Organizing for Languages Preservation, Community Enhancement, and Social Transformation in Kham Tibet: A Dialogical Ethnography

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This dissertation titled Organizing for Languages Preservation, Community Enhancement, and Social Transformation in Kham Tibet: A Dialogical Ethnography

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Abstract

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Organizing for Languages Preservation, Community Enhancement, and Social Transformation in Kham Tibet: A Dialogical Ethnography

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UNESCO (2013) has reported that many Kham Tibetan languages are facing extinction and will disappear by the end of this century if nothing is done. Languages embody the worldviews that enable us to understand, interpret, and share realities with one another. Preserving ethnic minority languages is crucial to the sustainability of plural human social practices. This dissertation research used a dialogical perspective to examine Tibetan teachers’ and community members’ organizing practices for mother tongue preservation, community building, and achieving meaningful social change. Tibetan communities have been historically silent, absent, and (mis)represented by romanticized and reductionist ideological/political discourse. My dissertation recognized Tibetan teachers and community members as active social change agents, organizers, and advocates who are capable of creating partnerships across differences (e.g. class, gender, ethnicity, and educational levels, etc.) to address local issues in communication and to organize for meaningful social transformation in Kham Tibet. To achieve this project, I conducted a dialogical ethnography for the past three summers including archival and textual collection, numerous in-depth interviews, and participant observation in Kham Tibet. Four narratives emerged that exemplified the features of meta-theory of dialogue. They are 1) Boundless Bound, 2) Purposeless Purpose, 3) Embodiment, and 4) Being
while Becoming. The findings of this study extend the theory of dialogue and advance knowledge in communication scholarship, as well as provide insights for educators, policymakers, governments, and international NPO/NGOs involved with indigenous/ethnic language and cultural preservation program implementation in Tibet. Finally, this study may provide transferable values to other indigenous/ethnic groups working towards similar goals.
Dedication

For the Others.
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Chapter One: Introduction

Lost in Modernity

Return to Lhasa

Return to the Potala

Brahmaptra purified my heart

The snow-capped mountains awake my soul

Climb over the Tangula, I meet the snow lotus… (Zheng, 1994)

When I was growing up, my mother always sang the song “Return to Lhasa.” My mother, an ethnic Han Chinese, was born and raised in Lhasa, the capital city of Tibet. My grandparents were first generation volunteers to the Tibetan Plateau after World War II. They had been working in Lhasa for over 20 years in hospitals and transportation services. They moved to Sichuan to live with my great-grandparents in the 1980s. I was born in Sichuan, the province next to the Tibetan plateau. Often, I imagined the land as the mysterious snow lotus in the mountains. My mother used to sing Tibetan songs and told me stories about beautiful Tibet. She longed to return and seek her roots in Lhasa.

In the summer of 2009, I took a trip to Lhasa to search for my mother’s birth hospital. The Skytrain, a special railway, took me from the southwest mainland city of Chongqing to the Tibetan plateau. The train staff told me that at least 10,000 people arrived in Tibet per day during travelling season. After I elbowed my way out of the Skytrain, I was pushed through Potala Palace and Jokhang Temple by a huge tourist crowd. While I was walking into the Potala palace, wishing to light a butter-oil lamp to pray, I was trapped here and there in the wave of ant-like tourists groups. Tourist agencies dominated the city and the number of hotels and fast food restaurants on every
street corner outnumbered the monasteries. Tourists from different parts of the world were running up and down the Potala Palace, stalking the lamas in order to capture some special moments with their big-lens cameras. Seeing the place with my own eyes, Lhasa did not seem as beautiful as my mother described.

Today’s Lhasa has become a modernized city, like any other cities in Mainland China. All the streets looked the same and were named after major mainland Chinese cities, such as Beijing Road, Shanghai Road, and Chong Qing Road, etc. In the area near Jokhang Temple, many Tibetans as well as Han Chinese tourists swaggered into the fried chicken fast food stores. A group of little Tibetan boys on the street corner chased the tourists for some change or free candies. Smelly trash piled on the side of the street: Chinese coke plastic bottles, wrappers of branded chips, and pieces of tourism advertisements. Modernization brings a new Lhasa, and a new Tibet. Thanks to economic development, the snow lotus is lost in modernity.

