

Introduction

Among the populations of refugees in the world, the Tibetans have a special place. Crossing the Himalaya at the end the 1950s to escape the Chinese invasion of their country, the Tibetans, led by their charismatic leader the Dalai Lama, still see their story spread and listened to, after more than fifty years. The Tibetan refugees are nowadays known, in the West and elsewhere, as a population trying to regain their freedom by peaceful means, following their religion, Buddhism, and their leader, the Dalai Lama.

In 1998, I came to Dharamsala (Himachal Pradesh, India), capital of the Tibetan ‘government-in-exile’, and home of the Dalai Lama and some ten thousand of his fellow refugees, while conducting research for my master’s degree in anthropology. I arrived replete with fantasies and dreams about Tibetan culture and religion, which had been instilled by readings on Tibet and the manner in which this country reached me through the media and on the cultural and artistic stage of France. Yet my first contacts with Tibetans, lay and clerical, showed me that they were not ‘magicians and mystics’ (David-Néel 1971), but rather people confronting difficult times, trying to keep their culture alive while surviving in a foreign land.

Looking at the community, the Tibetans seemed to have met both these challenges successfully, an impression reinforced during my frequent travels there and to other Tibetan refugee communities in India and Nepal. I also observed real economic development within the refugee community. The Tibetan-owned shops, farms and construction sites, often from positions of economic strength, employed Indian labourers, even in remote settlements like Tezu in the far north-east of India. This economic development is in many settlements in striking contrast with that of the local population. Observing this phenomenon, I have through the years wondered why the poverty narrative is still so prevalent among the refugees.

I have been impressed by the increasing numbers of Western individuals and organizations that are assisting¹ the Tibetans through welfare, development and political activism. Dharamsala became an international hub for all

well-wishers of the Tibetan cause. Thanks to several years of experience in non-governmental organizations (NGOs), I became aware of the questions raised by foreign assistance, prevalent in every Tibetan settlement, and of the sharp contrast between the level of assistance to Tibetans and that to other populations, even those living adjacent to the Tibetan settlements. Thus I decided to write this book – based on my doctoral research – on the interplay between Tibetan refugees and their Western benefactors.² The main question that I want to answer is this: How, after more than fifty years of exile, are the Tibetan refugees still able to attract such substantial assistance from Western governments, NGOs, other organizations and individuals, unlike other populations of refugees who are largely or totally forgotten?

This issue has been addressed by a number of authors, all of whom, however, adopt the point of view of Western individuals or organizations in their relations to the Tibetan refugees. From these works, one has the impression that the Tibetans are, if not totally powerless, then shaped by the foreign aid they receive. Moreover, in the larger anthropological critique of the development framework, the relationship between a population and their developers is almost always described from the latter's point of view in terms of power, influence and transformations. Here, I attempt to give the Tibetans a voice, and to study their own role in their successful attraction of Western support, by examining their discourses and actions towards their patrons and the ways in which they negotiate and mediate their position in such a relationship.

While discussing with Tibetans their success in attracting foreign – and especially Western – assistance, I was struck by the homogeneity of their answers. For them, this success is due not to chance or foreign charity, but to the charisma of their leader, the Dalai Lama, to their religion, from which the entire world has something to learn, to the justness of their cause, and to their own honest and hard-working community. These are the characteristics that, for Tibetans, explain their popularity among Western individuals and organizations. I was, at first, surprised by the absence of foreign influences in these explanations – the Tibetans give all the credit to themselves. I discovered, through my research, that the refugees have indeed managed to perpetuate the attraction of foreign resources thanks both to the establishment of a strong leadership – the Central Tibetan Administration (CTA), known informally as the Tibetan ‘government-in-exile’, – and to the preservation in exile of a traditional mode of governance that joins politics with religion (a union referred to as *chos srid zung 'brel*).³ Furthermore, the ongoing Western support is guaranteed by the existence of a strong movement of Western supporters – a movement that, as I will show, arose from an intense interest in the political and religious agendas launched by the Tibetan refugees themselves. However, I will argue that, contrary to what my informants claim, this success cannot be understood without further contextualization.

