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Tibetan Women in the Remaking and Keeping of Communal Solidarity in Toronto, Canada

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1. Introduction

Tibetan people are strongly interwoven in our deep rooted traditions and ethnicity blended with Buddhist principles, Tibetan culture and language. Although the pronunciation of the languages varies from region to region, due to regional dialects, the standardized Tibetan alphabet serves as the foundation. This national language further binds the Tibetan identity. Tibet has been a spiritual country for centuries. Therefore, Tibetans have a strong faith in Buddhism. The spiritual and temporal leader for the last 400 years has been H. H. the Dalai Lama. So the faith and respect that Tibetans have for him is on a very personal spiritual level and is profound and almost divine. Since a basic tenet of solidarity is faith, Tibetan people are able to communicate with one another easier through similar interests, beliefs and language.

While coming into exile has created instability within Tibet's social, familial and governmental structure, Tibetans have succeeded in accommodating to new environments, as Butler (2003) explains:

“In a world where refugees are often portrayed in both the popular and the academic media as passive and impersonal victims whose past, present, and future lies in the hands of other, and more powerful forces, this relatively tiny community has been able to project itself onto the global stage not only much more frequently but also in a more dynamic light than could be predicted either by its size or its immediate prospects of political success.”

This success is attributed to the far-sighted vision and leadership of H. H. the Dalai Lama. From the beginning, he emphasized maintaining cohesiveness of the community with physical proximity as this would help preserve our culture and identity in exile.

Towards this end, the Central Tibetan Administration (CTA) in exile was set up in India as the first spontaneous step:

- To rehabilitate and resettle the influx of refugees;
- At the same time, to create a universal education system in order to teach Tibetan children the traditional language, history, religion and culture along with providing a modern education;
- Shortly afterwards, to rebuild Tibetan monasteries and nunneries in exile to

- preserve Buddhist teachings and way of life;
- Gradually democratize the administration.

The administration has over the years served as the rallying point for governments and aid agencies in implementing rehabilitation projects and rebuilding refugee communities.

These paved the way to Tibetan women making positive contributions to remaking and keeping communal solidarity by moving away from traditional roles into new and broader positions of influence in Tibetan society. Therefore, in this paper I will discuss our deep-rooted faith, patriotism, language and culture as factors that contribute to their remaking and keeping of communal solidarity.

By presenting the historical background of the role of women, invasion of Tibet, and endangerment of Tibetan culture and identity, we will explore the roles of Tibetan women as leaders, conscious members of society and guardians of the home in remaking and keeping communal solidarity in Toronto, Canada.

2. Cultural Background of Gender

The lives of Tibetan women have been profoundly shaped by the centuries-old spread of Tibetan culture blended with Tibetan Buddhism. Mahayana Tibetan Buddhism emphasizes female symbols like ultimate wisdom in the form of a goddess, considers women to be of equal spiritual potential, and asserts that designations like male or female are irrelevant with regard to the absolute reality (Buddha nature).¹⁾ However, to some extent, Tibet also seems to have preserved traces of the male dominance customary in India, from where Tibetans adopted Buddhism. For example, nuns were under the monks' supervision, and some literary works depicted women as a source of male temptation. Thus, there is a misogynist strand within Tibetan Buddhism when women are seen as obstructing the spiritual progress of men. Yet, to a certain extent, Tibetan women enjoyed a higher status and more freedom than women in neighboring India and China.

Marriage is regarded as an auspicious union of man—a skillful means (*Thabs*)—and woman—wisdom (*Sherab*). A polygamous marriage system existed side by side with monogamy and fraternal polyandry. However, monogamous marriage was most common. Divorce was frequent and could be initiated by either party. In such cases, the property was divided between husband and wife. Remarriage was the norm for both parties. In general, lay people would marry, but women as well as men could stay single without living a celibate life. Therefore, the status of Tibetan women impressed many visitors to the country. Alam (2000: 59) wrote, “Chinese travelers of the 8th century spoke of Tibet as the kingdom of women.” Sir Charles Bell, British Political Representative in Tibet, Bhutan and Sikkim, wrote in 1928, “When a traveler enters Tibet from the neighboring nations of India and China few things impress him more vigorously or more deeply than the position of the Tibetan woman. They are not kept in seclusion as are Indian women. Accustomed to mix with the other sex throughout their lives, they are at ease with men and can hold their own as well as any women in the world.” Bell continues, “And the solid fact remains that in Buddhist countries women hold a remarkably good position. Burma, Ceylon and Tibet exhibit the same picture” (Bell 1928: 147). Thus, Tibetan

women have been contributing to society in many areas. Division of labor was organized in accordance with the difference in physical strength of men and women and with the need to nurse babies and toddlers.

