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# Introduction: Place, space and identity: the cultural, economic and aesthetic politics of Tibetan diaspora

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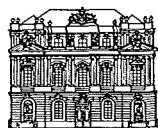
Volume IV

# Tibetan Culture in the Diaspora

Papers Presented at a Panel of the  
7th Seminar of the International Association for Tibetan Studies,  
Graz 1995

Edited by

Frank J. Korom



VERLAG DER ÖSTERREICHISCHEN AKADEMIE DER WISSENSCHAFTEN

TIBETAN CULTURE IN THE DIASPORA  
Papers Presented at a Panel of the  
7th Seminar of the International Association for Tibetan Studies,  
Graz 1995

Edited by Frank J. Korom

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# INTRODUCTION: PLACE, SPACE AND IDENTITY: THE CULTURAL, ECONOMIC AND AESTHETIC POLITICS OF TIBETAN DIASPORA

by

Frank J. Korom, Santa Fe

## Overview

In a recent review article on "refugees and exile," Liisa Malkki (1995) suggests that Europe has played a pivotal role in defining refugees and also in forming global policies towards their care. As she states (1995: 497), "it is in Europe emerging from World War II, that certain key techniques for managing displacements of people first became standardized and then globalized." One could also add the United States and Canada to the list of European countries that have served subsequently as the shapers of cultural policy concerning refugees. Malkki admits that people have always sought sanctuary and refuge in other countries, "but 'the refugee' as a specific social category and legal problem of global dimensions did not exist in its full modern form before this period" (1995: 497-498). To be sure, the period between World War II and the end of the Cold War produced the largest number of refugees due to decolonization and superpower conflict (Hein 1987: 47-48). Yet while a number of superpowers were decolonizing, some continued active policies of pulling their neighboring countries into their ideological fold. The one that interests us here – namely, the People's Republic of China (PRC) – was pursuing a colonization policy in neighboring Tibet.

The Seventeen Point Agreement signed by the PRC and Tibet in 1951 allowed Tibetans internal autonomy in exchange for Chinese suzerainty in foreign affairs. But as a resistance movement in the eastern Tibetan province of Kham became more problematic, the PRC's attempts at political ascendancy intensified, ultimately leading to the Lhasa Uprising in 1959. This is also the year that witnessed a mass exodus out of Tibet to the neighboring countries of India, Nepal and Bhutan, which followed after the fourteenth Dalai Lama, spiritual and political leader of Tibet, fled to India, where he established his government-in-exile in the Himalayan hamlet known as Dharamsala.

Now, the Department of Information and Internal Relations of the Central Tibetan Administration (CTA) in Dharamsala estimates that nearly 131,000 Tibetans have been exiled since the Chinese occupation (CTA 1995: personal communication). Of these, the majority (app. 125,777) remain close to the Tibetan border in India (110,000), Nepal (15,000) and Bhutan (1,457), while the rest are scattered in communities situated in no less than eleven nations around the world, mostly in Europe and North America (cf. Korom 1996, in press a). The fact that these figures differ slightly from those provided by Methfessel in this volume suggests that no systematic census has been carried out by the Tibetan government-in-exile.

It is true that Tibetans are only a small percentage of the overall refugee population in the Occident when compared to displaced populations closer to home. Perhaps it is this sense of distance that makes Tibet seem so insignificant on one level of meaning. On another level, however, Tibet and its people have played an important role in the Western *imaginaire* (cf. Korom in press b), occupying an exoticized mentalscape beckoning the foreigner into its midst. This exotic image, based on early travel literature and ethnic stereotypes (cf. Bishop 1989; Klieger this vol-

ume), certainly played a role in decisions to resettle Tibetan refugees in Europe (Sander 1984: 137), but the "making familiar" of the exotic through relocation has not really allowed for the total domestication or localization of the exotic, as the exhibition and book both titled *Exotische Welten – Europäische Phantasien* (Pollig 1987) seems to suggest. It would be incorrect, however, to posit that this process is simply one created solely in and by the West, as Elliot Sperling (1992) reminds us. Such exoticization is obviously not limited to Europe, for China, as well as many other Eastern nations (cf. Schwartz 1994: 201-354), also engages in presenting its own minorities – including Tibetans – in not only an exotic but also erotic light (Gladney 1994). The unhappy blending of the exotic and the familiar is further related to the sociological issues of assimilation and acculturation, one of the themes of this book.