This context includes, first, favourable conditions surrounding the installation of the Tibetans in exile; second, a long-standing Western fascination with everything Tibetan; and, third, a Western search for a new paradigm of the development relationship. The Tibetan leadership, their agendas, and the reception of these agendas in the West, constitute the main focus of this book.

Contextualization

It is important at this stage to clarify my understanding of certain general terms that have been used so far. Other concepts and expressions will be explained as they appear in the subsequent chapters.

Tibet

Delimiting Tibet is a contentious matter, as the Central Tibetan Administration and the Chinese authorities make very different claims as to its political and historical boundaries (see Powers 2004). Historically, during the time of the first kings, from the early seventh to the ninth centuries, the ethnic Tibetan populations were united under the Yarlung Dynasty. These populations were located in central Tibet: the regions of Ü (*dbus*), whose capital is Lhasa (*lha sa*), and Tsang (*gtsang*), which constitute the core of the Chinese Tibet Autonomous Region (TAR) created in 1965. Tibetan populations also existed to the north and east, in regions called Amdo (*a mdo*) and Kham (*kham*s) by the Tibetans, which the Chinese have now integrated into the provinces of Qinghai, Sichuan, Gansu and Yunnan. Finally, the Tibetan Empire also controlled ethnic Tibetan populations to the north-west and west of central Tibet in what is now the Uighur Autonomous Region of Xinjiang, as well as in parts of present-day India, such as Ladakh, Sikkim, Northern Uttar Pradesh and Arunachal Pradesh, and also parts of northern Nepal and Bhutan. This period represented the peak of Tibetan power, when the empire's territory was as large as Western Europe.⁴ The Tibetans even briefly captured Ch'ang-an (today's Xian), the then Chinese capital (Snellgrove and Richardson [1968] 2003: 31). After the assassination of King Langdarma (*glang dar ma*) in 842, the empire collapsed, and the central power in Lhasa never regained such a vast territory (*ibid.*), even during the reign of the fifth Dalai Lama (1617–1682) and his reunification of the country.

Different authors make a distinction between 'political' Tibet (central Tibet, where power was located in Lhasa) and 'ethnic' or 'ethnographic' Tibet, a much larger entity where 'Tibetan civilization' (Stein [1962] 1972) once flourished. Actually, different Tibetologists remark that if the Tibetans refer to *bod* (the Tibetan word for 'Tibet') for central Tibet and its inhabitants,

they refer to *nang pa* ('those from inside') for the followers of *chos* (meaning Dharma and, consequently, religion, as elaborated below), which is the main marker of their collective identification and, hence, applies to an area much larger than central Tibet (Kolas 1996: 52ff.).

Today, 'political' Tibet is more or less coextensive with the Tibet Autonomous Region (TAR). However, the Tibetan leadership in exile claims the three main provinces (*chol kha gsum*) of Tibet: Ü-Tsang, Kham and Amdo, which are much larger than the TAR. In this book, I shall use the name Tibet in both its political and ethnographic senses, and will specify the intended meaning as required.

Tibetan Refugees

As stated in the 1951 United Nations Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees, a refugee is a:

[p]erson who is outside his or her country of nationality or habitual residence; has a well-founded fear of persecution because of his or her race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group or political opinion; and is unable or unwilling to avail himself or herself of the protection of that country, or to return there, for fear of persecution. (United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees 2008: 6)

Today, 16 million refugees exist throughout the world (not counting the so-called 'internally displaced persons'). The largest of these communities is the Palestinians (around 4.6 million), followed by refugees from Syria and Afghanistan (around 2 million each), Iraq (around 2 million), Sudan (around 700,000), Somalia (around 460,000), Congo (around 400,000), Burundi (also around 400,000) and Vietnam (around 370,000) (*ibid.*). The Tibetan refugees in the world numbered 127,935 in 2009, according to the second official survey (Planning Commission 2010). Yet because of various complicating factors, such as continued migration from Tibet to Nepal and India, it remains very difficult to estimate their total numbers. An official from the CTA gave me a figure of 150,000 as the government's estimate of the number of exiles,⁵ which would make the Tibetans between the tenth and fifteenth largest refugee community in the world.