Moreover, women owned and operated businesses and inherited land and other assets. Historically, their responsibility was within the household and the locality. For that matter, the short-distance market economy was almost exclusively in the hands of women, while the long-distance trading economy was traditionally in the hands of men. Depending on class status, women could have considerable authority in the household, as well as in the local retail trade and craft production. The Tibetan adage, “Though I am the leader of one hundred men, my leader is at home,” reflects women’s importance in Tibet. Overall, women played the crucial roles of mother, the pivot of the family, and trustee of the material resources of the family, to which they equally contributed through their work. Due to this pivotal role in the family and as trustee of the material resources of the family, on each and every first day of the *Losar* (New Year) celebration, the traditional exchange of greetings was and still is “Fulfillment of auspicious propitious, and peace and joy (*Tashi Deleg Phunsum Tsog*), Mother be cheerful and healthy (*Ama Bagdo Kukham Sang*), may there be eternal joys (*Tendu Deva Thopar Shog*).” Therefore, historically Tibetan women have been playing a pivotal role in the family as well as in society, from caring for their own families to taking community responsibility.

3. The Chinese Invasion and Endangerment of Tibetan Culture and Identity

The Chinese occupation of Tibet posed a great threat to the survival of a distinct identity. Tibet’s unique brand of Buddhism formed the core of Tibetan culture and society, a radical contrast to the materialist anti-religion dogma of the Chinese communists. The Chinese authorities saw the distinct culture, religion, language and identity of Tibet as a threat to the stability of its rule and as a potential source of Tibet’s separation from China. Therefore, for the last 55 years and more, they have been systematically attempting to destroy the integral core of Tibetan civilization and its identity.

Tibetan language, religion, culture and traditions have been facing elimination inside Tibet, as Thurman (1988) describes: “Indeed, the whole aim of China’s cultural policy in Tibet has been to eradicate the Tibetan sense of distinct identity and inculcate in the Tibetans a sense of communality with the Chinese as fellow Communists and revolutionaries. That policy has so far proved dramatically unsuccessful.” To eradicate the Tibetan identity, Chinese authorities adjusted their policy to a more subtle and sophisticated approach by engaging in consistent efforts to replace authentic, organic Tibetan culture with a state-approved and controlled version that conforms to the ideological, political and economic objectives of the Chinese Communist Party. Some examples are the restrictions on and violence against Tibet’s religion, the policy of population transfer of Chinese into Tibet, family planning and language discrimination.

4. Women as Leaders

It is out of this context that Tibetan women were very active in the resistance movement before 1959. The March 10 Uprising of 1959 provided a direct impetus for the Tibetan Women's Uprising. In its aftermath, an estimated 3000 women met publicly at Drebu Lingka, the area just below the Potala Palace on the morning of March 12, 1959. Women visibly organized political action as a distinct group. They marched through the streets of Lhasa carrying banners, demanding "Tibet for Tibetans" and protesting against the illegal occupation of Tibet. Dechen (1995) rightly states, "According to eye-witnesses, three different protest-processions were taken out by Tibetan women in the streets of Lhasa between the 12th and 18th of March. On the 18th of March, at least five thousand women gathered at Drebu Lingka. The strength of the crowd has even been placed as high as 15,000 which may not be impossible since the population of Lhasa was swollen at the time and feelings were so strong that attendance was very high."

The Chinese authorities resorted to brute force and arrested the leaders and numerous other innocent women. Many were ruthlessly beaten to death and many more were sentenced to indefinite prison terms. The event was the start of a movement led by women and it prompted the beginning of the Tibetan Women's Association (TWA) which took root on that historic day. Since then Tibetan women have remained at the forefront of political struggle and are continuing to redefine their roles in Tibetan society. The women's movement in Tibet opened doors for women to become active contributors in every aspect of society. Devine says (1993: 25): "However, it is noted that unlike women's movements in other countries, it did not result from a breaking point of frustration with patriarchal limitations and oppression of women. Instead, women's transformation into high-profile, public figures was a spontaneous response to a critical need in Tibet's history."

Women in exile today continue to make a place for themselves in formal and informal politics, administration, religious institution and professional working life. In recent years, the number of Tibetan woman acting as community leaders has gradually increased.