While I was walking down the streets in downtown Lhasa, I had a short conversation with some Tibetan taxi drivers smoking by the sidewalk. “Tashi Deleh”! How do you speak that in Tibetan?” I pointed at a road sign written both in Chinese and Tibetan. “Uh, I don’t know! I only speak and cannot write, nor read these signs. I know it’s called Pedestrian Street in Chinese,” The taxi driver Nima responded. I found that it is very common that Tibetans like Nima cannot read and write their own language. A few other Tibetan taxi drivers joined our conversation, “We didn’t learn the Tibetan alphabets

1 Tashi Deleh is a blessing and a greeting statement that means good luck.
in school.” “Back then, these alphabets didn’t exist [in school]!” another group of taxi
drivers responded from the other side of the street.

I left Lhasa with fragmented images of tourists and fried chicken restaurants.

Deeply troubled by such “development,” I kept thinking about what has changed in the
traditional Tibetan communities. After wondering for many years, I got a chance and
started volunteering with an international non-government organization (NGO) in the
summer of 2012. My job was to teach public speaking to volunteer teachers and Tibetan
students. From the experience of working with a Tibetan international NGO, I noticed
many Tibetan students chose to speak English and Chinese in speech presentations in my
class. Surprisingly, some Tibetan students told me that they could not speak Tibetan
fluently nor could they write in their own language. Many of my Tibetan students from
different areas across the plateau dress exactly like us Han Chinese and American
volunteer teachers. One Tibetan teenaged girl Dawa from Qinghai province proudly told
me, “My high school has very good English teachers! I don’t speak Tibetan because it
sounds backward. We speak Chinese in school.” It made me wonder, what will happen to
Tibetans if most of the young children cannot speak or give up their own languages?

**Evolving Purpose**

The purpose of this dissertation evolved from my troubled experience in Lhasa,
concerns in volunteering teaching with Tibetan youth, and also learning experiences with
Tibet teachers during educational field trips to Kham Tibet. Particularly during my
education field trips to the Kham area in the summer of 2013, my conversations with my
Tibetan language teacher Tenzin drew my attention to a unique process and practice of preserving language. I remembered one conversation very well.

“I told my students to write anything they want in their own mother tongue,” Tenzin told me when he taught students in Tibetan language class.

“Do you give students topics to write homework (composition)?” I asked.

“No, they can write anything they want in Tibetan. And without limiting their topic, some students expressed their worries of losing their mother tongue.” Tenzin continued, “My friends and I try different ways to keep our language alive. At the same time, we are trying to improve our English.”

“How long have you worked at encouraging students to do so?” I asked.

“I don’t know when I started, maybe ever since I was a teacher. My other friends are doing the same. We work hard on protecting our language.” Tenzin responded.

“What do you and your friends do to promote Tibetan language?” I continued.

“In school, we encourage our youths to learn Tibetan. We encourage Han Chinese kids who live here to learn Tibetan language and literature. After class, we sing in our language and dance during our gatherings; I will bring you to our gathering.” Tenzin said.

From my conversations with Tenzin, I understood that the mother tongue language and identity is central to ethnic minority groups like Tibetans. Tenzin brought me to a group of 20 Tibetan teachers’ gathering after school. The whole afternoon this group was chatting about issues of teaching from class, what was going to be added to the school’s Tibetan heritage museum (and who made the effort to do so), and the harvest carnival at their own county (a group singing and dancing gathering).
I began to understand that this was a unique way of organizing, and not just with a small group of twenty Tibetan teachers. Throughout my field trip I met other groups of Tibetan teachers who have been working on preserving their culture in many different ways. My experiences inspired me to explore further the processes and potentials of Tibetan teachers’ and community members’ (friends, family, and students etc.) organizing and relating processes for their mother tongue preservation.

Kham Languages

Tibetan language belongs to the Sino-Tibetan language family and is spoken primarily on the high plateau north of the Himalayas (Beyer, 1992). It is important to understand that Tibetan is not simply a language the way modern English is, with a broad range of speakers who easily understand each other with shared vocabulary, grammar and structure. Tibetan languages can be understood as a series of languages and they are mutually incomprehensible (Germano, 2003). There is no standard Tibetan language across the three ethnolinguistic communities Utsang, Amdo, and Kham. It takes time and effort for persons from different regions (even within a same linguistic community) to communicate their meaning across dialects.