About 147 states have signed the 1951 UN Convention or its 1967 Protocol, but India has not. As a consequence, Tibetans who escaped their country and settled in India are not protected by the UN Convention. Nonetheless, from the very beginning the Indian government has recognized these Tibetans as refugees.⁶ As such, they have the right to stay in India and can work, even though considered foreigners. It must be noted – and this will become clear in the following chapters – that India granted unique relief and rights to the Tibetans. The Tibetans who arrived between 1959 and 1979, and their

children born in India since then, can obtain a Residential Certificate (RC), the Indian legal recognition of their status, which has to be endorsed every six or twelve months (depending on the settlement's location) by the Foreign Registration Office (FRO), as in the case of every other foreign resident in India. This RC entitles them to receive an Identity Certificate (IC), which permits them to travel abroad. Refugees who arrived after 1979 are in limbo; they are allowed to stay in India but are not entitled to any Indian official documents.

On the Tibetan side, the CTA provides a 'green book' (named after its colour, see Chapter 2), which acts as an identity card. Under the Tibetan Charter of 1991, every Tibetan should possess such an identity card, but for obvious political reasons Tibetans living in Tibet cannot obtain one. This document is valid only within the sphere of influence of the CTA, and entitles holders to claim such services as schooling and welfare from the Tibetan administration. As further described in Chapter 2, the CTA recognizes Tibet as the three provinces of Ü-Tsang, Kham and Amdo, and hence Tibetans and Tibetan refugees from these three regions, or those who have at least one parent from anywhere in 'ethnographic' Tibet, can claim such a Tibetan identity card.

My research concentrates on the Tibetan refugee community in India, the largest in the world (accounting for around 70 per cent of the 150,000 Tibetan refugees). Occasional comparisons are, however, drawn with other countries such as Nepal, where the CTA is well represented but where the socio-economic conditions of the Tibetan community are quite different. As always in such a project, the scope of the work is constrained by that fact that not all aspects of the central question can be dealt with exhaustively. I therefore limit myself to examining Western assistance to Tibetan refugees, in full awareness that they are also helped by traditionally Buddhist countries like Taiwan, Japan and Thailand, and, importantly, by their main host country, India.⁷

Tibetan Religion

My understanding of Tibetan 'religion' corresponds to what the Tibetans call *chos*, the Tibetan word for the Sanskrit word *dharma*: the teaching of the Buddha. According to the 1998 survey on Tibetans in exile, 99 per cent of the refugees living in India and Nepal are Buddhists, calling themselves *nang pa*, literally 'insiders' (Planning Council 2000: 201). They belong to one of the four prominent sects (or schools) of *Vajrayana* (the Adamantine Vehicle, also called *Tantrayana* or Tantric Vehicle), the latest of the three main phases of Buddhism. The schools in question are Nyingma (*rnying ma*), Kagyu (*bka' rgyud*), Sakya (*sa skya*) and Gelug (*dge lugs*). Buddhism came to Tibet in two phases: the Early Diffusion, which extended from the

seventh to the ninth centuries, and the Late Diffusion, which began in the late tenth century.

Besides *chos*, the Tibetans in exile officially recognize a ‘fifth school’: this is Bon (*bon*) – not Buddhism but a religion certainly influenced by it. Bon is known to Tibetan historians as the indigenous religion of Tibet. The mutual influences between Buddhism and Bon in Tibet are recognized, and the actual practice of Bon resembles Buddhism.⁸ As a Gelug master wrote in the eighteenth century: ‘Bon is so mingled with Buddhism and Buddhism with Bon that my analytic eye fails to see the difference between them’ (Karmay 1998: 533).

In exile in 1977, Bon was, for the first time in Tibet’s history, recognized by the official Tibetan leadership as a Tibetan religious tradition, when it was politically represented at the Tibetan Assembly alongside the four main schools of Buddhism. In exile, Bon followers represent less than 1 per cent of the refugee community, and most of them are concentrated in Dolanji (Himachal Pradesh, India), but their official visibility has become much greater thanks to their new seat in the Assembly.

At present, for reasons described below, the Tibetan leadership has adopted a broad definition of ‘religion’. This is consistent with the position expressed by the Dalai Lama in his first autobiography: ‘Roughly speaking, any noble activities of mind, body and speech are Dharma, or religion’ (Dalai Lama [1962] 1997: 204).