For all of its earlier perceived exotic qualities, Tibet and Tibetans have escaped the serious attention of scholars interested in the comparative social and humanistic study of diasporas and exile. Malkki's review essay referred to above, for example, does not discuss the Tibetan diaspora at all, nor do other recent surveys of diaspora literature, such as James Clifford's 1994 overview. While it is true that a number of significant studies have been written about Tibetans in exile (cf. bibliography), there has been very little attempt to look at the interactive dynamics of the Tibetans' emergent culture in their new homes. It is also imperative to relate the Tibetan data comparatively to the experiences of other refugee communities, since, as Clifford writes, "diasporic forms of longing, memory, and (dis)identification are shared by a broad spectrum of minority and migrant populations" (1994: 304).

Writing on the subject of Tibetan lifeways in the diaspora is in its infancy, yet the dire need to theorize about population movements across national boundaries is extremely relevant to life in the modern world. The essays in this book attempt to engage a number of complex questions about diasporic culture that should be of interest to Tibetologists as well as a wide range of researchers working in and around the margins of established academic disciplines.

### **Place, Space and Cultural Production**

The rapid dispersion of Tibetan ethnic groups gradually led to the establishment of a global communication network with Dharamsala at the hub. From this central location, Tibetan politicians attempt to maintain and project a self-perceived homogeneous culture, including not only religion and language but also traditional arts, crafts and performing traditions. The same network also serves as a passageway for the transportation of material goods across borders, creating a loosely structured transnational flow of commodities (Appadurai 1991). In India, for example, an infrastructure for the economic movement of goods along this communication network has already been well-developed, as Methfessel (1995) has shown. Moreover, all of these avenues of exchange provide an ideal case study for an analysis of the relationship between transaction and meaning (cf. Kapferer 1976).

In reality, Tibetan governmental representatives worldwide know that Tibetans must adapt in order to succeed in their newly adopted host countries. Thus a strategy of "limited acculturation" has developed over time to allow Tibetans living outside of the homeland to continue practicing their own cultural traditions, while simultaneously adjusting to local lifeways. But the balance has been difficult to achieve. Sociological studies (Brauen & Kantowsky 1987; DeVoe 1981; Goldstein 1975; Marazzi 1975; Messerschmidt 1976; Michael 1985; Nowak 1984; Ott-Marti 1971, 1976; Saklani 1978; Sander 1984) of Tibetans living abroad suggest that some refugees are having difficulties negotiating their multiple identities, and that "pure" Tibetan culture has suffered as a result (cf. Korom 1996, in press a). Realizing this, the transnational Tibetan community itself has taken steps to revive Tibetan cultural practices. Centers, cooperatives and

schools have been established in Tibetan settlements worldwide to preserve, or in some cases reintroduce, performing arts, craft traditions, language and religious instruction. Religion, of course, has played a quintessential role in keeping this global community together; that is, faith in Buddhism and in the Dalai Lama's office has provided the cohesion necessary for maintaining a form of "proto-nationalism" (Dreyfus 1994) within a broadly dispersed world society (Schwartz 1994). Of course, one must also account for the important role that Bon plays in diasporic culture, as Mona Schrempf's contribution to this volume does. The challenge that remains is to see what forms the revival will take as temporal and spatial factors continue to have an effect on Tibetan global culture.

Because Tibetan expressive traditions have become intimately associated with identity and ethnicity (Klieger 1989), arts, crafts, literature and performing traditions, both sacred and secular, stand at a critical crossroads. International supporters of Tibet and Tibetans themselves note the declining rate of artistic production by trained individuals who have gone into other fields of employment abroad. Generally, this seems to be true, since no traditional system of patronage exists in the Occident to compensate artisans for their talents (but see DeVoe 1983). As demand has decreased, artisans have turned to other occupations, producing crafted objects only on occasion. The decline is perceived as a genuine threat to cultural preservation by many policy makers. However, some exceptions do exist, for Tibetan artists and performers utilize their aesthetic skills to negotiate their identities in exile, as the essays by Calkowski, Huber, Klieger and Schrempf in this volume exemplify. For example, Karma Phuntsok, a Tibetan painter living in Australia, has combined innovatively Aboriginal themes with traditional Tibetan techniques to come up with a marketable style that suits Australian aesthetic sensibilities, and the Tibetan flute player, Nawang Khechog, combines traditional flute playing from Tibet with harmonic singing, didgeridoo, pan pipes and a number of other wind instruments to attract the lucrative New Age music audience. But at the same time, some Tibetan artisans consciously resist the syncretic tendencies of transnational culture in their attempts to keep "tradition" conservative and free from the influences of their host cultures, as Ström (this volume) suggests about Tibetan monastic practice in India.

