



Activism as Care: Kathmandu, Paris, Toronto, New York City

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ABSTRACT What are the possibilities for well-being in exile? If one is displaced, and in a constant struggle for what has been lost, can you be “well”? An individual’s answer to these questions might change on a day-to-day basis, or over the course of one’s lifetime. A definition of well-being is useful here: “the balance point between an individual’s resource pool and the challenges faced.” Resources the Tibetan community draws on include concepts and practices from Tibetan Buddhism, the leadership of the Dalai Lama, and political action and community care forged in the different contexts of lack of citizenship in South Asia and citizenship in the diaspora outside of it. China’s invasion and colonization of Tibet in the 1950s led to Tibetans fleeing south to India for refuge. In the six decades since then, the diaspora has spread around the world while many Tibetans also remain inside Tibet as part of the People’s Republic of China. In this article, I draw on ethnographic research in Tibetan communities in Canada, France, India, Nepal, Switzerland, and the USA from 1994 through 2020, including activism in the current Covid-19 pandemic. Notions of care embedded in Tibetan political activism enable possibilities for well-being even in times of loss. The idea of activism as care is the key.

Keywords: Tibet. Activism. Care. Citizenship. Refugees.

Introduction

There is no choice to opt-out. Being in exile, being a refugee, means one has a political cause. It means a commitment to something bigger than one’s own self, family, and everyday life. Exile includes a commitment to a community. This community might be organized on political lines or ethnic ones or geographic connections or any number of shared histories, beliefs, and practices. For Tibetans in exile, politics and religion jointly ground the community. Buddhist ideas and institutions frame Tibetan worlds, even for those few Tibetans who are not Buddhist, but are instead Muslim, Christian, or atheist. In exile, political activism is a community activity centred around the loss of country and home, around the shared project of restoring Tibet to Tibetan rule. Whether annual protests on March 10/Tibetan Uprising Day, solidarity with hunger strikers or self-immolators, sharing news about activist events over social media, or one’s own religious practice and prayers, there is no choice to fully opt-out of political activism on behalf of Tibet. Activism dedicated to regaining political sovereignty in Tibet is a community project in which all generations participate. It is a form of community self-care. That is, in the Tibetan exile community, to be an activist is to express care. Activism is care.

What are the possibilities for well-being in exile? If one is displaced, and in a constant struggle for what has been lost, can you be “well”? An individual’s answer to these questions might change on a day-to-day basis, or over the course of one’s lifetime. In general, though, the answer is yes. And in the specific case of the Tibetan exile community, I argue the

answer is also yes. A definition of well-being is useful here: “the balance point between an individual’s resource pool and the challenges faced” (Dodge et al. 2012). Resources the Tibetan community draws on include concepts and practices from Tibetan Buddhism, the leadership of the Dalai Lama, and political action and community care forged in the different contexts of lack of citizenship in South Asia and citizenship in the diaspora outside of it. China’s invasion and colonization of Tibet in the 1950s led to Tibetans fleeing south to India for refuge. In the decades since then, the diaspora has spread around the world while many Tibetans also remain inside Tibet as part of the People’s Republic of China. My ethnographic and historical research with this community began in 1994 in Kathmandu, and over the years has expanded to include Tibetan communities in Canada, France, India, Switzerland, and the USA. In this article, I draw on research in each of these communities from 1994 through 2020, including activism in the current Covid-19 pandemic. Notions of care embedded in Tibetan political activism enable possibilities for well-being even in times of loss.

Activists operate outside of the political mainstream. They challenge existing systems, demanding improvement or change or both. Activists are key to the formation of new political subjects (Rancière 1999, 2010). Refusing the probable in favour of the possible, activists open new and different possibilities for things deemed faulty, insufficient, or unjust (McGranahan 2016; Simpson 2014). Within anthropology, there are several strands of literature on activism, including *anthropology as activism* (Sanford and Angel-Anjali 2006; Willow and Yotebieng 2020) as well as *of activism* (Brosius 1999; Dave 2012, 2013; Edelman 2001; Gellner and Karki 2010; Ginsburg 1998; Haugerud 2013; Kunreuther 2018; Lee 2016; Pratt 2003; Shah and Shneiderman 2013; Weiss 2014; Zia 2019). As the study of activism, anthropologists have focused on “when, why, how, and with what effects a sense of injustice or grievance or other critique is converted to public protest or other displays of commitment to change” (Haugerud 2018: 8). Activism may include indirect political action such as petitioning legislatures or public marches, or direct action such as a Free Tibet protest at Mount Everest. For Tibetans in exile, activism is both direct and indirect, and is so in an expansive sense. The Tibetan political cause is one situated outside the political mainstream. No country in the world publicly supports the Tibetan exile government in their political struggle with the People’s Republic of China. Activism is political, but its framing is cultural. This is where care comes in.

To care is to help, to be concerned with, to feel for someone or something. Care is labour, tied to class, gender, race, and other markers of difference, and often requiring performances of happiness, innocence, and compliance while masking issues of power, inequality, and violence (Jones 2004; Parreñas 2018; Stevenson 2014; Stoler 2002). Care may be about or for; it may be affect or action. Caregiving can reveal symmetry between these as much as disjuncture. A rich body of scholarship on caregiving in institutional settings shows the moral components of care, including moments of disregard or abandonment (Biehl 2012; Buch 2013; Fassin 2008; Mol 2008; O’Neill 2019). Generating care about something, getting people to care, developing sympathy for others, is a common topic or problem in some communities, and is analysed as such within academia (Edmiston 2020; Puig de la Bellacasa 2017; Rutherford 2009; Schrader 2015). Care, it is suggested, should not be taken for granted. Instead, we need to collectively figure out “how” to care or what “good” care is or can be.

