

Imagining home: the reconstruction of Tibet in exile

by Clare Harris

Since 1959 when the 14th Dalai Lama escaped from Tibet, more than 130,000 Tibetans have followed him into exile.

This unprecedented mass migration of Tibetans is the result of an ongoing conflict between Tibet and the People's Republic of China (PRC) over questions of political autonomy and cultural self-determination. Tibetans continue to follow their spiritual leader into exile due to a fear of persecution and the ongoing repression of Tibetan religion and culture within what the Chinese government calls the Tibetan Autonomous Region of the People's Republic. This article analyses the reasons why cultural matters have been given a high priority by a particular group of refugees and demonstrates the ways in which Tibetans have asserted their sense of communal identity and agency through the built environment and images.

Education for the next generation

Like all refugees, Tibetans live in the hope of return to their homeland but in his first year in exile the Dalai Lama recognised that this aspiration might not be immediately fulfilled. From the start he emphasised the need to reconstruct the monastic institutions of Tibet in exile, to preserve cultural traditions and to educate the younger generation in Tibetan values.

In the year when the first refugee school was founded at Mussoorie in northern India (1962) he wrote: "It is even harder for children than for adults to be uprooted and taken to an entirely different environment... We had to do something drastic to preserve their health - and their education was also a

matter of great importance. We know that our children in Tibet are being snatched away from their parents and being brought up as Chinese Communists, not as Tibetan Buddhists.... So in the next generation, the children in India may be very important people, a nucleus of the peaceful religious life we wish to retain."¹ In order to meet this challenge he set about acquiring land from the government of India and funding from NGOs. Most importantly, many of the projects established all over India incorporated a cultural component designed to assist in the process of enculturation. In general it could be argued that this culture-specific agenda has played a major role in shaping what, after 40 years, must be considered to be a very successful refugee community.

The image of Tibet in exile

For the frontispiece to his manual for aspiring Tibetan painters, the exiled artist Gega Lama designed an image of Tibet that placed it at the centre of the world.² This depiction of the vacated homeland demonstrates the pride that Tibetan exiles derive from the global awareness of Tibetan culture and their hope that Tibetan Buddhist values, pre-eminently embodied in the figure of the 14th Dalai Lama, will spread far and wide. However, it also suggests the impact of the sense of loss and displacement that accompanies the 'virtual social identity' of refugees, an identity whose core element is "the root of their troubles - they leave home because of who they are".³ Thinking about the Tibet they have been forced to abandon

unifies Tibetan exiles in the face of challenges to their ethnic and political identity and confirms the idea of an originating source in which their cultural roots may be replenished.

However, the delineation of the historic Tibetan homeland, which appears on many of the publications, T-shirts, posters and books of the exile community, also has a more explicitly political function as an icon of neo-nationhood. The shape of the land 'Tibet' has taken on an iconic status, instantly recognisable to exiled Tibetans and their supporters world-wide, as confirmation that an independent Tibet existed and covered a section of the globe as large as Western Europe. It is essential that the exiles remember and depict the 'Tibet' that was taken over by the Chinese - beginning in 1950 and fully effected by 1959 - and that they continue, despite the ravages of Chinese colonialism, to imagine it in a state of unity with fixed boundaries. Gega Lama has created an icon of the nation that Tibetans dream of while they are forced to make Tibet anew in other locations.

Reconstruction of pre-exile traditions

Creating exilic Tibet was initially a matter of dealing with the brute facts of physical survival in host countries, particularly India, which is given due prominence in Gega Lama's mapping of the Tibetan local-to-global nexus. The so-called 'capital-in-exile', at Dharamsala in Himachal Pradesh (India), which contains the exile government, monastic institutions and the home of the 14th Dalai Lama, Tenzin Gyatso, has been the primary location in and from which the self-conscious reconstruction of pre-1959 'traditions' has been executed.

An exilic elite of religious figures and artists, writers, performers and musicians has been at the forefront of the promotion of what is in fact an invented tradition of what it means to be Tibetan after 1959: an invention defined in terms of the imagined communities of Tibetan Buddhism and neo-nationalism. Within and without the elite, Tibetan exiles refer to themselves as *nangpa* or



Buddhist 'insiders', a term which emphasises their membership of a community of Tibetan Buddhists and in which pre-exilic regional and sectarian identities have been subsumed for the sake of social and political survival. The *nangpa* sense of Tibetan-ness is reflected in cultural style and the dream of redrawing Tibetan nationhood is therefore depicted by Gega Lama in the hand of an artist gripping a (Tibetan-style) brush whose point touches on the hem of the seated Shakyamuni Buddha as he makes the earth-touching gesture. The preservation-in-practice ethos of the Dalai Lama and the exile government has meant that the connection between the Tibetan homeland and the global community into which the refugees have been displaced is mediated through the Buddha and the Tibetan painter; a religio-cultural definition of what it is to be Tibetan has been given priority and painting is recognised as one of the primary signifiers of exilic identity.

