

“History and Memory: The Making of a Tibetan Identity in Exile”
Rachel Meeks
Summer 2006

Note: Because the culmination of my research in Darjeeling will be my senior history thesis, this is simply a reflection of the successes, failures, and growth that came out of the research experience. I will submit a copy of my senior thesis to the Kellogg office after its completion in April 2007.

My experience this summer with the Tibetan refugee population in Darjeeling was the most frustrating and most rewarding challenge I may have ever faced. After keeping my cool through a two-day delay in Chicago, losing my bags in Delhi, and arriving at the Tibetan Refugee Center full of hope and anticipation, just to hear that they really didn't need or want any help from me, I considered throwing in the towel and coming right back home. I had imagined this research project as a way to reach out and serve a community in need as well as satisfy my own intellectual curiosity. Unfortunately, once I arrived, I was humbled by the disinterested and unimpressed Tibetan faces I saw all around me. They viewed me as another white face arriving in Darjeeling to marvel at the beauty and simplicity of the Tibetans and the mountainous environment in which they lived. This would be the first thing that the Tibetans taught me about doing social-historical research: don't assume poorer communities need your help.

Although I felt for a while like nothing was going my way, I did have the good fortune of being paired up with a Tibetan tour guide named Gyurmay. He seemed to think I was incredibly foolish for traveling so far just to ask his neighbors some questions about their lives – but I also think he pitied me and sensed that I needed some direction. During my first week in Darjeeling, he took me to the Hindu/Buddhist temple where all the Tibetans were celebrating “Universe Day”, to the Tibetan Refugee Center office in town where I was introduced to several senior staff members, and to the market to buy an umbrella (it was monsoon season and my rain gear was tucked away in my lost luggage). The Tibetans believe strongly in the idea of luck, and Gyurmay was mine.

Because the refugee center was not interested in looking after and finding jobs for volunteers, Gyurmay and I had to convince Mr. Chimay (the secretary and most senior member of the staff) to let me hang around the office in order to gather information about the center. He agreed to let me come in the mornings with the idea that I would do my own work at a desk they

would provide, and, when situations arose where my grasp on the English might be useful in their dealings with foreign customers who buy their handmade carpets, they would ask me for help. I readily agreed, grateful for any opportunity to observe the inter-workings of the refugee center. And with several members of the staff being women my age, I also hoped that this would be a way to make a few friends.

In the beginning, they were all fiercely shy – so much that I first mistook their behavior to be downright rudeness. Only Kunga, a 32-year old Tibetan woman who was educated through 10th grade and spoke decent English ever attempted to talk to me. She realized right away that if she brought me the basic message she needed to get across to a customer in Britain or Sweden or New Zealand, I could write the email in about two minutes and she could take an extra hour at lunch. Although it was uncomfortable in the beginning, the situation soon became mutually beneficial. I gained exposure to the inner workings of the refugee center, realizing it was a self-sustaining NGO funded through handicraft sales and not foreign aid. They gained a native English speaker as an office assistant.

My research began to really take off when I met Mr. Jampa-la. A refugee from Lhasa, Jampa-la came to India with his mother, grandmother, and younger brother when he was only 13 years old. Unlike many of the other refugees who came from farming or nomadic families, Jampa-la was a city boy and, thus, passionate about politics. He learned English in school and has made an effort to use and improve it whenever Western visitors come to the refugee center. I prepared for my meeting with him for hours, realizing that, as a politically aware and well-respected member of the Tibetan community who also happened to speak English, he was far and away my best shot at a translator. Gyurmay was wonderful, but his family was only loosely associated with the center and he had a full-time job that would never allow him to take entire afternoons off to help me conduct interviews. Jampa-la was my best chance and I had to convince him that my research project would benefit the community as well as myself. I got as far as “the stories of the older generation of Tibetan refugees are so important to the Tibetan cause...” and he was sold. We began interviews the next day.

