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WE ARE NO MONKS. NARRATING THE SELF THROUGH NEW TIBETAN EXILE CINEMA

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The purpose of this article is to analyse responses given by the young generation of Tibetan 'born refugees' to imaginations of Tibet which exist in global culture. They employ cinema as a medium for narrating about themselves: going beyond the idealized image of Tibetans created both by Western popular culture and the identity politics of Tibetan diaspora elites. This study presents an analysis of visual representations of Tibetanness in the new Tibetan exile cinema which burst on scene in the last decade of the 20th century.

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Zadaniem tego artykułu jest przeanalizowanie odpowiedzi, jakich udziela młode pokolenie tybetańskich „urodzonych uchodźców" na istniejące wyobrażenie Tybetu. Wykorzystują oni kino jako medium do opowiadania o sobie, wykraczając poza wyidealizowany obraz Tybetańczyków stworzony zarówno przez zachodnią kulturę popularną, jak i politykę tożsamościową prezentowaną przez elity tybetańskiej diaspory. W niniejszej pracy przedstawiam analizę wizualnych przedstawień tybetańskości w nowym tybetańskim kinie na uchodźstwie, które objawiło się na scenie w ostatniej dekadzie XX wieku.

K e y w o r d s: Tibetans, diaspora, born refugees, Tibetan cinema, identity politics.

INTRODUCTION

Tibet has been mythologized and romanticized in popular 'global' culture (Dodin and Räther 2001, see for example Bishop 1989, McLagan 1997) and it has been cinematography – primarily from Hollywood – that has largely contributed to the creation and spread of the exotic and spiritualized image of the Tibetan Other (Schell 2000). For many years, it was Westerners who made films about Tibetan people culture[1]. These images made Tibetans recognizable, but at the same time idealized them in the global

[1] See for example: *Lost Horizon* (1937, based on a James Hilton story), *Golden Child* (1986, a comedy adventure with Eddie Murphy as star), *Little Buddha* (1993, directed by Bernardo Bertolucci), *Seven Years in Tibet* (1997, a blockbuster starring Brad Pitt) and *Kundun* (1997, directed by Martin Scorsese).

imagination: depicted as mystical, inner-oriented, compassionate and peace-loving beings. Donald S. Lopez Jr. (1998) argues that Tibetans – as all of us – have become "the prisoners of Shangri-La"[2], trapped in Western notions of Buddhism that reify Tibetan culture and reduce it to a single religious dimension.

However, it is not just 'the West' that "orientalises" Tibet (Said 1978), constructing it as essentially distinct from itself. Tibetan- diaspora- elites also create their own myths about Tibetans, using stereotypes and expectations of who they are in order to promote their political cause and win international support. In this form of identity politics, which I will argue works as a "refugee identity regime" only one accepted articulation of identity is allowed with Tibetans pictured, as opposed to their Chinese 'Other' counterparts, as nature-loving, peaceful, kind, and religious (Bloch 2011). Such image-making, which skilfully plays on and exploits existing notions of Tibet, has ''invisibilized' certain groups of Tibetans. A case in point being the many young, secular Tibetans from India; a generation already born in exile, whose voices have not been represented in official representations created by both Tibetan- exile- elites and the outside world.

These young Tibetan 'born refugees'[3] have therefore being searching for alternative means of self-expression which would allow them recover their silenced voices. I argue that film – along with music and literature (prose, poetry, and essays) – have provided their voices with such an avenue for expression. A lot has been written on the Western creation of Tibetanness. In this article however I analyse responses given by young Tibetan generation living in exile to the existing imaginations of Tibet in global culture. They employ cinema as a medium for narrating their own self, which goes beyond the idealized image of Tibetans created both by Western popular culture and Tibetan diaspora-elite identity politics. This study presents an analysis of visual representations of Tibetanness in the new Tibetan exile cinema which burst on the scene in the last decade of the 20th century: *We're No Monks. A Struggle for Identity* (2004) by Pema Dhondup, *Dreaming Lhasa* (2005) by Ritu Sarin and Tenzing Sonam, *Tsampa to Pizza* (2006) by Sonam Tseten, *Richard Gere Is My Hero* (2007) by Tashi Wangchuk and Tsultrim Dorjee, and *Seeds* (2008) by Dazel, all have three things in common. Firstly, all were made by a young generation of Tibetans brought up outside Tibet (three of whom studied filmmaking in the United States of America). Among these directors only Sonam Tseten is not a '2nd generation 'refugee' as he came to India at a tender

[2] It was mostly Hilton who contributed to the invention of *Shangri la*, a Western paraphrase of *Shambhala* (Wylie: *Sham bha la*) – a hidden Buddhist kingdom, more spiritual than real. *Shangri la* is a myth that associates Tibet with a land of eternal happiness, peace and spirituality.