Similar revivalist phenomena are occurring with Tibetan artisans in Europe and North America. Some have even received governmental recognition for their talents. In the United States, Karma Sherap of Salt Lake City, has received funds from the Folk Arts Apprenticeship Project to train younger Tibetan refugees in the art of rug weaving, while the Ford Foundation has supported opera artists from the Tibetan Institute of Performing Arts (TIPA) in Dharamsala, India to spend time at American colleges and high schools giving workshops for Tibetan community members and their foreign hosts. The overall result has been a slow revitalization of artistic traditions. This has led to a fluidity of style and a redefinition of aesthetic canons. To use an example from New Mexico, a Tibetan craftsman runs a table saw to make furniture for the showroom at American Home Furnishings (Korom forthcoming). Further, a Tibetan stone mason in Massachusetts utilizes his skill in building *stupas* to restore masonry work on state park lands (Williamson 1996: 16-17). These are some of the ways that individuals are adapting to economic and cultural circumstances in the West.

In South Asia, the scenario is somewhat different. A large bulk of the crafted objects used by Tibetans or intended for export are being produced in cooperatives and training centers in South Asia. Established to revive the arts and crafts as well as to provide a livelihood for unemployed Tibetans living in India, Nepal and Bhutan, these centers are the creative lifeline of the exilic community. The ratio of Tibetan craft centers to habitation sites clearly demonstrates the socio-economic centrality that craft production plays in Indo-Tibetan refugee communities today. Re-



search reports from Nepal (e.g., Walter 1993) also seem to suggest that craft training and production play an even larger role in the Kathmandu Valley than they do in India.

The Lower Tibetan Children's Village Arts and Crafts Centre (McLeod Ganj), the Library of Tibetan Works and Archives (Dharamsala), the Tibetan Institute of Performing Arts (Dharamsala), the Crafts Complex at the Norbulingka Institute and the Tashi Jong Tibetan Craft Community Centre, along with the Tibetan Handicraft Charitrust Organization in New Delhi all produce and market a wide variety of Tibetan goods, as do a number of organizations in south India and the Kathmandu Valley. These items range from textiles (woven cotton aprons, appliqué work, woolen rugs and seat covers) to ceramics, jewelry and painting. Such objects have socioeconomic importance and histories of their own (Appadurai 1990a). But this is not to say that arts and crafts production is only economic, being produced for the international tourist trade alone (cf. Graburn 1984). On the contrary, many of the items have a highly symbolic value in the culture that nurtures their production.

Based on my initial impressions, place seems to be one of the central themes of Tibetan diasporic arts. Philosophers (Heidegger 1958; Bachelard 1961), geographers (Tuan 1975, 1991) and psychologists (Hallowell 1977; Zwingmann 1961) have all pointed out that the notion of place serves as a basic factor of human orientation. Moreover, studies by theorists of diaspora (Chow 1993; Clifford 1992, 1993; Malkki 1995; Hein 1993) reinforce the central importance of place as an organizing principle and as a creative key to imagination. Even though the Tibetan refugees live in a "deterritorialized" (Appadurai 1990b) state, the very fact that they may never return home creates a more intensified yearning for the homeland. This yearning becomes a major preoccupation and, in a sense, replaces the real possibility of returning home. Muhammad Anwar's study of Pakistanis in Britain, *The Myth of Return* (1979), makes a very similar point; that is, the construction of an imaginary homeland fills a necessary, nostalgic void in the lives of migrants and refugees (cf. also Seidel 1986). Thus, the longing for the homeland functions as a therapeutic for many who know that they may never return. In other words, the yearning replaces the actual phenomenon of physical repatriation, allowing the individual to remain loyal to a "stateless society" (Samuel 1982).

