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Digitizing Dharma: Computer-Mediated Mobilizations of Tibetan Buddhist Youth

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Abstract: Prior to the advent of the Internet, e-mail, and other information technologies, there was very little sustained communication between Tibetan Buddhist youth living in Chinese-dominated Tibet and their ethno-religious cohorts in the Diaspora. Recent years have witnessed a dramatic expansion of global networks linked to the Tibetan freedom movement, fueled in large measure by enhanced levels of computer-mediated interactions between Tibetan youth and sympathetic activists living in a wide variety of geographic locales. The role of the Internet and other information technologies in stimulating and facilitating cross-border political activism by Tibetan young people is explored in depth by this paper. The ways in which youth-based social movement organizations (SMOs) have framed the values, goals, and tactics of the Tibetan freedom movement in cyberspace are assessed. Computer-mediated discourses articulated by Tibetan teenagers and young adults who were mostly born and raised in the Diaspora - dubbed "Generation Exile" - are analyzed and compared to that of older activists in the movement. The subject matter of SMO websites and selected excerpts from blogs, social networking sites (e.g., MySpace, Facebook), and other online interactions involving Tibetans and interested parties are surveyed and evaluated.

Keywords: Tibetan Freedom Movement, Tibetan Buddhism, Tibetan Buddhist Youth, Computer-Mediated Communication, Generation Exile, Tibetan Diaspora, Great Firewall of China, Online Activism, Internet, Social Movement Organizations, Micro-Mobilization, Dalai Lama, Tibetan Youth Congress, Students for a Free Tibet, Framing Theory, Information Technologies, Social Networking, MySpace, Facebook, YouTube, Beijing Olympics, Tibetan National Uprising, Shangri-La

Introduction

IN THE YEARS prior to the advent of the Internet, e-mail, and other information technologies, there was very little sustained communication between Tibetan Buddhist youth living in Chinese-dominated Tibet¹ and their ethno-religious cohorts in the Diaspora.² Though countless thousands of Tibetan refugees of all ages have traversed the Himalayas and sought asylum in India and other countries since the official Chinese communist takeover of Tibet began in 1949, cross-border information exchanges were for decades extremely circumscribed by Chinese governmental restrictions on Tibetan-based television and radio stations, newspapers, and other media.³ Nonetheless, recent years have witnessed a dramatic expansion of global net-

works linked to the Tibetan freedom movement, fueled in large measure by enhanced levels of computer-mediated interactions between Tibetan Buddhist youth and sympathetic activists living in a wide variety of geographic locales.

With numerous Internet cafes currently operating in Tibet, a growing number of indigenous Tibetans – particularly teenagers and young adults - are accessing the Internet daily. As Internet usage has exploded throughout China in recent years, similar trends have impacted Tibet.⁴ This is due in large measure to the Chinese communist government embracing the Internet and other information technologies as part of a larger economic strategy designed to “open up” the country to direct foreign investment (Hachigian 2002:41-51). The continued success of China’s economic reform program is based primarily on ever-

¹ The Chinese government uses the term “Tibet” (Xizang) to describe the central-western Tibetan plateau area, officially known as the Tibet Autonomous Region (TAR). In contrast, Tibetan exiles view the entire plateau as Tibet, which includes counties located in the Chinese provinces of Qinghai, Gansu, Sichuan, and Yunnan. More than half of all Tibetans under Chinese rule live in provinces other than TAR (Sautman and Dreyer 2006:17)

² The idea of a “Tibetan Diaspora” has surfaced only in recent decades, thereby expanding on the concept of classical diasporas of ethno-national groups living apart from their ancestral homelands (e.g., that of the Jews, Armenians, Greeks, East Indians, Irish, black Africans). Tibetans – like members of other ethnic groups or “nations” such as the Palestinians, Kurds, and Sikhs – are contemporary examples of “stateless diasporas” (Sheffer 2003:73-74). The Tibetan Diaspora includes approximately 120,000 Tibetans, while around six million live in Tibet.

³ As Zissi and Bhattacharji (2008) note, “Chinese law includes media regulations with vague language that authorities use to claim stories endanger the country by sharing state secrets. Journalists face harassment and prison terms for violating these rules and revealing classified matter.” In addition, there are numerous government agencies that regulate and censor both broadcast and print media directly.

⁴ According to recent estimates, there are approximately 150 million Internet users in the People’s Republic of China (including Tibet) (Zissi and Bhattacharji, 2008).



expanding contacts and ties with Western-based firms and consumers, which has necessitated the Internet functioning as “an important aspect of globalization” (Liu 2004:127). The Chinese government has even sponsored a program of “information modernization” in Tibet,⁵ which includes the development and dissemination of Internet protocols and web-based surfing capabilities in the Tibetan language.

However, the Internet has served to expose China and its “autonomous” province of Tibet to a myriad of Western cultural and sociopolitical forces, while at the same time facilitating greater global awareness of the plight of Tibetan Buddhists and the Tibetan freedom movement’s struggle to achieve self-rule. As an Internet café manager in Tibet’s capital of Lhasa has observed:

Because of the Internet, we in Tibet aren’t isolated from the rest of the world. That’s been our fate for centuries, and was one reason China could take over. This has totally turned things around for Tibet. Before, nobody knew about us or cared (quoted in Gluckman 2001).

In an attempt to preclude any potentially disruptive information flows that might emanate from the Internet, the Chinese government has erected the so-called “Golden Shield.” Known euphemistically in the West as the “Great Red Firewall of China,” this electronic monitoring system regulates Internet traffic throughout the country. The firewall is designed to block particular websites, as well as certain words and phrases entered into search engines, deemed “objectionable” by communist officials. Thus, virtually anything relating to “Tibetan freedom” or similar issues are officially prohibited and often censored electronically. Problematically for the Chinese government, the filtering capabilities of the Golden Shield are often ineffective, inconsistent, and easily circumvented in actual day-to-day operations (Hachigian 2002).

For this reason, the Chinese government has relied primarily on so-called “self-censorship” in cyberspace; i.e., regulatory codes of conduct which ban the creation, dissemination, or viewing of websites (both domestic and foreign) deemed to be “subversive” or “disturbing to the social order” (Hachigian, 2002). Aiding the Chinese government in this regard have been Yahoo, Microsoft, and Google, who in recent years have agreed to enforce such regulatory codes on their search engines. In addition, China’s cyberspace norms have been strengthened in Tibet and other provinces through periodic mass media

campaigns, official chat room monitors, interceptions of e-mail, arrests of alleged offenders,⁶ and other hegemonic tactics, designed to deter potential violators. The Chinese Ministry of Culture has even begun requiring that all websites based in the country register with the authorities or face immediate closure (Eimer 2005).

