

“Teach me how to be Gesar’s daughter”
Voices of young Tibetan intellectuals in the diaspora

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Who is Gesar? Some of you will know, and others perhaps not. But who is Gesar’s daughter? That, I imagine, would appear to be a mystery. I shall answer both questions in a moment, but first of all I want to thank Professor Ulrike Roesler for having given me this chance to honour two remarkable men, who were, as all of you will know, twin brothers: Michael and Anthony Aris. It is especially moving for me to do so, for both were close friends of mine for many, many years, and for that reason I am particularly happy to see members of their families here tonight.

Back to the first question: Who is Gesar? Gesar is the hero of the great Tibetan epic, usually referred to as the Gesar Epic, centring on King Gesar, whose martial exploits are narrated in a vast body of oral as well as written literature. Gesar is a figure of righteousness, waging war against forces of darkness and evil in all directions. His name derives, by the way, from the Byzantine Kaisar (Caesar), transmitted to Tibet through Persia and Central Asia – so much for the notion of Tibet’s splendid isolation!

But who is Gesar’s daughter? You shall know that in a moment, but first I want to say a few words about tonight's topic: the struggles, hopes, and frustrations of Tibetan students and young scholars and writers in the Indian diaspora today. The topic may come as a surprise to those who know me. When I was invited to give this year’s Aris Lecture, the expectation was surely that I would say something about the Bön religion, especially in the 13th century, which is the period I am most familiar with. However, I decided to venture forth on a new path, and what I want to do tonight, is to bring to your attention the plight of young Tibetans in exile, some born in Tibet and having come to India when they were small, others born in India of Tibetan parents.

Until now, scholars engaged in the study of the Tibetan diaspora have paid little attention to young lay Tibetans, the focus having overwhelmingly been on monastic communities or the

workings of the Tibetan exile authorities. Maybe there is a mistaken perception that these institutions are in some sense more ‘Tibetan’ than the world of young Tibetan academics. Yet it can be argued that what I have loosely called “young Tibetan intellectuals” are the ones who hold the keys to the future of the Tibetan diaspora community.

In an attempt to come to grips with this topic, I have collected written statements from a number of young Tibetan intellectuals, roughly the same number of men and women, who will be quoted anonymously in this talk. Their statements will be clustered around a number of motifs which will be presented as the sequence of poems by a young Tibetan poet based in Dharamsala, Tenzin Kesang, who writes under the name of “Kaysang”, as found in a collection of her poems, published last year in India, under the title *broken portraits*.

Kaysang was in fact supposed to have been here tonight, but unfortunately the slowly moving wheels of India’s bureaucracy – a legacy, by the way, from the rule of the British Raj – has rendered that impossible. Nevertheless, Kaysang will, at least on the screen, be with us now.

[KAYSANG VIDEO RECORDING:]

teach me how to be
 gesar’s daughter:
 fierce
 warrior-like
 firm in the war for truth
 true freedom
 you could kill for –
 no, i’m gandhi’s niece
 but maybe not
 but maybe not
 not so easy to change
 change your mind
 believer in truth
 no such thing in exile
 manufactured truths
 manufactured goods
 who is who –
 enemy and protector
 consumerist communist
 democratic
 bullshit
 bullshit
 don’t talk to me like that
 ommanipemehum at kora

then spit poison
 while you sip on chai after
 gesar's daughter
 is lukar's mongrel

This poem plunges us into one of the central themes of tonight's talk: the question of the *identity* of young Tibetans in the diaspora community in India, or more precisely: what are the forces at play in creating their identity? Is a young Tibetan woman in India – or for that matter, any young Tibetan in the diaspora – “Gesar's daughter”? Or is she “Gandhi's niece”? Or perhaps a bit of both? And is being “Gesar's daughter” good or bad in the eyes of most diaspora Tibetans? I have asked Kaysang to send me written comments on her poems. With regard to these opening lines of the poem we have just heard, Kaysang expresses the wish that,

...as Tibetans, we could invoke our old myths and our old kings by being “fierce warrior-like” and “firm” in the war for “true freedom you could kill for”, but no matter how much we might be driven to helplessness, to rage, to despair, we always have to keep in mind the concept of non-violence. It is at once a choice, and a choice that ties our hands. But “maybe not”... maybe we don't need to feel so restricted by this narrative of being the kind, compassionate ones who don't feel any anger.