5. The Tibetan Diaspora in Toronto, Canada

Dolkar (2000) states, "In 1970, two Tibetans arrived in Trenton, Ontario, Canada from India sponsored by Bata Shoe Company to get trained and work in their Company. The following year the first group of Tibetan immigrants followed and settled in Ontario and in other parts of Canada." By 1978, the Canadian Tibetan Association of Ontario (CTAO) was formed at Lindsay, Ontario to serve the needs of a small community of Tibetans in Lindsay and the surrounding areas. On March 5, 1980, the Association was formally registered and incorporated under the Ontario Corporations Act within the Province of Ontario. The Tibetan Administration in Exile recognizes the Association as a formal organization, acting as an official establishment and representing all Tibetans in the province of Ontario. In 1998, a small number of Tibetan refugees from India and Nepal

settled in Canada. The influx of Tibetans in Ontario has been growing over the years and as the majority of the members settled in the Toronto area, the office of the CTAO moved to Toronto at the beginning of this millennium. (In the beginning, however, the CTAO “office” was fluid and largely depended on the executive team members’ residence.) It serves the needs of the growing Tibetan community and acts as a liaison between the community and the North American Office of the Representative of H. H. the Dalai Lama in Washington D.C. By virtue of this, its President is the ex officio President of the Tibetan Canadian Cultural Centre (TCCC), and the other Tibetan associations and organizations in Toronto also fall under its umbrella with the aim of unifying the Tibetan community as well as putting collective effort into our common goal of preserving our culture and staying connected. In 2011 there were 4245 Tibetans living in Toronto (Statistics Canada 2013) (Fig.1).

In its bid to develop and build community engagement, the CTAO/TCCC runs various programs for the promotion of moral values, peace and religious harmony and for sharing the value of distinct Tibetan arts, culture and heritage. It holds weekly Buddhist Philosophy, Tibetan Language, and Tibetan performing arts classes, organizes cultural events on Tibetan and Canadian festivals, builds awareness about the concept of the “universality of human rights”, and promotes democratization in collaboration with other civil rights groups throughout the world. Hence, the CTAO/TCCC is a highly significant pillar in the Tibetan community in Toronto (Photo 1).

The CTAO/TCCC recently appointed its first female President, Ms. Tsering Tsomo, since it started operating in a real formal office space in 2004. Her academic achievement

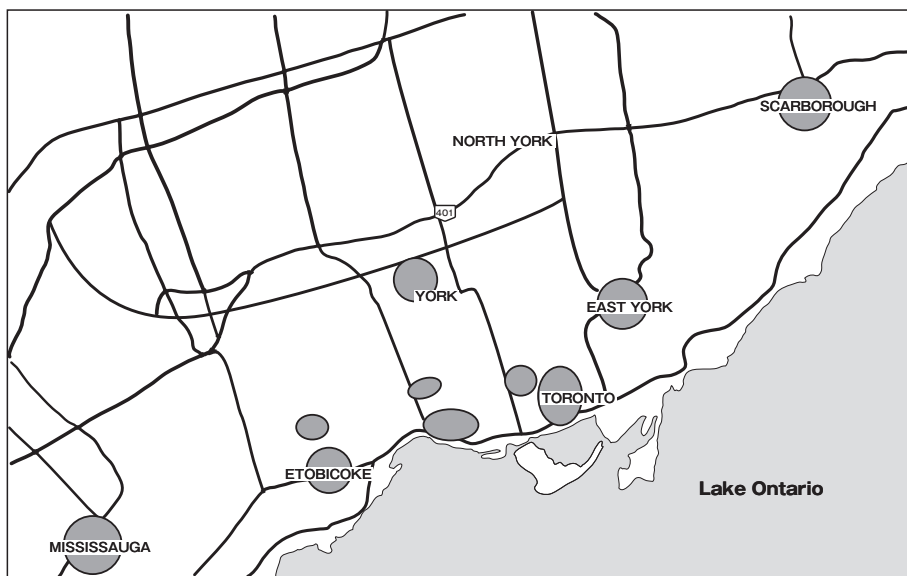


Figure 1 Map of Toronto showing the concentration of Tibetans in GTA, with shaded circles.
 [Toronto map from Google. Available at: Google.ca/maps/, accessed February 8, 2015]



