



Stitching a culture back together

While exiled Tibetans are scattered across countries and continents, much of their culture is being preserved by the Tibetan Government-in-Exile, in Dharamsala, India. **GUY BROOKSBANK** reports.

Dharamsala has become the stronghold of Tibetan culture; it's where the Dalai Lama sought asylum in 1959 and took up permanent residence.

The city is a far cry from the Tibet of old. Horns blare as taxi cabs rocket through crowds, sacred cows wander at will, and Hindi music pours out of makeshift food stalls. Even so, refugees arrive daily, roughly 30,000 a year. Welcome centers have been established for the refugees, and guesthouses for the hordes of visitors coming to catch a glimpse of the simple monk who has become an international symbol of peace. Every day another guesthouse appears out of nowhere, hanging over steep ravines like overripe fruit on too thin branches.

For a nation never before having a need to consciously preserve its culture, the progress of its people in exile is astounding. In less than 50 years, the exiled community has developed strong institutions with unambiguous commitments to promote Tibetan culture. The Tibetan Institute of Performing Arts collects traditional songs, dances and modes of acting. The Norbulingka Institute trains over seventy students in traditional Tibetan arts. The Library of Tibetan Works and Archives has massive holdings of artifacts and manuscripts. The Tibet Museum has established traveling exhibitions, as well as archiving thousands of photographs of the occupation. The Video Archives Project is digitizing hundreds of the Dalai Lama teachings. And these are just a few of the current efforts.

Sometimes the commitment to preserve Tibetan culture can come from a single person. In 1982, Phuntsok Tsering

created the Tibetan Tailoring Center, a place where newly arrived Tibetan refugees serve as apprentice tailors. Tsering was aware that the traditional lines of apprenticeship had been broken, and any attempt to maintain a vestige of Tibetan culture would require new measures.

Tsering is a master tailor, and, like his father and grandfather, learned the art of tailoring as a child. Following his heritage, Tsering learned the specialized art of creating thangkas, brocade tapestries that depict embroidered images of Tibetan Buddhist deities.

Each thangka is an assortment of hand-stitched brocades, assembled into patterns on a larger silk cloth. It is painstaking work, requiring vast amounts of skill and patience. Ceremonial thangkas can be as much as six feet high, requiring six months of work from a single pair of hands.

Tsering began extensive training from the Dalai Lama's personal tailor at fifteen. Tsering says it was a time he could easily learn from so many teachers "as one vessel filling another." In 1959, at the age of twenty-two, Tsering followed the Dalai Lama into exile, eventually becoming the Dalai Lama's personal tailor.

Apprenticeships last five years, and the learners' existence is by no means luxurious. They work six eight-hour days, live in small, unheated

dorm rooms in metal-framed bunk beds. Their dining hall is a rusted metal table balancing over a metal frame. They are paid the equivalent of ten dollars a month for spending money. With their choices now whittled away to few or none, many feel stuck here, suspended between an inconceivable past and an uncertain future.

Photo Courtesy of the Tibetan Tailoring Center



Shakyamuni Buddha with two disciples – the meticulous work of the Tibetan Tailoring Center

Sonam is a twenty-five year old refugee from Chamdo, with deep-set eyes and an uncharacteristic shyness when speaking English. The Chinese took the few available jobs in her village, and her parents were helpless in providing an education for her. She left Tibet at the age of eighteen for education and, she says haltingly, "I heard that if I went to India I would see the Dalai Lama."

Sonam left with a group of sixty, walking for five weeks across mountain passes between Tibet and Nepal. For five days the group went without food until reaching the Nepali village of Sharba. Here they traded their only coats and what little money they had for food. They were bartering for *tsampa*, a staple of the Tibetan diet, "but they didn't give us *tsampa*," she says, "only *aloo*," borrowing the Indian word for potato. "Afraid," she says, "dangerous," while conjuring up memories of the journey. "Some people can't open their eyes," then adds, "hands and feet like ice," not knowing the English word for frostbite.

Sonam hasn't heard from her family since she left Tibet. When I ask her if she will go back she gets excited and grabs Tashi, another refugee, to interpret for her. She wants to make certain I understand. Her words coming out in a man's voice sound cold. "She says if she goes back, the Chinese will kill her," Tashi informs me, without a hint of emotion.

Lhasa Tashi's journey was less arduous. He was smuggled across the border between Nepal and Tibet, dressed as a small child of a Nepali woman who had been paid for the journey by his mother. He eventually arrived in Dharamsala. Lhasa Tashi left because his family couldn't afford the fee required for him to go to school. "In Lhasa, there are plenty of schools, plenty of opportunity if you have money. We're Tibetan. We don't have any money."

Lhasa Tashi is more optimistic about returning to Tibet. He plans to get an Indian passport, although he admits it is a remote possibility. "Some get passports. Some don't. It's like karma. If I get educated, I will go back. If I can speak English and have learned some things, then I can help Tibet." Lhasa looks over at the Dalai Lama's temple, "but if I live in Tibet, I can't pray to His Holiness," he sighs, weighing the options.

None of the refugees here can return home safely. None regret leaving. What they want is an education, and a free Tibet. When asked about Tibet's future, most are vaguely optimistic. Ugyen, another refugee at the Center, is more realistic. "His Holiness is very intelligent and famous. But China is a very powerful country. I really don't know." When I ask him what he will do if Tibet remains a part of China, he smiles, saying, "I will make *thangkas*, I have a Tibetan culture skill. That is very important to have," he tells me, "Very important. Tibetan culture is lost, day by day."

Ugyen is speaking of another less pernicious but perhaps equally pervasive threat: the influence of Western culture plaguing the second and third generations of Tibetans born outside Tibet. Tapes and CDs of Britney Spears and The Backstreet Boys are commodities among younger Tibetans. American slang bootlegged from Hollywood movies is parroted



Photo Dory Beatrice

Master tailor Phuntsok Tsering oversees his students' work

by the younger crowd. Their desire to learn English and move to the West increases daily.

Recently I had lunch with Tenzin Dudul at the Dalai Lama's monastery, discussing the Video Archives Project he heads. Tenzin is racing to digitize footage of the Dalai Lama's teachings before the humidity destroys a stockpile of unarchived tapes. Like Tibet, his is a race against time.

When lunch ended, a head monk dropped a clump of *tsampa* – barley flour and water the consistency of clay – on the table in front of me. I turned to Tenzin and asked him if this was dessert. Tenzin laughed, then explained the mystery.

"Years ago," Tenzin begins, "a village was pestered by demons that would come and eat their children. The Buddha secretly stole the demon's children, safely hiding them where they could not be found. When the demons' mother found her children missing, she began to wail."

Tenzin stops for dramatic effect and I notice he's slowly molding a lump of *tsampa* in his hands. The other monks are doing the same.

"Hearing the demon's cries, the Buddha visits her, and she tells him of her stolen children. The Buddha says if she promises not to eat any of the villagers' children, her children will come back. The demon agrees, and the Buddha returns to the village to share the news. But the Buddha tells the villagers that even demons have to eat, so they should offer food to the demons and as well as the gods.

"So we mold the *tsampa* into the shape of a demon, like this." Tenzin holds up a misshapen mass of brown dough.

Outside, the monks were offering food to the demons. They had, however, put a modern spin on the ancient tradition, flattening the *tsampa* into a small disc not unlike a Frisbee. We were high up on a balcony of Namgyal Monastery, and the game was to see who could make their disk fly the farthest.

This may be the future of Tibet. Their children slowly stolen by Western culture. Although His Holiness offers up his wisdom to a world hungry for spiritual guidance, they still eat his children. ❁

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