not so easy to change
 change your mind
 believer in truth
 no such thing in exile

Even amongst Tibetans, it is so difficult to find space for differing views when everything is dominated by people who believe in “truth”, who are not willing to see that there are different “truths” for different people. There can be no such “truth” or “truths” in exile because we are all compelled to believe in one truth, and there can be no dissenting.

manufactured truths
 manufactured goods
 who is who –
 enemy and protector
 consumerist communist
 democratic
 bullshit

There are then the other kinds of truths that can be bought, as in the case of Chinese political power these days, which is dictated by their growing economic power, and the penetration of Chinese-manufactured goods on the global market. The world is divided along the lines of consumerism ... and ideology, but it is really “bullshit”, because when we think about it, the Chinese are not communists in the true sense, and the Tibetan system in exile is not truly democratic.

don't talk to me like that
 ommanipemehum at kora
 then spit poison
 while you sip on chai after

When we use swear words, people get offended (“don't talk to me like that”). But this is a farce, for most people are not true Buddhists, because they will go for a *kora* and right after that, gossip and spread harmful rumors while having chai.

gesar's daughter
 is lukar's mongrel

Lukar is used here to symbolize the polarization of Tibetan politics and the community. Lukar became the face of the people supporting Rangzen [*Tibetan independence*] for the duration of the 2016 elections, but he became extremely controversial, foremost because of his comments about the Dalai Lama. For most of those on the side of Rangzen, merely continuing to live in the community ... became difficult because the majority, the supporters of Umay-lam [the "*Middle Way*" advocated by the Dalai Lama] attempted to silence the minority Rangzen voice by likening everyone with Lukar, and painting them as being treacherous and disloyal to HH the Dalai Lama and the Tibetan people at large. From their point of view, Gesar's daughters (and sons) had become mere puppies barking against the Dalai Lama. I was called "*Lukar gyi aptuk*" or "Lukar's mongrel" many times.

As we shall see, this claustrophobic feeling of repression of opinion is quite common among young well-educated Tibetans.

In his autobiographical book *Familiar Stranger* (2017), the eminent cultural anthropologist Stuart Hall deals with his double identity as English and Jamaican. Hall, who by origin was Jamaican, was educated at Oxford – Merton College, to be precise. With regard to identity, he does not seem to reach a clear-cut conclusion, stating that in his own life, "Jamaica and Britain undoubtedly were 'entangled' " (p. 82). So I asked Kaysang whether one could use this term 'entangled' to describe the involvement with India of young Tibetans, to which she answered:

Of course, for young Tibetans who were born in India, this "entanglement" of India in the lives of Tibetans is a given, an undeniable fact. We grow up speaking Hindi and English from a very young age ... For school children, their imagination is shaped by references in their lessons to India, [and] Indian culture ... Then, we have adapted to the local food habits so much so that I doubt many Tibetans who have been here for one generation or more consume traditional Tibetan food on a regular basis ... There is also the popular culture, which is shaped by the media in its various forms – movies, music, television shows, celebrities, fashion, etc.

... For almost every Tibetan, Bollywood and Hollywood, Indian and American soap operas and music are the greatest source of entertainment, which also shapes the popular culture of the youth.

It might seem, then, that neither Gesar nor Gandhi is a role model for young Tibetans. But let us listen to a few other voices, expressing personal views of what kind of identity a young, well-educated Tibetan may have in India:

(1) When I first joined Delhi University as an undergraduate student, I was the only Tibetan in my class, and it made me question my identity ... I am not Nepali, nor Indian, nor Chinese for sure. When I introduce myself as Tibetan, my friends ask me: when are you going back to Tibet? I know I am Tibetan, but I know I do not possess a Tibetan passport ... nor do I have Indian passport for that matter – even after being in India for more than twenty years. Who am I, which category do I belong to? ... These conflicting thoughts confuse me and make me vulnerable.

