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The Power of Peace: A Reflection on the Shifting Methods, Strategies, and Philosophies of Peaceful Protest Within Dharamsala's Community of Activists Post-2008

Christian Bormann Paris
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A storefront in Mcleodgunj, India, one of the largest Tibetan communities-in-exile in the world and notably home to the Dalai Lama.

The Power of Peace: A Reflection on the Shifting Methods, Strategies, and Philosophies of Peaceful Protest Within Dharamsala's Community of Activists Post-2008

Christian Bormann Paris
SIT Nepal: Tibetan and Himalayan Peoples
Spring 2015
Advisor: Patrick J. Dowd
Academic Director: Isabelle Onians

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Abstract: Understanding Community Action Within Dharamsala's Tibetan Community-In-Exile

In the words of Chinese military philosopher, Sun Tzu, “The supreme art of war is to subdue the enemy without fighting.”¹ Since the renewal of the Tibetan socio-political movement within Tibet during 2008 and its eventual subdual by Chinese security forces, the community of activists operating outside of Tibet are now faced with the challenge of invigorating a refugee population stricken with complacency to join their brothers and sister up north. However, the community must accomplish this utilizing the tools of peace rather than the weapons of war and oppression. This document will serve as a reflection on the current state of the many movements-in-exile, having been completed in the most active community of all: Dharamsala. By investigating into the concrete strategic approaches to activism utilized by the multitude of NGO's in Mcleodganj as well as unpacking the many philosophical approaches adopted by the activists, this paper will strive to give clarity to the contemporary battle for Tibet, and especially the organizations operating on its front line.

¹ Sun Tzu, izquotes.com

Introduction: The World of Tibetan Activism in Context, post-2008

On March 14, 2008, a spark of national unity and resilience flickered once again from within the previously silenced halls of Lhasa's monasteries. The purpose was simple: to capitalize on the international attention focused on promoting and preparing for the Summer Olympic games scheduled to take place in Beijing that August. Monks, nuns, and Tibetan citizens alike took to the streets of their capitol in an attempt to dislodge what many activists viewed as a growing political complacency in the wake of China's growing economic power on a global scale. That day, “monks of the second most important section of the city, Ramoche (Ch. Xiaozhao), overturned a police car outside the monastery and went back inside” in response to “being roughed up by police” on the perimeter of the sacred site.² By that afternoon, “Bystanders went to the aid of the [originally protesting] monks, and the situation evolved into a large-scale riot by hundreds of Tibetans who lived in the area.”³ During the course of the day, many Han Chinese shopkeepers were injured in the riots, with 22 killed, as well.⁴ By the next day, the city of Lhasa was in military lockdown in response to the extensive damage (33 million U.S. Dollars' worth) caused by the protestors.⁵ By March 16th, the protests began to feel the wrath of Chinese security forces. 18 Tibetans [, whom] sources claimed were protesting peacefully in the district of Ngaba were killed by security forces. On March 17th, “demonstrations and protests took place in at least fifteen places,” mostly in the Eastern province of Amdo.⁶ On March 21st, Tibetans in Qinghai “protested by pulling down a Chinese flag from a local government office and replacing it with a Tibetan flag. Chinese security forces sent to respond were blocked by 350 horsemen.”⁷ Cries for freedom of the Tibetan people and for the return of the Dalai Lama echoed in the streets in spite of imminent arrest. The police response grew larger and swifter in scale and speed. By March 22nd, the number of arrests grew so large and the

² Warren Smith, *Tibet's Last Stand?* pp. 13

³ Warren Smith, *Tibet's Last Stand?* pp. 13

⁴ Warren Smith, *Tibet's Last Stand?* pp. 13

⁵ Warren Smith, *Tibet's Last Stand?* pp. 13

⁶ Warren Smith, *Tibet's Last Stand?* pp. 15

⁷ Warren Smith, *Tibet's Last Stand?* pp. 16

Lhasa prisons “so full that those arrested had to be transported to other areas.”⁸ The Tibetan Center for Human Rights and Democracy released a report that claimed “seventy-nine Tibetans” had been “killed by Chinese security forces” between the dates of March 22nd and March 25th.⁹ An increased fear became more apparent in the body of protestors as the reality of “coercion and torture to reveal information about others” involved in the uprisings became almost a certainty, despite the Chinese promise of leniency when an individual surrendered.¹⁰ By March 30th, over 570 monks were reportedly detained, with “patriotic education” being intensified in Chinese government schools.¹¹ The damage reached into the multimillions due to the intensity of the protests, leaving over 300 Chinese establishments throughout the country in shambles, and over 140 Tibetans dead.¹² No immediate interdiction took place from any international political office. The Olympics still took place. Michael Phelps remained in the headlines, not the hundreds of Chinese and Tibetans that lay dead, and in many cases, burning, in the streets of the ravaged country. So, was this series of actions, the largest resurgence of the Tibetan independence movement since the 1980's, effective in pushing back the slithering dragon of Beijing? Did it cause more than just a brief flash in the geopolitical pan, only reaffirming a perceived helplessness of the people held by both Tibetan communities-in-exile and global politicians alike?

In the Tibetan political bastion of Dharamsala, India, the location of both the Tibetan government-in-exile and the greatest concentration of nongovernmental organizations dedicated to protecting Tibetan culture, human rights, and the dream of a sovereign Tibet. The flash of the 2008 uprising continues to echo in the offices of these movements throughout the city's central hub of Mcleodganj. Questions of effectiveness and words such as “efficiency” and “adaptability” frequented conversations on strategy and methods of community engagement more and more. Should the historically specific focuses of some of these NGO's be broadened to encompass a greater necessity for

⁸ Warren Smith, *Tibet's Last Stand?* pp. 17

⁹ Warren Smith, *Tibet's Last Stand?* pp. 17

¹⁰ Warren Smith, *Tibet's Last Stand?* pp. 17-18

¹¹ Warren Smith, *Tibet's Last Stand?* pp. 18-19

¹² Warren Smith, *Tibet's Last Stand?* pp. 19

unification among movements-in-exile? What is the difference between Middle Way Policy and the movement for full Tibetan independence, and how could each philosophy be effective in the current fight for Tibetan human rights? How will the actions of today ripple into the effectiveness of these organizations in the future? What has been learned from 2008, and how are those lessons affecting actions now? What strategies can be employed now to secure a positively impactful future of Tibetan activism? These are but a few of the questions that ride constantly on the lips of men and women like Tenzing Jigme-La of the Tibetan Youth Congress (TYC), Dorjee Tseten-La of Students for a Free Tibet (SFT), and Namgyal Dolkar-La of Gu-Chu-Sum (GCS). Utilizing extensive interviews, literary support, and firsthand volunteer experience of these movements, this document will seek to uncover the truth of what drives modern Tibetan activism within Dharamsala, what isolates certain movements from others, and above all, how effective the strategies employed by the various organizations calling for Tibetan freedom from oppression seem to be in the realm of post-2008 socio-politics.