These are indispensable questions, ones that need to be asked and answered. But they are not universal. For the Tibetan community in exile, the premise of a lack of care that needs to be cultivated is absent. Instead, in the form of compassion/*snying rje* (“nying jey”), care is the central framing concept of community (Childs 2004; Lewis 2019; McGranahan 2012; Yeh 2002). To live a good life requires holding and practicing compassion for all sentient beings, that is, for creatures with the capacity to feel suffering. All creatures that have not achieved enlightenment exist in a state of suffering. Tibetan notions of care and compassion have thus long included non-human worlds. Well-being comes from working to help all sentient beings be free from suffering. What does this work look like? Prayer. Cultivating compassion. Caring for animals. Making offerings to the deities in the morning. Supporting monks, and also nuns, in their dedication to alleviating suffering through spiritual study and practice. These actions are not abstractions. Instead they are practices that are culturally embedded in ideas of a good person, a good life, and the right motivations needed for each. This is both a “mode of practical engagement” with the world as well as a moral sense of “obligation and responsibility to the more-than-human” (Gagne 2018: 7; Lewis 2019). *Snying rje* in this Tibetan Buddhist sense is deeper in meaning than its translation into the English word “compassion” suggests (Yeh 2002: 236). As such, while cultivating *snying rje* includes public acts of religious merit-making, it is best explained as a “daily lifelong practice” (Yeh 2002: 236). As *snying rje*, compassion is (ideally) something you do, something you have, and something you are.

Care’s relationship to activism comes via compassion. The Tibetan cultural mandate to commit oneself to relieving suffering for all sentient beings is not an individual decision one makes. Some individuals choose to become nurses (a highly popular occupation for Tibetans in exile), others might go into government service, and others still are leaders in political activism. Such occupational paths are linked to personal practices of compassion, but follow from the community-wide embodiment and practice of *snying rje*. All people, regardless of their gender or age or occupation or income level or so on, are understood to be in the realm of suffering and thus to need to cultivate *snying rje*. Right now, for Tibetans in exile, practices of care extend to include political activism, especially the need to alleviate suffering in relation to the loss of sovereignty. Suffering gives rise to compassion, and in the Tibetan context enables “agency in the face of structural violence” (Lewis 2019: 23). As anthropologist Sara Lewis argues (2019), the Tibetan community is skilled in the development of equanimity (*btang snyom* “tang nyom”) and spacious mind (*sems pa chen po* “sempa chenpo”) in relation to crisis.

If care and activism are in part about securing individual and community well-being, home is a key part of this well-being. Home is a sense of being grounded in the world. To be grounded is not just an individual phenomenon, but one experienced collectively in community. As such, feeling at home, feeling one has a home and a place in the world, may be considered a measure of well-being (El-Shaarawi 2015; Said 2000). In troubled times, well-being suffers. What happens, however, when troubled times are indefinite and extend across both decades and generations? This is the Tibetan experience. Multiple generations of refugees share in this loss of home, some who were born in Tibet and others who were born in exile, each of who possess individual and collective memories of Tibet even if they have never been there in person. For this community, well-being necessarily involves the securing of Tibetan political sovereignty. This is a collective rather than individual endeavour, a form

of community self-care as shared political commitment. This commitment is grounded in cultural resources such as Buddhist thought and practice, as well as in material efforts to provide for and protect the community through improving economic standards, education, and health. Based in Dharamsala, India, the Tibetan exile government is the centre of these cultural, material, and political efforts (Ardley 2003; Lokyitsang 2016; McConnell 2016). But, ideas of care in the community are not only about being cared for by the government, but caring for each other including with longstanding practices of mutual aid. Everyday mutual aid practices are amplified in times of individual and community crisis, such as the current Covid-19 pandemic. Care is activism is care.

Sharing Joys and Sorrows: Mutual Aid, Connection, and Compassion

I first learned about *skyid sdug* (“kyidu”) as I lay on a pharmacy floor. Holding me up, Kesang had walked me there from her home close to the Boudha stupa in Kathmandu. I was woozy, very sick with gastrointestinal distress, and we needed medicine. The effort to get to the pharmacy exhausted me and I fainted on the floor right in front of Kesang, the pharmacists, and all the other patients. Pharmacies in Nepal can be crowded places, and luckily for me, there were two people there who Kesang knew—a husband and wife. The man was *pha yul gcig pa* (“phayul chigpa”) with Kesang’s husband. This connection to the same district, or *pha yul* (“father land”), in Tibet came with a series of connections and obligations. That day in the pharmacy, I was barely conscious and unable to walk. The man fetched his car, and Kesang and his wife somehow got me into the car, and he brought us home. In the midst of all the chaos, Kesang also managed to collect my medicine. The next day when I was feeling better, she told me what happened, and also why. This was my introduction to Tibetan concepts of connection and compassion.

“We were lucky he was there,” Kesang explained. *Pha yul gcig pa mi* are people who help you when you need it. “This is what we do for people from our same district. They [the same couple] helped me before when I was pregnant. And we help people from our district when they arrive here from Tibet.” Over the next five years, I would witness this again and again in situations of need and friendship. If *pha yul gcig pa* was an informal mutual aid relationship, then *skyid sdug* was a formal one. “We also have groups for each *pha yul*,” Kesang explained. “They are called *skyid sdug*. They have lots of parties.” She laughed, sharing some of the more colourful details of a recent party, and then continued as I asked questions. “You pay to be a member of the *skyid sdug*, and give the money you can. Rich people have to give more. Then when someone needs the money, if they have a baby or if someone dies, then the *skyid sdug* gives money. They help out in person too, making food and taking care of people.” And then she turned back to the pharmacy. *Nga tsho dpe bsod sde chen po red*, she said again. “We were so lucky. T. Tashi was also at the pharmacy, and he is connected to Lobsang Tinley [her husband] because they are both from Lithang. He is someone we can ask for help.” This happened in June 1994, my very first summer of preliminary fieldwork with the Tibetan refugee community in Nepal. Fast forward eighteen years, to the summer of 2012 and once again I was at Kesang’s house. But this time it was in Toronto, not Kathmandu.