Nevertheless, countless thousands of native Tibetans have continued to utilize various circuitous electronic tactics designed to breach the Great Firewall and access “banned” websites, in spite of potential legal and social sanctions. Such tactics include decoding passwords and other loopholes that circumvent firewall censoring software, accessing foreign servers or related proxy servers that do not abide by Chinese regulations (which often host dissident bulletin boards, chat rooms, and blogs), establishing personal profile pages on overseas-based social networking/video sharing sites (e.g., MySpace, Facebook, YouTube), and utilizing short-message services (i.e., text-messaging) via cell phones for transmitting information and images that are largely unimpeded by the firewall (Pan 2005; McMahon 2008).

The role of the Internet and other information technologies in stimulating and facilitating cross-border political activism by Tibetan Buddhist youth is explored in depth by this paper. The ways in which social movement organizations (SMOs) have framed the values, goals, and tactics of the Tibetan freedom movement in cyberspace are assessed. Computer-mediated discourses articulated by Tibetan teenagers and young adults who were mostly born and/or raised in the Diaspora (known as “Generation Exile”) are analyzed and compared to that of older activists in the movement. The subject matter of SMO websites and selected excerpts from blogs, social networking/video sharing sites, and other online interactions involving Tibetans and interested parties, are examined and evaluated.

Mobilizing Social Movements

Social scientists who have investigated the mobilization of social movements often focus on the ways in which relevant events and ideas are framed. Defined by Erving Goffman (1974), frames are a “schemata of interpretations” that enable individuals “to locate, perceive, identify, and label” various events and occurrences within their own life experiences. Specific social phenomena do not normally become meaningful to individuals until they have been framed; i.e., socially and cognitively organized as part of a discourse. Activists frequently attempt to mobilize prospective participants by linking a

⁵ See *Xinhua News Agency* report (January 2, 2002).

⁶ For example, Jamyang Kyi, a famous Tibetan singer, TV announcer, and controversial blogger, was reportedly arrested and detained for over a month beginning in early April 2008. Many observers viewed her detention as being part of a larger Chinese crackdown on cyberdissidence in Tibet (Jacobs 2008).

given movement's frames with those of a sympathetic audience. Such "frame alignments" involve the micro-mobilization of potential recruits by appealing to a familiar set of symbols, beliefs, values, etc., that resonate with individualized conceptions of social norms (Snow et al 1986:211). Morris (2000:445-454) has employed the term "frame lifting" to describe the process by which social movement activists "shape the collective action to match an institutionally embedded frame." Put simply, movement leaders recognize that there are important symbols, narratives, and channels already in existence that can facilitate collective action.

In order for any social movement to gain active supporters, an awareness of collective identity must first emerge. Based primarily on the shared experiences of everyday life, collective identity refers to "an individual's cognitive, moral, and emotional connection with a broader community, category, practice, or institution" (Polletta and Jasper 2001:285). As Castels (1997:6) explains, collective identities involve "the process of construction of meaning on the basis of a cultural attribute or related set of attributes, that is/are given priority over other sources of meaning." Though perceptions of collective identity typically impact one's personal identity, individual feelings alone cannot engender a collective identity as such. Rather, there must be a shared identification that extends beyond the self and encompasses some sort of communal orientation. Social movement mobilization requires that prospective adherents develop cognitive, emotional, and moral ties with a community or category of like-minded others (Polletta and Jasper 2001:285).

Collective identities are directly related to the formation of specific group boundaries and an "oppositional consciousness" designed to articulate grievances and resist domination (Heath 2003:426). Framing serves as a simplified method for distinguishing in-groups from out-groups; i.e., differentiating "us" from "them" as a means of enhancing and delineating collective identity (Polletta and Jasper 2001). The identification of a tangible enemy through the framing process is a necessary ingredient in developing an individual's collective consciousness. As Gamson (1992:232) explains, "Without an adversarial component, the potential target of collective action is likely to remain an abstraction – hunger, disease, poverty, or war, for example." In addition, a given social movement must demonstrate to potential recruits that it will likely succeed in its mission; otherwise the prospective supporter will be much less likely to embrace the movement. A sense of agency, or the widely held belief that it is possible to affect change and alter conditions or policies, is therefore a prerequisite for widespread movement mobilization and collective behavior (Gamson 1992:232).

The Internet's Impact on Social Movements

The Internet and other information technologies have dramatically revolutionized social movement activism and related political campaigns in the contemporary era. Increasingly, SMOs – including those associated with the Tibetan freedom movement – have utilized the Internet for educational campaigns, fundraising, petition drives, membership recruitment, and the coordination of protests. The combination of high levels of interpersonal interactivity with instantaneous connectivity differentiates the Internet from conventional communication media. In this regard, the Internet effectively transcends the customary "spatial and temporal boundaries" of human existence (McCaughy and Ayers 2003:4).

One of the main benefits of the Internet in sparking political participation is that many different groups are easily able "to propagate and propagandize for their cause outside the media and norms traditionally instituted by the pre-Internet society" (Kahn and Kellner 2003:300). Countless documents and contacts are only a click away, as interconnected electronic threads on the web immediately link potential movement adherents with relevant sites. The Internet, which is "inherently non-hierarchical and non-controlling," thus enables "previously marginalized voices to be heard" (Mazepa 1996). As Naughton (2000:22) notes, the Internet is "the first totally unrestricted, totally uncensored communication system" in world history.

Importantly, computer-mediated communication systems "allow for information to be both collected and disseminated faster and more cheaply than before" (Metzel 1997:711). In contrast to direct mail and telephone solicitation campaigns, electronic-based methods are much more cost-effective in communicating concurrently with large numbers of like-minded activists and prospective movement recruits. SMOs and other groups are able to disseminate a steady stream of updates and reminders that contain not only text but also graphics, audio, and hyperlinks to relevant parties. E-mail messages containing digital photos depicting human rights abuses, for instance, can be combined with "action alerts" that instruct supporters to contact a given government official immediately, with corresponding e-mail addresses or web links provided. Thus, citizens can now air their grievances and register dissenting views with responsible parties and like-minded cohorts at will, without having to face the traditional information filters of journalistic, corporate, or governmental bureaucracies.