Fighting for Acceptance: The Tibetan Youth Congress

As Tenzing Jigme-La, lifelong Tibetan activist and recently elected president of the Tibetan Youth Congress (TYC) in Dharamsala, ambled into the facility's conference room, his dark eyes and tired smile quickly revealed the strain which the struggle for Tibetan freedom had increasingly left its mark upon him as the years have passed. Elected to the presidential position at TYC in 2011, Mr. Jigme-La cordially jests that he has inherited a job that ensures “being active, *always*.”¹³ From 1999 to 2013, Tenzing Jigme-La, a Tibetan born in the “comfortable holding cell” of the Tibetan community-in-exile, devoted the entirety of his professional life to the cause of the Tibetan freedom movement.¹⁴ His commitment ignited by the thousands of stories and countless violations of Tibetan human rights, Mr. Jigme-La began his work as a “lifelong activist,” forever carrying the banner of full freedom for his people, many of which have never even seen their ancestral Land of Snows [English Translation of the historical name of Tibet].¹⁵ His story is one of many that dot the complex historical narrative which makes up the history of the Tibetan struggle against the Chinese, yet it is this fact that drives Mr. Jigme-La to further his work every day. Yet, as the president of one of Tibet's largest advocacy organizations sat stirring the milk around in his cup of tea, the most pressing question that thundered persistently in his mind is whether the very strategies the multitude of Tibetan movements for socio-political freedom are as useful as they were originally projected to be.

As he continued his personal narrative, he slipped into a reflection on the division of his congress, split between those in favor of the Dalai Lama-sponsored Middle Way Approach of Tibetan autonomy under Chinese political control, and the TYC (Tibetan Youth Congress)-favored push for total independence. “We are trapped” by these conflicting ideals, Jigme-La states in his interview.¹⁶ Because of this, he believes, “There is so much we can do, and so much we can't.”¹⁷ This issue is what has driven a wedge amongst the once-unified agencies for Tibetan human rights, and what he claims has split the

¹³ Interview with Tenzing Jigme-La

¹⁴ Interview with Tenzing Jigme-La

¹⁵ Interview with Tenzing Jigme-La

¹⁶ Interview with Tenzing Jigme-La

¹⁷ Interview with Tenzing Jigme-La

congress that he oversees. “There are 88 chapters [of TYC] across the world. Every three years, there are new elections.”¹⁸ There is bound to be differing opinion within each chapter, but it is at TYC's headquarters in Dharamsala that has exhausted Jigme-La the most. “Under the guidance of His Holiness the Dalai Lama,” the Middle Way Policy was developed by Tibetan governmental voices in response to what is believed as a “mutually-beneficial policy that is based on the principles of justice, compassion, non-violence, friendship, and in the spirit of reconciliation for the well being of entire humanity. It does not envisage victory for oneself [or one's nation] and defeat for others.”¹⁹ Theoretically, the Dalai-Lama-backed Middle Way approach remains one of the most philosophically pleasing proposals on the resolutions of the Sino-Tibetan conflict. However, this is exactly what Jigme-La believes is deepening the rift among the members of his congress. “[Within the Tibetan community here], there is not a huge understanding of politics and democracy, [due to the absence of] formal education. This is why we [educated people] have the room and power to create dialogue [about these issues]. Faith in His Holiness is what drives so many [uneducated, and often elderly] Tibetans to support the Middle Way [policy].”²⁰ For Jigme-La, the president of an organization that continues to stand for a fully independent Tibet, a stance that consciously goes against the Middle Way policy of the Dalai Lama, this factor makes TYC “seem as if we are the bad guys.”²¹ Because of this Jigme-La sees this period in the history of TYC to be a very “crucial time...First and foremost,” he believes, “we cannot damage the sentiment of our people; we are built by the people...We must maintain balance... there will be different opinions [and] different approaches we have to respect...[Yet,] our opinion has not changed; we have had dialogue within [the organization and] we still are maintaining our position [for] independence.”²² Jigme-La believes that by adhering to TYC's four primary commitments to the Tibetan people, the “turmoil” of the organization that he inherited back in 2013 will disappear. The commitments are listed below:

¹⁸ Interview with Tenzing Jigme-La

¹⁹ *Middle Way Policy*

²⁰ Interview with Tenzing Jigme-La

²¹ Interview with Tenzing Jigme-La

²² Interview with Tenzing Jigme-La

1. To dedicate oneself to the task of serving one's country and people under the guidance of His Holiness the Dalai Lama, the Spiritual and Temporal Ruler of Tibet.
2. To promote and protect national unity and integrity by giving up all distinctions based on religion, regionalism or status.
3. To work for the preservation and promotion of religion and Tibet's unique culture and traditions.
4. To struggle for the total independence of Tibet even at the cost of one's life.²³

To these four statements, Jigme-La believes that TYC has made positive strides in promoting greater awareness and gaining support for the Tibetan cause for freedom. Since the 2008 uprising, “We have been [consistently] lobbying governments, cooperating with other international organizations from Hong Kong and Taiwan [fighting to exist independently and democratically outside of Chinese rule], making outreach to mainland China [for the purpose of creating] dialogue, and creating a greater understanding [of our mission].”²⁴ He continues to highlight the TYC Delhi chapter “rallying in front of the Chinese embassy,” to which he added triumphantly the news of his presence and eventual arrest during the event, as well as the importance of the chapter in Washington, D.C. continually lobbying at Capitol Hill for a greater American involvement in solving the Tibet issue.²⁵ Yet, as the interview came to a close, Tenzing Jigme-La released a revealing combination of a sigh and a giggle, pushing his cup of tea aside. “[Even though we stand for a free Tibet,] we do not want to jeopardize discussions between Dharmasala [a.k.a. The Central Tibetan Administration] and Beijing post-2008.... it is even more a [sensitive] time.” He continues, “[Because of this and the factors stated above,] I haven't been able to do as much [here at TYC] as I would want.”²⁶

What Tenzing Jigme-La, a graduate of the University of Colorado, former president of three different organizations' chapters in the U.S. fighting for Tibetan human rights, and a fourteen-year veteran of the Tibetan movement for independence, would reveal in his exhausted eyes and forced charm was the constant remapping and rerouting of possibilities for effective change. By the very nature of the organization's inception under the blessing of the current Dalai Lama, Jigme-La finds himself walking a

²³ www.tibetanyouthcongress.org

²⁴ Interview with Tenzing Jigme-La

²⁵ Interview with Tenzing Jigme-La

²⁶ Interview with Tenzing Jigme-La

tightrope of uncertainty, fighting to maintain a balance between being effective and being respected. It is his juggling of political correctness, social appeal, and, most importantly, the moral mission of the organization in which he believes so deeply that both drive him mad and drive him to juggle even faster. Perhaps it is this constant need to sustain equilibrium that has muted the power of TYC altogether.