Photo 1 Tibetan Canadian Cultural Centre.
[<http://www.tcccgc.org/>, accessed February 13, 2015]

and professional drive is an example of notable achievement among the first generation of Tibetan women born in exile. She is also a former President of the Tibetan Women's Association (TWA), Central Executive, Dharamsala; former member of the Tibetan Parliament-in-exile; she was the founding President of the Tibetan Women's Association of Ontario (TWAO), Toronto in 2003. In all of these roles, she has contributed immensely as a leader to the Tibetan community, both in India as well as in Toronto, exactly in the way stated by Bernstorff and von Welck (2003: 6): "Certainly, Tibetan women have risen to the challenge of exile and accepted responsibilities that they did not have before." The circumstances of how she became President of CTAO/TCCC and the positive outcome that she and her team have brought to the affairs of the CTAO/TCCC illustrate the contribution to the community's connectedness. Ms. Tsomo says, "Education is a great leveler – thanks to the vision of His Holiness the Dalai Lama, for giving top priority to quality education with equal opportunity to both boys and girls shortly after coming into exile. This educational opportunity opened doors for Tibetan women to contribute to our society in a more dynamic way. Today we see Tibetan women working as doctors, executives, politicians, bureaucrats, artist, nurses, etc. according to their own interests and aptitude."

It is evident that H. H. the Dalai Lama's scheme of universal education had brought positive changes in the lives of Tibetan women and today they are able to contribute through diverse roles.

6. Tibetan Women and Traditional Problem-Solving Skills

The literal meaning of leadership is the action of leading a group of people or an organization. Like all displaced communities, the Tibetan community in Toronto inherently became very fragile, vulnerable and relatively powerless toward the end of term for the former board members in the period August 2010-July 2011. The community experienced one of the greatest leadership crises in recent memory.²⁾ This crisis arose because of the 2010 TCCC Renovation Project which was started by the then President, Mr. Norbu Tsering, who was in the office until August 2011. Paradoxically, during his previous terms, Mr. Norbu Tsering is credited for acquiring the present site of the Centre

on a mortgage basis and was also able to secure 3.3 million of matching funds from the federal government to renovate the TCCC facility. Hence, he gained considerable respect and trust among the community, which even led to his election as a Member of the Tibetan Parliament representing North American Tibetans.

One month after the election, he handed over responsibility to the next incumbent President, Mr. Kunsang Tanzin, and his team (August 2011) without any mention of a crisis in the term report or in the books of account. A little over one month after the handover, the Tibetan community realized the magnitude of the crisis, which had started shortly around December 2010. In a memorandum dated November 28, 2011, Mr. Kunsang Tanzin states that, “when I took over as the new President of the Tibetan Canadian Cultural Centre and Canadian Tibetan Association of Ontario, to our great surprise the TCCC was found to be in deep trouble.” He summarized the trouble in three areas: a) physical condition of the building, b) liens over 1.5 million on the building, and c) the consequent deep crisis with both current and future liabilities exceeding almost six times the TCCC’s total assets. This failure was clearly due to a lack of delegation and communication, which was caused by a lack of responsibility and accountability, and in a lack of transparency on the part of the President who had served before August 2011.

Under such precarious circumstances, the incumbent President for the period August 2011-July 2013 and his team, although seriously burdened with challenges, took on their responsibility with full transparency and with the community’s interest at the core. They were able to remove all the legal liens registered against TCCC and continued the construction of TCCC to its present condition, which includes a hall for community gatherings. In a letter submitted by Mr. Gelek Gyaltong to the Chairperson of the Tibetan Parliament in exile (dated December 28, 2013 with an annexure report), he writes, “except for the Mortgage and Demand Loan that is held by the TD bank, TCCC is finally free of all the legal claims registered against its property from the failed 2010 TCCC Renovation Project.” The main driving force behind this success was crucial financial support from the Dalai Lama’s Trust, unrelenting moral, technical, procedural and financial support and guidance from a longtime friend of His Holiness and Tibetan people, Consiglo DiNino, (Senator, member of the Upper House of Parliament until June 30, 2012) and also support from his team, Tibetan associations and the Tibetan community at large.

When Mr. Kunsang Tanzin and his team members’ term of office was about to finish, the Tibetan community was much divided due to differences in opinion arising out of the abovementioned crisis that had sprung from a lack of responsibility, accountability, and transparency during his predecessor’s tenure. As election day approached, for the first time in Toronto there was a leadership crisis as both the contesting candidates for President withdrew their candidacy and other candidate for board members, at the last minute, followed suit.

A special meeting of the Tibetan community had to be convened on June 23, 2013 as it was customary in Toronto to introduce the board for the next term on July 6, the birthday celebration of H. H. the Dalai Lama. There was a big vacuum to be filled. After a lengthy, unending debate, a spontaneous and positive response came at that critical

hour from Ms. Lobsang Chozin. She stated, “The current situation is a deep betrayal to our cause as well as questions our loyalty to His Holiness and is a serious threat to the cohesion of the community – this is what the Chinese government needs. For all practical purposes we cannot allow this to happen. If the community is not finding candidates, I will find women candidates acceptable to all by the due date which is nearing soon.” Her proposal was well received by the community. True to her word, soon after the meeting she engaged in finding suitable women candidates and other candidates who wanted the Centre to do well. At Ms. Chozin’s fervent request and with persuasion from other prominent community members, Ms. Tsomo accepted the candidacy for President on July 5, 2013 and a nomination paper was immediately submitted to the Tibetan Election Committee of Ontario. The next day, which was the auspicious day of the birthday of H. H. the Dalai Lama, the Tibetan community unanimously voted in her favor.