[3] I use this term when referring to Tibetans who are 2nd generation 'refugees', who were already born in exile and therefore are not refugees in a direct sense (as they have never fled any country). However, they 'feel exiled' and intentionally maintain their statelessness by not acquiring Indian citizenship. The refugee status, which they identify with, is an imagined one and as such has been 'inherited' by them from their exiled parents. In other words, they were 'born as refugees' (Bloch 2011).

age and was raised in the diaspora. Secondly, all of them were filmed in India and tell the everyday stories of Tibetan youths who live in exile: a topic entirely ignored by Western artists. And thirdly, they all break with the perfect image of Tibetans, and instead attempt to deal with the real thoughts, desires, doubts and problems of young people. The Tibetans portrayed in these pictures do not go to *gompa*[4] nor say *mantras*[5] every day; instead they play rock music, drink alcohol, pick up Western girls, argue with their parents and discuss the use of violence in their political struggle, without sacrificing their feelings of being very much Tibetan.

Analysis of the films is supported by ethnographic fieldwork which I have been conducting among the Tibetan diaspora in India since 2004. It focuses on young Tibetans born in exile and living in different Tibetan settlements in the states of Karnataka, Orissa, Himachal Pradesh, Jammu and Kashmir. Included also are the cities of New Delhi and Bangalore[6]. Two of the analysed films I had the opportunity to watch during field research included, *Richard Gere Is My Hero*, which I saw at a premiere show in Dharamsala, and where I could observe the very spontaneous reactions of the audience to the scenes they knew from their own lives. *Tsampa to Pizza* was shown to me at its director's home in New Delhi. With the exception of Pema Dhondup – who, though raised in India, lives in the United States – I had the opportunity to personally meet all the directors, while some of the actors became research partners and friends. I still remember to this present day how moved I was when I saw *We're No Monks* for the first time, the film which, in my opinion, initiated new Tibetan exile cinema[7]. Having already been working for some time in a Tibetan world of perfectly polished images, I was really shocked by the frankness and directness with which the filmmakers unveiled the world of young Tibetan exiles that had hitherto been invisible in public discourse.

BEING TRAPPED IN AN IDEALIZED IMAGE: "A STRUGGLE FOR IDENTITY"

With reference to non-Tibetans' expectations of Tibetans as being so gentle that they are incapable of venting their anger during street protests, Lobsang Yeshi, a then member of the Central Executive Committee of the Tibetan Youth Congress, concluded that "[n]ot only are the Chinese oppressing us, so are the rest of the world" (following Susan 2008, 36). One of my research partners, a Bangalore-based activist with "Friends of Tibet. India" NGO, expressed this feeling of being suppressed by the outside world's expectations in a similar way:

[4] Wylie: *dgon pa* – a Buddhist temple or monastery.

[5] Sanskrit: an invocation to a deity and a kind of a short prayer repeated multiply.

[6] The findings of this research have been published in a book based on my PhD thesis (Bloch 2011).

[7] It was advertised as the "first Indo-Tibetan feature film" as it was made in cooperation with an Indian production company (with a famous Indian actor playing one of the main characters).

> "I'm sick of people's expectations. People in the West would like to see us always smiling, with an empathetic heart and peaceful. But these are their imaginations, not the truth. They need to get rid of these images and see the reality. In the depth of my heart – I assure you – this compassion is there. But we have to be very practical and circumstances play an important role. If the circumstances are O.K., then – I'm sure – Tibetans will smile all the time (...). But we are not happy here so who is to laugh? If we feel disappointment, anger".

