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# Dating in Dharamsala The Tibetan Exile Dating experience

Ben Kingstone  
*SIT Study Abroad*

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*Dating in Dharamsala*

**The Tibetan Exile Dating experience**

Kingstone, Ben

Academic Director: Onians Isabelle

Senior Faculty Advisor: Decler, Hubert

College of Wooster

Anthropology

Dharamsala, Himachal Pradesh, India

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## **Abstract:**

By studying the younger generation's dating culture in the Tibetan exile community of Dharamsala, I hoped to glean a deeper insight into how cultural values effected interpersonal relationships in an everyday context, and in doing so hoped to find a bit about the unique qualities of Tibetan culture. I came in with many ideas of different themes, from Buddhist values and their effect on the dating culture, to the effect of assimilation on imported Tibetan ideas about dating and relationships. What I ultimately found had very little to do with Buddhist ideas and had far larger implications about the effects of life in exile. To conduct my research, I conducted a total of 15 formal interviews, and about twice as many informal conversations with young Tibetans actively a part of or recently having exited the dating scene.

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## **Intro**

I choose to study dating culture among exiled Tibetans because I believed it was a tangible way to look at what I had very non-academically observed in many Tibetans to be an rare and beautiful way of approaching life. Studying such vast, intangible inner values such as love and kindness is difficult, but through relationships and the search for love, people express such qualities in a very concrete way. I believed that through studying the Tibetan dating culture, I could find a palpable way of understanding these values and what they meant to Tibetans.

As it happens, dating, and romantic love are some of the more recent categories “discovered” to be of value in anthropological study. This is largely because the Euro-centric anthropologists who created the field understood romantic love as an idea invented in the Modern West that was not universally human or meaningful. It was understood that because romantic love has the power to destabilize social structures forged by marriages, it was merely the newly emerged luxury of wealthy Western

peoples. Gradually, as research on the world beyond the scope of Europe was driven more by genuine fieldwork than on speculation and stereotypes, anthropologists were forced to accept the universal existence of romantic love (Sorrell 2005). It was not by any stretch a strong factor in marriage for the many cultures of the world, it was not guaranteed to be seen in the same idyllic light it had taken on in in modern European and American civilization, but it existed universally.

Globalization has grown from exponentially from slow exchanges of cross-cultural ideas into one of the most powerful influences that almost every culture in the world faces. I knew that the Tibetans living in Dharamsala, whether recently escaped from Tibet, or having been born in exile, would be exposed to the vast cultural influences of Indian media and media from around the world that had made its way over. I also knew that the currently dating generation in Dharamsala would be in fact the first generation of Tibetans to be dating at all. With these factors in mind I hoped to study the way in which uniquely Tibetan identity would blend with ideas from around the world in the first generation of Tibetans to be truly dating, and from this complex pool of factors, come to some insights about Tibetan exile culture.

I choose Dharamsala specifically to study Tibetan dating in exile for two reasons. While all Tibetan exile settlements would be prime areas to study inner values in dating life, Dharamsala added unique factors that would be of interest in my study. The first is the cultural force of Bollywood, and the increased access to modernization found far more in India than Nepal. As noted in Shani Shih's ISP, Tibetans themselves seem to understand that living in India poses a greater risk of assimilating and eroding Tibetan culture than most other places in the world (Shih, 2013). The second reason propelling me to study in Dharamsala is that I expected it to also be one of the most powerful sources of Tibetan culture in exile. The city wraps around the Tibetan government in exile, (CTA), as well as the highly influential Dalai Lama himself. Based on these assumptions I hypothesized that in Dharamsala, there would be the strongest battle between a fight to preserve Tibetan identity and the overwhelming powers of modernization. I guessed that these strong forces interacting with each other would create

a very interesting environment for the local dating scene, and one that would be revealing about both Tibetan culture, and the way Tibetan culture is interacting with the wider modern world.

## **Historical Context of Tibetan Dating**

It is important to understand the context from which the dating culture of exiled Tibetans developed, as many ideas were brought over from Tibet to the countries of asylum, and still hold weight among even the youngest generation. Dating is very clearly an idea introduced to the Tibetan people upon beginning their lives over in exile. As anthropologist Alam explains, it was upon entering Indian society that Tibetans simultaneously gave up systems of polyandry and polygamy, and with seemingly little resistance took on the cultural habit of modern dating (Alam, 2000).

This however was not the way in Tibet. In ancient times, and mostly still in its modern existence under the control of the PRC, Tibetan marriage has been a structure-maintaining societal institution, not an expression of emotion. Love absolutely is able to grow out of this arrangement, but for the majority of the population, the order is very firmly marriage then love, opposing the “first comes love, then comes marriage” of the American refrain. Unlike most other highly religious cultures, religion has played little direct role in Tibetan marriage. This is because of the unusual denomination of marriage as a secular topic in Tibetan Buddhism. While guidance is offered on how to steer marriage to the healthy form of love- based on compassion not attachment- there is not the usual tower of regulating rules it that is common in most religions. Because of this, certain hallmarks of conservatism typically a part of a theocratic society are missing. Both polygamy and polyandry were accepted as normal parts of life alongside monogamy with little to no religious comment. While divorce historically has held the emotional weight of once-attached people separating for life, it hasn't carried the weight of sacrilegious sin (French, 1995). Textually there are only a few rules that can be found in Buddhist scripture regarding marriage. As Buddha says in the Sigalovada Sutta, “In five

ways should a wife as the western direction be respected by a husband: by honoring, not disrespecting, being faithful, sharing authority, and by giving gifts. And, the wife so respected reciprocates with compassion in five ways: by being well-organized, being kindly disposed to the in-laws and household workers, being faithful, looking after the household goods, and being skillful and diligent in all duties". These ideas however, are simple, and not legally forceful, to the end that marriage in Tibet remained firmly outside the domain of the clergy (Dhammananda, 1993).