(2) I was born in Tibet... In the winter of 1998, I came to India... When I reached there, it was like a betrayal because the stories I had heard about India as I was growing up didn't seem to be in existence. The first few months were dreadful, there was no way of getting away from homesickness... As time goes, ... the land and people so alien to you become part of your everyday life... The Tibetan exile community and exile government has become an important part of my constant search for an identity. My ideals and beliefs, my understanding of society, relationship, responsibility, political ideology ... are influenced or rather socialized by its discourses and narratives. I belong to somewhere yet I really don't belong anywhere here, then I tell myself it is probably the feeling of being an exile, being stateless. There is a constant longing to return home, at the same time a constant fear of not fitting there as well.

Stuart Hall speaks about "profound, unsettling ambiguities and contradictions" (p. 96) inherent in a diaspora. He speaks about

‘double consciousness’: that of belonging to more than one world, being both ‘here’ and ‘there’, of thinking about ‘there’ from ‘here’ and vice versa; of being ‘at home’ – but never wholly – in both places; neither fundamentally the same, nor totally different (p. 140).

Other young Tibetans seem to find a more stable home in the Tibetan diaspora community:

I feel a purpose and a meaning for living because there is a strong sense of collective mission. The very identity of a refugee is both a source of anxiety as well as hope.

Kaysang has written a poem, linked to her name, which expresses this feeling of not having a clear identity. Her name, as mentioned, is Tenzin Kesang, but to make it easier for themselves, her Indian friends used to simply call her “Kay”:

[KAYSANG VIDEO RECORDING:]

when they call me
 by a quarter
 of the name i was given
 by my lama,
 it takes my friends
 three shouts —
 three times of a single syllable
 flung into my exile air
 instead of the four-syllabic beauty
 of ancient meanings
 and modern abundance:
 my friends say
 half of us are called by
 the same first name
 and the rest
 by a version of my second.

i still prefer to
 swallow three quarters of my name —
 if it means i am
 a face in a sea of names.
 even if it feels like
 three quarters of my soul
 has been sucked into the
 pitch black of
 refugee settlement mundaneness.
 even if it feels like
 half my heart
 has been buried into the
 corners of strange cities
 in strange countries
 my grandma doesn't want to know about;
 she's happy living inside
 memories of girlhood back home
 and becoming woman
 in the bellies of
 plastic-shelter refugee camps.

one quarter of my name
 leaves
 just one quarter of my self
 breathing.

This was written during the time when I was living in Delhi and my non-Tibetan friends took to calling me “Kay” instead of “Tenzin Kalsang”. It felt as if by removing the other three quarters of my name, Tenzin ...sang, they had also unintentionally removed the parts of me that were different from them and unique to my Tibetan identity.

even if it feels like
 three quarters of my soul
 has been sucked into the
 pitch black of
 refugee settlement mundaneness.

At some levels, it feels like a betrayal, but a necessary bargain we must make as refugees trying to make space for ourselves in spaces that are marked for others, as someone who has always felt like the only spaces which have been marked out for us and which we can claim without hesitation are the “settlements”. It is “pitch black” because there seems to be no escape from the life of compromises and back-room deals we must make to live like the “others”.

even if it feels like
 half my heart
 has been buried into the
 corners of strange cities
 in strange countries
 my grandma doesn't want to know about;
 she's happy living inside
 memories of girlhood back home
 and becoming woman
 in the bellies of
 plastic-shelter refugee camps.

I'm part of a generation that has grown up with social media, and the kind of interconnected globalization as we know right now, especially with the obsession with traveling and “finding oneself”/“discovering the world and yourself”. It is strange to have all this bombardment of images and information of places all over the world that I (and others like me) would like to visit, and maybe move to. But we cannot, and that feeling of being shackled almost literally physically to the land (India) feels like “half my heart has been buried into the corners of strange cities in strange countries”.

Still, life has to go on, and Tibetan students and young scholars in the diaspora have the same ambitions as their peers all over the world. However, they have a serious handicap: they have no citizenship, they are stateless. This means that they cannot get government jobs in India, nor buy property, nor leave and re-enter India without overcoming formidable bureaucratic hurdles.

(1) I am not eligible to work in Indian government sectors... I am not allowed to go back to Tibet as well. It reduces the effectiveness of my potential and determination... Because lack of documentation limits the movement, opportunity in education and jobs, and medical service, it increases my vulnerability.