Computer-mediated forms of communication are ideal for social movement mobilization purposes, given the deliberative and often targeted dissemination of text, images, video, and sound online. As an

inherently polycentric and interconnected technology, the Internet enables activists to frame and circulate ideas easily to geographically dispersed individuals with common interests and concerns. Howard Rheingold has coined the term “virtual communities” to describe such “social aggregations that emerge from the net when enough people carry on those public discussions long enough, with sufficient feeling, to form webs of personal relationships in cyberspace” (quoted in Foster 1997:24). Cyberspace is the ideal terrain for expansive social movement networks to take root, particularly since the Internet is akin to a rhizome; i.e., “a subterranean stem lacking a definite beginning or end that continues to grow in all directions, constantly building new connections while old ones die” (Froehling 1997:293).

Genesis of the Tibetan Freedom Movement

The origins of the Tibetan freedom movement can be traced back to the Chinese communist takeover of peripheral Tibetan territories (i.e., the eastern plateau region) in 1949 and the subsequent invasion of the Tibetan heartland (i.e., the central-western plateau region traditionally known as U-Tsang, which was directly under the jurisdiction of the Dalai Lama and his government) in 1950 (Goldstein 1998:83-90). The People’s Republic of China (PRC) officially annexed Tibet in 1951, with much of the territory subsequently incorporated into the new Tibetan Autonomous Region (TAR). Following a violent rebellion by CIA-supported Tibetan guerrillas fighting against Chinese troops in 1959, the 14th (and current) Dalai Lama, Tenzin Gyatso, fled the country and established an official government-in-exile in Dharamsala, India⁷ (Sperling 2007:9; Sautman and Dreyer 2006:5-7).

The Tibetan freedom movement has gradually increased in international importance over the years, due in large measure to the concerted diplomatic efforts of the Dalai Lama and his avid supporters. Having visited numerous countries in his official capacity as the spiritual and political leader of the Tibetan people, the Dalai Lama has repeatedly framed the movement as a modern-day human rights struggle, thereby mobilizing a great deal of support around the world. As the recipient of the Nobel Peace Prize in 1989, he has come to embody the movement’s humanitarian and spiritual ethos. Notably, the official websites of “His Holiness the 14th Dalai Lama”⁸ and “The Government of Tibet in Exile”

(GTE)⁹ have both consistently emphasized the values of peace, moderation, and diplomatic initiatives in seeking greater freedom for Tibet.

Though the Dalai Lama has been intensely critical of China in terms of human rights violations, he has clearly renounced the use of violence on behalf of the Tibetan freedom movement. Embracing what he calls “the Middle Way Approach,” he has opted not to seek independence for his homeland, asserting that Tibet will remain within the PRC. As a viable alternative, he has supported “greater autonomy” for Tibet in political, religious, cultural, economic, educational, and environmental affairs. Tibetan freedom will be based on the “one country, two systems” model, similar to what is found in Hong Kong and Macao; he has suggested (Sautman and Dreyer 2006:5). As he explains on his website, the Middle Way is designed “to peacefully resolve the issue of Tibet and to bring about stability and co-existence between the Tibetan and Chinese peoples based on equality and mutual cooperation.”

Conversely, Chinese communist officials have maintained that the issue of Tibetan freedom is actually the product of “imperialist” powers bent on dividing or destroying the Chinese nation. The “separatist,” “splitist” notions of the Dalai Lama are tied directly to “class struggle on an international scale,” Chinese authorities have asserted (Sautman and Dreyer 2006:7-8). Even though Tibet is ostensibly “autonomous,” the communist party has sought to intervene in Tibetan Buddhist rituals in recent years, claiming, for instance, that it has the sole authority to certify “incarnations” of the religious order’s leaders. Party officials in 1995 even went so far as to arrest and imprison the 11th Panchen Lama – who had been appointed by the Dalai Lama and was the second highest-ranking figure in Tibetan Buddhism.¹⁰ Subsequently, Chinese officials certified another Tibetan boy as the new Panchen Lama, even though most Tibetan Buddhists have refused to acknowledge the legitimacy of this decision.

Significantly, the Chinese government has held direct talks intermittently with representatives of the Dalai Lama since 2002. For the most part, such talks have been fruitless, with little or no progress being made on the issue of achieving genuine autonomy for Tibet. In highly paternalistic fashion, Chinese communist leaders have asserted that the Tibetan people are in need of “guidance” in their provincial affairs. As Zhang Qingli, Communist Party Secretary of the Tibet Autonomous Region, has explained, “The Communist Party is like the parent to the

⁷ Located in the northern Indian state of Himachal Pradesh, Dharamsala has become the political and cultural epicenter of the Tibetan Diaspora. Over ten thousand Tibetan refugees currently live in the city, with countless new arrivals seeking asylum every month.

⁸ See <http://www.dalailama.com/>

⁹ See <http://www.tibet.com/>

¹⁰ The Dalai Lama proclaimed Gedhun Choekiyi Nyima to be the 11th Panchen Lama on May 14, 1995. Shortly thereafter, Gedhun was charged with treason and incarcerated by the Chinese government.

Tibetan people, and it is always considerate about what the children need” (quoted in Yardley 2008).

Generational Fissures in the Movement

The Dalai’s Lama’s Middle Way approach has been promoted heavily by the GTE and most Western-based SMOs (e.g., International Campaign for Tibet,¹¹ Tibet Justice Center¹²), which are staffed primarily by older activists and legal experts. However, youth-based SMOs such as the Tibetan Youth Congress (TYC)¹³ and Students for a Free Tibet (SFT)¹⁴ have become ever more outspoken in recent years, building on rising levels of frustration and disenchantment with the status quo. Though the Dalai Lama and his cohorts have long-supported diplomatic campaigns designed to pressure China into granting Tibet genuine autonomy, many younger Tibetans increasingly have questioned the efficacy of this go-slow approach. Rather than employing the more cautious and conciliatory language of Dalai Lamaism (e.g., “interdependence,” “compassion”), a growing number of younger activists have stated that they are committed to achieving Tibet’s complete independence from China, even if directly confrontational (or presumably violent) forms of political action are needed to achieve that goal.

With numerous websites that include several emanating from U.S.-based chapters, the TYC in particular has brought a renewed sense of hope, urgency, and militancy to the cause. Former TYC president, Tseten Norbu, has argued publicly that the current struggle requires a more provocative agenda. “Two generations have been brought up in exile; they don’t have a sense of belonging to Tibet,” he states. “We are paying the price of a peaceful movement. Our nonviolence seems like non-action” (quoted in Ganguly 2001:19). Not surprisingly, the TYC’s homepage features numerous photos of Tibetan youths marching and demonstrating with raised, clenched fists; indicating a newfound angry defiance of Chinese authorities. The website clearly states that the TYC “is a worldwide organization of Tibetans...united in our common struggle for the restoration of complete independence for the whole of Tibet.” Similarly, the SFT website asserts that its organizational mission is to work “in solidarity with the Tibetan people in their struggle for freedom and independence.”