Lunch that day was at an Indian restaurant. I was with two activists from the Students for Free Tibet-Canada office, and we had an animated conversation about politics and citizenship and asylum. We talked about their work and my research, and shared stories about people we realized we all knew. My respect for these young activists and the work

they were doing was immense. When I returned to Kesang's house after lunch, I shared my excitement with her. She listened, then asked, "The man, what was his family name?" I didn't know off the top of my head, but reached into my bag to get his business card. I said his full name out loud. Her face changed with a knowing smile of recognition. "I thought so!" she said. "Did you know who he was?" I said no, I knew him only as a young activist I had just met. "His father is the one who rescued you," she said. "T. Tashi. That day in the pharmacy. He drove us home." Almost two decades later, on another continent, these two families and me, the anthropologist, were still connected.

Mutual aid practices are important for refugees. Yet, practices such as *skyid sdug* predate the Chinese invasion, and were used by Tibetans in earlier times both inside and outside Tibet. Written in 1956, anthropologist Beatrice Miller's description of "kidu" in Darjeeling is still accurate today: "The kidu is designed to function as a source of aid and comfort during the life crises or major prolonged illnesses of its members. In these circumstances, the kidu contributes as a unit toward the expenses incurred by its members" (160). *Skyid sdug* have elected leaders and also treasurers and sometimes other officers. Embodying the culturally-valued idea of connection as "sharing joys and sorrows," mutual aid groups such as *skyid sdug* are a "peculiarly Tibetan" phenomenon (Miller 1956: 157), and remain vital in the exile community (McGranahan 2010: 64-65). For my earlier research with Tibetan resistance army veterans, most of whom were elderly men originally from the eastern Tibetan region of Kham, *skyid sdug* and *pha yul gcig pa* connections were invaluable. They provided social outlets as well as economic security and a sense of belonging, especially for those men whose families had remained in Tibet. In Kalimpong in the mid-1990s, three decades after Miller's research in neighbouring Darjeeling, I quickly learned that I had to schedule my visits to people's homes around *skyid sdug* parties, as well as to avoid scheduling interviews for the morning after a party. However, if mutual aid organizations are an important part of exile life, they are not a substitute for what has been lost. It is always, it seems, part of the conversation that we are refugees, we are in exile, we are not in Tibet.

Without Rights: Political Protest as Community Self-Care

What does political activism look like without rights? If you do not have the rights to free speech or political opinion or even to gather in public, then what forms of political activity are available to you? Answering these questions requires dislodging the citizen as the unmarked or presumed subject in the world. To be a citizen is to have rights. But to be a citizen is not a given, not all peoples in the world hold citizenship, and thus not all individuals have rights. This is not about taking rights for granted, or acknowledging that rights can be distributed unequally and unjustly among peoples who should possess them without discrimination. Instead, it is to acknowledge that some individuals in the world are not citizens, and thus do not necessarily have rights at all. Some might have been citizens in one country, but are now living in another country where they are not citizens. Whether or not such undocumented people have rights, and what those rights are, is determined inconsistently across countries. Others have never been citizens in the first place. This is the situation for many Tibetans: not possessing citizenship, including from birth, is a normative condition for Tibetan refugees in India and Nepal.

By definition, to be in exile is to be away from home. However, exile is not a singular category. Exile in South Asia rests on a different set of histories and possibilities than does

exile elsewhere in the world. Each region, each country, has its own logics and rules for foreigners. Foreigners are, of course, also not a singular category. There are tourists and expats and migrants and refugees and traders and missionaries and diplomats and mercenaries and pilgrims and students and scholars and more. Some borders between communities and countries are open; others are not. Different rules exist for how long one may stay in a foreign country, including the possibility of no real rules at all. This is the case in South Asia, the only region in the world where not a single country has signed on to any of the UN conventions on refugees.

Tibetans have no state-guaranteed rights in India and Nepal, nor a path to citizenship in either country even if they were born there. They cannot vote, own property, qualify for certain jobs, or have bank accounts. Within the community, there are some groups of Tibetans in each country who have found ways to work around the system to secure certain rights ranging from property ownership all the way up to citizenship. A partial list includes Tibetans who were resident in India prior to 1959, some individuals who allied with the Nepali king in the early 1970s, the community of Majnu ka Tilla in Delhi (Balasubramaniam and Gupta 2019), and a handful of intrepid individuals who have pursued citizenship in the high courts of India (Gupta 2019; McGranahan 2018). Protest is something Tibetans also do not have a right to do, and yet political protest is a ubiquitous activity in exile. Protest in exile is linked to protest inside Tibet which, while rarer, is also at much higher risk in terms of the lethal power used by Chinese security forces (Barnett and Akiner 1994). In addition, therefore, to the ongoing, even everyday political activism of those in exile, Tibetans outside Tibet also publicly support and communicate to the world activism by Tibetans inside Tibet. In the last decade, this has been most striking in response to the self-immolations conducted in part as a form of political opposition to Chinese rule (Buffetrille and Robin 2012; McGranahan and Litzinger 2012; Woesser 2016). Of the 165 self-immolators, 154 were individuals inside Tibet who also did not have the right to protest.