(2) I would wish to work in think tanks and any organisation that works on the issue of Tibet's environment. However, currently I have no clear direction about my future, which is quite sad.

(3) ... objectively looking there isn't much opportunity for the emerging young Tibetan scholars and researchers in India.

4) Being refugee means being exploited by landlords by charging high rent in spite of our meagre salary. Being called Chinese when travelling outside. Having limited livelihood options. Having a documents problem. Being uncertain about what the future holds for us.

Being stateless can also put an effective stop to a dream of working internationally:

I always wanted to work in the United Nations since my childhood, but there is no hope because working in the UN demands a citizenship, which I am deprived of.

It is therefore not surprising that a great many, perhaps even the majority, of young Tibetan intellectuals are eager, sometimes even desperate, to leave India and settle in the West, legally if possible, or, failing that, sometimes illegally. In fact, it would not seem to be an exaggeration to say that the Tibetan diaspora in India is facing a brain drain. This trend has a negative effect on those who are striving to complete their university education in India:

(1) Young Tibetans in India are affected by globalisation in many ways, but something that affects us directly is that our Tibetan community places higher value on Tibetan students who have studied in Western colleges and universities than those who have completed their studies in India.

In my contact with young Tibetans, however limited it may be, their vision of a future where they can place their education and skills at the service of their people and of humanity at large nevertheless seems to be central to their way of thinking:

(1) I have never stopped dreaming about meeting my parents again in my life. Second, I have never given up on my goal to complete my education and do something for the cause of my country, Tibet, or humanity at large.

(2) I feel happy to have been able to contribute to the Tibetan community for a decade, and it gives me immense satisfaction... One of my biggest wishes is to be able to visit my parents' villages in Tibet and meet their relatives.

(3) I feel fortunate to be born as a Tibetan who has a purpose and vision in life. I have a clear goal to aim for a better life for the people of Tibet inside and outside Tibet. My research is focused on the issue of environmental problems in Tibet as well as China's policies on it. Thus, I hope that I can still continue to work on these issues.

(4) As a Tibetan student, I always have the sense of having a big responsibility. I hope that I will get a better opportunity and become a better scholar who will be able to make some difference to our future.

Some of the Tibetan female students express a strong wish to contribute to improving the social position of women in the Tibetan diaspora:

(1) Through my research on gender and its various aspects, and through advocacy work on gender equality, I want to contribute to creating a better understanding of the lives of common Tibetan women ... so that we can become equal partners in the process of nation building and [not] just remain ... as receivers of discourse.

(2) I want to be a well-educated woman guided by knowledge rather than mere physical beauty that won't last long. I want to inspire other young girls to pursue an academic life so as to write more about Tibetan issues. We already have a few Tibetan writers, researchers, and academics, but fewer Tibetan women who work in this field. Our history is all ruled by men and their actions. Having the opportunity for education, I think we young women should make the best use of it.

It is perhaps less important whether we call this "feminism" or "a gender-focused programme of action". At the bottom of these and similar statements, there is impatience and frustration at the deeply entrenched patriarchal values and norms of Tibetan society. It is easy to be misled by the apparent freedom of movement of Tibetan women in society. They move, but they do not set the agenda. Using the figure of her mother, Kaysang reflects on the position of women in Tibetan society:

[KAYSANG VIDEO RECORDING:]

mother, i have
inherited
your hands.

each wrinkle speaks
of decades older than
your age;
no amount of
hand-creams
and vaseline
can conceal these markers
of laboring love.
each crack in your skin
holds stories of
a hundred thousand days
feeding a hundred souls.

your brothers call you
durga,
fierce one,
protectress —
they are your sons
and i, your only daughter.

your hands know only
to love,
to labor,
to devote,
to attend.

mother, i have
inherited
your hands
and
their full weight.

The hands of my mother and my grandmother tell a huge part of their stories. If we put the three of our hands side by side, I find that with each generation, the amount of knots at the joints, the amount of wrinkles, etc. become less and less. It is a representation of the change in circumstances since my mother's mother first arrived in exile ... harsh, back-breaking labor in road construction in extreme weather, and also the change and stagnation in the roles of the women. Although there have been huge changes through the three generations, women still inherit the legacy of patriarchal expectations to which our mothers and grandmothers are still bound.

each wrinkle speaks
of decades older than
your age;
no amount of
hand-creams
and vaseline
can conceal these markers
of laboring love.