Yet, it was at the TYC/SFT-sponsored Panchen Lama's birthday celebration at the Tibetan Children's Village Day School that Tenzing broke the proverbial stalemate within his mind. Half celebration – half statement of defiance, the screams of students brought forth a smile not seen on Jigme-La's face yet... It beamed as the sea of children tripped over each other, clambering for a turn at the momo-eating contest, singing at full volume the rhythmic slew of Tibetan rock songs playing on the loudspeakers. He danced when they danced, he shouted when they shouted. He knew that despite the grinding halts in potential and productivity due to bureaucratic swamps of philosophical impasses within his own organization, each promotion of truth, each calculated public display of commitment to the cause meant something positive. The true question, however, continued to fester. How effective are these displays, and can they truly be implemented in creating change in a community as steadfastly divided as his?

Fighting for Effective Action: An Afternoon with The Active Nonviolence Education Center

According to Swarthmore College's Global Nonviolent Action Database, Gene Sharp, professor of political science at Dartmouth and a devoted scholar of nonviolent action against oppressive systems of control, is credited with the establishment of the list of 198 techniques of engagement in a peaceful, effective manner. These became titled as *The Methods of Nonviolent Protest and Persuasion*.²⁷ Stretching seven categories and 29 subcategories of what Dr. Sharp believed to be evidently effective methods of intervention and noncooperation, these methods became the pillars on which the Active Nonviolence Education Center (ANEC) was built.²⁸ Created by Rabbi Everett Gendler in 2009 upon returning from Tibet and hearing of the countless tales of oppressive governance of the country's people, the organization came into existence in the Rabbi's desire to manifest fruitful change within the community of exiled youth. This meant educating, training, and preparing Tibetan students. In the eyes of Mr. Wongdue Tsering-La, current vice president of the organization, fully understanding the utility, procedures, and importance of this list is not only useful, but utterly necessary when practicing nonviolent protest. As he sits on the roof above his office, "this system [of nonviolent measures of action] provides a weapon [even more powerful,] and available for all."²⁹ With a claimed 77 nonviolence curricula established in Tibetan schools across India, Bhutan, and Nepal, ANEC is succeeding in arming Tibetan youth with this toolset. "We have collaborated with the CTA's Education Bureau to establish these programs in the Tibetan schools...our actions depend on our motivations," he states, as he explains why ANEC has specifically targeted schools for the installation of their educational model.³⁰ "[We are aiming] to educate the younger generations...this is something that is not there in the [current] system."³¹ Commenting on some Tibetan youths' growing glorification of violent reaction to the recent increase in Chinese sociopolitical restrictions inside Tibet, he states, "Taking a violent step against the Chinese is

²⁷ Swarthmore.edu

²⁸ Swarthmore.edu

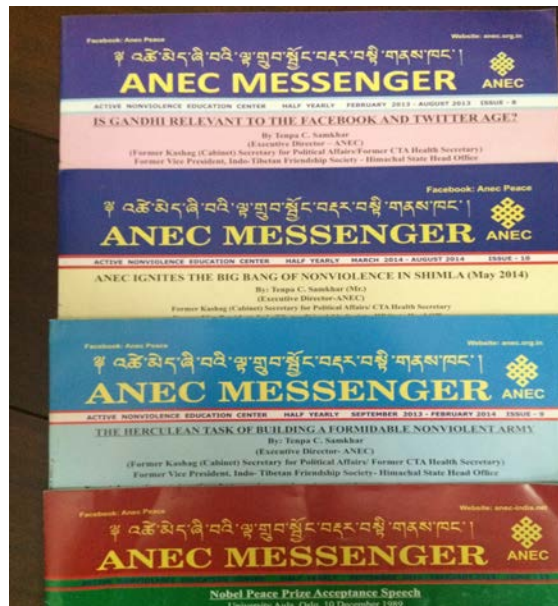
²⁹ Interview with Wongdue Tsering-La

³⁰ Interview with Wongdue Tsering-La

³¹ Interview with Wongdue Tsering-La

suicide...The power from the gun is not sustainable...We must attack the pillars of support to the Chinese Communist Party [in this way].”³² As the conversation continued, he highlighted several strategies of active engagement that the Center focuses on primarily when engaging with the various communities-in-exile, more specifically “nonviolent communication,” adapting to the contemporary “cultural and artistic revolution” that Tsering-La believes has spread throughout the Tibetan community, and consistent training programs aimed to prep youth for effective nonviolent protest in the wake of China's tightening grip on Tibet post-2008:³³

*Nonviolent Communication (Methods #09 and #10: leaflets, pamphlets, and books; Newspapers and journals)*³⁴



Several copies of the organization's half-yearly publication, the *ANEC Messenger*

ANEC's commitment to an annual report on the organization's half-yearly progress, published in a pamphlet called the “ANEC Messenger,” documents the locations, classes, and philosophical reflections on the effectiveness of nonviolent training. Ranging from descriptions of the pilot “Universal Nonviolence Training' in Mussoorie,' India in 2011 to president Tenpa C. Samkhar's repetitive clarification of the “Nonviolent Army[’s]” moral foundation that “Nonviolence is not inaction but action

³² Interview with Wongdue Tsering-La

³³ Interview with Wongdue Tsering-La

³⁴ Swarthmore.edu

devoid of violence” with a goal of granting “equal footing” to both the forces of “good and evil” in 2014, the intended philosophical alignments and dreams for a universally applicable morality are spoken heavily and fervently on every page of the magazine.³⁵ However, the names, phone numbers, and locations of various restaurants and guest houses along with other various advertisements scattered throughout Mcleodganj were so heavily interwoven into the pages of each Messenger that it distracts from the true, educational intention of publication in the first place.



Could this be drawing important focus and thus wane interest in those who would pick up the magazine, and perhaps consider donation or volunteer work in the future?

Investment in the renaissance of Tibetan language and culture within and outside of Tibet (Methods #28, #29, and #35-#40: Artistic and poetic expression and promotion)³⁶

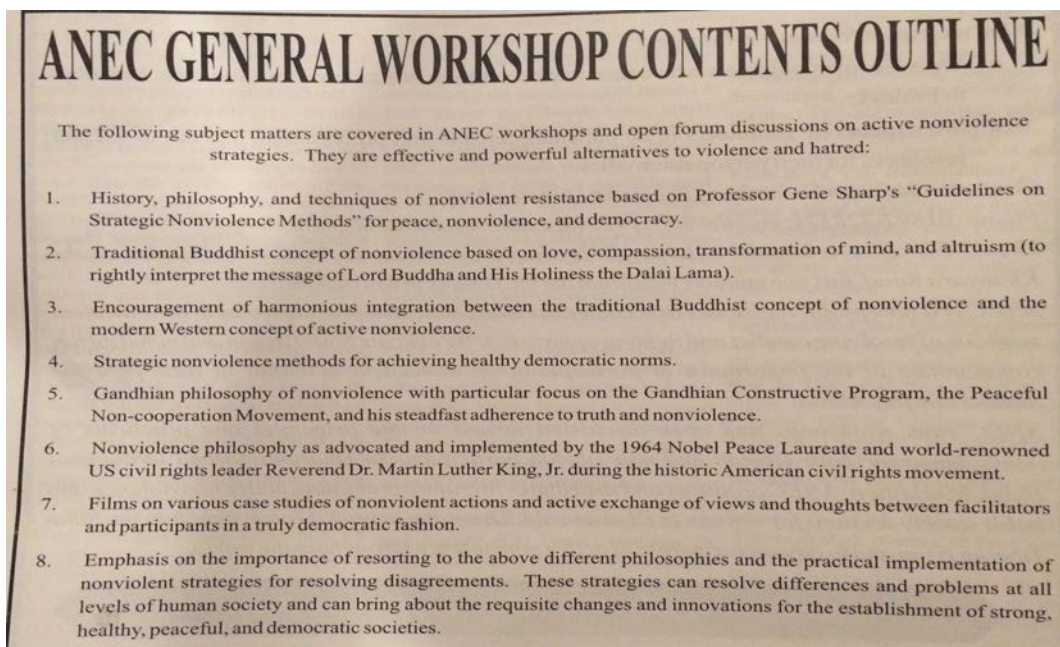
Reacting in kind with the post-2008 “Lhakar” movement within Tibet, the encouragement and distribution of contemporary Tibetan literature, prose, and song is utilized by ANEC to provide an outlet for creativity and reflection amongst Tibetan youth, as well as an incredibly powerful mode of conveying frustration and internal strife and resisting Chinese restrictions on traditional forms of Tibetan