During my five weeks in Darjeeling of actively doing research within the community, I conducted almost thirty interviews, primarily among the elderly women trained in traditional Tibetan handicrafts. Some were wool spinners, others were carpet weavers, and still others were knitters and painters. Their backgrounds were more diverse. I interviewed nomads, serfs,

household servants, and nuns – women of nearly every strata of society. I was able to interview a few of the oldest men in the community as well who were famous for their story-telling abilities. Two of them were bodyguards for the Dalai Lama stationed at Potala Palace when violence broke out in Lhasa on March 10, 1959. I also interviewed many of the younger adults that were born, raised, and educated at the center. They tended to speak a bit more English, though not much, and received significantly more education than their parents. Those employed at the center held the white collar, office jobs while their parents worked for much less pay in the workshops. I interviewed the TRSHC president (during his two-day visit), the secretary, several assistant managers, female office assistants, and a few medical technicians working in the center's health clinic.

The main objective of this thesis project was originally “to uncover the ways in which Tibetan refugees living in North India collectively remember the March 10, 1959 uprising.” I posed the questions: ‘What narrative of this historical event lives on in the memories and stories of the Tibetan people?’ and, ‘How important are these collective memories in the shaping of a Tibetan identity in exile?’ After reading about the Tibetans extensively and spending many weeks among them, I have come to a few significant realizations. The first is that, in the beginning, I was asking the wrong questions. I had read in articles and reports about how this diverse Tibetan population seemed to unify and homogenize in exile where they were all joined together under the same cause, and that the March 10th Uprising has become a rallying day for the people. This is all true. The problem was that all of the questions I originally posed were simply set out to confirm these facts, not to go beyond them. While in Darjeeling, I saw that I was in a position to let the sources lead me, instead of trying to lead my sources. Put another way, I feel like I was trying to confirm a story that had already been told instead of telling a new one.

When it comes to stories that have not yet been told, there are two in particular that I decided to explore. The first was the collective story of journey over the Himalayas told by the older carpet-weaving and wool spinning women at the center. They are the heart and soul of that place, and listening to story after story of their journeys into exile was not only fascinating, but also inspiring. They also spoke a great deal about the differences of being a woman in rural Tibet versus a refugee center in India. With almost thirty interviews to draw on, I feel as though I have the raw material for a really interesting experiment in oral history.

The second story, which is the one I am most excited about writing, revolves around the life of Mrs. Gyalo Thondup, the founder of the refugee center and sister-in-law of His Holiness the Dalai Lama. Chu Tan by birth, Mrs. Thondup was the daughter of a Kuomintang general from the Yunnan province of China. She met Gyalo Thondup, the elder brother of the Dalai Lama, in Nanking where she was serving as a nurse during the Sino-Japanese war. After they married, the Lhasa government refused to allow them to return to Tibet, as they felt that she might become a political liability. They moved to India in 1950 where they both became very active in Tibetan exile politics. Mr. Gyalo Thondup is well known for his leadership in the resistance movement and his involvement with the CIA. Mrs. Gyalo Thondup was the heart and brains behind the Tibetan Refugee Self Help Center in Darjeeling. Every Tibetan, old and young, would tell me, ‘You know she was a Chinese woman, but her heart was kinder than any Tibetan’s.’ Every story that was told, every interview that I conducted, every wall in every room – there she was. I was so interested in her that I began spending hours upon hours in the main office going through old letters, photo albums, and anything else that would help me understand why and how she built the center. It was this experience that taught me another lesson: until you really dig into your research topic, you can never know just how deep the rabbit hole goes.

While the discovery of Mrs. Gyalo Thondup and the humble beginnings of the Tibetan Refugee Self-Help Center was a significant accomplishment for me this summer, I do not consider it to be my greatest success. What was truly magical about my summer research experience was not what I acquired but the fact that I was able to acquire it. Slowly but surely, the people in the office began to know my face, to smile back, to offer me tea and most importantly, to share their stories. After first feeling alienated by culture and language, I was soon welcomed into the community. During my last week in Darjeeling, I was invited to an all day staff party where we pushed away our desks to dance and feasted on Tibetan cuisine; I attended a Tibetan wedding where I was dressed in a formal *chuba*, the Lhasa-style dress that all Tibetans in exile have adopted, and treated as a guest of honor; and I visited a Tibetan government school functioning in the countryside where my friend Yangzom served as a teacher. In the end, I had earned their trust. I had made friends. I had succeeded.