Activism without rights is a form of refusal. It is to insist on the validity and truth of one's cause. It is to claim a public voice regardless of whether or not it has been granted by governmental authorities. Refusal can be a form of wellness, and wellness involves both caring and being cared for (De Michelis 2020). Refusing citizenship means that care of the Tibetan refugee community in institutional form is in the hands of the exile Tibetan government, led by the 14th Dalai Lama until he retired from political leadership in 2011. The Dalai Lama is a figure, a person, an institution distinct in the world. He is a bodhisattva, an enlightened being who chose to come back to earth in human form to aid others on their path to enlightenment. Tibetans understand the Dalai Lama to be the embodiment of wisdom and compassion, an individual who while here on earth as a human being is also much more than that. In 1642, the Dalai Lama lineage began spiritual and political rule over Tibet, a period of governance that lasted until 1959 with various periods of disruption and displacement. Fleeing into exile in 1959, the Dalai Lama's role as caretaker of the Tibetan people was amplified in a new way. He is spiritual teacher, root guru for many Tibetans, who place their faith and trust in him, and in exile has also taken on new secular caretaking aspects via the building and safeguarding of the refugee community. In turn, "service" to the exile government is seen as not just civil service, but also as respect to and care for the Dalai Lama.

Service is intricately tied to cultural notions of right behaviour and motivation. To serve matters deeply. It should not be self-serving, however. As with activists elsewhere, including among youth political activists in Nepal, people differentiate between politics as opportunity and politics as service (Snellinger 2018: 58). The qualities of others' political service is debated—who is most sincere, most devoted to His Holiness [the Dalai Lama], and most accomplished. Accomplishments hinge on two things: if it benefits His Holiness, and/or if it benefits Tibet. Broadly speaking, benefiting Tibet is to work toward regaining sovereignty. Sovereignty will return the Dalai Lama to Tibet and reunite the community, including the many families who have been separated since 1959. Political activism on behalf of Tibet has been part of Tibetan public life in South Asia since the early years of exile. Protests were often cultural events and family affairs, involving monks and prayer, school children performing “traditional” songs and dances while parents and grandparents looked on appreciatively, and politicians and activists made speeches. Over time, things have changed for Tibetans in India and Nepal. Political protests and even cultural events that were once allowed are now policed in severe ways or even banned altogether.

Tibetans who protest against the Chinese government, or who have gathered for the sole purpose of celebrating the Dalai Lama's birthday, are sometimes beaten by police officers. Sometimes they are also arrested or detained, and physically and verbally abused, including being told to “go home to Tibet.” What does one do in such a situation? Some continue to protest, as with the well-known activist and writer Tenzin Tsundue, as well as activist groups such as Tibetan Youth Congress and Students for Free Tibet. Others choose to stop joining public protests, and find other ways to commit themselves to sovereignty. And still others choose to leave India and Nepal, traveling to countries outside of South Asia for safety, for work, and sometimes for rights and citizenship. Police abuse and the inability to publicly protest against the Chinese government is sometimes considered a legitimate reason for receiving political asylum elsewhere. A lack of rights to freedom of expression may be interpreted as a form of political persecution. Receiving political asylum puts one on a path to citizenship including rights long denied to multiple generations of Tibetan refugees in South Asia. In the diaspora, people have quickly learned that rights extend well beyond the ability to protest against the Chinese government. Rights are also about establishing and asserting one's place in the world.

Kathmandu: Exile Dreams of Home

“I don't dream about this place.” Nyarong Gyurme said this as he looked around the room in which we sat talking in a Tibetan refugee camp in Nepal. “Before I used to dream about Tibet, about my village. Now I don't even have those dreams often.” His sentiment was echoed by other Tibetan elders with whom I've spoken over the years. They don't dream of the Jorpati or Jampaling camps in Nepal or of the Majnu ka Tilla settlement in Old Delhi. Instead, home is somewhere else. After decades in exile, the referent for home is not India or Nepal. Instead, they figuratively and literally dream of home in and as Tibet. This is about sovereignty as much as nostalgia. Tibetans are refugees because the People's Republic of China (PRC) invaded and took over their country. Under the leadership of Mao Zedong, Tibet was colonized by China, becoming a formal part of the PRC and thus losing its sovereignty. In 1959, after Tibet's leader the Dalai Lama escaped into exile in India,

thousands of Tibetans followed him. Many left behind their families, their animals, and other belongings; all left behind their homes. Six decades later, what are the possibilities for home? In exile, community dispossession in the loss of country is met with a continuing political struggle to regain it. Actions to regain home inside Tibet are paired with refusals and reproductions of the status quo outside Tibet. This is not necessarily a contradiction, but instead a reflection of political possibility in the contemporary world. Fighting for home requires shifting relationships to the possible, including the possibility of making home elsewhere prior to regaining sovereignty.

For many decades in South Asia, home in exile was only ever elsewhere. Home was Tibet to which refugees did not have access. They could not go home, nor could they communicate with family members inside Tibet. From 1959 through the mid-1980s, no contact was possible between individuals inside and outside Tibet. People had no way of knowing what the status was of their parents, grandparents, brothers, sisters, and other relatives left behind. Following the death of Mao in 1976, the Chinese government introduced liberalization policies in Tibet. In the 1980s, small numbers of people began to legally move across the border to Nepal and on to India, and large numbers began to clandestinely escape from Tibet to life in exile. This erratic movement of people was accompanied by an informal communication and courier service. At the time, postal mail and phone services did not exist between South Asia and Tibet. Informal personal couriership was therefore crucial once the border opened. Packages of clothing and sturdy shoes containing secret stashes of money hidden in them were sent from India and Nepal, while packages of special dried mushrooms, yak meat, and other local delicacies were sent from Tibet. Transiting both ways were letters, photographs, and self-recorded cassette tapes.