“Love” in Tibetan households is measured by the amount of labor one is able to put in. For the women, it shows on their hands, and in their health Tibetan women have always contributed economically to the household income, whether through small family businesses, or farming, ... and they had the added responsibility of doing all the household chores, which the majority of the men neither did nor do now share in. This dynamic also translates into the space of shaping our national struggle. The Tibetan national struggle has been built for a very long time by men, because apart from a few old aristocratic women who had the privilege of getting equal education as men, women were mostly confined to the domestic space until our generation. They therefore did not have much role in shaping either the national narrative or the direction of the national struggle. Things are changing slowly these days, with the younger generation of women and girls getting equal access to education.

However, a woman’s worth is still judged primarily by how good of a daughter, sister, mother and wife she is. A woman who puts in extra hours and dedication to her studies and work, and has succeeded more in her field than her male counterparts will still be considered a failure if she is not able to perform household chores at the same level as her mother. A woman is expected to ‘inherit’ her ‘mother’s hands’, and to ‘labor’ for the people she loves. The result is that many women are not able to become as good as the men in their respective careers, because there are so many other things that demand their time, energy and attention.

Kaysang has a poem in which she begins by highlighting what she says is “the expectations and restrictions placed upon women by women themselves. ... there is always the expectation of softness, prettiness, delicateness etc.”.

[KAYSANG VIDEO RECORDING:]

were we ever meant to be
smiling-faced
sparkling-eyed
pictures painted with
black on our eyelids
pink on our lips

sakura with the backdrop
of golden-roofed buildings
wind-chimes chiming in the wind -
they always sounded creepy to me

couldn't we have meant to be
wild-haired
loud-mouthed
sacred art in the colors of
blood and grime

streaking our hearts
and showing on our bodies
of all the battles waged and won
against mountains burning
red-gold-star cloth tearing

“This is the image that we see predominantly, women who are expected to care about their appearance, who are expected to smile, who are expected to retain the “sparkle in their eyes”, Kaysang explains. The poem goes on to describe Dharamsala, with its association to softness, non-violence, ‘golden-roofed buildings’ of the temples and monasteries, in other words, the by now universal myth of Tibetan non-violence. With considerable courage, Kaysang goes on to talk about

... the possibility that Tibetan women could actually do much better if they were ‘wild-haired/loud-mouthed’, unafraid and fierce and evoked fear with their love for their land and their people. The image of how different it might be if we could manifest the battles that we wage daily in a patriarchal world, and if we could actually pour out all our pain fully into the ‘battles’. If we could actually dare ... burn the red-and-gold-stars flag.

This poem brings us to the theme of the nature of the Tibetan diaspora society, which is, not surprisingly, linked to the phenomenon of nationalism in exile. Nationalism is a fact in the Tibetan diaspora. For decades, the goal was clear: an independent Tibet. Since 1988, the official goal of the Tibetan government in exile, or what is now called the Central Tibetan Administration (CTA), has been a different one: it is stated to be ‘autonomy’, not independence. This policy, under the label “the Middle Way”, has been spearheaded by the Dalai Lama, and is understood to follow from the unquestioned link between Buddhism as faith and non-violence as a programme of political action.

In an atmosphere of intense pressure towards political, religious and social conformity in the Tibetan diaspora, it requires not a little courage to challenge this official ideological and political position. Tibetans who do so risk being branded as “anti-Dalai Lama” and hence “pro-Chinese”, no matter how patriotic they in fact may be. Kaysang’s cry for Tibetan women to be “wild-haired/ loud-mouthed” and to tear up the Chinese flag, no matter how metaphorical this may be – for I do not for a moment think she actually intends to engage in futile flag-burning in front of Chinese embassies – is a challenge to the accepted norms and conventions of conformity in the Tibetan diaspora, and, crucially, to the so-called “Middle Way”.