After the election of President, the Tibetan Election Committee of Ontario announced the nomination of other board members. The names of 17 candidates were proposed by the community to elect 14 members to assist the President as per the rules.

At the end of the community’s birthday celebration of H. H. the Dalai Lama in 2013, it came to be that all’s well that ends well. The Tibetan community saw its first woman President since it started having decent office space, with 6 men and 8 women on the board to assist her. With 8 female board members, this was also the highest number of women ever to have sat on the CTAO/TCCC Board. A little over a year into office, the team has made significant positive differences in all spheres of the CTAO/TCCC, notably in dealing with the financial crisis and bringing more efficiency to the functioning of the Centre. This story reinforces communal cohesiveness. This movement showed that Tibetan women identified themselves as stronger for being Tibetan than for being female. Similarly, being Tibetan also helped bring the community together. The driving force here was patriotism and faith in H. H. the Dalai Lama.

The networking skill of Tibetan women is also a significant contributing factor to our cohesiveness. Pemma Mentuh, the current President of Tibetan Women’s Association of Ontario (TWAO) states as follows:

“Many of the Tibetan women I grew up knowing were social creatures. They love to socialize, connect together after a hard day’s work. Stories were shared and many good lessons were learned about a broad range of topics. Without realizing it, Tibetan women are excellent networkers. As I grew up, I recall watching many women get acquainted with a deck of cards at the table. These women bonded over their life stories and in discussions on their backgrounds. In most cases, it turned out that many of these women shared common friends, relatives or social circles. Many women in Toronto were members of the Tibetan Women’s Association (TWA) in Nepal or India. Continuing their membership in Toronto based on this connection has opened doors for new friendship. Their shared language and interest attracted each other in staying connected. The platform of being membership with TWA gave them a common stage and sense of belongingness. Their common language (Tibetan) bridged them to network with each other and contributed to their reconnection” (Photo 2).

Pemma continues, “Compared to overseas Tibetan societies, here, women have more



Photo 2 Ms. Pemma Mentuh, current President of the Tibetan Women Association of Ontario (TWAO).

[Facebook Group “Tibetan Women Association of Ontario”, <https://www.facebook.com/TibetanWomenAssociationOfOntario/>, accessed February 8, 2015]

equitable access to language, jobs, skills development and education. In Toronto Tibetan women have guided and supported other Tibetan women, and families gain access and entry to these resources. Organizations such as TWAO and CTAO have historically (and presently) provided immense assistance, information and education to women and their families. This in turn has empowered women to build alliances, friendships and networks for strengthening community infrastructure and along the way, trust has been established.” This reinforces that Tibetan language is a contributing factor to communal connectedness.

The TWAO is entirely led and operated by Tibetan women residing in the province of Ontario. It runs women’s wellness programs and serves the community with activities and initiatives that aim to contribute to the preservation and promotion of the religion, culture and identity of Tibetan people. Collective efforts are made with other associations like the CTAO in raising global awareness of the circumstances of critical human rights for Tibetans living inside Tibet.

Loyalty to H. H. the Dalai Lama and parental influence and patriotism provide a strong driving force for Tibetan woman to act as leaders in the community. As for Ms. Lobsang Chozin, her spearheading of the smooth election of the new Board of Directors of CTAO/TCCC is another visible contribution to the remaking and keeping of communal solidarity in Toronto. She shared with me that her mother was a great inspiration to her. Their family is known by Aema Ghang of the Shang neighborhood, western Tibet. Her father was imprisoned by the Chinese authorities when she was a toddler. Without a responsible father figure in the family, her mother brought her and her older sister and younger brother into exile during the refugee influx following the Tibetan National

Uprising against Chinese rule in 1959. She and her siblings were raised by their single mother. In her own words, “I could not complete high school because mother needed me at home to assist her. I was in grade 10 at the Tibetan residential school. My mother was a skilled craftswoman from Tibet. She wove woollen clothes which my uncle, my mom’s brother, sewed into jackets or dolls. As the demand was rising, they needed me as a sales person. Starting from a small craft shop, I grew the venture into a successful enterprise. My family started the first Tibetan private handicraft industry in Nepal. Our family was very active in community affairs especially with religious activities.” Her story is one of many.