The West

The use of the term ‘West’ as a totalizing concept does not mean that it describes a single, homogeneous reality. However, my use of the term follows that of the population I study: the Tibetans refer to ‘Westerners’ as *dbyin ji* (pronounced ‘yinji’), a term that means ‘Englishman’ but also, by extension, any (white) foreigner coming from Europe or the New World.

The Tibetan refugees have the opportunity to meet different *dbyin ji* in India and Nepal: tourists and travellers, Dharma and New Age followers, sympathizers with the Tibetan cause, researchers, and others. The Tibetans hold certain preconceptions about the *dbyin ji* they meet. I am one of these *dbyin ji*, and I was often surprised to hear of the expectations that the Tibetans had of me, as much as they must have been to learn of my expectations of them as Tibetans. By and large, the Tibetans call anyone of Caucasian type *dbyin ji*. People of other ethnic backgrounds are more commonly referred by their colour. Finally, my understanding of assistance as ‘Western’ is those organizations and individuals from Western Europe, South Africa, North, Central and South America, Australia and New Zealand.

Methodology

The research undertaken for this book has been in the form of fieldwork, involving ‘participant observation’. I understand fieldwork as a qualitative method involving the immersion of the researcher within the studied population, as well as the holistic study of this population’s behaviour and customs. The understanding of the latter, however, arises from a wide range of contacts, interviews, surveys, participation in the community’s life, and other observations. As a result, such a method enables the researcher to acquire an inductive form of knowledge.

Since 1998, I have conducted three principal rounds of fieldwork in India, the longest of these being for doctoral research, when I spent one year (2006) in different settlements. My different stays in Tibetan settlements since 1998 amount to a total of two and a half years. I chose to conduct my main fieldwork in three places, selected for their representativeness of the Tibetan community in India. I spent the longest period in Dharamsala, capital of the Tibetan diaspora and the transnational location where Western individuals and organizations meet the refugees. I spent a shorter period in Tezu (Arunachal Pradesh), a remote settlement difficult of access, because I wanted to see how the Tibetan Agency (i.e. the CTA) and Western organizations worked there. I also spent time in Bylakuppe (Karnataka), the largest and oldest Tibetan settlement, and, moreover, the one most fully documented since the earliest time of exile, and whose subsequent evolution I wished to understand.

In Dharamsala, through contacts and interviews, I gained a thorough overview of the organization and management of the CTA. I conducted research in every department of the administration, with a special emphasis on the Planning Commission. The people interviewed in this commission were willing to assist me, and provided as much information as I needed – information all the more significant because foreign researchers do not apparently approach the commission as frequently as they do other departments. I also spent much time in the Library of Tibetan Works and Archives, reading different reports and literature from or about the CTA – documentation that is unavailable in European libraries. Thanks to an accreditation letter issued by the CTA, I could interview officials who were not normally willing to answer questions (such as those in the Department of Finance). Armed with this letter, and with personal contacts, I organized my journey to the settlement in Tezu (Arunachal Pradesh), which, for political and geographical reasons, is very difficult to visit. My interviews there gave me insights into the power and authority of the CTA over the remotest Tibetan settlement, as well as on the impact of foreign assistance in a place where no Westerners (tourists or development professionals) had stayed for at least the previous seven years. My stay in Bylakuppe was also fruitful, for the

same reasons, and I was able to observe relations between the largest Tibetan settlement outside Tibet and both the CTA and Western organizations. I also spent time in the Tibetan area of Darjeeling, as well as in all the settlements of Arunachal Pradesh, including Shimla. In 2007, I spent three months with two organizations based in Europe and worked with Tibetans, inside and outside Tibet, as I wanted to understand how they negotiated with the Tibetan administration. My internships in both organizations gave me insights concerning their work, their internal management, their engagement with the CTA and Tibetans, and the individuals working there as well as members and donors. Finally, I spent three months in Tibet itself, mostly in Lhasa, the capital, since I wanted to understand the contacts between Western organizations and Tibetans in a different setting. This rich experience allowed me to better situate relations between Tibetans living inside and outside Tibet, between Western organizations working inside and outside Tibet, and between Tibetans living in Tibet and the Western organizations in a wider context. In Tibet, I was able to interview many informants working in Western organizations. All were anxious that I should preserve their anonymity. Some even postponed our meetings continuously because they did not want to meet me, but wished to avoid refusing an appointment directly. The level of paranoia I discovered in Lhasa seemed to be an excuse for the organization not to communicate; but it is true that in the People's Republic of China (PRC) the work of these bodies is never guaranteed, and their presence is contingent on their absolute neutrality on the Tibet issue.