In her poem “teach me how to be/ Gesar’s daughter”, which we have already listened to, she is quite explicit. I would like to repeat her comments on this poem, where she expresses the wish “that as Tibetans, we could invoke our old myths and our old kings by being “fierce warrior-like” and “firm” in the war for “true freedom you could kill for”. However, this seems to be only a futile dream and a vague vision, for “no matter how much we might be driven to helplessness, to rage, to despair, we always have to keep in mind the concept of non-violence.” Nevertheless, at this point she says something important. She rejects the current idea that non-violence is inborn in the minds of every Tibetan through their culture – on the contrary, it is a “choice”: non-violence “is at once a choice, and a choice that ties our hands”, and in her poem she says “but maybe not”, explaining “Maybe we don’t need to feel so restricted by this narrative of being the kind, compassionate ones who don’t feel any anger”.

Here Kaysang makes a crucial statement: She points out that the idea of Tibetan “non-violence” is the product of a specific “narrative”. If one thinks about it, one realizes that for a Tibetan, her statement is a courageous one. Because, as she goes on to say, “Even amongst Tibetans, it is so difficult to find space for differing views when everything is dominated by people who believe in “truth”, who are not willing to see that there are different “truths” for different people.” Perhaps she is referring here to the Gandhian political concept of *satyagraha*, “non-violent civil disobedience”, so much favoured in certain Tibetan diasporic circles, and especially espoused by individuals occupying positions of great authority and close to the centre of power in the exile community.

The debate triggered by nationalism, often focusing on the controversy for or against Tibetan independence as the ultimate goal – a controversy which is only partly visible in the public space due to the pressure for political and social conformity in the exile community – is part of

the larger issue of what kind of society Tibetan students hope to see emerge, or sometimes despair of ever seeing emerging, in the diaspora. Once again, let us listen to what they themselves have to say:

(1) I feel Dharamsala should be more progressive and evolve from the traditional politics of power struggles among themselves. There is a larger cause we need to focus on. I would want youngsters to do something for the greater cause, not just sustain themselves.

It is evident that young Tibetan intellectuals are fully aware of what is implied by an open and democratic society, and *that* is the kind of society they want to live in:

(1) I want our diaspora community to be more accepting and respectful of differences of opinion ... and to have a better understanding of democracy and liberty so that all kinds of beliefs, thoughts, and knowledge can be included and appreciated.

(2) I want the diaspora community to evolve into a liberal, democratic, progressive and inclusive society, which could tolerate different ideas, opinions, and sects, while remaining deeply rooted in its culture and language. I wish my community to evolve into a more intellectual society where a deep culture of open and frank debate and discussion of social and political questions prevails at every corner of the society.

(3) The prime concern of the new Tibetan élites is the Dalai Lama and Buddhism. For most of them, the Tibetan issue and voices of commoners don't matter. ... Recent all-out efforts led by new élites to ostracize any voice critical of the current political class as anti-Dalai Lama are an example of this.

In general, the exile community and its administration is viewed – at best – as having a long way to go:

(1) The democracy that the Tibetan Government in Exile practises is a top-down approach which is striving and struggling to label itself a 'democratic government' and emphasizes its importance not because of liberal democratic values but rather because it is gifted from the Dalai Lama. It is evolving from its infancy and I feel large sections of the exile community are still literally illiterate about democracy, which has become an obstacle for a more inclusive debate on the question of autonomy or independence or any other critical issue.

(2) Challenging authority ... in the exile context inevitable brings me to H.H. the Dalai Lama, something the nationalist ideology cannot tolerate and I personally find difficult to resolve... However, ... I see issues of domination and resistance as inevitable in the context of power – I believe there is no benign power. In the absence of space for dissent, all utopian ideas backed by power become oppressive ... Especially in the context of colonial occupation, we as Tibetans

are expected to critique the ‘others’, that is, Chinese oppression. Any reflexive criticism is seen at best as ‘un-strategic’ or at worst ‘scandalous’.

In other words, there are high hopes and deep frustrations, and it is not for me to resolve this dilemma. However, I would like to return once again to Stewart Hall, who writes about diaspora as “an emergent space of inquiry”, because “The diasporic challenges the idea of whole, integral, traditionally unchanging cultural identities” (pp. 143-144). Can the Tibetan diaspora become “an emergent space of inquiry”? Clearly young Tibetans wish this to happen. Once again, I believe it boils down to a question of narratives, in other words, stories and identities received and accepted as true. We have already touched on the narrative of Tibetans as innately guided by the principle of non-violence, and we have seen that Kaysang has questioned this narrative. As one of the students expresses it, “Everyone is left with a certain pre-given notion shaped by a certain narrative truth about Tibet”. I think the recognition of this fact is fundamental to any understanding of the Tibetan diaspora.