However, as Paul Christiaan Klieger argues, Tibetan refugees are not merely the passive victims of our (Western) imaginative constructs but they actively and consciously make selective self-representations of their culture (Klieger 1997). I wish to argue that the contemporary image of Tibetans is a product of bilateral idealization: that of romanticized notions of Tibetanness created in the Western world and that of identity politics created by Tibetan- diaspora- elites. Although the latter can be read as the collective agency of a subaltern group, it also works as a regime by classifying certain attitudes and behaviors as 'non-Tibetan', and therefore employing authenticity as an exclusionary category (such as being violent connoting being non-Buddhist and thus not being an 'authentic Tibetan'). This involves the condemning attitude of many Tibetan exile elites towards the 'Westernization'[8] that the Tibetan youth are supposed to be undergoing, although many Tibetan traditions now so celebrated were invented in exile (Bloch 2011, 403–482)[9].

In the film *Tsampa to Pizza* – itself a telling title[10] – there is a scene in which an elder Tibetan tells his few-years- old grandson: "You have to preserve it [the culture and tradition]; otherwise who will do it?" I find this scene representative of the pressure that the community – family, school, government – puts on 'born refugees'(2nd generation) who are expected to be part of a 'living heritage' or an 'open-air museum' of traditional Tibetan culture. The "traditional Tibetan culture" is believed to survive only in exile and such an assumption is a source of cultural 'neo-puritanism' (Nowak 1984). However, as I observe during my fieldwork, many young Tibetans are increasingly tired of this idealized, neo-puritanist image. I argue that there are two main reasons behind that. First of all, young Tibetans, educated in modern schools and living in exile believe that this pacifist and spiritual image has yet to bring any significant political change to the Tibetan cause. They expect their government to be pragmatic and not idealistic. In the monologue opening the film, one of the characters in *We're No Monks* asks a crucial question in this regard and answers it himself: "What has the

[8] There is also a fear of "Bollywoodization", but as a result of the separation strategy consequently employed by the Tibetan exile government this impact has become more limited (Bloch 2012).

[9] See for example Huber (1997) for environmentalism. See Calkowski (1997) for performance arts.

[10] *Tsampa* (Wylie: *rtsam pa*) is a roasted barley flour, usually mixed and drank with salted butter tea, with the alcoholic drink *chang,* or simply with water; it can be accompanied by yak cheese or meat. In the process of Tibetan nation-building, *tsampa* is considered to be a 'traditional' Tibetan food as opposed to Chinese rice-eaters (see Shakya 1993).

world given us? Only empty sympathy!" Secondly, the 'born refugees' want to be active participants in global culture and initiators of cultural change. They demand the right to wear jeans, listen to rock music, drink beer and still be considered Tibetans. In other words, they strive for agency in the process of self-identification and they search for a space to create their own articulations of Tibetanness, instead of simply adjusting to the image of a 'good traditional Tibetan'.

However, such articulations have been mostly refused to them. The generation of young, secular Tibetans born in exile is not represented in either popular 'global' culture or the official publications of the Central Tibetan Administration[11]. On websites, in photo albums and in movies it is rare to see young people – wearing baseball caps, leather jackets, hip-hop pants, jeans or Nike trainers. Their broadly smiling parents and grandparents are widely represented – dressed 'traditionally' while carrying a prayer wheel in one hand and a *mala*[12] in the other. If any youths perchance to appear in these visual representations, they are mostly monks or school-uniformed children. The fact that young, secular Tibetans have been erased from mainstream representations proves that they are not considered representative of Tibetan culture. When speaking of Tibetan youths, senior diaspora elites employ either narratives of expectation or critique. In the former, young Tibetans are expected to be "the seedlings of a future Tibet", and it is this pressure that the film *Seeds* refers to in its title. Similarly, when they fail to meet these expectations, they are often condemned, especially by Tibetan educators, such as Tsepak Rigzin, the long-term principal of the Central School for Tibetans in Mundgod settlement (Karnataka state):

> "The drive and interest of the younger generation towards modern rock music and Indian cinema overshadows their interest and love of Tibetan culture and tradition. Complaints of the poor standard of the Tibetan language, a lack of interest in religious and cultural activities, rising cases of indiscipline and the formation of undesirable social habits to name but a few are causing concerns. (...) There is a growing trend among the Tibetan youth of today to look for quick money and luxurious lifestyles" (Rigzin 2004, 276–277).