The younger, more radical, face of the Tibetan freedom movement became visibly apparent in a series of protests that began on March 10, 2008 –

the forty-ninth anniversary of the first Tibetan uprising against the Chinese occupation. The impending Olympic Games, which were to be hosted by Beijing in August 2008, seemed to galvanize the movement into action – both inside and outside of Tibet. Numerous websites focused on the impending Games and encouraged a new uprising. Around the world, the Olympic torch parade drew numerous protests, with diasporic youth and their supporters directly confronting parade participants and even vandalizing Chinese embassies in a variety of locations. In Lhasa and other cities in Tibet, the largest protests in decades erupted, with Chinese military crackdowns ensuing in numerous instances. Though many protestors indicated their continued reverence for the Dalai Lama, they appeared to reject his pacifistic approach. “For us young people it doesn’t mean disrespect,” Lhadon Tehong, SFT executive director explained. “But our approach is not to meet China halfway, to wait for them to come around and change their minds. We want them to know that Tibet demands a solution whether they like it or not” (quoted in Currier 2008).

Framing Dharma Online

Dharma is an Indian Sanskrit word that literally translates as “that which upholds or supports,” though the term is generally defined by Buddhists as actions taken by individuals or groups that lead to enlightenment. As the Dalai Lama (2002) notes in *The Buddhism of Tibet*, “Any elevated action of body, speech or mind is regarded as a dharma because through doing such an action one is protected or held back from all sorts of disasters” (23). In his writings, the Dalai Lama primarily emphasizes the spiritual and humanitarian dimensions of dharma. For example, he states that one should always show compassion and concern for the enemy, including the Chinese. As he notes on his website, the “greatest hindrances to compassion” are “anger and hatred.” The GTE site makes a similar contention, noting that the Tibetan nation is by definition based on dharma-related principles. As the site explains, “Tradition has it that Tibet is the land of Avalokiteshvara, the Bodhisattva of compassion, and the Tibetan people are his descendants.”

In contrast, younger activists frequently invoke the concept of dharma in a decidedly political or even militant context, while often failing to mention any feelings of compassion or concern for the Chinese people. As a 29-year old Tibetan Buddhist in Colorado notes on his MySpace page: “I am a

¹¹ See <http://www.savetibet.org/tibet/index.php>

¹² See <http://www.tibetjustice.org/>

¹³ Diasporic Tibetans founded the TYC in Dharamsala, India, in October 1970. The organization currently has approximately 30,000 members. See <http://www.tibetanyouthcongress.org/>

¹⁴ Established in New York City in 1994, the SFT was founded by diasporic Tibetan and American students. See <http://www.studentsforafreetibet.org/>

servant to the dharma. I believe in all sentient beings and their ability to climb to liberation.” Though his site includes several photos of the Dalai Lama, he apparently rejects the Middle Way approach, noting that he envisions Tibet once again becoming “an independent land of the Buddha’s Teachings.” Similarly, a 23-year old Tibetan living in Maryland states that he is “in love with the dharma above all things.” But in contradistinction to the Dalai Lama’s goal of achieving Tibetan autonomy within the confines of the PRC, he states that he favors total independence for his homeland. This stance is clearly evident on the MySpace group site that he monitors, which is entitled “End Communist Rule in China.”¹⁵

Many youthful Tibetan Buddhists refer to what are termed “dharma protectors,” contending that various “emanations” of the Buddha may manifest themselves as “wrathful” guardians of the Tibetan people, depending on the circumstances. As one 19-year old Tibetan living in India notes on his MySpace page, “dharma protectors” are needed in order to “eliminate hindrances” to human liberation. In his view, such liberation can be realized only when “the openly declared enemies to the cause of Tibet are vanquished.”

One such “dharma protector” observed on several MySpace sites is Dorje Shugden - reportedly a vengeful “enemy-defeating god.”¹⁶ Importantly, the Dalai Lama has formally condemned the worship of this particular Bodhisattva; though an entire sect of diasporic Tibetan Buddhists have chosen to ignore this edict (Woodward 1998). Not coincidentally, members of the Dorje Shugden sect¹⁷ generally have opposed the Middle Way approach. “This Tibetan autonomy issue has not been decided by the Tibetan people in a democratic way,” a spokesman for the sect has observed. “It is just the Dalai Lama’s personal viewpoint” (quoted in Shukla 1998).

Though generally not nearly as militant as members of the Shugden sect, several TYC leaders have also sought to defend their opposition to the Middle Way approach by citing Buddhist teachings. For instance, Tenzin Phulchung, president of the Delhi branch of the TYC, has argued that the current Tibetan freedom struggle has been “too passive.” Though he claims to support the Dalai Lama, he notes that young people are “losing patience” and would be justified by Buddhist dharma in resorting

to violent attacks on Chinese military installations. Interestingly, he cites the 17th Karmapa Lama – currently the second-ranking leader of Tibetan Buddhism¹⁸ who escaped from China at age fourteen in 2000 – as a more germane influence for Tibetan youth engaged in such a struggle. As he contends, the Karmapa represents “the wrathful manifestation of the Buddha” (quoted in Lakshmi 2000).

Despite the fact that the relatively youthful Karmapa Lama is often featured on youth-oriented websites committed to Tibetan freedom, he rarely makes political statements. Often touted as the future leader of the Tibetan Buddhist movement, the Karmapa has his own “official” MySpace site,¹⁹ in which he blogs about his life and religious philosophy. In addition, the main page of the MySpace group site “Free Tibet”²⁰ features a very prominent link to an article about the Karmapa’s first trip to the U.S. in May 2008.

Reframing Tibetan History

Articulating historical differences between Tibet and China are very important in facilitating the mobilization of support for the Tibetan freedom movement. As Neill (2005:5) explains, “the positioning of a meaningful past” infuses a group’s collective consciousness with “a narrative of continuity” that effectively links past grievances to present-day circumstances. Along these lines, Tibet is depicted by movement activists as having been a sovereign nation for over two thousand years until the Chinese invasion commenced in 1949. While virtually all of the major SMO websites dedicated to Tibetan freedom make this argument, the TYC and SFT websites go even further and directly refute the Chinese contention that Tibet has been an “integral” part of China since its territorial absorption by the Yuan (Mongol) dynasty in the 13th century. As the TYC site observes, this claim is “ridiculous” since “both China and Tibet were ruled by the Mongols.” Significantly, the SFT site portrays Tibet historically as “one of the mightiest powers of Asia,” emphasizing not only its long-term independent status but also its impressive military strength within the region.