Many Tibetans today in exile grew up hearing stories about the Chinese invasion and how it has affected their family and their community. This created a strong sense of patriotism from childhood. Living in exile, many of our daily activities remind us of who we are and where we are from (e.g., praying in the morning, offering water bowls, burning incense, and talking about political issues). Our patriotism as Tibetans is so strong that kids usually speak of how they are going to contribute to the Tibetan cause through whatever career path they choose.

Mrs. Chozin was one of the 12 founding members of the Regional Tibetan Women’s Association in Nepal. When the Maoist insurgency started in Nepal, their family was one of the hardest hit business owners. Therefore, she immigrated to Canada and sought Canadian protection. On reaching Canada, she was again one of the founding members of TWAOC. She is also a consistent donor, fund raiser and volunteer of CTAO/TCCC. Currently she is the Vice President of Projects and Religious Coordinator. Her initiative and innovation during the last community’s election was much appreciated by the community.

7. Tibetan Women as Guardians of the Home

Since the Chinese aggression of 1959, many families had to be separated due to the prevailing circumstances at the time. Even inside Tibet in the 1960s, during the “Cultural Revolution” we’ve heard stories about how mothers would go to extreme means to keep their children from starving to death. Those who came into exile also had to endure other forms of hardship. While escaping from Chinese atrocities, they had to walk their way to exile. This meant climbing the cold and dangerous Himalayan mountain range. There are countless stories of brave women who brought their children into exile while facing great hardship. The Tibetan concept of the mother being the guardian of home definitely motivates Tibetan women today to take on that responsibility and boost their morale. Even though the dynamics of hardship is not the same today, starting a new life in a new place has been hard on mothers. The life of Tsering Tsomo (a different Tsering Tsomo from the woman mentioned earlier) is one such story. In her words, “I came to Canada with my three kids in early 2003 for a family reunion with my beloved husband. At that time I was very fragile, new and fully depended on my husband. Before I was fully ready to take the whole family responsibility I lost my husband to cancer in early 2004, leaving my kids semi-orphaned which is the saddest part of our life. I was anxious how I

am going to raise my kids and make them contributing members of society.”

This mentality of making her children contributing members of society reveals the urgency that Tibetan people have toward contributing to their society. “The word of advice that my late husband gave me on his death bed was to listen to H. H. the Dalai Lama’s teachings whenever I feel sad and depressed. His valuable teachings give me strength and courage to face all the challenges in my daily life.” The Tibetan faith and loyalty to the Dalai Lama is a source of strength for many Tibetans. Buddhism and our culture is so intertwined that many things considered “cultural” have a lot of Buddhist background. Therefore, many of our daily rituals involve many Buddhist practices. These tiny actions act as a conscious reminder of who we are as a social group.

With a growing concern that children growing up in western society will lose touch with their Tibetan heritage, many parents are attempting to create a Tibetan atmosphere by speaking the language, taking them to Sunday school and exposing them to Tibetan culture. Mrs. Tsomo continues: “For the sake of my children I started becoming involved in the Tibetan Parents Committee, Toronto as a board member in 2004 and 2005. As we had a shortage of Tibetan language teachers, I volunteered to teach the Tibetan national anthem, morning prayers and Tibetan Language on the weekends. Later when my children were more independent and mature, I served the TWAO as its Vice President for the term 2010–2011 to the best of my ability. By being busy with my kids and in my community, I felt stronger and more confident to live on. I tried my best to raise my children with love and affection, taking the role of both parents. I am proud that by now my elder son is attending college, my daughter is in university and my youngest son is in high school. I also make an occasional donation to the CTAO/TCCC and do voluntary service when needed.” We have many women in the community who hold patriotic values similar to Tsering Tsomo.

According to Pemma Mentuh, “our cultural mores play a huge role in shaping the connectedness of the Tibetan community. Tibetan culture is uniquely impressive; whether it be about respecting elders, valuing family ties or on treating the spiritual community. To some degree I feel we have a pre-established set of social and cultural rules. I believe it is these cultural mores that have enhanced the ability of the Tibetan community to maintain its rare qualities and I find that Tibetan women, as household gatekeepers, play a critical role in espousing these values within the family.”