Unlike other displaced people who have been uprooted by war (e.g. Afghans, Hmong), Tibetans do not generally depict horrific scenes of combat in their commodified artistic productions, even though Tibetan children's art has, on occasion, shown graphic evidence of conflict and political oppression, as is the case with artwork produced in the Tibetan schools of Dharamsala and Mussoorie. This may be due in part to a Buddhist adherence to the doctrine of non-violence. Yet mainstream Tibetan arts do reflect displacement in subtle ways that are not always noticeable at first glance.

What the keen observer notices is a strong emphasis on place. In fact, a whole genre of popular song (Diehl forthcoming; cf. also Goldstein 1982: 64-65), based on the *rang btsan* or "freedom" metaphor described by Nowak (1984), has emerged to elucidate the strong nationalistic desire to return home. Place, imagined or real, thus becomes a central metaphor for the construction of identity in exile. Quite often this metaphor is expressed in and through material culture as well. The last 20 years has also witnessed a dramatic transformation of the plastic arts. Woolen rugs (cf. Denwood 1974: 77-81) and cotton textiles have slowly begun to reflect the yearning for the homeland. Weavers now incorporate motifs of geography and architecture, and religious and national symbols into their designs. The Lower Tibetan Children's Village Arts and Crafts Centre (LTCVAC), for example, is now producing showpiece rugs of the Potala Palace in Lhasa. Similarly, the Tibetan Institute of Performing Arts (TIPA) utilizes a large painted backdrop of the Potala Palace for their Lhamo (traditional opera) performances. In the past, Lhamo

was performed just below the immense palace on festive days (Calkowski 1991; Snyder 1979). Now, however, due to exile, Tibetan performers use a painted Potala to visually frame their performance space. Contemporary Tibetan performers wish to preserve the image of the Potala's centrality by using the backdrop as an *aide memoire* for spectators. Although some impetus for producing such items has come from a marketing strategy aimed at the tourist sector (e.g., Yeshi 1985), the same sorts of objects can often be found in Tibetan homes throughout the world. Many older Tibetans living in Rikon, Switzerland, for example, hang painted and woven images of the Potala on their walls.

The last decade has also seen a rise in the number of Kalachakra mandalas (wheel of time sandpaintings) created for foreign patrons abroad (cf. McLagan this volume). Like the Navajo tradition of sandpainting (Gold 1994), the Tibetan form is intended to be destroyed after completion. Now, given the fact that this is a highly complicated ritual activity that must be performed by trained monks, the current international demand is greater than monastic personnel are able to meet. As a result, with initial impetus coming from Europe, weavers at the LTCVAC have been given permission to make a limited number of lifesized replicas of the mandala in wool. Thus far, only approximately seven are displayed abroad, since prior permission from the Private Office of H.H. the Dalai Lama is needed before a mandala rug can be commissioned.

These few examples of the power of place in Tibetan artistic traditions could be supplemented with others. For example, in addition to providing sorely needed income, the making of ornately sewn national flags has, in and of itself, become an aesthetic and social activity. Further, ethnic dolls clothed in regional costumes are produced by monks at Norbulingka with the intention of reminding refugees of their provincial traditions within Tibet (cf. Yeshi 1985). Ironically, these quaint dolls have not found an indigenous market; rather, they are consumed almost exclusively by tourists. Very few can be viewed in the homes of Tibetans living in India. Nevertheless, the intentionality behind these emergent craft forms seems to suggest a purposeful attempt to locate the homeland at the center of refugee discourse. Although Templeman (1995) disagrees with this point, arguing that images of place rather suggest the perpetuation of the romantic image of Tibet in the West, we must remember that even such romanticization is the result of ongoing negotiations between Westerners and Tibetans, as the essays included herein clearly demonstrate.

The production of such objects also allows Tibetans to draw foreign sympathizers into the realm of traditional crafts patronage. This has resulted in an ongoing dialogic (cf. Bakhtin 1981) process in which Tibetans constantly and consciously redefine themselves according to the expectations of their new patrons (DeVoe 1983; Klieger 1989: 202-275). Based on this assumption, one could still argue that all of the above examples are intended to keep the image of the homeland vivid in people's minds, not only in diasporic Tibetan minds but also in the minds of Western sympathizers, for as McLagan argues (this volume), the dynamic and highly politicized process of Tibetan identity formation is a dialectic created from the mutual interaction of hosts and guests in a process Dean McCannell (1984) has termed "reconstructed ethnicity."