In order to counteract these negative influences, books have been published which aim to admonish young Tibetans for deviating onto the wrong path'. One such book recounts the story of a young girl, Yungtso, who rather than focusing on her college studies, abandons herself to the nightlife of an Indian city: starting an informal relationship with seductive Nyima. As a result she falls pregnant, is abandoned and finally expelled from college (Khedup 2003). In the introduction to this moralizing story, Tsewang Gyalpo writes:

[11] It is the official name used by the Tibetan government in exile since the Indian state has never recognized its authority.

[12] Sanskrit: a Buddhist rosary consisting of 108 beads.

> “[The] media and the demonstrative effect of this modern world is taking our youngsters for a ride. Besides the academic syllabus, we need to evoke and cultivate in our children the essentials of our social and moral values, so that a good girl like Yungtso (our generation) do[es] not become confused in the middle [in itself] and degenerate. We cannot afford this at this moment of history (...). I sincerely hope that the story of Yungtso will serve as a rein and a reminder to all those youngsters galloping to the path of degeneration that it is better to come into the fold of our society and serve our common cause” (following Khedup 2003, 4).

BREAKING THOUGH: “A VOYAGE TO TIBET LIKE YOU’VE NEVER SEEN”

Throughout my fieldwork, I was in a position to observe the appearance of young Tibetans who wandered through the narrow streets of McLeod Ganj[13] and Majnu Ka Tila[14] armed with camcorders and experimenting with film-making (spelling). Such characters have been depicted before in films made by young Tibetan exiles. Cases in point being mute Damdul from *We’re No Monks* who documents the everyday life of his friends with a small digital camera and Karma from *Dreaming Lhasa* who comes to Dharamsala to make a documentary film about former political prisoners from Tibet. Scenes shot by them have been included in their films, which – along with the ‘natural’ settings of the Tibetan diaspora in India (settlements, districts, markets) – strengthens the reality of the images. More and more young Tibetans who I came to know during my research graduated in filmmaking from mainly North American universities, taking advantage of scholarships provided to them (especially from the Fulbright Program). Others were self-taught directors and learnt the art of filmmaking with the support of foreign friends.

We’re No Monks. A Struggle for Identity, as its title clearly states, is a manifesto of sorts for the young generation of Tibetans brought up in exile. It tells the story of four Tibetan friends in their twenties and thirties from Dharamsala who deny involvement in a series of robberies from a local shop; the investigation of which is led by a thuggish Indian policeman. The four protagonists are definitely not monks and pass their time hanging out, guzzling beer and getting high on marijuana. This monotony is interrupted from time to time by an interstate bus which brings young female tourists. The director portrays his generation accurately such as. Tenzin, the main character, who is a figure that can often be met among Tibetan youths: an unemployed college graduate dreaming of “greener pastures” in the United States. He does everything not to follow in the footsteps of his father – an employee of the Tibetan government. Tsering, also unemployed, is the father of a girl whose mother emigrated to the US where she became involved with another man. The woman’s father, however, perceives his

[13] The upper part of Dharamsala in the state of Himachal Pradesh, north India. Dharamsala has become the ‘capital’ of the Tibetan diaspora in India.

[14] The name of the district in the northern part of New Delhi inhabited by Tibetans.

son-in-law to be an irresponsible idler and restricts his contact with the sick daughter. Damdul, the aforementioned self-taught filmmaker, sells bread from the roadside. The fourth protagonist, Pasang, is the only one born in Tibet. He runs a small eatery in McLeod Ganj and takes care of his sister, a former political prisoner who has just fled Tibet. In his spare time Pasang writes a play devoted to the Tibetan cause. He strongly supports the radical methods of political struggle against the Chinese presence in Tibet and condemns the complacency of 'born refugees'. The film poses a question about the possibility of the Tibetan freedom movement turning violent.