Pemma Mentuh herself is a daughter, a wife, a mother, a full-time manager, and the president of TWAO. She was born and raised in Canada. Her parents are both active in the Tibetan cause. Her father, Lobsang Mentuh, initiated *Rangzen Tsogchung*³⁾ for the first in North America in Lindsay in 1977, was a founding member of the CTAO and was at the front of all the activities in Lindsay, with her mother behind the scenes and in the kitchen. They imparted Tibetan values and culture to Pemma at a very young age. This confirms that Tibetan women keep communal cohesion by being the guardian of the home, as explained by Smalley (2010): “While exiled women are working alongside men to preserve many elements of traditional Tibetan culture, they are simultaneously becoming agents of change as they develop an amended identity in diaspora.” This is true in Canada too. The Canadian value system is founded on equality, freedom and

respect for all individuals in society. This opens us up to form associations like the Tibetan Parents Committee, TWAO and CTAO, Students for Free Tibet, and these form a platform to make their patriotic contributions.

Mrs. Yeshe Jamyangling is yet another example of a guardian of the home who contributes to the communal connectedness. She is the wife of the late Mr. Konchok Jamyangling, one of the founding members of the CTAO. She still lives in Lindsay, Ontario. She states:

“My late husband was a religious person. In those old days, he often organized prayer sessions. I worked actively at religious events, making and serving meals and tea; attending to the various needs of attendees and ensuring order was maintained. He was also one of the founding members of the CTAO. In those days, the Tibetan community was very small. In Lindsay, there were about 10 families, in Peterborough about 4 families, and 12 families in Belleville. Still, we were very connected. We had Sunday school to teach Tibetan language and arts, and we got together to observe Tibetan festivals. We used to go to Ottawa every 10th of March to commemorate the Tibetan People’s Uprising of 1959 with our supporters. We did not have a community centre, but we managed to host the indoor activities at our own home on a voluntary rotational basis. As Lindsay had more children than other Ontario Tibetan communities, we mostly organized activities in Lindsay. In all those activities, my late husband was at the front, but whenever it was the turn for our family, I was the backbone by staying behind the scenes and in the kitchen, rather than at the forefront of the action. Now, most of the families have moved to Toronto. In the early 2000s, the CTAO also moved down to



Photo 3 The Tibetan Women Association of Ontario.

[Facebook Group of the Tibetan Women Association of Ontario, <https://www.facebook.com/TibetanWomenAssociationOfOntario/>, accessed February 8, 2015]

Toronto. I tried to stay connected with the community through my participation by giving donations, personal participation during the ‘*Losar*,’ the Tibetan New Year, the birthday celebration of H. H. the Dalai Lama and the 10th of March procession and other special occasions in Toronto. On all these, I also push my children and their families to participate.”

In many households, Tibetan women have long been drivers for maintaining religious respect and practicing religion in the home and within the community. This deep-rooted culture of religious practice may be the most significant factor for older generation Tibetans in keeping community cohesiveness. Photo 3 shows the TWAO observing *Lhakar* (White Wednesday) at Kagyud Monastery, Laxton Avenue, Toronto.

8. Tibetan Women as Conscious Members of Society

Under the umbrella of CTAO activities, Tibetan organizations organize many Tibetan-related events, including but not limited to commemoration of the 10th of March Tibetan National Uprising and the 12th of March Tibetan Women’s Uprising against Chinese aggression, the celebration of *Losar*, H. H. the Dalai Lama’s birthday, the anniversary of conferment of the Nobel Peace Prize to H. H. the Dalai Lama and many other religious festivals. As conscious members of society, Tibetan women engage themselves more actively in these events and women are more conspicuous and vocal. According to Pemma Mentuh, “Continuing to engage in organized social events and associations strengthens the sense of connectedness for Tibetan women. I believe this empowers women to be active and engaged citizens. When women are involved in the community, their families and friends support and applaud their efforts.” In addition, such organized events give young children the opportunity to develop an understanding of their roots, their language and help deepen their cultural awareness, foster pride in their heritage, and strengthen their self-esteem and self-image.

Another community engagement platform was staged when we had a Tibetan parade in the streets of Toronto, where we showcased Tibetan culture like religious ritual and different regional dresses in Tibet. The Tibetan women’s wearing of their traditional regional dresses in the parade was especially remarkable (Photo 4).



Photo 4 Tibetan Canadian Cultural Centre.
[<http://www.tcccg.org/>, accessed February 13, 2015]

In support of the *Lhakar* Movement, we wear Tibetan clothing and speak in pure Tibetan on every Wednesday to reinforce our culture. Another conscious act is parents sending their children to Sunday school and teaching them Tibetan language and performing arts.