In exile, *thangka* (religious scroll paintings) remain empowering within Tibetan Buddhist practice and as markers of important life-events. They continue to have a role when commissioned for the commemoration of the dead, to aid good rebirth, to tell tales of the Buddha and

bodhisattvas, to gain merit and occasionally to assist in meditation and visualisation and so on as they did in pre-1959 Tibet. Yet images made by Tibetan exiles (and not just *thangka* paintings) also provide recognisable proof of Tibetan identity, the tangible evidence of difference and cultural distinctiveness from the new local context. This is most markedly the case for public images such as murals in the new monasteries and temples of Dharamsala or government sponsored buildings such as the Library of Tibetan Works and Archives where the detailed painting of architectural features dresses the concrete frame in Tibetan style.

Aims of reconstruction

There are three main aims behind the official agenda.

1. Firstly, it enables exiles to represent exilic Tibet within the host community of India and the wider world. The built environment is the primary focus for marking refugee spaces as Tibetan. Even in the first decade of exile, orphanages such as those at the Tibetan Homes Foundation in Mussoorie, UP, India, were designed according to the principles of Tibetan architecture. In the staging of 'authentic' Tibet in dance, opera and theatre productions, images of the homeland frequently provide the backdrop, with the Potala Palace the favoured imagined location.
2. The second role for images refers to the need to educate the generations growing up in exile and to provide them with appropriate imagery for the new conditions. Some of these images are explicitly didactic but the majority are designed to ensure that the visual world in which refugee children grow up informs them of their culture and religion. Hence at the Tibetan Homes Foundation each home was provided with a simple image of the Buddha for their communal space.
3. Finally, there is a deep consciousness of recent history and the need to counteract the destruction of

Buddhist images in Tibet and the Chinese depiction of Tibet. As Gega Lama's mapping of exile shows, a sharp demarcation must be made between Tibet and China. For exiled image-makers, drawing the lines of difference has been an essential political task and making an image in 'Tibetan' style is thus a statement of resilience and resistance.

The implementation of these three aims has meant that the image of Tibet which is reconstructed in exile is envisaged in terms of the past and the traditional. Since for exiles 'tradition' refers to all that went before the disastrous break of 1959, its appeal is powerful within a process of psychological and cultural retrieval.

The majority of exilic images appear to recreate traditional artistic styles and techniques but an undifferentiated notion of tradition conceals the debates and dilemmas which underpin them. Works which for non-Tibetans may conform to a transparent category of traditional Tibetan art which has simply been preserved and relocated are often

the result of a selectivity exercise in which one historic style has been accorded the equivalent of state patronage. Broadly speaking the religious and preservative ethos of Dharamsala places high value on pre-1959 styles of painting while the politics of representation in that place has meant that other aspects of the history of Tibetan culture have to be negated. Hence the question of exactly how Tibetan exilic images should be designed - that is, in which style - is a matter of consequence, not merely of connoisseurship, in the Dharamsala art-world. In the 1970s, a debate over an important public commission demonstrated that, in their adoption or rejection of certain styles, refugee painters are seen to inscribe a political narrative; for just as there is no such thing as an 'innocent eye', there is no innocent brush. Those who wield the brush are required to demonstrate, both in their works and lives, that their Tibetan-ness is legitimate and authentic.

The continuation of Tibetan cultural practices in exile has therefore largely been entrusted to those who were born in Tibet and who had firmly established

reputations prior to making the journey into exile. The artists within this group are viewed by other Tibetan exiles as an endangered, and therefore extremely precious, species. Their knowledge, determined by years of physical presence in Tibet, means that they are perceived as cultural repositories with an embodied authenticity which the younger generation can only hope to emulate.

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For further information on the culture of Tibet, visit the website of the Tibetan Government in exile at www.tibet.com and the list of links at www.tibet.org/sft/culturallinks.htm

1 Dalai Lama *My Land My People*, 1962.

2 Gega Lama *The Principles of Tibetan Art*, 1983.

3 D De Vos 'The Refugee Problem', *Tibet Journal*, Vol XX, 1981.

Women performing a dance from Central Tibet in front of the Nmgyl Temple



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