³⁵ ANEC Messenger Magazine, Issue No. 5

³⁶ Swarthmore.edu

expression.³⁷ With works ranging from well-known Tibetan writers-in-protest such as Tenzin Tsundue to essays from students like Tenzin Dhazay reflecting on the “Essentiality of Non-Violence in the 21st Century,” ANEC has maintained a continual focus on promoting the influential power of the pen in a world ceaselessly ravaged by the sword.³⁸ Though these written pieces on the importance of strategic resistance have been a staple throughout modern activism's long history, Tsering-La believes that the most effective words of resistance are sang by those who know oppression rather than just having bared witness to it. “What is the Tibetan issue? It is [now even more important that] Tibetans as well as non-Tibetans should know, [especially] through Tibetan voice.”³⁹ ANEC allows a consistent forum for said voices to be heard, consistently, loudly, and most importantly, persistently.

Education in the strategic application of nonviolent protest techniques (Understanding Methods #01 thru #198)⁴⁰



Outline of goals, techniques, and philosophies that ANEC targets its students with once enrolled in a program. This particular “Workshop Outline” comes from *ANEC Messenger Issue – 5*

Some of ANEC's most important contributions to the active support for true Tibetan autonomy and the preservation of Tibetan human rights are their annual strategic nonviolence training programs.

³⁷ lhakar.org

³⁸ ANEC MESSENGER Magazine, Issue No. 11

³⁹ Interview with Wongdue Tsering-La

⁴⁰ Swarthmore.edu

Aiming to increase the knowledge, comprehension, and skills in the activist's toolshed, Tsering-La reflects on the utmost necessity of these sessions' universal purpose. "Looking back over the last two years, we have been able to organize dozens of workshops, working with the [CTA] Department of Education [to ensure] a huge achievement for us and [the community]...Our job is to educate, educate, educate. That is why we are here. It is our job [to] ensure the education of nonviolence for Tibet tomorrow."⁴¹ Have these meetings been affective? Formally recognized by the Indian government as well as the office of the Dalai Lama, ANEC has established itself as a formidable asset to those desiring more training before entering the war on Chinese aggression. Yet, in the words of Nima Tshering-La, a graduate of the training program and an international representative of the organization, "It is up to those who gain the training to use it well, and now [post-2008] it is a necessity."⁴²

While ANEC is the theoretical "new kid on the block" in the circuit of Dharmasala organizations for activism post-2008, Executive Director Tenpa C. Samkhar believes the organization's commitment to the cause of universal human rights, not just those of Tibetans, seems to have propelled the young organization to a new and vital position of educating young foreign volunteers and Tibetan activists alike. "...ANEC was not established for the Tibetan Community in Exile alone but for both Tibetan and Non-Tibetan communities. Our methods mainly focus on His Holiness the Dalai Lama's teachings on nonviolence, love and compassion and the Gandhian Philosophy of nonviolence."⁴³ Though formally aligned the Dalai Lama's Middle Way Approach, Samkhar-La clarifies that "ANEC's main objective is to contribute towards the establishment of a 'firmly rooted global culture of peace and nonviolence,'" universally accessible for all those fighting for banners of coexistence and equality.⁴⁴ Having trained organizations standing for Autonomy as well as those standing for full independence, ANEC has provided an easily attainable set of skills and strategic methods that all those fighting for human rights in Dharmasala, Tibetan and Non-Tibetan, Middle Way advocate or freedom fighter, can access. As the

⁴¹ Interview with Wongdue Tsering-La

⁴² Interview With Nima Tshering-La

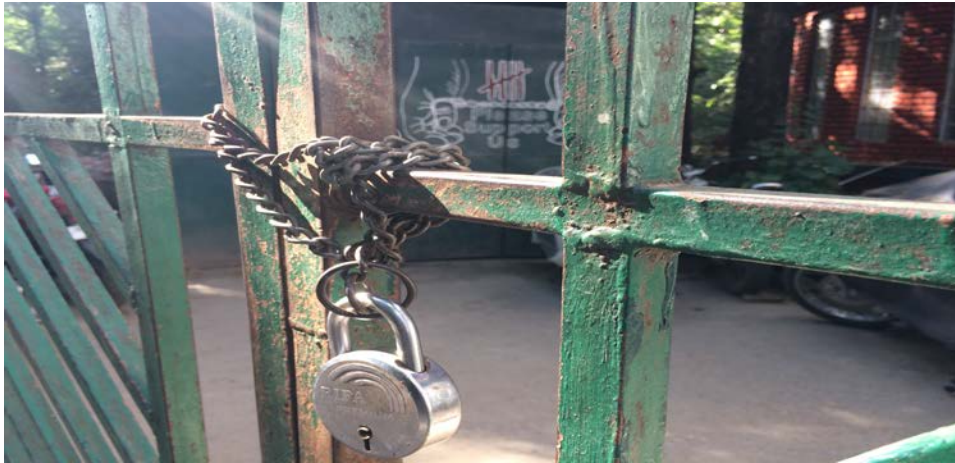
⁴³ ANEC MESSENGER Magazine, Issue No. 1

⁴⁴ ANEC MESSENGER Magazine, Issue No. 1

interview ended, Tsering-La walked out of the bright afternoon sun back into the small office in which he operates daily. A couple from France stood in the corner, asking a Tibetan volunteer about the origin of the Tibetan documentary they had just seen. The volunteer enlightens them, recommending his favorite momo restaurant in Mcleodganj as they begin to leave. “We are only here Thursdays and Fridays, so we only need two of us,” Tsering-La comments, “Not many people come out for our [documentary and training video] screenings.”⁴⁵ Giggling as he lamented this fact with an added sigh for effect, Tsering-La began to organize the shelves of ANEC messengers, some three years old, in the tiny cabinet by his desk, waiting for the next interested patron to come along on a lazy afternoon such as that. Only time, and the success of the students and organizations ANEC has trained, will tell of its usefulness. Yet, it is the ladder factor of measuring impact-in-exile, or lack thereof, which has driven movements such as Gu-Chu-Sum to redirect their efforts to supporting the voices for freedom and equality inside Tibet rather than the ones freely speaking outside the nations borders.