### **Promiscuity:**

Tibet has throughout its history up into the current day had a culture of relative promiscuity. Because religion has historically been the strictest moderator of sexual activity in a culture, Buddhist aloofness on the matter left few of the notions of sin pervading ideas of sex in many cultures. While infidelity in marriage was condemned, it was not at all uncommon in Tibet. Furthermore, it was considered understandable and quite common for women to have open sexual relationships when their husbands were away and vice versa. Two theories have been proposed to explain the frequency of promiscuity in Tibet. One is that because of bad fertility rates, (birth rates were low and infant mortality was high), promiscuity was almost a necessity to continue the population. The other explanation is that with a large percentage of the male population living as celibate monastics, (somewhere between 15-20 percent), a constant rate of monogamous couples throughout the country wasn't viable. The final explanation, which is probably an equally contributing factor to the above two theories, is that promiscuity simply wasn't viewed as sinful, socially or religiously, and thus had little reason to be repressed. Tibet is still maintains a promiscuous culture, though Chinese rule has manifested this in the warping of a culture free about sex into one dominated by a massive prostitution industry, (9% of the women in Lhasa are estimated to be involved in the industry, though most of them are Chinese). Finally, it was not deemed unseemly for a woman to raise a child out of wedlock, or to remain unmarried for life, (though this was rare as husbands were very necessary source of livelihood) (French, 1995).

### **Monogamy:**

Monogamy in Tibet was traditionally the lifestyle of those on the extreme ends of the class spectrum. The lowest class Tibetans, (often those who worked in trades condemned by Buddhism such as butchers), and the poorest Tibetans such as the nomads, tended to favor monogamous marriage. As I will explain in the next few sections, polyandry tended to be an economic tactic while polygamy was more of a luxury. For those with too little stake in society to even consider the possibility of advancing their means, monogamous love marriages were favorable. And these lowest class Tibetans were in fact the only stratus of the population with the consistent option for a love marriage. At the opposite upper end of society, monogamous marriages were possible as there was no need for economic strategizing. However, these were rarely love marriages, but generally arranged political ones seeking to advance the families standing (French, 1995).

### **Polygamy:**

Polygamy was always a luxury of the wealthy, as men provided the main means of breadwinning in a family. As a result, stretching one man out to provide for a large family of women was not something remotely viable for the poor and middle class. The two ways polygamy occurred were in a wealthy nobleman marrying multiple women, or in the case of an outsider marrying into a wealthy family bereft of a male heir (French, 1995).

### **Polyandry:**

Polyandry was in many ways the most economically effective grouping of men and women in society. The most common form was fraternal polyandry in which a group of brothers would share the same wife, thus making the most of the family's limited tract



of land and reducing taxation. The wife would live in her own room in the house, going to the rooms of each of the brothers on rotating nights. Alternately, the brothers would visit her one night at a time, leaving their shoes outside the door to signal their presence (Marriage in Tibet, 2013). This system led to much less conflict than might be imagined from a Western perspective, however having less dependence on women for economic survival, it was not unheard of for brothers in fraternal polyandry to break up the families. The cause of these came in everything from jealousy to a desire for more personal freedom and space. Polyandry was not just fraternal however; it was not uncommon for unrelated men to join together for a wife, or to join entire groups of brothers. It was also a common practice for a son and father to together take on a new wife after the previous wife/mother had died. The final explanation of polyandry was the skewed ratio of females to males. The large monastic and celibate population left a Tibet with many eligible women and far fewer men to accommodate them. Polyandry was the only way to find marriages without leaving a significant population of unmarried women. (Childs, 2003).

### **“Dating”**

Dating certainly didn't come anywhere from Tibet. It is an idea that has been introduced into the exile culture through the window of modernization. Nevertheless, a small segment of the activities associated with dating in exile still existed in altered forms in traditional Tibet. One of the most relatable issues to the current crop of exiled Tibetans is the pursuit of forbidden relationships. Love marriages were not viable for the majority of the population, and as such, getting the very necessary parental consent for such relationships was almost impossible through non-devious means. One practice prescribed to bypass this wall of stern parents was the ominously titled 'bride rape'. This was not as bad as it sounds. A young Tibetan woman would walk down a pre agreed upon road where her lover and his friends were lying in wait. They would snatch her up and for all seeming purposes, kidnap her and then elope (Marriage in Tibet, 2013). The parents of the women would then be forced to over time accept the marriage. Most of the time however, marriages, in reflection of the casual nature society put on them, would happen quietly and with little fuss. A matchmaker would propose to the girl decided upon in question,

and in wealthier families, large rites and marriages with traditions and religion tied in would ensue. However, for the poor majority of the population, these ceremonies weren't practical or desirable. In most cases, the young girls proposed to would be notified of their marriage and future husband only a few days in advance (Ibid).

One factor tying together the couplings of the richest Tibetans down to the lowliest serfs was the importance of family in marriage. The bride would be expected to live in the husband's family, and the importance of the spouses getting along with their married-into families was an essential quality expected in all marriage partners.