To respect my informants in Tibet, I decided to preserve strict anonymity of individuals and organizations throughout the book, with some exceptions where I received formal authorization. I have thus changed the names of my informants, and have avoided, to the best of my ability, giving information that could lead to their identification. However, none of the characters or situations in this book is fictitious; all are represented as I genuinely saw, understood and lived with them.

This book is built upon more than 150 structured or semi-structured interviews that I conducted, the numerous notes I took from my observations and from secondary sources. The interviews were mostly conducted in English, because I was more at ease with this than with the Tibetan language, although a translator helped me on a few occasions. Conducting the interviews in English was not a problem because most of the people I interviewed spoke it well. During my fieldwork, I collected a variety of important materials: reports from the CTA, from Tibetan and Western organizations, and from meetings of these different groups; various internal documents on these organizations; and various materials published by the organizations themselves, such as flyers and booklets. These documents represent an important way to understand how these organizations are established and managed, and how they communicate and disseminate their work. I will

use some of these extensively because they underpin my arguments. I refer to the relevant internet addresses whenever these are available, in order to allow the reader easy access to them and to further reading.

Finally, I would like to finish this section on methodology by raising a point that is rarely mentioned in research on Tibet and Tibetans: the position of the researcher. It should be remembered – especially in the domain studied here, where passion, emotion and politics rule – that ethnographies are shaped by the ethnographer himself.⁹ Thus, allow me a few words about myself. I indeed conducted this research following my own opinions, which could be defined, in the words of my own informants, as a ‘middle-way approach’. This means that I am not a Buddhist, but neither am I against Buddhism; I feel close to the Tibetans, but am not against the Chinese; I place myself between theoretical perspectives on NGOs and their day-to-day practices. As a result, my research was built not on any conscious preconceived agenda, but by following a middle path in trying to understand and shed light on difficult questions. This was even more important given the fact that, in different presentations of my work, I encountered often very emotional, if not extreme, reactions from people who thought that I was showing the Tibetans as maliciously controlling their donors, or on the contrary, as being ‘too clever’. I think instead that, like many refugees in the world, the Tibetan refugees developed certain successful survival strategies.

Chapter Outlines

Every chapter in this book is a brick in the structure of explaining the Tibetan refugees’ success in the West.

Chapter 1 presents the historical context of the settlement and rehabilitation of Tibetans in India. It details the key historical, political and socio-economic events that allow for an understanding of the argumentation developed in the following chapters. Moreover, this diachronic study gives insights into how the CTA could and did emerge as a developmental agency, thanks to the help of the host and Western countries. This chapter proceeds through the distinct historical phases that the Tibetans themselves recognize, giving an original and updated context for the Tibetan refugees. It is built out of my fieldwork as well as original secondary sources from, for example, NGO archives, as well as published and unpublished materials.

Chapter 2 studies the Tibetan administration, the CTA – its history, its organization, and the principal discourses that provide it with legitimacy and power within the Tibetan community. As Chapter 1 shows, the collective memory of shared sufferings was important in the creation of a diaspora. Chapter 2 describes how the CTA continues to use this memory, and other symbols and institutions, to create the sense of belonging to a diaspora

with nationalist objectives. This chapter describes also how the Tibetan administration negotiated its position as a local partner for the organizations that work with Tibetans. These organizations are then described together with the type of resources that they bring. Finally, the chapter addresses the concept of *chos srid zung 'brel* (religion and politics joined), and how this has led to the construction of two interconnected agendas. This chapter shows that the Tibetan leadership has been absolutely instrumental in the Tibetan refugees' success – a point neglected by the existing literature.