⁴⁵ Interview with Wongdue Tsering-La

Fighting for the Rising Fists: The Gu-Chu-Sum Movement and the Representation of the Voices Inside Tibet



Namgyal Dolkar Lhagyari, the newly elected Vice President of the Gu-Chu-Sum movement for former Tibetan political prisoners, sat elegantly in her traditional chupa. She was surrounded by the walls of the organization's small museum, densely packed with photographs, newspaper articles, and bloodied fragments of monastic robes belonging to ghostly voices once proclaiming the freedom of Tibet. “This movement began as an organization for former political prisoners *by* political prisoners. It has now expanded to encompass political activists [exiled from Tibet], too. Now, we have developed a third category, caring for families of former prisoners, as well.”⁴⁶ Reflecting on the last piece of her statement, she continued slowly, “My link [here] is my late father, his friends, and their stories of being prisoners themselves...”⁴⁷ With countless tales such as her father’s and storytellers to go along with them, Gu-Chu-Sum deploys a team with a former victim of political imprisonment to the numerous Tibetan settlements, with the goals of instilling a deeper understanding of the true struggle still raging within the borders of Tibet, thus utilizing the method of testimonial education throughout the Tibetan exile community at large. She continued on to clarify that with over 70 percent of the employed workforce at Gu-Chu-Sum having fled Tibet as former political prisoners, the primary mission of the organization has become one of rehabilitation rather than active political protest.

⁴⁶ Interview with Namgyal Dolkar Lhagyari-La

⁴⁷ Interview with Namgyal Dolkar Lhagyari-La



. The empty museum/conference room where the interview took place. All of the photographs adorning the walls have been smuggled into India by anonymous sources or survivors, and depict the history of Tibetan activism within the country... and the instruments of torture the Chinese security forces utilize if the individual is caught. At the bottom right lies a record of all of the documented self-immolations since 2008.

However, Lhagyari-La believes that the very rehabilitation, preservation, and understanding of the former prisoners' experiences from within Tibet is a more significant action of resistance than organizing events in the streets and schools of Dharamsala. With a library of over 2,000 testimonies collected since the organization's inception, the use of video recording and digital audio documentation has been added to the arsenal of preservation techniques for the survivors' tales. While there are only around 25 recorded videos so far, the number is projected to increase at an unprecedented rate, granting the interviewee more privacy in front of just a camera, as well as allowing ease of transportation when traveling for presentations. "We used to travel with five people and one survivor. Now we travel with two people and

the tales of 25 survivors, giving more access to those who hear [the testimonies].”⁴⁸ She continues, “Our greatest resources are the testimonies we are supplied with...we have images and stories [from inside Tibet] that the CTA doesn't even have...”⁴⁹ This has given the members of Gu-Chu-Sum great pride according to their Vice President, as their success is measured by the amount of Tibetan lives they care for, and the number of stories preserved. “Our duty is to spread what is going on inside Tibet and enlighten the outside world...we are the connection between the communities-in-protest here and the true underground there [in Tibet].”⁵⁰

In 2008, it was Gu-Chu-Sum that first felt the tremors of the Chinese crackdown during the March protests. From sources that she neglected to name, Lhagyari-La stated that “the freedom movement made us realize that the [resistance] is not just in the T.A.R. [Tibetan Autonomous Region], but in Kham and Amdo [eastern provinces] as well...So, we started including more members [who had been] persecuted all over Tibet, allowing us to gain even more information on what was going on inside.”⁵¹ Since then, she also commented that “so many [more former] members now [were] in the 2008 uprising [have joined Gu-Chu-Sum] as well.”⁵² However, Lhagyari-La has found herself caught amidst a theoretical divide. While many organizations throughout Dharamsala still identify as striving for a fully free Tibet, many others, along with Gu-Chu-Sum, have shifted toward regulated autonomy, a choice with which the young Vice President was not so pleased:

“It was a majority decision to adopt this stance; the majority will rule...this [type of decision-making] is democracy, and it is what we believe in. All members [of the Gu-Chu-Sum organization] speak, all members vote. The space that His Holiness has in our hearts is huge. However, I do not agree...I'll definitely call myself a [full freedom] activist. If they [the CTA] really wanted to stay with Chinese authority [under the Middle Way approach] why protest? In this case, if we are just staying with [Chinese] rule then just shut up.”⁵³

Her outrage, coupled with the utter sincerity in her personal reflection, outlined a growing frustration felt by many interviewed in the Tibetan community of activists. As the philosophical stalemate between

⁴⁸ Interview with Namgyal Dolkar Lhagyari-La

⁴⁹ Interview with Namgyal Dolkar Lhagyari-La

⁵⁰ Interview with Namgyal Dolkar Lhagyari-La

⁵¹ Interview with Namgyal Dolkar Lhagyari-La

⁵² Interview with Namgyal Dolkar Lhagyari-La

⁵³ Interview with Namgyal Dolkar Lhagyari-La

autonomy and full independence endured, so too did the increasingly festering sore of Chinese policy within Tibet. Even worse, Lhagyari-La proclaims, is the worry she feels “every time I see a Tibetan getting too comfortable here [in Dharamsala].”⁵⁴ In her mind, allowing this to happen is the greatest sin of the activist community. “We sometimes forget that this is our fight, that we are Tibetans here, too...we must continue to tell these stories as a reminder of this.”⁵⁵ Though Gu-Chu-Sum specializes in a very specific, rehabilitative form of community activism, it is quite possible that this organization, aside from the CTA, has single-handedly maintained one of the strongest connections to the political battlefield inside Tibet. According to The Tibetan Center for Human Rights and Democracy, that is exactly where the future of the freedom movement lies.