### **Modern Day:**

Chinese ruling practices have severely warped all Tibet's marriage and family practices. The Tibet in which the newest exiles are escaping reflects very little of the history above. Both polyandry and polygamy are illegal in Chinese law, thus reducing notably the rate at which they occur. Chinese eugenics is also at play here, and the number of children allowed to a family has been steadily declining, to a current rate of two children for rural families and one for urban families (Post Beijing Alternative, 2000). Promiscuity is still culturally relevant, but in its different context, it can be imagined to take on a different kind of ethical impression. In Lhasa, The current estimation is that 40-70 percent of men will now have more than one sexual partner outside of marriage, while the prostitution industry as mentioned earlier is on a huge climb. Divorce while never a true scandal in society has risen to almost half of the population. (Divorce In Buddhism, 2000).

### **Interracial Dating and Tibetan Identity in Dharamsala**

The Dharamsalan Tibetans dating in exile face an enormous pressure beyond the one already inherent in such a vulnerable endeavor. This is the preservation of their culture. While their Indian peers are already under the serious burden of marrying

someone in an equal or favorable caste, their actions do not have implications that rise beyond their own family's name. For the Tibetans, dating speaks not just to their own lives, or those of their parents, or even their community, but to the entirety of their people. While the strength of this monumentally heavy conviction varies from person to person, I observed it in some form in almost everyone I spoke to regardless of any other factors.

One clear and very skewed divide in this seems to be between the men and women. While the men are understood to be upholding and preserving their culture through their dating, the young women are seen as by far more responsible for this preservation. While the young men are mostly free of this responsibility until marriage, both the community and especially the less progressive parents hold their daughters accountable from the beginning of their dating lives. As one young Tibetan woman explained; "it's the girls. Guys are so free, they can do whatever they want. But if we date a non Tibetan it will be a big deal." She went on further to explain that particularly dating an Indian would be heavily frowned upon in the community. When asked if she would ever date an Indian she responded, "Indians are like.. you just don't want to take the risk. it depends on how you handle it. if I have a friend and she dated an indian, if someone asked me about her, I would put even in there yeah she dated an indian". My informant made it very clear that it was almost as extreme as a community taboo for a young Tibetan woman to date an Indian. Not only would her parents disapprove of this union, seeing it as assimilation, but that the community would be harsh. She continued that she is constantly socially aware not just of the actual nature of her romantic involvements, but even of their possible appearances. "If I go to meet an Indian somewhere, just for work, I will wear a Chuba to make sure everyone knows it's professional you know? Otherwise people will talk. And actually they still will maybe". Another woman I talked to was completely dismissive of dating outside her race despite saying that she personally had no discomfort with the idea. "If I dated a foreigner, my parents will definitely beat me!" she laughed, before adding, "it is very serious though. I don't think they would allow me".

This fear was not unique to these two women. But it was unique to women. The Tibetan men I talked to never saw any necessary connection between their dating lives and the preservation of their culture. They had the luxury of partial separation between their personal lives and the preservation of their culture, something few of the Tibetan women I talked to could relate to, (generally because of more educated and open minded parents). As one informant explained when I asked how parents responded to Tibetans dating other races, “They don’t care. These days. Some people, some Tibetans, just like my mom, my parents, they came from Tibet so they will oppose you, ‘you are Tibetan so you be in Tibetan community!’”. Some of my friends their parents are educated so they think about these things, I don’t care because if he is happy we are happy. So it is changing yeah. But I think many still would not be happy if you date a non Tibetan”. This particular informant went on to admit that despite his parents discomfort with him dating other races, they would accept whomever he dated in the end, although he wasn’t sure it would be the same for a girl. All of the Tibetans I talked to who felt parental or community constriction in their dating lives handled the issue with a lot of humor and good nature. However, women typically would follow this with a sobering comment on how the situation was very serious, while the guys would dismiss the parental warnings as not truly in need of being followed. The fight to maintain a ‘pure’ Tibetan identity passed on from the older generation was not the only factor I identified in interracial dating however.

As became clear in very few interviews, Tibetan men are no strangers to interracial dating. In fact, for many of the young Tibetan men I met in Dharamsala, this was the preferred choice. I more than once cluelessly bumbled into a group of young Tibetans in the process of seducing a foreign woman and was told sometimes politely, sometimes not, to make myself scarce. The reasons that foreign women were so often preferred seems to have something to do with the perceived differences in their views on dating. As one young Tibetan man explained when asked the difference between Tibetan girls and foreigners, “They want to free you, if you don’t call no problem”. He continued to explain his view that Ingies were far more open then Tibetan women about casual sex and casual dating, two things that were very important to most of the Tibetan men I talked to. “For Ingies, sex is fun, meaningless part of life. They never think about such

serious things as making you get married them, they won't stop what you do". When I proposed that this carefree nature might be partly a factor of the specific Westerners my informant came in contact with, I.e travellers, women on gap years, tourists, and hippies seeking spiritual enlightenment, as opposed to rooted members of a community who are not just passing through Dharamsala, my informant felt this was only partially a factor. "Yes maybe not all foreign women are like this. It's the more free spirited types who are here. But I think it's also maybe a cultural thing". I found no shortage of guys interested in praising to me the merits of Ingie women. This didn't always stem from an appreciation of the perceived as carefree and casual about sex attitude of foreigners. "Many Tibetan men will get married with foreign women now. One of my friends right now is married with Swiss girl" said one informant, nearly word for word echoing what many other interviewees had told me.