In spite of the joys of daily life and the satisfaction of work and academic success, being stateless instils a sense of not belonging, and, at the end of the day, of existential insecurity. The lost homeland, Tibet, exerts a powerful attraction, and serving it and Tibetans living in Tibet is often perceived as an obligation, as a duty that is painful because it is difficult to see how it can be fulfilled. Nevertheless, as the years pass by, Tibetans in Tibet and Tibetans in the diaspora slowly but inevitably drift apart. These are feelings that come to the fore in Kaysang’s poem “we have forgotten/ how to hold your hands”:

[KAYSANG VIDEO RECORDING:]

we have forgotten
how to hold your hands,
sisters of our snowland

our hearts beat
slower
each hour
to the beat of that
white crane’s wings —
he too is tired, it seems.
so long have we spoken
this same,
singular
tongue,
your diverse music

has started sounding
alien
to our ears.

who are we to say
what your heart aches for?

our bodies have soaked in
too much of
this summer-land sun —
i'm scared now,
i'm scared
i'm forgetting
the arid wind
of my father's Ngari
and the wooded joys
of my mother's Kyidong.
the blood in my veins
has flowed
so far already
too far
from Kailash —
it no longer sings
my ancestors' songs.

my feet move
backwards now,
i'm searching for you,
sisters killed
by red bullets,
sisters gone missing
on red winter nights,
sisters huddled
deep in red prisons
we don't know of.

teach me again
how to hold your hands,
teach me again
how to sing your songs.

We do not know how to offer comfort and company to the Tibetans living inside Tibet these days... Most of us in exile (especially those not born in Tibet) hardly have any idea what life is like in Tibet, and what the people there are like.

our hearts beat
 slower
 each hour
 to the beat of that
 white crane's wings —
 he too is tired, it seems.

The white crane has long been used as the symbol of a messenger. Here, as a symbol of the connection between those inside and outside Tibet... But “he too is tired, it seems”, because the distance between our hearts seems to have grown so much, despite the physical distance remaining the same.

so long have we spoken
 this same,
 singular
 tongue,
 your diverse music
 has started sounding
 alien
 to our ears.

Homogenization of the Tibetan culture, language, traditions and history has made us deaf to the beautiful difference that exists from region to region, and village to village in Tibet. Local tongues, ways of life, and local histories are being slowly forgotten by children of those in exile because of this homogenization... It is the fault of us in exile, who have spoken the “same, singular tongue” of *u-key* (also resulting in the same kinds of thoughts and ideologies, etc.), that we cannot understand the “diverse music” of those inside Tibet.

who are we to say
 what your heart aches for?

Who are we in exile to say what the hearts of the Tibetans inside Tibet ache for? How can we decide the future of the Tibetans inside Tibet along the lines of *rangzen* [independence] and *umay lam* [the political middle way approach]? Do we know or even care what they want?

i'm scared now,
 too much of
 this summer-land

It is scary to realize that our bodies have lived in and gotten too accustomed to the sun, land, way of life, food, of India — we have been here for so long.

i'm searching for you,
 sisters killed
 by red bullets,
 sisters gone missing
 on red winter nights,

sisters huddled
 deep in red prisons
 we don't know of.
 teach me again
 how to hold your hands,
 teach me again
 how to sing your songs.

I shall let Kaysang's comments to this concluding lines of her poem also serve as the conclusion to my talk, in the knowledge that Michael as well as Anthony would have joined Kaysang's passionate cry for humans rights in Tibet, her search for her roots, and, in spite of everything, her faith in her own generation of Tibetans:

The focus here is on "sisters", because, as in the case of the story of every other struggle in the world, the stories of women "killed ... gone missing ... huddled deep in red prisons" are missing from the story of our national struggle.

However, the younger generation these days has started paying much more attention to these issues, and most of us have started to embark on this journey of going back to our roots, our feet are moving backwards to search for our sisters, and in the process, ourselves.

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