⁵⁴ Interview with Namgyal Dolkar Lhagyari-La

⁵⁵ Interview with Namgyal Dolkar Lhagyari-La

Fighting for Redirection: The Tibetan Center for Human Rights and Democracy and the Call for the Transition of Tibetan Activism's Focus



Tsering-La, former member of the Tibetan Women's Association (TWA) and current Vice President of the Tibetan Center for Human Rights and Democracy (TCHRD), has spent her life laboring tirelessly to analyze, assess, and carefully outline the violations of Tibetans' innate human rights to life, freedom of expression, and safety with no inhibitions by the Chinese. After studying journalism at New York University, she began writing for the *Tibetan Review*, the oldest running Tibetan publication-in-exile, coupling her writing with her service at TWA. A year later, she entered the world of TCHRD, working first in their Delhi Bureau before transitioning to the main office in Mcleodgunj which operates as the ears of the CTA on the rights violations occurring inside Tibet. “Our purpose is to monitor human rights inside Tibet. Yet, increased restrictions, especially in the last two years, have made this much more difficult.”⁵⁶ Her calm, collected delivery of the organization's mission was indicative of a person who had grown quite accustomed to explaining her purpose to those who did not understand. “However, we are *not* like TWA or TYC... they are small, grassroots organizations that began with the passion of the people. Yet, they are *political* organizations...we here at TCHRD are a *human rights monitoring body*.”⁵⁷ Tsering-La believes, however, that the growing constrictions of the Tibetan people by Chinese security forces have blurred the line between the previously stated distinctions. “In 2008, there was a cultural awakening, where bilingual Tibetans raised speaking Mandarin began speaking Tibetan more regularly

⁵⁶ Interview with Tsering-La, TCHRD

⁵⁷ Interview with Tsering-La, TCHRD

and in public, wearing Tibetan clothes and singing Tibetan songs.”⁵⁸ Those actions, exposing those Tibetans who choose to protest in that way to immense danger has provided the Center with new information as to how the security forces respond. “Because of this, our focus has shifted from publicizing rights violations for outside communities to understanding how to protect the rights of activists on the inside.”⁵⁹ This has caused a major philosophical overhaul within the organization. On their official page, TCHRD states that their work “entails monitoring, researching, translating and exposing human rights violations to the international community, thereby making China answerable for their consolidation of control over Tibet through repression. The Centre conducts regular, systematic investigation of human rights situation in Tibet and monitors human rights policies of the People’s Republic of China (PRC). Every year, we bring out annual report, thematic reports, testimonies of victims of human rights violations, biweekly newsletters, press releases and briefings on human rights issues that confront Tibetans inside Tibet.”⁶⁰ Tsering-La believes that that is not enough. She explains that the annual human rights reports are “verified with two primary sources inside Tibet for each piece of info,” only being published with the permission of the deliverers.⁶¹ However, many times the entirety of the rely fails to be communicated, as the individual reporting information becomes “nervous, or calls five-to-six times and then disappears, much of the time for good.”⁶² She continues to convey that there is a “necessity” for international “lawyers” to work with them in order to understand how to ensure the security of the informant as well as fully and legally obtain and translate the message he or she sends.⁶³ Despite the persistent lobbying at UN summits for Chinese accountability in Tibet, as well as the report of confirmed human rights violations committed by the superpower's military, Tsering-La believes that external protest has not nearly been as effective as desired, and that the lack of progress coupled with China's rapidly expanding economic influence has “lost us a lot of friends [in the international arena that

⁵⁸ Interview with Tsering-La, TCHRD

⁵⁹ Interview with Tsering-La, TCHRD

⁶⁰ tchrd.org

⁶¹ Interview with Tsering-La, TCHRD

⁶² Interview with Tsering-La, TCHRD

⁶³ Interview with Tsering-La, TCHRD

are increasingly necessary.”⁶⁴ Though the cultural renaissance of the Lhakar movement has provided a glimmer of hope in both the internal Tibetan community and the communities-in-exile, the Chinese propaganda has increased in a crushing response. “Unless we increase communication with Chinese activists operating in the mainland, as well as our fellow protestors in Taiwan and Hong Kong [reflecting on the pro-democratic rallies occurring in the two small states], we will not effectively benefit the Cause operating within Tibet.”⁶⁵ As the interview concluded, Tsering-La proceeded to make one last comment: “At the end of the day, it is up to the Tibetans inside Tibet to make change.”⁶⁶ She closed the door and resumed documenting the new reports that had just arrived as it became ever more apparent as to how essential it is for the movements-in-exile to readapt, realign, and reconsider how effective they really are.

⁶⁴ Interview with Tsering-La, TCHRD

⁶⁵ Interview with Tsering-La, TCHRD

⁶⁶ Interview with Tsering-La, TCHRD

Fighting for the Future: Students for a Free Tibet and the New Generation of Tibetan Activists-In-Exile



The enduring sign of the SFT office amidst the clutter of local advertisements

The office is small, cozy, and utterly under-equipped to technically support six interns along with the four regularly appearing staff members. The whiteboards were covered with schematics and tallies, arranged in the artistic chaos only produced by strategic planning meetings. Of the six interns residing in Dharamsala for the summer, four were Indian-born Tibetans, another an ambitious German gap year student from near Stuttgart, and the last a four-year veteran of the SFT model of operation, having organized a chapter in college and continuing her work at the organization's headquarters in New York before arriving in India. Laughs are abundant. Steaming chai is aplenty. Tenzin Tsundue, one of the premier poetic voices of Tibetan freedom, regularly stops in for lunch. The environment plays to its grassroots, student led origin, yet remains cluttered with the debris of years of countless rallies, protests, and politically fueled theatrical performances.

Since its inception in 1994, Students for a Free Tibet, and organization originally founded by passionate American students in New York City, has grown into one of the largest and most popular movements in both the international and the Dharamsala communities-in-exile. Committed to a path of “creative nonviolent direct action (NDA) and the pillars of civil disobedience, perseverance, and non-

capitulation,” SFT continues to remain one of the most enthusiastic exercisers of peaceful protest in Dharamsala.⁶⁷ Their vision statement reads, “In our work for Tibetan independence we also aim to inspire and enable people, especially youth, to create a just and equitable world, free of oppression, in which there is respect for the earth and all living things.”⁶⁸ Stemming from a hybrid of Buddhist philosophy and historically tested models of effective activism, SFT has been molded around the idea that the only productive movement for a subjugated group of people is a universal one. Dorjee Tseten-La, current Executive Director and lifelong activist, explains that existing as a “national movement” while simultaneously “giving up national distinctions” in order to encompass the growing number of international student-volunteers.⁶⁹ “Being surrounded by people not like you who generate your curiosity about why we are all really here is very important. Students have organized over 100 chapters of SFT around the world. This has created channels around the world protesting injustice in Tibet.”⁷⁰ To Dorjee-La, the interconnectivity of passionate, internationally based students advocating on the behalf of Tibet adds a certain diversity of strategic approach to the occupation that he feels is of the utmost necessity for the success of SFT. “[Truly effective] advocacy is representing people inside of Tibet by continuing to engage and educate youth, students, and politicians from around the world... We must foster [true] solidarity around freeing Tibet in the international realm of politics.”⁷¹ It became evident by his charismatic delivery of this point that Dorjee-La's true dream resided in the quest for international political unity in the support of full freedom. “We need to form a multilateral alliance to call for Chinese accountability...2008 [protests] happens every day.”⁷² SFT's methodical approaches, however, were focused primarily on the ultimate preservation and cultivation of Tibetan national pride, working heavily in the community as purveyors of Tibetan cultural tradition and language. “We are heavily associated with the Lhakar [Tibetan cultural] movement, as we hold cultural gatherings and sponsor Tibetan