Chapters 3 and 4 study, respectively, the political and the religious agendas that the CTA has developed in order to maintain its presence on the international stage and perpetuate foreign support for the refugees. In Chapter 3, the political agenda is described in terms of the deployment and display by the Tibetan administration of the main concepts, ideas and values expected of the local partner by the Western organizations in the development relationship. Chapter 4 focuses on the religious agenda – that is, how the Tibetans came to launch what I call a religious strategy. They have managed indeed to present themselves as invaluable in their relationship with their Western patrons: by reorganizing their religion in exile; by presenting their Western patrons as being in need of this religion; and by operating what I call a 'spiritualization' of the received support. These two chapters show that the Tibetans have not only a political and religious power able to represent them, but one that has launched proactive agendas to keep the Tibet cause alive and to perpetuate the attraction of Western resources. In so doing, the Tibetan refugees have accommodated their patrons' expectations, as described in the literature on development and on Tibetans, and have also created their own model, their own specificities in the relationship with their patrons.

Chapter 5 describes the reception in the West of these two agendas, and how a transnational community, which I call 'the Global Tibet Movement', was created around the Tibet cause. It shows the prevailing stereotypes of Tibet and Tibetans in the West, ones that validate the reception of the Tibetan agendas. This chapter, through a discursive analysis, shows how the Global Tibet Movement is the platform for the Tibetan agendas in the West, in terms not only of assistance but also of discourse and action.

Chapter 6 analyses the developmental relationship between the Tibetans and their Western supporters. It shows how a kind of model relationship could arise from the different elements described in the previous chapters. The model proposed by the Tibetans initiated what I call the 're-enchancement' of the development relationship, which is described in this chapter. I propose here a new way of understanding relations between the Tibetans and their patrons, and study the adaptability of such a model.

The last chapter, Chapter 7, describes the challenges induced by the relationship on the Tibetan refugee community. It analyses the latest developments in the community from the perspective of Western patronage.

Notes

1. I use the terms ‘assistance’, ‘support’ and ‘aid’ interchangeably to refer to the allocation of political, material or symbolic resources (see Chapter 1) from donor countries, organizations or individuals.
2. Similarly, I use the terms ‘benefactors’, ‘patrons’ and ‘donors’ interchangeably to refer to the individuals or organizations that provide assistance to Tibetans (see Chapter 2).
3. As a rule, I will give the Wylie transliteration (written in italics) of every Tibetan term I use. However, having transliterated it, I will usually go on to use its common form, where such exists: for example, *mchod yon* will always be written as such, but *kham*s will be presented as Kham. As for Sanskrit terms, I will write these in italics without diacritics and follow the same principles as for the rendering of Tibetan terms.
4. See, amongst others, Stein ([1962] 1972: Chapter 1), Snellgrove and Richardson ([1968] 2003: Chapter 1) and Goldstein (1994: 76ff.).
5. The 2008 edition of *World Refugee Survey* counts 110,000 Tibetan refugees in India (U.S. Committee for Refugees and Immigrants 2008: 31) and 20,500 in Nepal (*ibid.*: 24).
6. The only community apart from Sri Lankan Tamils to have this recognition in India.
7. Although Western assistance to Tibetans has been addressed by a number of works, non-Western support, especially Indian, which has been crucial to the Tibetans’ successful rehabilitation and development, tends to be overlooked in literature on Tibetan refugees. Studies of this non-Western assistance to Tibetans are needed, not least because Asian assistance, both inside and outside Tibet, is increasing.
8. For further reading on Bon, see, amongst others, Skorupski (1981), Kvaerne (1990), Kvaerne and Thargyal (1993), Kumar (1997), Karmay (1998), and Karmay and Watt (2007).
9. A recent development in ethnography has reshaped and reconfigured some classical dichotomies used in the field, such as local/global, inside/outside, tradition/modernity, ‘us’/‘them’, and so on. This deconstruction has been brought about by a self-reflexive rethinking on the part of ethnography itself, initiated by a variety of post-modern, post-structuralist and post-colonial thinkers such as Clifford (Clifford, Marcus et al. 1986; Clifford 1983, 1988, 1997), Jameson (1991), Pratt (1992), Gupta and Ferguson (1992, 1997), Bhabha (1994), Marcus (1995) and Appadurai (1990, 1996), to name but a few.