In contrast to the websites of the Dalai Lama and the TGE, the TYC and SFT sites contain detailed accounts of Tibetan history designed to explain the

¹⁵ See <http://groups.myspace.com/downwithchina>

¹⁶ For example, see <http://www.myspace.com/dorjeshugde>

¹⁷ Officially known as the New Kadampa Tradition, the sect is headquartered in Great Britain and run by diasporic monks. According to reports, posters appearing on the streets of Dharamsala in 2002 directly threatened the lives of the Dalai Lama and his followers. Police believe that militant Shugdengs made such threats. While the Shugdengs consider themselves to be “the guardians of Tibetan Buddhism,” opponents have dubbed them “the Talibans of Tibetan Buddhism” (Rahman 2002).

¹⁸ Officially, the Karmapa Lama is the spiritual leader of the Kagyu school of Tibetan Buddhism. According to tradition, the Karmapa is the third highest-ranking figure in Tibetan Buddhism as a whole, following the Dalai Lama and the Panchen Lama. But the arrest and imprisonment by Chinese officials of the 11th Panchen Lama in 1995 elevated the Karmapa to second place in the religious hierarchy.

¹⁹ <http://www.myspace.com/17thgyalwangkarmapa>

²⁰ <http://groups.myspace.com/FreeTibet2005>

precise political and religious relationship that Tibet maintained with Chinese imperial authorities for centuries. Sino-Tibetan relations, particularly during the era of the Ming and Qing (Manchu) dynasties, are thus described as being based on a reciprocal “priest-patron relationship” in which Tibet tacitly recognized limited Chinese suzerainty in foreign affairs, while Chinese emperors solicited the spiritual counsel of Tibetan Buddhist lamas. As the SFT site notes, “The Dalai Lama agreed to become the spiritual guide of the Manchu emperor, and accepted patronage and protection in exchange.”

Nonetheless, both the TYC and SFT sites contend that this reciprocal priest-patron relationship “did not, in itself, affect Tibet’s independence.” As the SFT site notes, “Tibet was never incorporated into the Manchu empire, much less China.” The TYC site explains that while the Manchurians at times “tried to engage in nefarious intrigue and meddle in Tibetan affairs,” the nation “never lost her sovereignty.” In this regard, a major turning point in Tibet’s relationship with China occurred in the immediate aftermath of the 1911 Revolution that overthrew the Manchu and ushered in China’s republican era. As the TYC site proudly asserts, “The Tibetans expelled all the Chinese and Manchu troops from Lhasa and elsewhere in Tibet,” leading to an official reassertion of “Tibet’s independence through a special declaration in 1913.”²¹

The Chinese communist invasion of Tibet that began in 1949 is cited by virtually all of the leading Tibetan freedom movement sites as being a pivotal historical moment, leading ultimately to the loss of national sovereignty. However, the violent nature of the “uprising” conducted by Tibetan guerrillas against Chinese troops that began in the late 1950s is minimized to a large extent on the GTE and Dalai Lama websites. Curiously, the uprising is described on GTE’s website as involving “massive demonstrations” throughout the country, implying mainly non-violent passive resistance. The site also notes that the Chinese military ended the rebellion in March 1959 after “slaughtering” tens of thousands of Tibetans. On the Dalai Lama’s site, a text of his most recent speech commemorating the 49th anniversary of Tibetan Uprising Day refers only to “the Tibetan people’s peaceful uprising in Lhasa on 10 March 1959.”

In contrast, the youth-oriented SFT site strongly emphasizes the importance of the “guerrilla resistance movement” that began in eastern Tibet and quickly spread nationwide. The site contends that

Chinese peasants “formed the core of the popular resistance to the Chinese occupation,” noting that “armed resistance” by Tibetan insurgents did not fully end until the early 1970s. Even now, “substantial popular resistance remains,” the website observes. Several youth-based sites affiliated with the movement on MySpace and Facebook make a similar argument. As a blogger on the MySpace “Free Tibet” site²² observes proudly, “A bloody war of resistance was continued by Tibetans for nearly two decades, with some serious casualties being inflicted upon the Chinese.”

Framing and Unframing Shangri-La

One of the most enduring Western depictions of Tibet is that of Shangri-La - an exotic and harmonious Buddhist land that is surrounded by spectacular snow-capped mountains and largely isolated from the outside world. As the fictional “earthly paradise” first described in the 1933 novel *Lost Horizon*, authored by the British author, James Hilton, Shangri-La became a template for Western depictions of Tibet in antiquity. As Schell (2000:16) has observed, Tibet “has long summoned forth images of a quintessentially exotic fairy-tale kingdom whose loss we lament in our own contemporary lives.” Klieger (2006:226) has noted, “In this format, Tibet, its people, and its institutions are special and unique: they are the holders of occult knowledge that is of great potential benefit for the world in the form of the complete set of Tibetan Buddhist teachings.” Lopez (1999:8) has written, “‘Traditional Tibet’ has come to mean something from which strength and identity are to be derived... a land free from strife, ruled by a benevolent Dalai Lama, his people devoted to the dharma.”

Building on decades of Western depictions of Tibet as “magical,” “mystical,” and “holy,” hit movies such as *Little Buddha* (1994), *Seven Years in Tibet* (1997), *Kundun* (1997), and *Tibet - Cry of the Snow Lion* (2003) have helped generate renewed interest in the beleaguered nation. In this regard, Western awareness of the Tibetan freedom movement has been fueled by hyper-idealized portrayals of Tibet as a benevolent theocracy that existed in tranquil splendor prior to the Chinese invasion of 1949. By framing Tibet as an historic “zone of peace” prior to the communist takeover, an appealing (if somewhat unrealistic) narrative for sympathetic Western audiences has been fashioned (Klieger 2006:224-226).

²¹ Many Western historians contend that Tibet was actually semi-sovereign during much of its history; i.e., it was nominally independent but often treated as a subordinate “vassal” state by the Chinese empire. However, historians note that Western terminology in such matters is often imprecise, especially given the fact that modern notions of “sovereignty” and “suzerainty” were alien to many Asian cultures of antiquity, including Tibet (Anand 2006:290). Western historians tend to agree that the Tibetan Buddhist hierarchy clearly exercised authority over Tibet’s governance during China’s Republican period from 1911 to 1949 (Sperling 2007:16-19).