⁶⁷ Interview with Dorjee Tseten-La

⁶⁸ studentsforafreetibet.org

⁶⁹ Interview with Dorjee Tseten-La

⁷⁰ Interview with Dorjee Tseten-La

⁷¹ Interview with Dorjee Tseten-La

⁷² Interview with Dorjee Tseten-La

language classes throughout Dharamsala.”⁷³

Tactically speaking, Dorjee-La's philosophy on effective protest lies with unrelenting persistence of societal interaction. “There is no one restricting us here [in Dharamsala], so we can always protest freely. So, protest is even more important. We cannot become comfortable.”⁷⁴ And it is this perception of communal complacency that has driven Dorjee-La and the SFT team to think on how a redirection of outdated protest tactics in an established and protected community of refugees can be imagined. “In concrete terms, we use street theatre, bi-weekly presentations to advertise our new fiscal and community engagement projects, organize petition signings to be sent to Chinese political leaders, and have now sponsored over 30 training sessions in effective nonviolent techniques [with ANEC] to prepare our volunteers and employees to engage in active protest at any moment. We have held many rallies, too.”⁷⁵ Dorjee-La has also traveled to Taiwan to meet with representatives from the popular democratic movements operating in Hong Kong, Taiwan, and mainland China, as well as to Washington D.C. to lobby congress to formally denounce Chinese political policy in Tibet. “My main job is to foster alliances with international advocacy organizations and political bodies, securing inter-Tibetan relations.”⁷⁶ However, while Dorjee-La continues his work as a traveling ambassador for Tibetan freedom, it is the work on the streets of Dharamsala that have molded and solidified SFT as the flagship of the movement-in-exile.

Transition to Volunteer Reports

There is a saying that reads, “Actions speak louder than words.” For a short period of time during the month of April, 2015, the organizations, Students for a Free Tibet, the Gu-Chu-Sum movement of Tibet, the Tibetan Women's Association, and the Tibetan Youth congress allowed participation in three of their co-sponsored events for the purpose of furthered research. Below is an individual report and generalized reflection on each particular event, as well as a perceived level of effectiveness based upon

⁷³ Interview with Dorjee Tseten-La

⁷⁴ Interview with Dorjee Tseten-La

⁷⁵ Interview with Dorjee Tseten-La

⁷⁶ Interview with Dorjee Tseten-La

the execution of the event in the eyes of the researching party:

April 22, 2015

Students for a Free Tibet Earth Day Celebration and Petition Signing

Location: In front of the Tsuglagkhang, the Dalai Lama's Temple, Mcleodganj

Number of Representatives Present: 8

Primary Purposes: To gain petition signatures against the damming of Tibetan rivers, deferring precious water sources away from Tibetans and South Asians to mainland China, as well as raise awareness of the environmental abuses exercised by China.

Methods Used: Hailing foot traffic, displaying an interactive “pledge display for people to sign in support of environmental cleanliness, and providing individuals with materiel intended on thoroughly yet efficiently educating the reader on the growing environmental crisis in Tibet.



Earth Day Petition Signing

As Ilias, an SFT summer intern from Germany, hailed individuals on the streets by bullhorn in French, English and German, the young Tibetan interns engaged foot traffic handing out flyers, speaking swiftly in Hindi as well as their native tongue. Two out of every ten passersby paused to investigate what was taking place, asking questions ranging from how much they could contribute monetarily to the projected magnitude the petition would have, if any, on the Chinese environmental policies in Tibet. It was observed that some individuals representing SFT were not always swift or clear enough in their

responses to these inquiries, possibly indicating a lack of preparedness overall. There was even a point when the researching party assumed the lead chair at the petition signing table, realizing that there was a great number of details of the petition campaign's inner workings that the organization had not prepared to publicly disclose. This may not have been the best choice in effectively marketing the aspirations for the event or the petition, especially when considering SFT's tenet of fully educating the populace on its intentions when working out on the streets. However, the persistence of the Tibetan interns when talking to specific people on the street and the multilingual call for support by Ilias in the megaphone proved one thing: there truly was a significant and useful diversity of languages, heritages, and skill sets Dorjee-La believes to be so crucial in the successful execution of activist activities. While organization and clarity of mission was a bit lacking, the tireless and passionate pursuit of individuals to sign the petition by the activists proved an essential asset, with over 100 names added to the petition's growing list.

Overall Event Success Rating: Fairly Effective

April 25, 2015

Students for a Free Tibet, Gu-Chu-Sum, and the Tibetan Youth Congress Penchen Lama Birthday Celebration

Location: The Tibetan Children's Village Day School, Mcleodganj

Total Number of Representatives Present: ~20

Primary Purposes: To honor the imprisoned Panchen Lama's birthday in the symbolically disobedient act of singing praise to his name in Tibetan, as well as raise awareness of the increasingly perilous situation for political prisoners inside Tibet.

Methods Used: Political Theatre, Traditional Song, and "birthday games" to honor the young Lama imprisoned, location still withheld, in China.



A silent and expectant crowd of Indian and Tibetan Students await for the reading of the names which will take part in the next round of momo-eating carnage

Drowned out by the shouts of children, volunteers scrambled to keep the incredibly popular momo-eating competition arranged by the NGO's fully stocked with fat potato dumplings. A picture of the young Panchen Lama, adorned with multiple "khataks," or honorary Tibetan scarves, sat alone in the corner of the school's gym, where the event had taken place. With the brief political theatre performance, dramatically depicting the Panchen Lama behind bars and then symbolically being freed by monks, chupa-clad women, and Tibetan children, finished, the entirety of the festivities' energies were redirected toward the entertainment of the children and adults alike. After several rounds of blind yogurt eating and four exhilarating bouts of tug o' war, the event came to a close as quickly as it began. Children laughed, volunteers giggled, the presidents of their respective organizations chatted in the corner. The picture of

the Panchen Lama, after being so beautifully christened with the traditional woven forms of honor, still sat in the corner, immobile until a volunteer remembered to take it down. As a community gathering, the event was immensely successful. However, the speed at which focus transitioned away from the real purpose for which it was planned was disconcerting. Overall, it seems as if the day could have honored the Panchen Lama with an equal amount of joyful resilience as well as furthered education for the members of the celebration who may not have known the true horror of the kidnapping of the Panchen Lama at the tender age of six.

Overall Event Success Rating: Moderately Effective (at community organization); Relatively Ineffective (at providing basic useful information for the public which may not have heard of the Panchen Lama before, or his current plight in China)

April 27-May 4

****Nepal Earthquake Relief Project and Benefit Concert, Organized by the Tibetan Women's Association and the Students for a Free Tibet****

Location: Throughout Mcleodganj, ending with a concert at the Tibetan Children's Village Day School.

Total Number of Representatives Present: ~10-15 throughout the week

Primary Purpose: To raise a Dharamsala NGO network-sponsored aid fund to be pumped directly into the aid effort in Nepal.

Methods Used: Funding tables set up for six days on the streets of Dharamsala with a benefit concert to end the week.