The nostalgic *Dreaming Lhasa* was directed by the most famous Tibetan-Indian duo of filmmakers, the couple that is Tenzing Sonam and Ritu Sarin, who started their own production company, White Crane Films. The film tells the story of three young Tibetans in their thirties who belong to three different worlds. Karma who has grown up in the United States is a director working in New York. She comes to Dharamsala to make a documentary feature about former political prisoners. However, the main purpose of her trip to the exiled 'Tibet' in India is a search for identity but also an attempt to escape from a failing relationship to her American boyfriend. One day Karma interviews Dhondup, an enigmatic ex-monk, and a recent arrival from Tibet. The real reason behind his stay in India is to fulfill his dying mother's last wish to deliver a charm box to a long-missing guerilla fighter. Karma falls in love with Dhondup and decides to help him search for the mysterious soldier. They start their journey into the Tibetan diaspora – through the dark streets of Majnu Ka Tila and the sweater sellers' stalls in Jaipur. Also present is Jimmy, Karma's assistant (played by a musician from the JJI Exile Brothers, a Dharamsala-based band very popular among young Tibetans). Jimmy is a typical vagabond of Dharamsala and the permanently unemployed leader of a local rock band who is trying to pick up Karma. The film was publicized as "a voyage to Tibet like you've never seen".

Tsampa to Pizza is a short feature film which was shot in New Delhi and tells the story of Tenzin and Dhondup who have just graduated from a Tibetan school and are admitted to an Indian college to pursue their studies. This is the first time they have lived outside their Tibetan community. However, their interest in education pales into insignificance when compared to their interest in girls, music, fashionable clothes, and sport. They share a room, the rent of which is paid for, by their parents. They are carefree and clueless until they meet a former political prisoner and an Indian Tibet supporter, sparking Tenzin into thinking about the meaning of his life.

Richard Gere is My Hero is a funny yet bold production with a challenging title. It is again a story of four young Tibetans and their daily lives in Mcleod Ganj: hanging around, playing snooker, drinking alcohol, fighting with other Tibetans and trying to pick up female tourists. Nyima, the main character, is a diehard fan of Richard Gere and awaits the arrival of his idol in the town (which is not such an unrealistic dream considering Gere's friendship with the 14th Dalai Lama and his constant support for the

Tibetan cause). Nyima wants to be a famous actor himself but does absolutely nothing to accomplish this. The main plot focuses on the annual drama competition that teams from different Tibetan settlements take part in. Nyima's friends prepare a play – they do not want to lose the competition as they do every year. A beautiful Tibetan girl comes from New Delhi to support the boys in their acting endeavours and problems arise when two of them fall in love with her which gives the film a romantic comedy element.

The film *Seeds* is the first to present a female perspective, as it was directed and produced by a young Tibetan woman, born and raised in India, although then living in Paris. The titular "seeds" are a group of young Tibetans who live in New Delhi. Unlike *Tsampa to Pizza* they are not students but graduates who are trying to find their place in an Indian metropolis, outside their Tibetan community. They mainly work for transnational companies which have outsourced their customer services to the countries of the Global South where labour costs are lower. They live in the Amar Colony, a neighborhood frequently inhabited by young Tibetans and where my research was conducted (two of the actors are my longtime research partners whom I have known from the time when they lived in the Dolanji settlement in the state of Himachal Pradesh). This short black-and-white feature film recounts the story of one day of their life in the spring of 2008, when a demonstration against the upcoming Olympic Games in Beijing and a crackdown on protests in Tibet were taking place in the city. Politics provides a backdrop for the everyday activities of the young Tibetans living in a big city: boys speeding on motorbikes: lifting weights at the gym; passing time on the rooftops of a crowded metropolis taking photos of their tattoos and hairstyles for social media and girls doing makeup in front of the camera as if in front of a mirror. One of the former falls pregnant and her Tibetan boyfriend vanishes.

WE ARE NO MONKS – BUT WHO ARE WE?

What you may ask is the image of the young generation of Tibetans living in exile in India that emerges from these very autobiographical films. Other questions worth posing include what kind of self-representations have they created and what do young Tibetans want to tell us about themselves. First of all, they are not monks and do not want to be perceived as such. What is really striking in these productions is the lack of Buddhist-related- images which are so strongly associated with Tibet in the global imagination: no prayer wheels, no butter lamps, no mantras, no *gompas*, and no monks. Tenzin from *We're No Monks* says: "Praying for all sentient being[s] is outdated". If there are any manifestations of religiosity in all the films, they refer only to the newcomers from Tibet: Dhondup from *Dreaming Lhasa,* believes in the prophecy of the oracle (for which he is roundly ridiculed by Jimmy) and Pasang from *We're No Monks*, carries a *mala* as a matter of course. The critical attitude held by 'born refugees' towards the