In marriage however, Tibetan men faced more scrutiny for marrying outside of the race. "I think my parents would be very disappointed if I married foreigner" admitted one informant. "If I date, that is okay, but when I marry, I think its good if she's Tibetan. My mother will be happy that way". When asked why, he responded "My mother is worried I will lose my Tibetan culture. If I move away from the community and I will forget everything she thinks." Interestingly, my participant didn't agree with his mother's conclusion here. "I am always Tibetan. I've dated many many Ingie girls. They never control me, I don't change about these things. I am always Tibetan still Tibetan" he laughed. The idea that a foreign wife could steal his identity seemed laughable to him. This thought was echoed by most of the Tibetan men I talked to whether or not their parents supported them marrying outside their race. Unlike the Tibetan women I met who only very rarely had parents completely okay with a foreign marriage, there was a wide spectrum of parental opinions on the issue for men. It ranged all the way from one Tibetan man telling me his parents "just wanted him to be happy" to one who said he thinks "[his] mother will die" if he marries outside the community. The most common factor in determining this reaction seemed to be education. Those parents who seemed most open to this were those who had the most opportunity to be educated, while those most opposed were often those with the least education, and also often those more recently escaped from Tibet. The fear of seeing one's children losing the culture was

stronger among these parents and they appeared to be harsher on interracial coupling both for their sons and daughters.

In marriage I in fact met no women who had married or dated foreigners in my whole study. Women would tell me that it happened but often couldn't point to a personal friend who had actually dated one. The reasons for this ranged from a harsher community reaction and the stronger perceived responsibility of maintaining 'pure' Tibetan culture to simple shyness according to the women I talked to. Explained one woman "Guys are more frank I think. More fast forward you know? Tibetan girls are also very pretty I don't think they will not get a good English guy. But frankly speaking they are very shy. Tibetan guys they are a little bit fast forward very blunt". Another woman said Tibetan men said a very hard double standard. "Yeah the guys date girls then we want to date too even, and then we fight about it! You guys get to go with foreigners and once a Tibetan woman goes with another person the guys talk about it!" So its seen as sort of traitorous? I asked. "Sort of. Like if you see there are so many Amdo guys and majority are dating foreigners like if you go to a pub they are like almost all over the foreigners. And we are fine with that! And once a Tibetan girl goes with a guy they all talk about it". The same fear that leads parents to restrict their daughters seems to be in its own way present in the young Tibetan men. Ultimately, the responsibility of maintaining Tibetan culture is tied to the idea of dating within the culture, among not just the older generation, but the younger generation as well. While they are generally more far more progressive than their parents, by the stage of marriage, almost all Tibetans I spoke with seemed aware of the implications of the spouse they choose, and no one seemed light about it.

### **Bollywood and Realism**

There is no doubt a force of assimilation acting on the Tibetans living in Dharamsala. But to say it is as simple as Tibetans gradually absorbing Indian ideas would be to ignore an ongoing, somewhat dissonant struggle occurring in the minds of Dharamsala Tibetans. As Timm Lau has noted in his study on Bollywood and Tibetan

identity, Indian media is certainly a constant and powerful force acting on exiled Tibetans, “The television sets in Tibetan houses are nearly constantly showing Hindi films: colourful, impassioned, violent and romantic spectacles. The TV sets are rarely turned off” (Lau, 2010). This from my own personal experience proved to be very true. One thing neglected in Lau’s study, however, was the rejection of Bollywood that is fiercely emerging in the current young generation of Tibetans. While many of my informants talked about watching Bollywood in their youth, they without fail wrote this off as something they grew out of. My informant’s present views of Bollywood sloped lightly from affectionate mocking to complete disdain. Bollywood’s over-the-top spectacles of romantic love, dance numbers, and heroism all prickled my Tibetan informants as hopelessly cheesy and out of touch. “Bollywood movies, they spend tons of money on this kind of thing. That doesn’t impress me. Its cheesy plus like why waste so much money!” laughed one informant to me. “It does impress at some point”, she admitted, “but if you look at Korean dramas, its not just the drama that’s crazy everywhere. What I really like is with a really small budget it will be shot, the whole entire film in house or garden but they will make the story really nice and feels real”. “Bollywood is ridiculous” another informant told me. When asked why he just laughed. “I am not gonna watch this kind of movie, Okay?” he told me, almost offended at the idea.



Dhoom 3, a typical example of Bollywood

I found however that Bollywood cheesiness had an interesting way of dividing people's minds. While the Tibetan men I talked to more thoroughly reject it in every aspect, some young Tibetan women seemed torn between disdaining it's lameness while also on some level longing for its sweetness. One interesting interview led me to the heart of this discrepancy. When discussing what she saw as the shortcomings of Tibetan guys, one informant said, "With Tibetan guys, there is no romance. They will just say \*grunting noise\* lets drink this, \*grunting\* lets hang out. Indian guys will you know bring you flowers and you know talk sweet and all this. They know how to show they love". But you would never date an Indian guy? I asked her, "Nevverrrr. Its nice to see them do like that but the problem why many Tibetan girls don't like Indian guys, is the cheesy part is fun but they do more than that. And staring it gets very uncomfortable. Just cheesy is okay, It's fine but then he gets weird. I don't know, I've never even dated Indian guy." In fact, without fail every Tibetan girl I talked to described Indian guys as a bit repugnant. When asked if they would date Indian guys if it was discrete and there would be no communal response I heard, "NO!", "I wouldn't" "I don't even imagine going out with them", and a bunch of nearly identical responses. "Sometimes in cities, Tibetans might date Indians, because like you know if they are working in a place surrounded by Indians, sometimes its like you have to end up dating the people you are around you know?" conceded one sheepish interviewee. And yet, while some of the girls would fully write off Indian values of romance along with the Indians themselves, many girls still valued these qualities very highly. One girl described her first boyfriend as the best guy she had dated so far, admitting at the end it was because "He grew up among Indians so he has more of those Indian ideas or mentalities". He was kind hearted she said, brought her flowers and believed in romantic sentiments. When asking if these were all qualities she thought came from the 'Indian style' she admitted that they were, but reminded me emphatically that she would never date an Indian.