The emphasis on place suggests a somewhat conservative attitude towards change in that it attempts to keep Tibetan refugees focused on the past (cf. Appadurai 1981; cf. also Lowenthal 1985). One would think that this "nostalgia for the past" would hinder acculturation and social change. Yet, as can be gleaned from the examples above, change is indeed occurring, and new styles of art and performance are emerging to reflect this change. The very idea of having to keep the notion of place alive is a clear and creative result of being displaced.

As temporal factors pose a threat to imaginings of the homeland, so too do spatial ones (cf. Anderson 1991). Tibetans living outside of the Indic subcontinent have been even more re-

moved geographically from their origins. This has resulted in a greater rate of assimilation and more drastic changes in artistic style. One *thangka* painter in Santa Fe, for example, has recently completed a painting that powerfully reflects cultural encounter: a Himalayan scene with an unidentified *bodhisattva* (enlightened being) meditating on one peak and Santa Claus riding his reindeer sleigh over another. In this example we notice an ingenious attempt to overcome a "situational incongruity" (Smith 1982); that is, a blending of legends and beliefs to reflect the East-West clash in one unified frame of reference. Similarly, Karma Phuntsok's paintings ironically juxtapose Aboriginal sacred sites with Tibetan ones in an attempt to describe visually the "hyphenated" (Brody 1995) identities of Tibetan-Australians. This sort of "cultural clash" is alluded to in Klieger's (this volume) utilization of Umberto Eco's (1990) term "hyperreality" to characterize the production of hybridized cultural artifacts at the margins of society where innovation and change occur most frequently (cf. Kapchen 1993).

Rug weaving is a good case in point to illustrate how economic patterns, rules of supply and demand and local circumstances influence styles and tastes. Most rugs produced in India and Nepal by Tibetans are entering the European and American markets through middlemen. These "culture brokers" (cf. Ioannou 1989; Steiner 1994) request pieces to be woven in certain colors and with certain geometric patterns that appeal to Western sensibilities, not necessarily Tibetan ones. Bright red medallion motifs centered on fields of green are replacing more traditional deep blues and grays and earthen tones. Color is further affected by an increase in the use of synthetic dyes and millspun New Zealand wool. Yet, as I have already suggested above, I do not wish to suggest that contemporary Tibetan crafts produced in exile are merely "tourist art," (cf. Bentor 1993) for Tibetans themselves are consumers of many products now being produced for a global marketplace. A visit to any Tibetan home in South Asia would, for example, provide the visitor with glimpses of 3' x 6' rugs being used to cover sleeping cots. The indigenous use of locally made objects as well as the commodification of material culture for economic gain abroad are both central to understanding the dynamics of craft production and aesthetic choice in exile. Moreover, these same factors contribute to the spiritual, political and ethnic image of Tibet and Tibetans in the West.

### **Prolegomenon to the Study of Tibetan Diaspora**

Is style self-consciously manipulated for economic gain? Do Tibetan refugees intentionally utilize cultural traditions to express diaspora? Do foreign perceptions of Tibetans differ from Tibetan self-perceptions? If so, how do these foreign images influence Tibetan ideas pertaining to their own identity? How are these ideas then put into action to create distinct patterns of ethnicity? And how do Tibetans ultimately reconcile their past with their present? These are just some of the many complex questions that the papers in this volume raise.

The discourse on culture in exile that emerges from the papers in this volume suggests a number of approaches to the study of ethnic identity formation through religion, representation, performance, politics, ecology and economics. Discussing Lhamo performances, Marcia Calkowski points out that more than two groups are involved in the dialectical process; that is, the construction of culture in exile takes place on many levels and with many conversation partners as Axel Ström also points out. Meg McLagan, following Melvyn Goldstein (1994), refers to this as a "confrontation of representations." For her, the representation of culture is a collaborative process involving Western, Tibetan and Chinese, as well as exilic constructions of culture, which are all interrelated. This has led to what McLagan and Calkowski both describe as a "self-conscious objectification of culture." In his discussion of the "green identity" of Tibetans in exile, Toni Huber adds that representations must be treated as facts for anthropological and historical

analysis, since they are produced in specific contexts and used to "negotiate human existence." I have already pointed out that the Tibetan diaspora has led to newly emergent forms of culture. In fact, McLagan goes so far as to state that putting culture on display in new contexts itself is a contemporary mode of representation (cf. also Myers 1994). Mona Schrempf adumbrates the same argument in her discussion of 'cham performances in India and Europe.