way Buddhism is practiced by the older generation has been captured in *We're No Monks* where there is the grotesquely portrayed character of an old woman who each morning walks through the streets of McLeod Ganj with a conspicuous prayer wheel in her hand. However, instead of praying, the woman spreads gossip about others throughout the town. Even the 14th Dalai Lama, an icon of Tibet and a global "spiritual celebrity" (Iyer 2008), is barely referred to and, if he is, then only as an image that in fact veils the real feelings and desires of Tibetans. Tenzin tells an American female tourist whom he picks up: "He [the Dalai Lama] is enlightened. I'm not", as if he wanted to make her see him as a man of flesh and blood. Tenzin Tsundue, a poet and activist among the youthful generation of Tibetans born in exile, speaks in a similar vein:

> "(...) His Holiness' sense of compassion is that of the Buddha. I'm a human being looking for freedom in this world. As a Buddhist, my attempt is to be a better person and not to renounce the world" (following Chaudhury 2008, 33–34).

I have to admit that I myself have been guilty of perpetrating reductionist simplifications. Once I asked the aforementioned activist from the "Friends of Tibet. India" NGO whether in his opinion the fact that Tibetans serve in the Indian army did not directly contradict the Buddhist principle of *ahimsa*[15] and the political concept of non-violence both built on it and promoted by the government in exile. My research partner looked really disappointed and irritated with my question: "When you say this, it seems that all Tibetan boys and girls should be monks and nuns! Only then would everything fit, but we are human beings!" Tsering Namgyal, a Tibetan journalist born in India and now living in Taiwan, the author of one of the first literary self-reflections on the generation of 'born refugees', published in India at the same time when the new Tibetan exile cinema was born, expressed his irritation with the fact that religious identity has completely overshadowed all other marks of Tibetan identification and belonging, such as profession, ethnicity or gender: "Whenever I have been abroad (...) when I said that I was Tibetan, it was a given that I would be asked a question about Buddhism" (Namgyal 2006, 42). Young Tibetans are aware of the exclusionary workings of a "refugee identity regime". One of my research partners, an employee of a call centre in New Delhi and one of the actors in *Seeds*, told me once that his parents "say that I'm a communist because I don't go to *gompa*". The film *Seeds* illustrates well the pressure that is imposed, particularly on young women, to behave properly. In one scene a girl's brother warns her against going out in a miniskirt: "You are embarrassing your community and your family". She fights back: "All girls in the world dress like this. Why not me?"

The young Tibetans portrayed in these analysed films are undoubtedly not renouncing the world. They binge drink, smoke marijuana, chase Western girls, hang around

[15] Sanskrit: not causing suffering, non-violence.

on motorbikes, listen to hip-hop and play rock music. Moreover, they dream about emigrating to the 'West'. Tenzin from *We're No Monks* carries a one-dollar banknote in his wallet and wears a T-shirt emblazoned with an American flag. He says: "I must have done something very wrong in a previous life, that I got stuck here [in India]". One of the characters in *Seeds* says: "Whatever [America] is, I am sure, it's much, much better out there than here". In order to obtain a visa to the United States, Jimmy from *Dreaming Lhasa* shaves his head and pretends to be a monk; the success of this highly agentic use of Tibetan's global image was lavishly celebrated in a pub in McLeod Ganj.