It is clear that there is a cultural battle between the desire for romance and the rejection of Bollywood and what is perceived as Indian qualities. The question is what motivates the rejection. I think there are multiple factors at work. The first is that by rejecting Bollywood culture, and dismissing it as less cool, Tibetans forcefully assert their own Tibetan identity. By distinguishing between their own pragmatic, less cheesy



sense of self, and the almost extreme opposite perpetuated by the Indian media, Tibetans fight the forces of assimilation and strengthen the sense of their own personal identity. An identity that may be perceived as slowly being lost in the flow of the surrounding and dominating Indian culture. The Korean dramas which Tibetan youth espouse as the usurpers of Bollywood films in their hearts, are not culturally threatening because they are not a part of the host culture. They are from a country that is exerting no other influence on Tibetans, and in their lack of popularity with the Indian youth, the Korean dramas serve as one more piece of identity to separate from Indian culture and strengthen Tibetan sense of originality.

The second reason that I believe Tibetans are so strong in rejecting Bollywood culture is its deep inherent clash with the truth of life from a Tibetan perspective. Bollywood films are made from sentimentality and bombastic optimism to a point of that I imagine would look delusional to many Tibetans. In watching just twenty minutes of Indian tv, I witnessed a man drive a motorcycle up the side of a skyscraper, brides running ecstatic to grooms who swept them up in their arms in the midst of a massive dance routine, and an elephant save a little girl from dying by lifting her out of harms way with its trunk. The camera panned in to show tears pouring down the cheeks of the elephant at the prospect of losing its little girl while an orchestra swelled so loud in the background that the tv's speakers distorted the sound. This over the top romantic, everything-is-possible, good-always-triumphs image of life could be perceived as daft by a people who have lost their homeland and live in exile. It might even be stinging in its inaccuracy to a Tibetan exile. Tibetans by circumstance must be more pragmatic and less romantic, regardless of their nature, because their existence is on many levels a very real fight for survival. Tibetans who have arrived in Dharamsala from Tibet had to escape through the Himalayas, witnessing friends die, and worse atrocities back in Tibet at the hands of the PRC. Those born in exile still hold a sober understanding of the precariousness of their situation, the loss of their country, and the ongoing suffering their people experience both in exile and Tibet. Asking Tibetans if they had seen a marriage they want for themselves in any form of media, no one mentioned Bollywood. And most were quick to identify the over-sentimentality of television and film. As one informant said, "So many nice marriages, but its Tv. They show us very forever forever type thing

with flower background which do not happen in real life. you know I always wish how my boyfriend or husband will come home, treat me nicely and we will laugh and go vacation like a happy environment kind of thing, not a sad environment. But you know this is just tv”.

## **Cheating and Distrust**

This sad sentiment leads me to the last large theme I found during my research. This was the dip of Tibetan pragmatism into what could be seen more clearly as cynicism in many of the people I interviewed. The two main elements of unease I identified in the dating scene were cheating, and the natural distrust of the opposite gender and lack of hope that followed.

A point I had to be careful of in my investigation of cheating was my lack of academic familiarity with cheating in my own culture, or any other culture for that matter. In order to make sure the data I was finding on cheating was not merely reflective of a common ratio, I researched its frequency in American culture for a point of comparison. While there are of course many demographics and sub demographics that would suggest different rates in the United States, I found that generally 25% of people are thought to cheat at some point in their lives, while 6% of people in relationships are thought to be cheating at any given moment in their lives. This smaller second number reflects how cheaters do not all cheat frequently, and some may not even do it more than once (Blow and Harnett, 2005). My investigation of cheating is a part of my study I am especially reluctant to call firm data due to the very small relative size of my study group. With these numbers in mind I had to acknowledge that the numbers of cheaters I talked to in the younger generation was overwhelming. Out of 15 formal interview, only two people had neither cheated nor been cheated on in the course of their lives. One of these people was an ex monk, and the other was an anomaly. My informal conversations

tended to back up these findings, although for the sake of accuracy many people would also assure me that there were still plenty of those who didn't cheat.

When I asked how common cheating was one particular informant responded, "Very common. Seriously. There are so many butterflies around here", laughing at the end at the use of her term which clearly was not familiar to me. She defined butterflies as young people flitting around catching each other's eyes. "For the girls there are so many young boys, and for the boys so many young girls" she said. One young Tibetan man told me he had been in love with his girlfriend of ten years for as long as he had known her. Near the end of the interview he professed to have slept with fifty girls outside of his relationship during this time. He was clearly on the extreme end, but many of the people I talked to echoed this claim in lesser terms. One young Tibetan woman explained that with her husband off working in Switzerland she has an arrangement with him that involves her sleeping with the boy she described as her first crush in a way that is accepted by the husband. "But I also cheat" she laughed. Another Tibetan man described to me simultaneously dating two women who worked together in the same store, on the gamble that they rarely talked to each other. He was found out eventually, at which point he said with a rueful smile, "so I had to break up with both of them".