Oral recordings are one way to connect to home. In the 1990s, generations met for the first time over cassette tapes; reunions took place; once again people heard the voices of their loved ones. Such cassette recordings provided occasion for a wide range of emotions: tears, joy, hope, fear. Usually recorded over cheaply available music tapes—of Bollywood hits, of Tracy Chapman albums, of the Titanic soundtrack, of Nepali folk music—the preferred genre to record was song rather than spoken message. All types of songs were sung: village songs, ritual songs, songs for courtship, and popular contemporary songs in a range of languages. In exile, these tapes were played endlessly, especially during Losar, the Tibetan New Year. The exchange of songs between families split by the Chinese invasion of Tibet bridged the gap between home and exile. Such meaningful moments are generative of affective ties as well as of dreams.

One morning in 1998, Kesang told me of a dream she had the night before. In it she dreamt that her brother from Tibet appeared unexpectedly at her home in Kathmandu. In the dream she saw her family members, her mother, both fathers, and brothers as well as her village, their house, and the land surrounding it. She told me that it was just like seeing her family and her home in person. “I rarely dream about Tibet,” she said, “even though I try to when I go to sleep.” The day before she had listened repeatedly to a cassette tape of her mother and brothers singing songs. Amidst her excitement was an element of sadness. Dreams, she explained, are not real. They are about real things, but fall short of the experience she truly wants which is to be home in Tibet with her family and with the Tibetan government back in place. Her dream is a momentary respite from being here rather than there. The distance between “this place” and “home” is far. The exile community

organizes itself around the distance, but does not always adhere to a singular geographic or temporal notion of home. For Kesang, both shift, as has she from Tibet to Kathmandu and then to Toronto via New York. Technology has also shifted. Cassette tapes are relics of the past now, and instead people connect on social media.

Another morning, this time in 2016, Kesang and I sat in her kitchen talking. She said to me in Tibetan, “People in Toronto aren’t as busy as they are in New York.” Then switching to English, this fifty-something woman who never had the opportunity to attend school before the English classes provided to new immigrants by the Canadian government, proclaimed, “In Toronto, we are too happy.” After growing up in Tibet under the colonial Chinese government, then living in Nepal as a refugee for 25 years, she is now happy in Canada. She pulled out her iPad and checked in on WeChat with family members and friends from her hometown in eastern Tibet. We listened to their voices, and to recorded messages of the sort one exchanges with beloved relatives who are far away—How are you? We are fine. And so on. We watched videos of dances and listened to songs performed in Tibet, and then the mood changed. We watched with horror the execution of a Tibetan man in Lhasa by Chinese security forces. We scoured the internet for information about the killing which had supposedly happened earlier that day. We found none. We did not know what to do.

Paris: Asylum, Shared Experience, and Helping Others

It was cold and raining as we approached the camp. For as far as one can see there was a line of tents running alongside the edge of a forest. As my husband and I walked up, two men rode past on a bike and a group of three young men walked by giggling; each said “Bonjour” to us, which we said too as a reply. Outside one of the first tents we walked by was a baby stroller. Flying high above several tents were Tibetan flags. As it began to rain harder, a man and woman walked up to us; they had been expecting us and invited us into their communal tent where we sat down around an open fire. Quickly a pot was put on the fire; into the pot went milk and water, tea and sugar. Others came to see who we were and to join the conversation. Several took out their phones, opening them to either Facebook or WhatsApp, and then showing me photos of myself giving public lectures or messages I had sent as part of coordinating this preliminary visit. “This is you, right?” they asked me in Tibetan. “Yes,” I said as we watched the tea come to a boil and began the work of situating ourselves in each other’s worlds.

In November 2019 in the French town of Achères, 30 kilometres north of Paris, there were 600 Tibetans (and it was rumoured, other Himalayan people) living in the camp. This was not the first location for the camp. Over the years, the location of the camp shifted from the banks of the Seine to the edge of the forest, including living on boats as well as in tents, in the towns of Conflans-Sainte-Honorine and Achères. The camp was informal, not officially approved, and the French government would occasionally dismantle it. Local residents and municipalities aided the asylum seekers in individual and official ways, providing meals, supplies, clothes, and sometimes private homes in which to stay. On December 2, four days after my visit to the camp, the municipality of Achères moved all of the asylum seekers inside for the winter. The day I was there was the day this plan was announced, and there was a lot of talk of it. What will it be like? Will I get to stay with my brother? Will they separate men and women? At that point, much was still unknown. We finished our tea and stood. It was

now fully dark outside. The only light came from the glow of people’s phone screens. We said our goodbyes, and walked with our host to the kitchen tent where a huge fire roared, and several naked lightbulbs also helped to illuminate things for the kitchen volunteers. They cooked under a *kha btsags* (“khata”) or prayer flag-wrapped image of the Dalai Lama (Image 1). That night they were making thukpa, noodle soup (Image 2).



Image 1. Photo of the Dalai Lama in the kitchen tent. Achères, November 2019.



Image 2. The kitchen tent. Achères, November 2019.

