Chapter 13

Getting Old in Little Lhasa: Experiences of Aging in Dharamsala

M. N. Rajesh
University of Hyderabad, India

ABSTRACT

This chapter tries to analyze the aging process of some Tibetans who came to India as young refugees but were forced to stay back and have spent the best part of their years in Dharamsala also known as Little Lhasa in Northern India. The question of coming to terms with aging and the nostalgia for a lost land in the midst of large-scale global changes informs the painful truth of aging on one hand and also the cultural resources of Tibetan Buddhism that helps them to come to terms with reality is the thread that describes their aging. The loss of this culture and the Buddhist way of life so brutally cut short in Tibet is the focus of the chapter, along with how they come to terms with these aspects. The chapter ends the description of activities in Dharamsala by arguing that aging is informed by spiritual and political climate with the old people also being active participants.

INTRODUCTION

1959 was a threshold year and a dividing line in Tibetan history, brutally inaugurating a period of forced modernisation of a Chinese variety on a peaceful Buddhist society, and shaking up the entire moorings of the entire Tibetan society. It was said that there was no wheel in Tibet and the only wheel was the prayer wheel indicating the predominance of religion and tradition and religious avoidance of modernity headed by a Buddhist monastic gerontocracy. In one stroke, beginning from 1949, to the signing of the 17 point agreement between China and Tibet in 1951, Tibet that was an independent state suddenly became a colony of China (Laird 2007:341-348). Paradoxically, all this took place when the dominant global rhetoric was one of decolonisation. During the aftermath of World War II, the victory of the Allied forces over the Axis powers heralded the message of an end to all evil signified by the persona of Mussolini and Hitler. In the ensuing narrative of the demonization of the Axis powers, the Allied victory inaugurated the rise of another set of superpowers. Immediately after the end of World War II, a series of conflagrations broke out all over the world mainly in Asia-the crisis in the Korean Peninsula and the
French presence in Vietnam, where the world attention was focused on forgetting Tibet, Xinjiang and other parts of China is an idea that is perpetuated to this day (Phillips 2001). This official history has therefore led to a countermemory and is part of the process of ageing among the refugee populations as they are the last to preserve these oral memories. Problems in other parts of the world thus became relegated to the status of unknown wars and uprisings (Katsiaficas 2013: 104-124). The point is that all of them generated a large number of refugees were to leave their homeland and Tibet is one of the important cases in this point.

With the conquest of inner Mongolia, Xinjiang, and Tibet, the natural frontiers of China seem to be complete and China was only agrarian empire whose territory expanded the World War I, whereas all the other agrarian empires collapsed and this was described by Wang Hui as the incorporation of the ethnic minorities (Hui 2014:31-39). Many Chinese, sincerely believed that this was a civilising mission and China was an old nation and Tibet a young nation and therefore needed some handholding and Tibet was imagined as a clean slate. This is in keeping with the larger narrative of conquest of ethnic territories the world over and the justification of developmentseems to take precedence (Norbu 1987:176-206).

 Ironically, Tibet was not young as China under Mao and the Communists would like to imagine. Tibet had a great history and was one of those important cultures with a Buddhist great tradition and was therefore not young but already mature. This paper argues that it is this maturity of the Tibetan civilisation that provided it certain cultural resources to encounter modernity and also exile (Norbu 1999:8-14). Thus, getting old in the Tibetan context was not just a matter of physical ageing, but also a period of one’s life where other larger aspects had to be comprehended and it is here that the Tibetan genius is at play and is able to afford explanations to such crisis situations in human life and also how like the Chinese, the Tibetans also respected people of old age. An example of a famous doctor is given by Janet Gyatso while discussing the human body and the expertise that aged people had (Gyatso 2015: 88). This point of divergence establishes that Tibetan civilisation is not only not a young civilisation needing handholding but also a major civilisation that has immense cultural resources to come to terms with all aspects of modern life including ageing in the modern world. In this paper a detailed narrative of the ageing Tibetan diaspora in India is attempted.

When we talk about the Tibetan experience, we are led to understanding and answering the question of what is Tibetanness? One point is very clear is that Tibetan identity is inseparable from the Buddhist religion (Kolås 1996:51-55). In providing the answer to the question of the nature Buddhism in the Tibetan context, one is tempted to quote a book by Karma Lekshe Tsomo. In answering this question, Karma Lekshe Tsomo begins by describing the stages of death. How, in the final stages, and the human body is about to end its consciousness, a series of events happen. In other western cultures, they dismissed end as a single instant that separates life-and-death, but in the Tibetan Buddhist tradition, drawing on the ancient Indian concept of antharabhava or bardo meaning intermediate stages, lengthy descriptions of the last phase of existence in this world is expounded in great detail. First, the body loses its ability to sense smell and one by one all the five faculties ebb out while at the same time strange sounds and lights create a disturbing effect, that are created due to the Karma of the person and through which the person has to navigate without being lost (Wicks 1997:480). Such a lengthy explanation and the confidence in action needed to combat the unavoidable situation is part of one of the greatest cultural resources of Tibetan Buddhist tradition. This was also interpreted by Timothy Leary in the 1960’s as a phenomena that the Tibetans had by some methods reached to a universal experience based on his study of psychedelic experience (Powers and Templeman 2012:69).The need to meditate on death and the role of afterlife
Related Content

A Study of Decline Ethical Values in Education System at Higher Level
[www.igi-global.com/chapter/a-study-of-decline-ethical-values-in-education-system-at-higher-level/208995?camid=4v1a](www.igi-global.com/chapter/a-study-of-decline-ethical-values-in-education-system-at-higher-level/208995?camid=4v1a)

Describing Undergraduate Students' Intercultural Learning through Study Abroad in Terms of Their 'Cultural Responsiveness'
[www.igi-global.com/article/describing-undergraduate-students-intercultural-learning-through-study-abroad-in-terms-of-their-cultural-responsiveness/156496?camid=4v1a](www.igi-global.com/article/describing-undergraduate-students-intercultural-learning-through-study-abroad-in-terms-of-their-cultural-responsiveness/156496?camid=4v1a)

“Struggle” for Trust – Unintended Consequences of an “Integration Project”
[www.igi-global.com/article/struggle-for-trust--unintended-consequences-of-an-integration-project/231471?camid=4v1a](www.igi-global.com/article/struggle-for-trust--unintended-consequences-of-an-integration-project/231471?camid=4v1a)

Gender-Responsive TVET Framework: An Indian Perspective
[www.igi-global.com/chapter/gender-responsive-tvet-framework/227949?camid=4v1a](www.igi-global.com/chapter/gender-responsive-tvet-framework/227949?camid=4v1a)