Reasons given for cheating varied. One Tibetan woman told me that while guys and girls cheated with equal frequency, girls more often were strategically looking for a way out of a bad relationship. "Mostly girls they looking for financial security" she said. "A guy who have a job. Moral support. If a girl gets pregnant she will not work for one or two years, if they don't have family support, so she needs guy with job. If I talk to most of my friends, like why what happened why you guys are broke up, why you are cheating him?? They tell me come on (name omitted), he don't have a job come on, how he gonna feed me. He's a drunkard, he smokes, he drinks a lot, he's not doing anything just taking money from the parents and if I get pregnant, if I get sick who takes care of me?" The Tibetan men I talked to would in fact often corroborate this story, albeit with less sympathy. "Tibetan women I think are cheating mostly I think to get a better money. They want a guy with the newest Iphone, need a car, motorcycle!" laughed one young Tibetan. Another Tibetan man I talked to proposed that it's a symptom of modern life, "Now these days technology's improving and you can see lots of things, watch the

movies. The mind is going to change these days. Sex is very easy whenever you want you can go”.

It is notable that even with the frequency in which cheating occurs and the extent to which it is a part of dating in at least in the lives’ of my small demographic, its emotional impact on the victims is in no way lessened. This brings me to the second main negative condition I found to be a part of the Tibetan Dharamsala dating scene, which was the pervasive distrust and distaste the two genders professed for one another. One often reoccurring story I found in the guys I talked to was an experience of being cheated on at a young age, and being enduringly distrustful from that point onwards. One of the most serial cheaters I interviewed described this early incident as being very influential in his life, “when I was in school time, I totally crush with one girl, we dated like eight years, girlfriend and boyfriend. After school we are in college, we are staying in same house living like wife and husband after eight years I broke up with her because I find she get some boy and like this I said ‘ohh I give up. I don’t trust anyone’ So that’s why”. In all of the men with whom I discussed early experiences of being cheated on, there was a noticeable shift in their demeanor at this moment. Talking about all kinds of other difficulties in their lives, they had a very constant light, humorous nature, but on this subject it was difficult for people to not show some kind of pain or vulnerability. Jokes on how you can’t trust women often followed. The women I talked to were equally injured by these experiences. Said one interviewee, “. He was like 19 and he was also a kid. And take me out for dinner and brings me chocolates and flowers. And it feels good like this is what people mostly fall in love for. And then later on he cheated on me with another girl. And then for me I think the relationship really hurts once your partner cheated everything is changed. You don’t trust that person, even if you meet someone else new, you don’t know if he gonna cheat or not”.

The distrust between the two genders came up in almost every interview. Tibetan men would constantly mention how they felt Tibetan girls were motivated by money and the search for financial stability. “We don’t trust them” said one young Tibetan man. “Most of the time Tibetan girls these days, generation is changing and thinking power is improving. They date with college boy in college. After college they think about money.

They have to earn, the main thing is future, what are you going to do, how much money will you make”. “All Tibetan girls think about is judge you on money, and job, car, stuff like this” another man told me. A constant complaint of the Tibetan men was how untrusting Tibetan women were. I heard many very similar impressions on the variant of “where are you going? Why you didn’t answer your phone last night? Where are you?” that one young informant demonstrated for me. The remarkable similarity in these impressions across different Dharamsala Tibetans with no connection made me think it is quite a familiar cultural idea among the men of Dharamsala. For that matter the Tibetan girls I spoke with had similar hostilities, with even one of the more unguarded and romantic girls I spoke to saying, “Soo many of the guys will just take money from parents. They wont work, you know just spend all the time chasing girls”.

This distrust magnified further down the line in few of the Tibetans I talked to displaying grand hopes for their marriages. This interestingly was a distinction more of the younger generation. Of all the Tibetans I talked to who expressed doubts and fear of marriage, and relationships in general, many also described their parents as in love. Said one Tibetan woman, “My parents was more like arranged and love marriage. They are still happily in love and really good”. This was not an uncommon thing to hear. But this was the majority of the time that love came up. Most of the young Tibetans I spoke to said they wanted to get married, but it rarely came with enthusiasm. My record setting hesitator took about a minute of pondering and chewing her nails to finally say “Yeah i mean, um yeah. I mean I do have a boyfriend so yeah I will marry him”. When pressed why she wanted to if it was such a difficult notion she responded, “I think its important to have a partner maybe. You know later in life when you are old. And its good to have a family”. Other answers showed that there were still lingering notions of meaningful love and family life, they were simply tempered by acquired low standards. “Yes I want to get married. When I see a family with the kids and with a husband who love each other, yeah I want to get married. Its good to have a partner you know. It’s a beautiful thing to share between two people”. This same interviewee went on to admit that such marriages are very rare though, and maybe not likely in this generation. Said another informant when asked, “For me frankly speaking its not like where everyone its this dream thing about

marriage, I'm more like okay I have to get married". The most poignant point that arose when I discussed qualities of ideal mates was the longing for trust. More than half of the Tibetans I interviewed said that the most important quality they looked for in a future spouse was someone they could trust, and someone who trusted them.