Contrary to what supporters of Tibet from Western countries imagine, and against the wishes of exile elites, the daily lives of young Tibetans from India do not encompass a space between home and *gompa*. These are rather marked in settlement-landscapes by such sites as snooker clubs (from time to time shut by camp authorities), football grounds and areas on the outskirts of the settlements where young people congregate on their motorbikes after dark in order to chat and have a drink. In Dharamsala, like in many Indian cities, they gather in pubs and discos. *We're No Monks* opens up with a scene at Shiva Café, a popular spot located above a waterfall, about half-an-hour walk from McLeod Ganj where Tibetans and tourists meet to enjoy music, alcohol and marijuana (the place has a habit of being repeatedly shut by the Indian police). One of the main protagonists in the film says: "My friends and I were enjoying the night as usual at Shiva Café. That is our life and also our world". Commenting on the Tibetan youth enjoying themselves, one Tibetan activist says: "People can't carry pain all the time. The wounds are there and when the times comes the people will rise and they will rise strong" (following Susan 2008, 36). In *Tsampa to Pizza*,Tenzin and Dhondup hang both a poster of Eminem and the national Tibetan flag on the wall of their rented room. For them, as for many young Tibetans among whom I conducted research, entertainment and so called 'Western cultural influences' do not conflict with patriotism. In other words, what the analyzed films attempt to tell us, is that one can listen to hip-hop music and be a Tibetan at the same time, which is something denied by the neo-puritanist-identity politics of the exile elites. It seems that although Tibetan elites are very afraid of 'Westernisation', for many young Tibetans this does not mean the vanishing of Tibetanness because their Tibetanness is more defined in terms of political engagement than cultural 'purity'.

The third motif common to all the films is political engagement as a core characterising the Tibetanness in exile. The characters portrayed in all the films may not be religious and may waste their time at parties, but they cannot escape politics, although one of the protagonists in *We're No Monks* says in despair: "Forget all this bull-shit politics". As one of my research partners, a 'born refugee', says: "When you are a refugee, everything is about politics". This is why, despite fleeing the candle-lit protest organized each year to commemorate the 1959 uprising in Tibet, the four friends from *Richard Gere Is My Hero* engage themselves in a drama competition, preparing a play

about the 'independence versus Middle Way' dilemma[16]. This is why Tenzin from *We're No Monks* decides to go to New Delhi to abduct a Chinese diplomat in order to exchange him for Tibetan political prisoners. This is also why Tenzin from *Tsampa to Pizza* discovers his 'true self' through political awareness when he says to a journalist: "We are born as refugees but we are not gonna die as refugees"; and the film's director adds: "Never give up!". This is why all the friends from *Seeds* – although they risk losing their jobs and being detained which would put them at risk of being refused visas to the United States – decide to take part in a demonstration. This is also why one of the female protagonists in *Seeds* has a nightmare in which she is in the middle of an empty road wearing a wedding-style dress made out of the Tibetan national flag that starts bleeding. In all the films the Tibetan cause is shown as an integral part of the 'born refugees'' everyday life – lived, experienced, felt, and discussed over a bottle of beer. This sense of belonging to the 'cause' makes exiled Tibetanness highly political. The imagined, 'inherited' refugee status seems to be the most significant factor behind Tibetan identity-making in India. Tibetans born and brought up there emphasize their constant consciousness of living with the big 'R' (standing for 'Refugee') written on their foreheads. Being refugees makes them Tibetans (Bloch 2011; see Mountcastle 1997, 177–178; Anand 2000, 275; Yeh 2002, 248).

The politicization of self in exile is related to the question of violence – the fourth motif omnipresent in new Tibetan exile cinema. Violence appears in all the films as a political means vis-à-vis the non-violence policy of the government in exile, as well as the daily violence which occurs – in relations with Indians and other Tibetans – which is present in the life of 'born refugees'. This of course directly contrasts with the pacifist global image of Tibetans which 'invisibilizes' such violence. However, violence seems to be the axis of *We're No Monks*. Its director employed similar means to debate the legitimacy and effectiveness of the non-violence principle in the Tibetan freedom struggle in *Richard Gere Is My Hero* by putting into the mouths of his characters such words as: "If we struggle just for our stomach every day, one day we will die" and "Either you kill or get killed". Domestic violence is shown in the film as resulting from the growing generation gap between the 'born refugees' and their parents who have ceased to be authority figures to their kids because of both political helplessness and low material status. Tenzin, the main character of *We're No Monks*, does not want to be like his father. He says that over the course of his years working for the government in exile he has got nowhere. Once, when he returns home drunk, late at night, his father threatens that: "I can kill him if I want". Tenzin does not remain beholden and says: "I can kill too". In *Seeds,* there is a young Tibetan man who threatens to use violence

[16] There is an ongoing dispute in the diaspora whether the Tibetan struggle should aim at full political independence or autonomy within the People's Republic of China; the latter is strongly supported by the 14th Dalai Lama, the government in exile and most elder Tibetan elites.

in order to discipline his sister for whom he feels responsible for as they live together under the same roof in an Indian city. In one scene his friends are playing with a gun on a New Delhi-rooftop. "Who would you shoot first?" – asks one of them and then furnishes the following answer: "For me, the first would be a Chinese".