²² See <http://groups.myspace.com/FreeTibet2005>

Many activists in the Tibetan freedom movement have implicitly embraced the Shangri-La frame, ironically utilizing a Western-devised representation to characterize Tibet's "pristine" national heritage. For example, much of the language employed by the Dalai Lama on his website evokes images of a Himalayan paradise lost. As he observes, Tibet will someday be reborn as "a free haven" in which "humanity and nature live in harmonious balance." In this regard, the Dalai Lama seemingly combines Buddhist dharma with national-utopian missionary zeal. As he observed on his site, "My country's unique history and profound spiritual heritage render it ideally suited for fulfilling the role of a sanctuary of peace at the heart of Asia." Similarly, the TGE site refers to Tibet in glowing terms as "the rooftop of the world," while noting sadly "the nature-friendly way of life of the Tibetan people was trampled upon by a materialist Chinese ideology."

In many respects, framing pre-communist Tibet as a utopian Shangri-La is designed to rebut the modern Chinese assertion that Tibet was actually the opposite – a nightmarish, despotic dystopia. Indeed, Chinese officials and their supporters contend that the communists "liberated" Tibet from a particularly tyrannical, brutal form of feudalism. As former Chinese Premier Li Peng has stated, "Old Tibet was one of the darkest and most backward regions of the world, and one of the regions where the violation of human rights was most severe" (quoted in Sautman and Dreyer 2006:7-8).

In response to such Chinese assertions, the SFT site has posted an insightful essay entitled "A lie repeated: the far left's flawed history of Tibet."²³ The essay seeks to rebut the claim that Tibet was despotic, vile, or particularly exploitative of its people, noting, "That Tibetan society was a vast, multifaceted affair, as societies tend to be." The Chinese and their supporters are accused of misrepresenting the facts by "drawing on selective quotes from non-native history – quite often the history of the occupiers themselves – and presenting it as fact." Notably, the writer accuses the Chinese of being the truly brutal ones, engaging in "cultural genocide" against the Tibetan people.

However, the SFT essay rejects the Shangri-La frame as equally mythical, noting that Tibetans – like all peoples at various points in their history – "waged war, robbed each other, had strict laws and engaged in corporal punishment." In this respect, Tibet is being reframed as an ordinary country – neither utopian nor dystopian – prior to the communist takeover. "Tibetans never called their country Shangri-La; it was an outsider, James Hilton, who first did that," the writer notes. "They never saw their

country as a paradise and the Tibetan community is certainly not seeking to re-establish the same political system that existed in pre-1959 Tibet (nor would it be possible)."

In posting this essay, SFT appears to be indicating that Tibetan youth generally tend to reject the overly simplistic Shangri-La descriptor for Tibet, but also deplore any Chinese assertions that pre-1949 Tibetan society was overly repressive. As the site states, "Any society seen through this blurry lens would come up short." Besides, "the crucial subtext of Beijing's condemnation of Tibet's 'feudal' past is a classic colonialist argument that the target's alleged backwardness serves as a justification for invasion and occupation."

Framing Tibetan Buddhism as "Cool"

Tibetan Buddhism has been repeatedly framed as "cool" or "hip" in movies, music, and other forms of Western popular culture in recent years, sparking what is often referred to as "Tibet chic." Such trends have been reinforced by a series of highly idealistic rock/rap concerts held in the U.S. and other countries from 1996 to 2001 on behalf of the Tibetan freedom movement. Named for the legendary 11th century Tibetan monk that was passionate about music, the Milarepa Foundation sponsored "Free Tibet" mega-concerts in numerous cities that featured not only raucous headliners such as the Beastie Boys, Rage Against the Machine, Pearl Jam, Smashing Pumpkins, and the Fugees, but also special speakers and panels focusing on the Tibetan freedom cause. Tens of thousands of North American and European young people became directly familiar with the movement as a result. The concerts fueled the rapid growth of SFT, which had been founded by diasporic Tibetan youth and their supporters in New York City in the 1990s.

Until recently, the Milarepa Foundation's website²⁴ featured alternating images of the Dalai Lama and Martin Luther King, Jr., accompanied by pertinent quotes from both men concerning the importance of non-violent activism. Invoking the image and philosophy of King involved lifting frames from agency-laden non-Tibetan sources, designed apparently to attract new supporters in the U.S. and other Western nations. The unstated but strongly implied frame alignment between the American civil rights movement and the Tibetan freedom cause was readily apparent. Additionally, the website contained a hyperlink to a Beastie Boys bulletin board featuring threaded discussions on a variety of topics related to Tibet. One discussion board, for instance, focused on the issue of whether or not violence should ever

²³ See <http://www.studentsforafreetibet.org/article.php?id=425>

²⁴ See <http://www.milarepa.org/>

be utilized by social movements. By connecting the Tibetan freedom movement directly to the Beastie Boys and other popular bands, the Tibetan cause was effectively framed as “cool,” thereby appealing to youth from a wide variety of backgrounds.

Currently, the “Tibetan Freedom Movement” website on Facebook, sponsored by SFT,²⁵ includes relevant links to downloadable rock songs and videos. For example, the song “Declare Independence” by Bjork – an Icelandic alternative rock artist who had performed previously at the Free Tibet concerts – was first posted in March 2008. The song includes lyrics such as the following:

Declare independence! Don't let them do that
to you! With a flag and a trumpet, go to the top
of your highest mountain!

Though the song does not mention Tibet directly, lyrical references to the “highest mountain” clearly evoke nationalistic images of the Himalayan nation. Moreover, Bjork recently provoked Chinese censors with her live performance of “Declare Independence” at a Shanghai concert. Performing in China for the first time in March 2008, she ended her passionate rendition of the song with a defiant shout of “Tibet, Tibet,” which led the Chinese Ministry of Culture to “tighten controls on foreign artists performing in China to prevent similar cases from happening in the future” (quoted in Macartney 2008). Tellingly, the Facebook member posting the link to “Declare Independence,” did so in the immediate aftermath of the Shanghai concert. As he observes:

The song sends a great message to the world
and to the people of Tibet! Be heard and raise
your voice! Let China and the rest of the world
know that Tibet is a free and sovereign nation
with a heart of gold and a mind of its own.

The SFT Facebook site, which is administered by Tibetan diasporic youth in New York City and claims over 15,000 members, also includes a post describing a recent concert by the British progressive rock band, Radiohead. The site notes that the band recently inaugurated their 2008 world tour with “an obvious message about China’s political and humanitarian actions in Tibet.”