## Conclusion

I came to Dharamsala in the hopes of finding a model of dating that arose from the incredible kindness I've seen inherent in the natures of so many Tibetans. What I instead found was a vision of the impact of China's grip on Tibet. At a point of deep cynicism and disappointment with what I was finding, I asked one interviewee where they felt the difficulties in the Tibetan dating scene emerged from. "If you talk to different Tibetans you know you will get different answers" she said. "I love my husband and I have friends with very happy relationships. But you know it is hard for us living out of our country like this. My husband is very compassionate you know. He cries much easier than me. But I feel like I have to be so tough living here. If I see a beggar, I know I should feel compassion like the Dalai Lama has taught me, but you know I feel I am so tough now I don't feel compassion. I just think I made it out from so many hard things so will he. I think we have trouble trusting most of us". I found as I talked to people that even the most solid and unemotional seeming exiles found spots of serious ongoing psychological pain when discussing life in exile. Said another informant who ended up in tears, ". Ive been without my parents since I am two years old, they are back in Tibet still. I have my teachers in school and foster parents but there was no one to love me or to give me chocolates or to teach me compassion. Still today my friends I have I am so close and when their family comes they give me food and treat me with love and still my friends today I am closer to than my real siblings back home. But it changes us. I feel it is so hard for me to love". Talking to a born in exile informant who I had known for a while, and come to see as happy-go-lucky and emotionally disconnected from Tibet, I was

feeling baffled as he revealed the extent of how constantly he was effected by living in exile. He noticed this and explained, “We don’t talk about it all the time, it doesn’t show on our face, we cant always express it but we are all sad. It is hard growing up here with these strangers”.

The more I dug beneath the surface, the more I found people were psychologically burned by the condition of their motherland, whether they had escaped early in their life, recently, or had been born in exile. Many people had grown up without their parents and in doing so, fostered a sense of tough independence, and a lack of reliance on others. Many of those who had grown up with their parents had still become a part of a culture of survival. As one born-in-exile informant pointed out, “Tomorrow the Indian government could say we have to move now. We would have no home just like that”. In the pressure of living in a state of constant half tension, many exiled Tibetans have the need to reinforce a unique identity through the rejection of Bollywood, and all of the values that come with it. The pain of the Tibetan crises colors sentimentality in a bad glaring light, and naturally has steered many of the young Tibetans into a painful state of distrust and survival. It is important to remember the size of my studied demographic, and the existence of many exceptions in the young population to the trends I have found. But it is also important to recognize just how powerfully a society can be hurt and warped by the loss of their home.

## **Methodology**

I gathered information both from formal interviews, and from informal conversations. I choose to use interviews as my method of gathering data due to the qualitative nature of the questions I came into the study with. A review of literature on the subject gave me a good background on how love and relationships function and have been perceived back in Tibet, but there was next to no research on the modern exile dating scene. For this reason I ruled out using primarily a literature review. Because I was

looking at more complex psychological themes as opposed to answering a large quantitative question, surveys made little sense. Interviews were by far the strongest means I could propose to develop an understanding of what dating culture is for the Dharamsala Tibetan population. I varied my research between formal interviews and informal conversations because I found that even people who expressed a strong willingness to be interviewed would often be far less open as when they were not being formally recorded. While I never used quotes directly from informal conversations or recorded them in any manner, they helped shape my understanding of the research and showed me which areas to investigate. The informal nature of these conversations let people express their ideas in a wider more free flowing way that introduced many theories I might not have been able to pick up on with my own guided questions and the direct responses I received from them. And in fact, I often heard the most interesting thoughts and explanations after I had closed my computer and thanked the participant for the interview. Nearer the end of my study, (and I wish I had thought to do this earlier), I let the people I informally conversed with in on the nature of my study more than I would in interviews. While this initially came from a casual moment for me in which I didn't see myself as actively researching, I found that by letting people in on what theories I was developing, and letting my research be more transparent, I received thoughtful analysis from people that would never have come to me on my own. I think I saw it professional and correct anthropology to remain opaque in my research, and was surprised to find that when I let my own guard down, others were much more likely to follow suit.

In formal interviews I began by first explaining the policy of complete anonymity and adding that any questions that made the participants remotely uncomfortable could be completely ignored. For the most part, the younger generation I conducted most of my interviews with found none of the questions I asked uncomfortable in any way. It was not uncommon for people to volunteer more personal information than I had asked for. This ran partially contrary to the shyness I had been warned about in Tibetan girls of the younger generation. Interestingly this warning came almost always from young Tibetan guys. At least in my limited line of study it proved to not be true at all. Many



interviewees would actually respond to my disclaimer by saying they could talk about anything, and that shyness was maybe something the older generation had not them.

I selected people for interviews largely through them being open to talk to me. This wide, undiscerning approach was partially narrowed down by my focus on the younger generation, who for the most part is still actively dating or not yet settled. While I informally discussed these themes with people of all ages, the oldest person I formally interviewed was 33, while the youngest was 20. A very small percentage of these subjects were married, a larger number were in relationships, and the remaining majority was single. I interviewed 15 people formally. I found my initial interviews through a social group introduced to me by Conor's host brother, and contacts I was put in touch with through Tenzin Yurie. As I grew more settled in the area and was able to meet a larger number of Tibetans, I was able to pull interviews from a wider amount of sources. These included friends I met through the study, Tibetans who attended the Chu Shi Gonthu school I occasionally taught English in, and waiters and waitresses who expressed a willingness to participate. At the end of the study I have the strong impression of not having nearly captured the entirety of the Tibetan dating experience in Dharamsala. While I do believe the small sample of people I talked to represent a wide range of lifestyles and experiences, (one participant was a record-setting serial dater while another was an ex-monk just beginning the first romantic relationship of his life), I do not think the whole picture is remotely visible in the data I have. I had to keep this in mind in coming to any conclusions, or making any generalizations beyond the people I talked to. Ultimately, whatever information I was able to convey about the dating scene among Tibetan exiles in Dharamsala is just a sample of what the whole picture may be. As my Amala explained to me, "If I say all Tibetans are good that's not true but if you talk to someone who is different and they say all Tibetans are bad, that's not true either. Really we will all tell you something different".