More tea was made, and introductions too. This tent was clearly an organizational centre of the camp, and an important source of warmth on a cold night. There were some French volunteers here as well, men who had been helping with supplies and construction and French translation and with whatever, it seemed, was needed. Other volunteers who helped at the camp were Tibetan. Some were already resident in the Paris area, and some were based in Zurich. Switzerland has one of the oldest and largest Tibetan communities in Europe. “The Swiss Tibetans just came here to help us,” a man offered. “They brought jackets and warm clothes and things for the kitchen.” Others also told me about the visit of Swiss Tibetans. It had clearly been a morale boost for camp residents. It was also a new form of aid, of care, in the Tibetan community. Not bound by the limits of *skyid sdug* or *pha yul gcig pa* communities, in this new space of exile outside of the jurisdiction of the Tibetan exile government, and in a context where many individuals had Swiss citizenship by either birth or naturalization, possibilities for care expanded.

I knew about the Swiss operation before going to the camp. Two months earlier I had been in Zurich. While there, I met with young activists and learned about Shenpen, a Tibetan organization dedicated to helping Tibetans in Switzerland with translation needs, letter writing, and navigating governmental bureaucracies. Back home in Colorado in October, I and many others followed along on Facebook as the Shenpen (“helping others”) organization coordinated a relief effort for the refugees in Achères. On October 26, they held a clothing drive for the asylum seekers in Paris. They collected enough to fill two vans, and set off for Paris on November 1. Shenpen organizers documented this all on Facebook,

sharing photos and messages to the community (Image 3). On November 5, they shared their experience with a detailed public report and message of thanks to the community (Image 4):

Their post captures the sentiment expressed across the community—by friends in the Zurich area who were grateful to contribute, by activists in Paris who helped with

unloading and distribution, as well as the broader community in diaspora, some of who were in similar asylum situations at earlier periods in their own lives. This last part is important: this is a shared experience that is distributed across time and generation. That is, the exiled diaspora consists of people who came out of Tibet at different times (or their parents or grandparents did), who were born in different countries, and whose experiences of exile, of asylum, of escape, of protest have certain shared but also dissimilar elements. Elements of luck as well as karma are attributed to this, to one's position in the world right now, of needing care or being in a position from which to offer care. Compassion underlies this activism, and citizenship and rights make it possible in new ways.



Image 3. Shenpen volunteers from Switzerland at the Tibetan camp in Achères, France. November 2019.

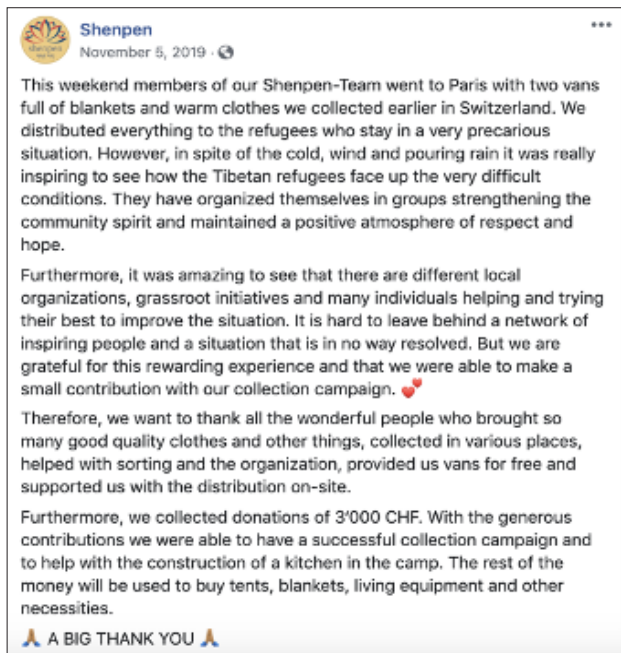


Image 4. Shenpen letter of thanks shared on Facebook. November 2019.

Toronto: Citizenship and the Right to Have Rights

Citizenship is the right to have rights. Hannah Arendt offered this famous critique of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights in 1948 in her essay “The Rights of Man: What Are They?” Her argument was this: in claiming that all people had human rights, but in making states the guarantor of these rights, then stateless people were excluded from the right to rights. Instead, rights were only for citizens. This is the Tibetan situation. Without a path

to citizenship in South Asia, Tibetans have lived for six decades without the rights that many people take for granted. While small groups of Tibetans did move out of South Asia in earlier periods—especially in official programs to the UK and Switzerland in the 1960s, and to Canada in the 1970s—there was not serious Tibetan immigration out of South Asia until the enactment of Section 134 of the US Immigration Act of 1990.

In the mid-1990s, 1,000 Tibetans from India and Nepal were selected for official resettlement in the USA. This official program inspired other Tibetans to unofficially immigrate to North America. Some were able to secure citizenship there, whereas others travelled to Canada where they overwhelmingly applied for and received political asylum and citizenship. As time went on, still more began to migrate to European countries such as France in the hopes of receiving asylum there. Prior to the US resettlement program, there had not been mass immigration out of South Asia. It is not so much that the idea was unthinkable, as some Tibetans did live abroad, and this fact was widely known. It was more that this was something for elites, not necessarily a possibility for ordinary people in the refugee community. The US resettlement project changed that. What followed from this was not simply a change in location for roughly 50 percent of the exile population, and also new ideas about citizenship, and thus rights (Hess 2006, 2009; McGranahan 2018). As one man in Toronto expressed to me in 2012, “Here in Canada you can make something of yourself. In India, you couldn’t even own a car.” The right to have rights, even with the criticisms and problems of the current state system acknowledged, can genuinely make a difference. It might especially make a difference for a community in which multiple generations of individuals have not held any rights, including for some, from birth to death.