All of these strands of analysis raise searching questions. How does one control meaning? Is it through inscribed or embodied culture, as Calkowski, Klieger and Ström ask? The issue is who speaks for whom and with what level of authority? Huber and Ström both answer this question by suggesting that meaning is monopolized and controlled in a hierarchical manner from top to bottom.

It seems to me that with all of the essentialism of *Tibetanness* pointed out by Klieger, the central problematic is authenticity, which Deborah Root (1996: 79) has recently discussed as "a definition imposed from the outside on a living culture so that the community will never be able to live up to the way it has been defined" (cf. also Appiah 1994; Berman 1972; Handler 1986; McCannell 1973). Does the "logic of the market," as Fabian and Szombati-Fabian (1980) term it, the economic commodification of culture for political and ideological ends, create an artificial dichotomy between the real and the hyperreal in Eco's (1990) sense? Or does it simply draw attention to the need to reexamine and perhaps expand the canon which dictates the normative dimensions of aesthetic and expressive aspects of cultural traditions?

Perhaps there is a process of "domesticating the alien" (Goody 1977) occurring in Western imaginings of Tibet. If we follow McLagan's dialogic line of reasoning, we must view this domestication as a means of intercultural adaptation and survival. For example, Ström argues that one needs to look at aspects of tradition that converge upon common points of different cultures' interests in order to map patterns of continuity and change. His utilization of indigenous Tibetan categories for determining continuity and authentic authority seems to be a good methodological starting point of departure. But it is also important to devise a transnational vocabulary to account for the types of emergent Tibetan culture that fit into broader strategies employed by displaced people worldwide.

One closing point to consider is that the joint construction of Tibetan culture in exile is a direct by-product of "modernity," broadly conceived as a public realm encompassing sites such as museums, sports arenas, restaurants and pubs, open spaces (e.g., gardens and parks) as well as social activities including television and video-viewing (Naficy 1993), music-listening (Diehl forthcoming) and internet-surfing (McLagan 1996), to name just a few (cf. Breckenridge 1995). Sites and activities such as these, while not all the result of modern or postcolonial global processes, are spaces within which modern culture is synthetically produced in the late twentieth century from an unlimited number of possible sources. Virtually all of the papers in *Tibetan Culture in the Diaspora* address issues relating to modernity.

Rinzin Thargyal's contribution to this volume, for example, argues that both the concepts of secularism and nationalism in the exiled Tibetans' worldview is linked to the ideas of progress and modernity. Moreover, Huber's analysis of the development of environmental correctness in the Tibetan refugee communities today is an ecological image clearly resulting from emerging global notions of modernity propagated via a number of media. Klieger and McLagan also suggest that mass-mediated forms of Tibetan diasporic representation must be seen as part and parcel of a transnational and intercultural process of identity construction that cuts across virtually all social boundaries, be they national, ethnic, linguistic or cultural.

A number of recent thinkers on the topic of modernity and culture frame their discussions in

terms of consumption (e.g., Breckenridge 1995; McCracken 1988) and appropriation (Root 1996), as when Tibetan shaman robes are co-opted for advertisement and sale (cf. Kamenetz 1996: 49), or when Tibetan ritual implements are marketed as New Age jewelry (Korom in press b). Root (1996) terms this sort of appropriation as a "cannibalizing" of traditional culture for the purpose of commodifying difference. In this contested realm, even religion, something so precious to Tibetans, is "sold" in the marketplace (cf. Moore 1994).

We need to keep in mind, however, as the papers in this volume aptly point out, that a reappropriation for their own purposes of such commodified goods occurs precisely by the populations being essentialized. The study of Tibetan cultural production in exile must account for the various and complex nuances of cultural encounter and historical change if we are to find a theoretical "place" (Appadurai 1988) for Tibetan diaspora studies. This would allow research on exile currently being conducted in the field of Tibetology to become relevant to the broader sociological and anthropological issues that confront diaspora studies at large. We hope that the papers presented here are a step in that direction.

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