It seems that for 'born refugees' the idealized image of a peaceful Tibetan underestimates Tibet's cause, as a result weakening the political agency of Tibetans. Tibetans portrayed as unreal creatures obsessed with religion are not taken seriously in the world of *realpolitik* (Anand 2008, 99). Although widely admired, the Dalai Lama does not pose any concrete threat to anyone; therefore his political aspirations are ignored. The protagonist in Pasang's play argues that unless Tibetans are more radical in their actions, "nobody will sympathize or hate us". *We're No Monks* ends with a scene in which Damdul tries on a suicide belt with sticks of dynamite. The screen then darkens and finally sound erupts in the form of an explosion and the nervous chatter of Indian policemen on CB radios. The director thus, returns full circle as the film opens with a scene on the media coverage of a suicide attack on a Chinese diplomat in New Delhi.

The question of violence is, in my opinion, more an issue of effectiveness. Pasang, who urges his friends to employ more radical methods in the political struggle, says: "It is time to finally do something!" and points to the examples of Palestine and Kashmir. Such thoughts were often raised during my fieldwork, although most often in informal talks. Many young 'born refugees' doubt whether the idea of non-violence is a viable and successful strategy in relation to the People's Republic of China, for which it can be read as a sign of weakness. That is why one of the protagonists in *Seeds* urges his friend: "Never mix politics and religion together. It never worked". My research partner, a 30-year old monk from a big Tibetan monastery reconstructed in southern India, says:

> "If the Chinese were smarter, they would manage the Tibetan cause as long as His Holiness is still alive. He is the only one who Tibetans are obliged to. Otherwise, we are savage and we are like Spanish bulls! We can easily kill. In the past we used to carry knives on daily basis. Tibetans were precisely like that".

Meanwhile 'the West' – here represented by a Hollywood actor and supporter of the Tibetan cause, Richard Gere – admonishes the Tibetans:

> "You must maintain that sense of uniqueness and that genuine cultural commitment to nonviolence. If you pick up arms and become like Palestinians, you'll lose your special status" (following Schell 200, 56).

It seems that the 'born refugees' are aware that if they go beyond the framework of the identity politics designed by their elites in response to the expectations of the outside world, they might be denied the right to be perceived as 'real Tibetans' (Yeh 2002). These concerns are reflected in the final scene of Pasang's play: in reaction to the main character's detention after he had cut off the abducted Chinese hostage's hand, the Tibetan protesters enter the stage, carrying a banner which reads: "He is not Tibetan".

CONCLUSIONS

The new Tibetan exile cinema which emerged in the last decade of the 20th century has become a platform for a young generation of Tibetan 'born refugees' who have not previously been represented in either the 'global' imaginations of Tibet (to a great extent shaped by cinematography itself) or in official representations created within diaspora elite- identity politics. As such it offers an insight into alternative, "unofficial" versions of Tibetanness. Film has become a means to recover silenced narratives and a medium to create self-articulations which go beyond the idealized image of Tibetans and their culture.

The analysed films unveil the hitherto invisible world of young, secular Tibetans born and raised in India. Four motifs seem to percolate through these productions. Firstly, there is the reluctance towards reducing Tibetanness to Buddhism. Secondly, there is a resistance against cultural 'neo-puritanism' and a demand for the right to enjoy life and global culture. Thirdly, there is a sense of belonging to the 'cause' which makes political engagement the core of Tibetanness in exile (here being a refugee equates to being Tibetan). And fourthly, there is a rejection of the pacifist global image of Tibetans which ignores the presence of violence in the diaspora, both as a debated political method vis-à-vis the non-violence policy of the government in exile and everyday violence. The analyzed films capture the complexity of the young generation of Tibetan exiles clearly, making people aware that there is no single story of Tibetanness.

Finally, it is worth noting that the directors of all these films have decided to speak openly about topics mostly silenced in external self-representations created by the Tibetan diaspora. I find this to be very courageous as by airing them they have risked accusations of breaking the idealized image of the Tibetan community and therefore harming the Tibetan cause.

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