Rights in the workplace, for example, matter. In Canada, these rights are part of a series of rights granted to individuals who receive asylum. In comparison with the USA, where some Tibetans live without documentation, Tibetans in Canada can work decent jobs. Good jobs, better jobs than are available to workers without papers. As one woman in Toronto who works for a job placement office told me as we discussed the differences between the USA and Canada, “Tibetans can get better jobs here in Toronto. The jobs they could work in New York City are all under the table. Here Tibetans can’t do those jobs. You can’t be a nanny if you can’t call 911 and speak English. It wouldn’t be safe.” Her job is to place Tibetans in jobs with benefits and unions, decent pay, and good safety protocols. Among some employers who are her clients, Tibetans are known as reliable, hard workers. Over the last decade, one employer’s workforce grew to over 50% Tibetan. However, not all Tibetans end up working for such good employers.

In the fall of 2015, upon learning their wages were less than those of non-immigrant workers, Tibetan workers at Fresh Taste Produce joined Teamsters Local 419, and began efforts to bargain with management (Badheysang 2016; Wangkhang 2016). With no progress after five months, they went on strike in April 2016. After eleven days on strike, an agreement was reached with the company and the Tibetan community’s first collective action was successful. Other immigrant workers and unions throughout Toronto supported the Tibetans’ strike. As one Tibetan striker explained, this solidarity mattered deeply in the beginning: “We’re not as educated. We’re humble and hardworking. I want to get back to work as soon as possible. But once you know something like this (he gestures to the picket line), you become aware of your rights. You feel how your dignity is being kicked around, and it eats at your heart. You can’t allow them to continue treating you like this, because they’ll do the same to others too” (Badheysang 2016).

Being aware of your rights changes things. In several countries, Tibetans serve in elected offices: among them are Bhutla Karpoche in Canada, Aftab Pureval in the USA, and Jigme Shitsetsang in Switzerland. Political protest on behalf of Tibetan sovereignty continues. March 10 protests continue, as do marches to the Chinese embassy, and year-round protests tied to annual events such as the day in 1995 that Chinese security forces kidnapped the 11th Panchen Lama, who was then a six-year-old boy, or sporadic events such as when someone self-immolates. Activism online, over social media, also proliferates, both with and without the vibrancy of in-person activism depending on the size and energy of the local community. Social media also enables activists to organize, advertise, and share actions such as housing rights protests in the Parkdale neighborhood of Toronto where many Tibetans live, or a recent Students for Free Tibet protest against Queens Public Library in NYC in which a Chinese Consulate exhibit about Tibet was presented as fact rather than propaganda.

Activism also continues in ways consonant with *skyid sdug* and *pha yul gcig pa* obligations: volunteer tutoring programs for school children, the Pocket Money Project to raise money to support underprivileged Tibetan students in India, and all manners of projects to raise funds or offer in-person assistance to community members in need, whether in one's current community or former homes in India, Nepal, or Tibet. Kesang sends as much money as she can to her *pha yul gcig pa* community, mostly for elders and school children, and as needed in times of crisis like the 2015 earthquakes in Nepal. In this, she is in good company; her actions are shared across the community; this is *snying rje*, compassion, in action. "Sometimes," Kesang says as we walk past a Sri Lankan grocery store in Parkdale, "I buy some \$3 scratch lottery tickets in there. I hope that I will win \$50,000 and then I will send it all to Nepal." She laughs, I laugh, and we keep on walking.

New York City: Momos and Practices of Care in a Pandemic

Elmhurst, a neighbourhood in Queens, New York City was the initial centre of the Covid-19 pandemic in the USA. Elmhurst and the surrounding neighbourhoods of Jackson Heights, Sunnyside, and Woodside is also the centre of the Tibetan community in the USA. This is an immigrant neighbourhood, an historic first US home for people from around the world. It is a low-income area, full of workers newly designated as "essential." The community reflects those of the diaspora elsewhere—individuals who were born in the USA or who came here as small children, individuals born in India or Nepal or elsewhere in diaspora, and those born in Tibet, and of all ages from babies to elders. It is a community in which someone is always arriving, from Dharamsala, from Kham, from Boston. And it is a community which has responded in both an extraordinary and an unsurprising way to the Covid-19 pandemic.

Activism as care defines the Tibetan response. Care about the community; care for the community. And care about and for frontline workers. Many frontline workers are Tibetans. They are nurses and doctors and public health workers; they are caregivers of all sorts, public and private, as well as gig economy workers. The Tibetan Nurses Association (TNA) estimates that there are 400-500 Tibetan nurses working in New York City. Together with the Tibetan Association of New York and New Jersey (TCNYNJ), the TNA has raised funds and committed themselves to community service as well as professional service during the pandemic. Their efforts stretched beyond the Tibetan community to include other Himalayan people as well, including Bhutanese and Sherpa. They established a Tibetan and

Nepali-language phone hotline for Covid-19 information where callers could speak with nurses, psychiatrists, and other specialists. Tibetan language material about Covid-19 in print and video was created, as it had been by Tibetans inside Tibet in January and February when the pandemic hit there. These organizations circulated lists of Tibetan nurses and doctors, including their names, qualifications, and phone numbers for at least nine hospitals in New York City, including Bellevue, Elmhurst, Jamaica, Long Island Jewish, Mount Sinai Manhattan, Mount Sinai Queens, NYP Weill Cornell, Queens, and Queens Presbyterian. These health workers are also able to be there in person when someone from the community is in the hospital and dying, allowing family members to speak with their loved one over the phone, and also facilitating Buddhist last rites by monks via FaceTime.

A young man in Queens, newly arrived from India, once told me that he took the Dalai Lama as his moral compass. This was instilled in him by his parents. “My father,” he said, “always talked about giving back.” These sentiments are embodied in the concept of



Image 5. Delivering PPE.



43 mins · 🌐

We provide lunch for Elmhurst Hospital...