Despite not having direct links to the causes for Tibetan freedom and human rights, the collective response of the Dharamsala NGO's to the immediate need for aid inside Nepal was swift and meticulously executed. During the entire week, a minimum of two representatives from SFT, TWA, and TYC, the primary organizers of the relief fund, were required to be tabling each day until the night of the benefit concert. Collecting a minimum of 40,000 Rupees per day before the actual concert, the teams tirelessly campaigned on several street corners to ensure a decent chunk to be sent northward. As a bookend to a beautiful candlelight vigil held the day after the earthquake in the center of Mcleodganj, the citywide benefit concert was held, with artists from over five different countries performing. The efficiency was at a peak for the organizations by the week's end, the concert's setting magnificent, and the drive for the cause more passionate each minute. It was a brilliant seven-day display of what confidence, drive, and unified intention can do within a community. Even more importantly, it proved that even movements

outside the area affected could do, be it shaky political foundations, or the tremors within the Earth itself.

Overall Event Success Rating: Incredibly Effective

Concluding Thoughts

For leaders like Dorjee and Deckyi-La, each day brings with it a new series of challenges in the wake of what authors Wang Lixiong and Tsering Shakya refer to in their book, *The Struggle for Tibet*, as “The March Incident” in 2008.⁷⁷ These include the task of maintaining commitment to their causes in the face of an increasingly complacent Tibetan Refugee community. The endurance through the endless barrages of critique from outside parties who claim to know how to activate the communities in which these leaders have lived all their lives more powerfully and efficiently. Attacking head-on the daunting necessity to transcend the morphing, ever present socio-political gridlock created by their elected officials. Yet, above all, it is the struggle to fight for a national cultural, spiritual and lingual identity that is dwindling in a country they were not born in, on lands they have never seen. In the words of Lixiong and Shakya:

“One of the biggest grievances is that the Chinese authorities equate any expression of Tibetan identity with separatism. The government seems to think that if it allows any kind of cultural autonomy, it will escalate into demands for secession...In Tibet, everything from newspapers and magazines to music distribution is kept firmly under control...”⁷⁸

Thus continues the herculean task for these organizations to simultaneously stoke the fires of their own missions, as well as attempt to breathe air onto the stifled flames of those inside Tibet. Yet, for Dorjee-La, this is not a setback, but an exercise of resistance in-and-of itself. “It creates a sense of belonging, really,” Dorjee-La states confidently, “even though we are outside Tibet, we are Tibetan and must hold

⁷⁷ Wang Lixiong & Tsering Shakya, *The Struggle for Tibet* pp. 221

⁷⁸ Wang Lixiong & Tsering Shakya, *The Struggle for Tibet* pp. 221

our ground [as Tibetans, anywhere].”⁷⁹ And perhaps that is one of the most powerful weapons at their disposal; to breathe air back into the cultural lungs of the Tibetan people simply by proudly exclaiming in body and mind the truth of the situation, like at Gu-Chu-Sum, the power of the Tibetan community at large, like at the Tibetan Youth Congress, and ceaselessly educating those on the paths of peace and effective action like at ANEC and SFT, never once “losing faith” in the potential of the Tibetan people.⁸⁰ In a world of increasing interconnectivity across borders, one can only hope that the Tibetan communities throughout the world can draw insight, inspiration, and new brave and creative approaches to deal with the oppressor who has subjugated them for far too long. However, time is more of the essence, and the necessity for international political allegiance is at an all-time high for Tibet. The single most certain conclusion to be drawn from the Dharamsala movements is this: At this point in time, the many movements in question are bursting with potential. 2008 has offered an opportunity to unite in power and voice, as well as utilize the increasing Chinese restrictions as leverage in the international political arenas. However, that very promise, if left untapped, will dissipate as quickly as it came, tamed by complacency veiled as security and compromise. This, coupled with the philosophical stalemate amongst senior socio-political figures, will surely pin the exile movement’s ability to truly assist the Tibetan activists inside once again, and hopefully, not once and for all.

⁷⁹ Interview with Dorjee Tseten-La

⁸⁰ Interview with Namgyal Dolkar Lhagyari-La

List of Interviewees

Dorjee Tseten, Students for a Free Tibet, Regional Executive Director
Date Interviewed: April 20, 2015

Namgyal Dolkar Lhagyari, , The Gu-Chu-Sum Movement of Tibet, Vice President
Date Interviewed: May 4, 2015

Nima Tshering, Active Nonviolence Education Center, Special Member
Date Interviewed: April 22, 2015

Tenzing Jigme, Tibetan Youth Congress, President
Date Interviewed April 21, 2015

Ms. Tsering, Tibetan Centre for Human Rights and Democracy, Vice President
Date Interviewed: May 2, 2015

Wongdue Tsering, Active Nonviolence Education Center, Vice President

Volunteer Immersions

April 22, 2015, Earth Day celebration and petition signing against Chinese damming

Organizations: Students for a Free Tibet and the Gu-Chu-Sum Movement of Tibet

Position during event: Petition Table Manager

Duration of event: 5 hours

April 25, 2015, Celebration of Panchen Lama's birthday

Organizations: Students for a Free Tibet, Tibetan Women's Association, and the Tibetan Youth Congress

Position(s) during event: cleaner, goods carrier, feet traffic conductor

Duration of event: 4 hours

April 27-May 4, 2015, Nepal Earthquake Relief Drive and benefit concert

Organizations: Students for a Free Tibet, the Tibetan Women's Association, the Gu-Chu-Sum Movement of Tibet, and the Tibetan Youth Congress

Position(s) during event: Street Announcer, Ticket Collector, goods carrier

Duration of event: 6 days

Works Cited:***All photographs taken by the author**

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Methodology in Brief Review:

The majority of this research was based on elongated involvement with particular organizations throughout Dharamsala, utilizing interviews, literary support, and most importantly, direct involvement in the very events and rallies discussed in the conversations with their organizers prior to their occurrence. This proved to be instrumental in supplementing the information that was obtained in one-on-one dialogue, often supporting or nullifying the claims that were made beforehand. This also enabled the author to gain essential insight and additional skill sets from the brilliantly creative minds of the Tibetan activists operating in Mcleodganj.

Organizations Researched, with Respective Cited Email Addresses (If Applicable)

The Active Nonviolence Education Center

Jogibara Road, Mcleodganj
 Dharamsala, H.P. India
 01892-228121 (Office)
tcsamkhar@gmail.com

The Gu-Chu-Sum Movement of Tibet

Jogibara Road, Mcleodganj
 Dharamsala 176219, Distt. Kangra, H.P.
 01892-220680/ 221379-220679
guchusum1991@gmail.com (primary email)
www.guchusum.org

Students for a Free Tibet India

P.O. Mcleod Ganj. Dharamshala,
 District Kangra, Himachal Pradesh
 India – 176219
 +91 1892 220589
<http://sftindia.org/>

Tibetan Centre for Human Rights and Democracy

Narthang Building
 Gangchen Kyishong
 Dharamsala, (HP)-176215
 India
www.tchrd.org

Tibetan Youth Congress, Central Executive Committee

Mcleod Ganj, Dharamshala
 HP 176219, India
 +91-1892-221554/+91-98822-21554
tyc@tibetanyouthcongress.org

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