth remembering is that *Kalon Tripa*, Samdhong Rinpoche, actually has said that those in the West have little or no part in keeping the Tibetan culture alive and

⁶ He spells here, and in the sentence below, quiet as quite. I have presumed though that it is quiet he means and therefore exchanged these.

well. “Realist Utsangwa”⁷ writes from Paris: “Seem Mr. Chakri is comfortably settled in USA but others who have to make pragmatic decisions to save Tibetan people and culture inside Tibet, the stark realities of geopolitics is very different” (posted October 7, 2005 11.14 PM). “dd” from “us” writes “The point is Tibetans in the west plays a supporting role, not a major role”, but in addition states that those in India does not really play one either; concluding that the Tibetan cause “is a one man operation, H.H.D.L.[His Holiness the Dalai Lama]” (posted October 11, 2005 05.39 PM). “Loden” from New Mexico asks “Freelance”, who has been condescending towards Tibetans in the West why he thinks they have no part in shaping the future of Tibet. “Freelance” replies with a question of his own: “... can you [tell] me what you are doing for Tibet independence in New Mexico in day to day life? Don’t tell me you are trying to speak Tibetan at home, telling horrible stories to your friends at school, and so on. What is the real concrete stuff you are doing?”

“Freelance” goes further, stating that “the naked fact is, Tibet [is] not only vanishing from inside [Tibet], but from outside [in exile] as well like you are everyday having more diminished Tibetan character, your children will be more Americanised Asian who is no different from an American Chinese” (posted in October 10, 2005 12.51).

An interesting point is that intellectuals and critics, if they have the possibility, often choose to leave India and the more conservative settlements, for, preferably, a life in the USA. This becomes controversial when *Kalon Tripa* effectively undermines their influence by saying that Tibetans living in the West is of lesser importance in the struggle to preserve Tibetan culture and identity in exile.⁸ The divide between their religious leadership and those intellectuals critical of the official policy will most probably grow deeper with this attitude from the Government-in-exile. Samdhong Rinpoche is known to be outspoken, and his condemnation of the above-mentioned beauty contest in Dharamsala surprised many young Tibetans and raised questions regarding democracy and change as well as a discussion concerning what is suitable for a Buddhist. In this case, the critique coming from Thubden is effectively undermined as he is not even considered a “proper” Tibetan by those who are the targets of his critique. “Freelance”, who is a frequent writer, uses this argument when he writes, “I think the author is not even clear what Rinpoche means in its literal and contextual sense. This in turns proves how illiterate the author is about Tibetan language and its contextual implications!” (posted October 13, 2005 01.57 PM).

I will not delve further into the comments in this article, since the first week of comments will suffice to get a feeling for the sentiments, the discussions and the rhetoric prevalent in the discourse of Tibetan identity, as expressed on *Phayul.com*.

⁷ Utsangwa, meaning somebody from the area of Ü-Tsang (central Tibet).

⁸ “New Year Interviews... Part two” 2004, “Exile Administration does not interfere...” 2004.

Conclusion

Even if most scholars within the area of Internet studies emphasize the media's capacity in offering new possibilities for questioning authorities, there is still some need for hesitation. In the Tibetan case it is definitely a novelty for the "common people" to be able to discuss freely, and in writing question their religion and religious authorities. At the same time, the diasporic condition has put an even greater emphasis on the need to stand united. Since their leader is a monk and Buddhism is defined as the core of Tibetan identity, it is an arena where one has to tread carefully. The Dalai Lama's statements, for example, seldom receive any commentaries at all, since it is considered a heresy to criticize or question the greatest authority of them all. Many of the young, regardless of education or social standing, consider the Dalai Lama their "father, mother and god"; with infinite wisdom and the ability of foretelling what will be for the best in a longer perspective.

Generally speaking, Internet is an open arena in the sense that everyone can read and write what they want (with some restrictions). That aside, it is as well a potent instrument for control within the young Tibetan community. Being accused of being not only a "lazy Buddhist", or not a Buddhist at all, is perhaps not as bad as having one's ethnicity questioned in the present situation. Implicitly, or explicitly in some cases, the Tibetan youth risk to loose their sense of belonging by crossing the visible or invisible boundaries that exist between "good" and "bad", Tibetan and "anti-Tibetan" views.

Aware of this, many prefer to keep for themselves their doubts about religion and its salvaging effects on their present predicament. Others decide not to back down from their convictions and thereby put themselves in a position where they might find themselves isolated from the majority of Tibetans. The Internet constitutes in this case not only an arena for debate, but even more so for control of the public identity. The collective identity is often regarded as essential for a community depending on the surrounding world for support, and for a people where the question of safeguarding tradition and accepting cultural change is considered a question of life and death. *

* I am indebted to "Helge Ax:son Johnsons Stiftelse" for funding my work on Tibetan Youth and their interaction on the Internet.

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