On a daily basis, when people ask us of our ethnicity, we answer “Tibetan.” For those who have never heard the term “Tibetan,” we make it our obligation to tell them of who we are. We go on protests. When Tibetans see one another on the streets, even though they may not be acquaintances, they still greet one another with *Tashi Delek* or by exchanging smiles. These little daily routines of Tibetans that are influenced by our pride in being Tibetan and our faith help us stay together in this new country. .

As for the younger Tibetans who are spending their childhood in Canada, there is also a distinct sense of patriotism when compared to children of other ethnicity. This is highly influenced by how strong family members and the Tibetan community identify themselves as Tibetan. At Parkdale Collegiate Institute, there is a Tibetan Club. This club observes *Lhakar* by wearing Tibetan dress every Wednesday, organizing Tibetan cultural dance and music events at school functions and supporting Tibetan students.

9. Conclusion

In our belief system, men are regarded as a skillful means (*Thabs*) and women as wisdom (*Sherab*). Aptly, there is an adage that says, “Though I am the leader of one hundred men, my leader is at home.” However, before 1959, Tibetan women seldom worked in government services, were involved in politics or took any responsibility outside the home. Chinese aggression in Tibet compelled women to rise up to defend Tibet and the Buddha Dharma in and around the 1950s. The educational opportunities that Tibetan children received after 1959 impacted Tibetan women profoundly, and today we can see women politicians, bureaucrats, doctors, teachers, artists and other professionals. In a nutshell, Tibetan women played a pivotal role in the household and local economy but after 1959 this pivotal role was diversified according to their individual interests and aptitude. Tibetan women continue to explore their ever-growing potential and redefine their role to further contribute to communal cohesion as leaders, conscious individual members of society and guardians of the home.

Notes

- 1) The word Buddha Nature in Sanskrit is “*Tathagatagarba*.” Here, the term is used almost the same as the following usage:

“The Buddha-nature is always present, in all times and in all beings. This does not mean that sentient beings are at present endowed with the qualities of a Buddha, but that they will have those qualities in the future” (Internet, June 20, 2016, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Buddha-nature#cite_note-FOOTNOTEIiu198266-67-72);

“It is obscured from worldly vision by the screening effect of tenacious negative mental afflictions within each being (Internet, June 20, 2016, <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Buddha->

nature#cite_note-73)”;

“Once these negative mental states have been eliminated, however, the Buddha-dhatu is said to shine forth unimpededly and the Buddha-sphere (Buddha-dhatu/visaya) can then be consciously “entered into”, and therewith deathless Nirvana attained” (Internet, June 20, 2016, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Buddha-nature#cite_note-FOOTNOTEYamamoto197594.E2.80.9396-74); “[T]he tathagatagarbha is none but Thusness or the Buddha Nature, and is the originally untainted pure mind which lies overspread by, and exists in, the mind of greed and anger of all beings. This bespeaks a Buddha Body that exists in a state of bondage” (Internet, June 20, 2016, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Buddha-nature#cite_note-FOOTNOTEYamamoto197594.E2.80.9396-74)

- 2) Information on the leadership crisis in Toronto was based on a Memorandum dated November 28, 2013 submitted by Mr. Kunsang Tanzin, President, CTAO/TCCC (August 2011–July 2013) to the Private Office of H. H. the Dalai Lama and subsequent letter with an attached Timeline report dated December 28, 2013 submitted to the Chairperson, Tibetan Parliament in exile by Mr. Gelek Gyaltong, a respectable and conscious member of the community who also had served the community in various capacities including the President prior to 2009, as well as on my own personal memory of the disclosures made from time to time by Mr. Kunsang Tanzin and Mrs. Tsering Tsomo, the current and former presidents to the community, respectively.
- 3) Tibetan documents use the Tibetan Freedom Movement for *Rangzen Tsogchung*. In early 1972 a group of devoted Tibetans at Sarnath initiated a mass movement to make voluntary contribution to the Central Tibetan Administration (CTA). On July 30, 1972, a unanimous resolution to form the Tibetan Freedom Movement and contribute to CTA was passed. From August 1, 1972 onward, the voluntary contribution by all the Tibetans spread across all pockets of Tibetan refugee settlements and community in India, Nepal and Bhutan. Subsequently on the basis of the resolution, the 11th Assembly of Tibetan People’s Deputy adopted a bill of voluntary contributions (chatrel) on a regular basis. By contributing voluntarily to the CTA, it signifies the allegiance of Tibetans to the CTA as their legitimate Government and a rejection of Chinese occupation.

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Abbreviations used:

CTA Central Tibetan Administration
 CTAO Canadian Tibetan Association of Ontario
 TCCC Tibetan Canadian Cultural Centre
 TWA Tibetan Women's Association
 TWAO Tibetan Women's Association of Ontario