Diasporic Tibetan rock bands have become prominent on the Internet as well. For example, the Dharamsala-based band, J JI Exile Brothers, has its own MySpace music site²⁶ and several videos posted on YouTube.²⁷ Referring to themselves as “refugee

rockers,” the band is composed of three Indian-born brothers of Tibetan parentage. Effectively combining rock music with Hindi-style love tunes and Tibetan instrumentation, the band’s songs (e.g., “We Are in Exile,” “Stand Up”) often include lyrics that reveal diasporic longings for Tibet. Interestingly, the band’s MySpace site features a colorful background with Buddhist imagery sampled from Pimp-My-Profile.com. The site contains photos of the band members dressed in decidedly hip Western attire, along with videos depicting the history of Tibet and symbols associated with the movement. The band claims to be committed to encouraging young people to embrace *rangzen*; i.e., the slogan referring to Tibetan self-determination and freedom, which has been shouted at Chinese embassies all over the world in recent years. “Our band is a revolution,” says one band member on the band’s MySpace site. “Before, Tibetan songs were too poetic. No one understood them. But everyone understands our music.”²⁸

In addition to “cool” tunes associated with the movement on the Internet, fashionable clothing emblazoned with Tibetan freedom slogans (e.g., “I Love Tibet,” “Free Tibet Now”) are available on many of the youth-oriented sites surveyed. Advertisements for “Team Tibet apparel” are featured on the SFT website, for instance, which includes jackets, t-shirts, tank tops, bracelets, tote bags, stickers, etc. The site has an entire page that features various images of Tibetan young people modeling such subcultural commodities. “Tibet Team jackets” in particular appear to be very popular among diasporic youth, as evidenced by several postings on the SFT Facebook site. For instance, one Facebook member laments, “Hey guys, I want to purchase a Team Tibet jacket and it says they’re sold out. Are there going to be any more soon?”

Framing Chinese Communists as “Neo-Nazis”

Virtually all of the major Tibetan freedom movement websites claim that the PRC has engaged in extremely repressive activities in Tibet for years, including the widespread use of torture, imprisonment of monks and political dissidents, and mass killings of civilians. Such websites assert that since the start of the Chinese occupation, Tibet’s population has been decimated by communist party policies, leading to the deaths of 1.2 million people. Additionally, Tibetan activists of all ages contend that a kind of “cultural genocide” has occurred, with Tibet’s tradi-

²⁵ See <http://apps.facebook.com/causes/sharings/82171>.

²⁶ See <http://www.myspace.com/jjiexilebrothers>

²⁷ For example, see <http://youtube.com/watch?v=Uc6QCx-zx6g>

²⁸ There are also Tibetan hip-hop bands featured on MySpace and YouTube. For instance, see Sontsa: The Next Generation at <http://www.myspace.com/sontsageneration>

tional Buddhist practices and customs seriously debilitated by various communist measures. The relatively large influx of Han (i.e., ethnic Chinese) migrants into Tibet in recent years, coupled with serious environmental degradation wrought by Chinese development schemes, has further jeopardized the nation's future, activists allege.

However, youth-oriented websites have tended to use much more inflammatory language than that found on the GTE and Dalai Lama sites to describe the Chinese regime. This has been especially the case since the start of the "Tibetan National Uprising" in March 2008. For instance, a growing number of youthful activists involved in the uprising have compared the Chinese communists to Nazi storm troopers. Referring to the "brutal crackdown on peaceful Tibetan protestors," the TYC website notes that "the illegal Communist Chinese regime in Tibet" is currently engaged in a genocidal campaign. The site includes photographs of protestors in Tibet carrying signs emblazoned with the phrase, "Stop Killing in Tibet." On the SFT site, there are several graphics that combine Chinese communist and Nazi symbols, including a black swastika superimposed on the red flag of the PRC. In this respect, the SFT site is essentially framing the Chinese communists as neo-Nazis.

Tibetan youth and their Western cohorts have engaged in similar rhetoric in various posts on social networking sites. For instance, a 17-year old Tibetan living in Colorado proclaims on MySpace's "Free Tibet" page that the PRC is ruled by vicious "ChiNazis," i.e., Chinese Nazis. She contends that the communist regime is responsible for a modern-day "holocaust" in Tibet, even though Chinese officials refuse to acknowledge as much. "They are really the Tibetan Holocaust deniers," she states. "The world needs to understand that not only are the Tibetans suffering because of China, but also Darfur, Burma and many other places because China is more concerned about their military-industrial-prison complex and making money than about human rights." In responding to the post, a 20-year old non-Tibetan from New York agrees, noting, "As a Jew whose grandparents survived the Holocaust, I feel obligated to push for a free Tibet."

Framing the Beijing Olympics as "Political Propaganda"

In open defiance of the Dalai Lama's position that Tibetans should not oppose the Beijing Olympics, thousands of mostly youthful demonstrators have marched in opposition to the Games – inside and outside of Tibet – since the start of the new uprising

in March 2008. Youth-based groups such as the TYC and SFT in particular have framed the Beijing Olympics as "a political tool designed to promote a false image of Chinese control of Tibet" (Currier 2008). Working in conjunction with other diasporic groups, the TYC and SFT have formed a broad based coalition, "Tibetan People's Movement Uprising" (TPMU),²⁹ which is touted on the TYC site as "a new coordinated Tibetan resistance effort in the lead up to the 2008 Beijing Olympics."

Responding to the International Olympic Committee's (IOC) decision to transport the torch through Tibet, TPMU activists have organized demonstrations around the world, calling for international opposition to the torch relay and a boycott of the Olympic Games (Wonacott 2008:1). In fact, SFT and TYC websites have posted numerous videos, text, and graphics critical of IOC for its plan. The TYC site proclaims that the Olympics should not be held in China "until Tibet is free." As the site asserts, "China has welcomed with bloodied hands, the historic institution of the Olympics; which has striven to promote peace through sports; with more killings, more torture, more repression, more arbitrary detentions, more censorship." According to the SFT site, "the tainted Olympic torch" is being used as "an act of ultimate assault" on the Tibetan people. SFT claims to be exposing "the true face of the Chinese government as it tries to hide behind its glossy Olympics propaganda." A video posted on the site entitled "No Torch in Tibet" is addressed to IOC executive members: "There's already blood on China's hands. Will it be on yours?" A posting by a 17-year old on MySpace's "Free Tibet" site features a graphic image depicting five human skulls substituting for the traditional interlocking rings of the Olympics, captioned with the headline, "Beijing's Olympic Symbol."