Image 6. Preparing food to be delivered to local hospital workers.

snying rje, and are being put into action on a daily basis (as I write this sentence in May 2020) by his community in New York City. Each day on Facebook, there are posts about donations of PPE (personal protective equipment such as N95 masks) to hospital workers, and also of volunteers sewing and donating masks. But the one thing that stands out in Tibetan pandemic activism is food. The community is cooking food for frontline workers, preparing homemade, nourishing food, including momos, Tibetan dumplings, and delivering it to hospitals. Tibetans are skilled at cooking for crowds; this is surely related to centuries of monastery cooking, as well as the huge meals that always accompany *skyid sdug* and other community parties. Photos of people cooking, of meals ready to be delivered, of messages of thanks and support, including prayers from the Dalai Lama, and also of delivery flood my Facebook timeline from many different Tibetan groups—Chushi Gangdruk, Tibetan Youth Congress, and more (Images 5 & 6). Generosity might be one of the few universally-valued cultural traits. For the Tibetan community, this moment has been one of service and generosity.

Tsampa, it turns out, can be as hard to get during a pandemic as toilet paper. Roasted barley flour or tsampa is

a staple of the Tibetan diet. It is especially appreciated by elders in the community whose needs have been a priority throughout the pandemic. The Queens-based Himalayan Elders Project delivers tsampa and other groceries to elders. There is a newly-created Tibetan radio app as well as Barkhor TV providing ongoing recorded programming for elders, as well as live music programs one can Zoom (that is, video conference) into to enjoy. Online storytelling for children occurs regularly, as do community programs. The online Himalayan Covid-19 Task Force shares important medical information and resources with the community. Students for Free Tibet host live conversations with community members who have stories to tell or needed information to share: a nurse who has Covid-19, a lawyer who can help community members navigate confusing legal issues in this time, practitioners trained in different self-care modalities. Machik is similarly hosting online “kora” sessions addressing issues such as mental health, domestic violence, and reimagining elder care. In Toronto (Etobicoke), the Tibetan Canadian Cultural Centre/Gangjong Choedenling is active with food and mask donation programs, as well as live online *sgor gshas* (“gorshey”) dancing classes every Wednesday. *Sgor gshas*, a type of circle dance, is not just an art form. In exile it is also a form of community solidarity and protest.

When the pandemic started, Kesang was working for a company that was allowed to stay open. But, she says, they weren't keeping the workers safe. There were too many people there and not enough protection. She said something about this to her bosses and they threatened to fire her, so she quit. This did not surprise me. Kesang is a woman of unusually strong character. Her co-workers felt differently. They were worried about being fired, so stayed on the job. Two weeks after Kesang quit, a former co-worker called her. Two people at the company had just tested positive for Covid-19.

Meanwhile, north of Paris, the tented camp has been reassembled along the river in Conflans Sainte-Honorine. Springtime is here, the weather is warm enough, but now there is a pandemic. They are in their tents, but in quarantine; they are not supposed to leave. The local municipality helped to find shelter for some of the asylum seekers, for 18 women and 47 men, but others were left behind. They now try to social distance, relying mostly on food donations, while waiting for their chance at asylum, and waiting like everyone else for the pandemic to be over.

Kora: Care as Activism

To care is an active verb. To be cared for is passive. These may go together. Any gratitude that is not coerced is an example of this. Gratitude for one's caretaker, gratitude at being able to offer care. Refusal to see care as delinked from political struggle. Insistence that compassion is a political keyword. Each of these commitments is how the struggle for sovereignty is practiced in the Tibetan exile diaspora. We see this in the early days of political struggle and socioeconomic efforts to gain community sustainability without the rights of citizenship, and also in current activist work aimed at relieving suffering for fellow asylum seekers or aiding frontline medical workers in a pandemic. This is care as activism. While having rights enables new forms of care, activism and compassion are possible without citizen-based rights. To care, to help others, to work toward alleviating suffering is, as Hannah Arendt might argue, the domain of the human, of the stateless as well as the citizen.

Many families in New York City, in Toronto or Minneapolis or Zurich, or any other hub in the diaspora outside of South Asia are multigenerational. Many elders have made this shift, which is yet another massive journey and displacement in their life experiences.

Not all do, though. In Jackson Heights one summer day, talking with an old friend from Jorpati in Kathmandu, he told me he had given up trying to get his mother to come live with him here in New York. “She won’t come,” he said. “There are no monasteries. There is nowhere for her to do kora.” Kora (skor ba) is the Buddhist practice of circumambulation as a form of walking prayer. One circumambulates a religious building such as a chorten or monastery, while saying prayers and also possibly turning prayer beads. How many circumambulations one does depends on the size of the kora circuit, as well as the time one has; elders often do many, having been released from the workday obligations of younger adults. In Dharamsala, the centre of the exile community, the kora path circles the Dalai Lama’s residence and temple.

A week after I spoke with my friend whose mother would not come to New York, I heard a different story from another person. His friend’s elderly mother had come. She also was concerned about the lack of a place to do kora. But she got creative. She learned all of the buildings in her Queens neighbourhood in which Tibetan families lived. Knowing that each of those families would have an altar in their home, and that each altar would include a photograph of the Dalai Lama, she decided she would walk a kora route encircling each of these apartment buildings. Her kora is thus consecrated as a form of daily prayer and activism. This is one way to remain well in this world, to balance the resources available to you with the challenges faced. Far from home, when you have lost your country and are fighting for sovereignty, there are ways to carry with you the practices, concepts, and convictions that allow you to remain well in the fight. To be well does not mean to be without pain or without suffering. Instead, in this context of a refugee diaspora, it is to be in community, to feel you are cared for, and to be able to act with care.

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