## Obstacles to the Research

It is important to recognize the admittedly very flawed preconceived notion I brought to the study, and was only gradually able to let go of throughout my interviews. This was the assumption that ideas from Buddhism would factor deeply into the way in which young Tibetans dated, and create a somewhat idyllic and vastly different dating culture than the ones I am familiar with as an American. This notion is probably tied to the western romanticized ideal of Tibetan culture that is commonplace in tourists and students of Tibetan culture alike. I obviously have not fully escaped it, though I can say having now met many Tibetans and spent a long time immersed in their culture that there is a heartening amount of truth in this romanticization.

I also had to be mindful of the many universal aspects of marriage, romance and relationships, and make sure I was not focusing in on them as specifically Tibetan. While different cultures have vastly different styles, different interpretations, different semantics, and even different purposes for coupling, it exists in some form in every culture. Having never studied dating in any culture besides the small scene in Dharamsala, I had to be careful that everything I found was more unique than universal. Everything that I found through research had to be crosschecked against at least my own culture to see if it was something uniquely Tibetan, or something that spoke to a cultural universal.

The final issue I faced in my research was the perception of my area of study as unacademic by many of the Tibetans I talked to. The younger generation felt quite comfortable talking about all aspects of their dating life, though they still tended to see it as sort of a strange hobby on my part, rather than anything academic. Those of the older generation I talked to were more reluctant to talk about that part of their lives or comment on the younger generation, instead often attempting to dissuade me from the subject and pursue something they thought of as more noble a study. I found I could help this impression by debriefing them at the end, explaining that I saw dating and ideas of love as a key window into how a culture functioned, what it valued, and what its current state

was. This generally reassured my subjects that I was doing at least a little bit more than gossiping.

In my initial interviews, I asked very few questions as I came into the study feeling too ignorant to guide anything in a general direction. As I became both more comfortable interviewing, and more aware of the themes that were emerging, I asked participants a larger list of questions and felt more free to go off topic. I also learned to be quieter and get out of the way of my interviewees, who I found I had often been cutting off and interrupting with excessive talking early on. I also learned to keep my opinions out of the interviews. In listening to recordings of earlier interviews, I heard myself agreeing strongly with sentiments expressed that made me happy and violently questioning those that I disagreed with. This was an embarrassing find to make. I strongly remedied this later on growing quieter and more impartial as my research continued, and I think by the end of my research I was finally doing proper interviews.

The following is the basic question list I would approach interviews with. As I grew more comfortable with interviewing I would ask a lot more spontaneous questions not included on my reference list, sometimes just asking for clarification on cryptic or seemingly indirect answers, and sometimes following a thought I had come up with in response. I would sometimes refrain from asking certain questions on even the basic list due to either a lack of applicability, or the intuitive feeling that it would be insensitive to ask in that particular context. I also came up with many of these questions after listening to previous interviews and wishing I had asked them.

1. Do you think you will get married?
  - a. If so why do you want to get married?
  
2. In your friend group do you think more of your friends will have an arranged marriage or a love marriage? Which one do you think you will have?

3. What would your perfect wife/husband be like?
4. Can you describe your parents' image of the ideal wife/husband for you?
5. How much have you and your parents talked about dating?
6. Do your parents have an arranged or love marriage?
  - a. Do you think your parents are in love?
7. Have you ever been in love?
8. Is there a difference between love and being in love to you?
9. Whether or not you've seen Tibet, how do you think the dating is different in exile than back home?
10. Can you describe/remember your youngest memory or awareness of romance and relationships? How did this feeling and your ideas on it change as you got older?
11. Can you remember what it was that made you like your first crush?
12. Have you dated before?
  - a. If so describe your first relationship and what made you like them and begin dating them?
  - b. If comfortable sharing, how and why did it end?
13. Why do you date?
14. Have you dated a Tibetan? Have you dated a foreigner?
15. What are the differences in the ways Tibetans and Indians date if there are any?

16. Do you think you are more idealistic or realistic in your dating life?
17. Do you think Tibetans are more optimistic or pessimistic about dating?
18. Is there a difference between the girls/guys you date and the type of girl/guy you would marry?
19. Do you have any relationship you've seen in real life or fiction that is a model for how you'd like your relationships to be?
20. Do you have a celebrity crush?

## **Glossary of Tibetan Terms**

**Amdo-** region of Tibet

**Ingies-** foreigners

**Chuba-** Tibetan traditional dress

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## **Suggestions for future research**

**The effect of aid-** I met in my research many young Tibetan men who had been essentially detached from a feeling of purpose in life, stemming possibly from the large amount of money they received from foreign sponsors. They spent huge amounts of their days smoking and sleeping, and I think all had symptoms of being depressed. I think it would be very interesting to study the effect sponsors truly have on Tibetan youth, and whether or not it is an inherently good thing.

**Tibet to born-in-exile Tibetans-** Born in exile Tibetans have such a complex relationship with Tibet. Their parents constantly remind them of their connection to it, and the importance of its culture, while they have never seen the country itself. They are not Indian, and clearly are refugees, but they also are not truly Tibetan in the sense of having been born in Tibet or experienced it. I think the psychological weight and image it takes on for these exiles would be a very interesting study.

**Tibetan ideas of the west-** I have heard such a wide range of different ideas about the west expressed to me by various Tibetans. Some are very positive, some are very negative, and many were very interesting and surprising to me. It would be interesting to study where ideas from the west mainly come from and what it means to Tibetans.