Youthful Tibetan activists have targeted corporate sponsors of China's Olympic torch relay as well. On the SFT site, Coca-Cola is named as a serious "offender" in this regard, due to the company's substantial financing backing of the relay. To dramatize the issue, the SFT site includes an image of what appears to be a Tibetan woman screaming in agony, superimposed on the red and white Coke logo. The caption reads, "Please join Tibetans and supporters worldwide in calling on Coke's executives to use their influence to pressure the International Olympics Committee to withdraw Tibet from the torch relay." Visitors to the site are encouraged to e-mail Coca-Cola's president on behalf of the anti-torch campaign.

Notably, many indigenous Tibetan activists involved in the latest uprising have coordinated and

²⁹ The coalition also includes the Tibetan Women's Association, Gu Chu Sum Movement of Tibet, and the National Democratic Party of Tibet.

publicized their activities with various digital technologies. Photos and videos of protests in Tibet and crackdowns by Chinese troops and police have been disseminated extensively on the web. Tibetans have utilized their mobile phones – which are largely unmonitored by Chinese authorities – to disseminate text messages and images of the protests abroad. The website of the Tibetan Center for Human Rights and Democracy (TCHRD),³⁰ for instance, has posted what it claims are mobile phone photos of demonstrations that occurred on March 14, 2008 in Gansu province, Tibet. Hundreds of monks, students, and other laypeople are seen in the photos marching and carrying the banned Tibetan flag. As the photos and text reveal, the protest culminated with calls for “Tibetan independence,” which soon results in violent reprisals and arrests by police. Countless indigenous and diasporic activists have also posted videos of similar protests and related events directly onto YouTube and other video-sharing sites, which have led to Chinese attempts to block access to such sites across the country (Ford 2008).

Conclusion

As a result of the growing accessibility of the Internet and other information technologies, Tibetan Buddhist youth have established unprecedented interactive contacts with like-minded persons around the world. Teenagers and young adults living in Tibet have been able to interact much more frequently with their diasporic cohorts and vice versa in recent years, due in large measure to the widespread dissemination of computer-mediated forms of communication. Many such Tibetans have effectively constructed virtual communities based on relatively new social aggregations and webs of personal relationships that have crystallized in cyberspace. Youth-oriented SMO websites affiliated with the Tibetan freedom movement and related social networking group sites hosted by MySpace and Facebook have played an extremely important role in this regard.

Certainly, the collective identity of Tibetan Buddhists has been strengthened by the growing prevalence of interlocking online contacts between geographically dispersed ethno-religious cohorts, thereby bolstering the organizing capabilities of activists involved in the Tibetan freedom movement. With websites and mobile phones being utilized as ubiquitous tools of protest, the movement has clearly demonstrated its renewed strength and vigor. Rheingold (2002) has described this newest wave of 21st century cybernetic human interaction as “e-tribalism,” with members of various “thumb tribes” essentially linked together through social networking

sites, networked handheld computers, and “smart” mobile phones. Text messaging has allowed for “private” conversations to be conducted with numerous people simultaneously, even in very public settings such as the roadways and town squares of Tibet. Moreover, many grassroots activists involved in the current uprising have been actively engaged in video blogging – filming events as they occur and subsequently posting them on YouTube and other video-sharing sites.

Evidently, a growing number of Tibetan young people – both indigenous and diasporic – have embraced a relatively defiant and uncompromising stance regarding the Chinese occupation of Tibet, particularly in comparison to the “Middle Way” approach espoused by the Dalai Lama and other traditional activists. As the long-time spiritual leader of Tibetan Buddhism, the Dalai Lama continues to be revered by a majority of Tibetan youth, though his relatively moderate policies and tactics have been increasingly challenged by more radical youth-based SMOs such as TYC and SFT.

In contrast to “establishment” websites of the Dalai Lama and his government-in-exile, youth-based websites and bloggers tend to frame Tibetan history in much more confrontational, militaristic terms. For example, younger activists have framed the initial Tibetan uprising that began in March 1959 as a popular, sustained guerrilla-based insurgency that actively employed lethal tactics against Chinese troops, while older activists have largely portrayed the event as a particularly tragic episode of non-violent civil disobedience in which peaceful Tibetans were victimized and massacred by Chinese military forces. In addition, younger online activists – in contrast to the Dalai Lama and the GTE establishment – have apparently rejected the Shangri-La frame as counterproductive in securing the long-term goals of the movement, contending that such a depiction only serves to perpetuate the myth of Tibetan passivity in the face of unreconstructed Chinese repression.

Nevertheless, framing the Tibetan freedom movement as “cool” or “hip” appears to be completely acceptable to most youthful activists. Indeed, such an approach is tailor-made for dramatically expanding the ranks of active movement participants in the West – particularly among diasporic Tibetan youth and their cohorts of all backgrounds. In sociological terms, the consumption of Tibetan-influenced rock music, t-shirts, stickers, posters, and handbags are examples of “subcultural capital,” i.e., certain products or objects that “confer status on its owner in the eyes of the relevant beholder” (Thornton 1997:202). The mass media – including various

³⁰ This SMO was founded in 1996 and headquartered in Dharamsala, India. The staff is composed of mostly diasporic young adults. See <http://www.tchrd.org/>

websites - are the primary means for diffusing and legitimizing particular forms of subcultural capital. Such media outlets help to determine what is (or is not) "cool," thereby reinforcing existing subcultural hierarchies. Thus, accruing subcultural capital that is symbolically linked to Tibetan freedom involves spurning the cultural/political mainstream while maintaining esoteric prerogatives that are deemed "cool" by one's subcultural peers.

In many respects, the formation of an oppositional consciousness among Tibetan Buddhist youth has been expedited by portraying China explicitly as "the enemy." In contrast to the Dalai Lama's professed "compassion" for the Chinese, younger activists have tended to employ relatively harsh rhetoric in describing their adversary. Numerous youth-based websites and blogs have framed the Chinese communists in highly negative terms (e.g., "Nazis," "Holocaust deniers," "bloody hands"), which are designed to clearly distinguish the in-group from the out-group. Youthful online activists have even framed the

Beijing Olympics as mere "political propaganda" that is designed to mask the "genocidal" intent of the Chinese communists in Tibet. In contrast to the Dalai Lama's attempts at diplomatic engagement with Chinese officialdom, youthful activists have sought to coordinate protests against the Olympics and anything else that appears to improve China's image in the world.

In spite of their differences, Tibetan Buddhist activists of all ages and political persuasions share a basic commitment to some form of self-rule for Tibet. Indeed, youthful activists applying militant pressure to the Chinese communist regime have likely strengthened the diplomatic hand of the Dalai Lama and the Tibetan government-in-exile. Experiencing the most recent Tibetan national uprising has almost certainly had a sobering effect on Chinese officials, which may yet compel them to engage in serious, substantive negotiations with the Dalai Lama's representatives.

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