Within Kham Tibet, there is a vast range of languages/dialects\(^2\). According to Watters (2003), Kham language consists of three major language groupings—Sheshi, Gamale, and Parbate, which can be further classified into eleven groups of languages. Kham Tibetan languages are inherently divergent and unique. However, the situation for

\(^2\) I use “language” and “dialect” interchangeably since many linguists rarely distinguished two terms clearly. As the famous saying goes “A language is a dialect with an army; and a dialect is a language without army.” Accordingly, I chose to use the term “language” in the rest of this dissertation.
these Kham languages is not optimistic today. Moseley’s (2010) *Atlas of the World’s Languages in Danger* located at least six languages facing extinction in the Kham Tibet area. These indigenous languages will disappear by the end of this century if nothing is done (UNESCO, 2013).

The divergences of Kham languages has brought a diversity of cultures, but to some extent it created barriers for Kham Tibetans from different regions to engage their mother tongue. In addition, the ethnographic space where Kham languages are embedded has influenced their survival. Compared with other Tibetan interior regions such Amdo and Utsang, Kham has been an area integrated with Chinese communities historically. I first visited the Kham area seventeen years ago and could communicate with Tibetans freely in my Sichuan dialect throughout the trip. Today, the homogenizing process of Chinese language is even more observable in the Kham area, from the shop signs to Tibetan vendors’ bargains along the street. Kham Tibetan languages and culture has been deemphasized by the intensification of Chinese modernity, particularly in Kham Tibet, the borderland between Tibetan and Han Chinese regions.

The social and economic environment cannot maintain the number of Kham languages users. The Kham area has been regarded as economically underdeveloped since the 1980s. Kham Tibetan scholar Badeng Nima (2008) noted that the Tibetan regions have been flooded with a vast amount of modern terminology from Han Chinese language due to the region’s continuing socioeconomic developments. Mandarin has been legitimated as the standard language and gradually is growing as the “interethnic language” in China since the 1950s. And then English has emerged as a second important
national language through the process of carrying out the era of Reform and Openness\textsuperscript{3} since 1978 (Ma, 2007). As a result of the complexity of local and global power relations, Tibetan languages users are decreasing in number.

Moreover, standardized Chinese schooling functions as the vehicle to homogenize ethnic minority languages like Kham Tibetan languages. In the Kham area, most examinations are conducted in Mandarin since it was named the “official language” of China in 1950. During the Cultural Revolution, Tibetan language was even more devalued and Tibetan culture was denigrated. Teachers in ethnic minority areas today, like Kham Tibet, have to achieve a certain Mandarin speaking certificate in order to teach. In Kham Tibet, a bilingual-bicultural education has been in practice for nearly 30 years. However, only Tibetan History and Language courses are instructed in Tibetan language; other courses such as math, biology, chemistry, etc. are taught in Mandarin. Additionally, after China entered the World Trade Organization in the 1990s, English language education has gained national popularity progressively along with Chinese free market capitalism.

In the current Tibetan education, Tibetan teachers play a major role in either discouraging or encouraging their students to study Tibetan language and literature (Postiglione, Jiao, & Manlaji, 2007). In addition, the Tibetan teachers are highly mobile across their regions and are regarded as a “medium” of knowledge by Tibetans. Over the past three summers, I worked with this group and observed their efforts in promoting

\textsuperscript{3} According to Ma (2007), Reform and Openness was a series of policies the Chinese government implemented that mainly focuses on economic development. Besides that, it also modernized education, such as formalizing standard English language education in schooling.
Tibetan language use among students and villagers, documenting traditional
performance, and building connections with business organizations for revitalizing the
traditional Buddhist art. Thus, the groups I focus on in my dissertation research are
Tibetan teachers and their community members, because they are the most important and
influential actors in Tibetan language preservation.

Attitudes towards History

This dissertation examines Tibetan teachers’ and community member’s
organizing practices for language preservation without alienating itself from a historical
environment. The relationship between Tibet and China has been inextricably
interconnected throughout history. I have repetitively heard and read many histories and
stories about Tibet describing this interconnection. As Crites (1986) suggested:

The world must begin as a story begins, by the postulation of a fictive past. The
story in fact begins as everything begins, out of the unformed future, and this
universal fluidity is ironically what is presented within the story as its primordial
past. (p.168-9)

A grand narrative told generations after generations has constructed a coherent truth for
members who are living within the community. When I grew up and was educated in
China in the 1990s, I was taught in history class that Tibet is a province of China since
the Tibetan Tufan Dynasty, around seventh century A.D. It has been my “subjugated
truth” for many years. What I have remembered is the story of unity—Princess Wen
Cheng of Tang Dynasty, married the Tibetan King Srong-btsan sgam-po around 641. The
influential political marriage between the Tang Dynasty of China and the Tufan Dynasty
has been chanted in all my history books. It was said that the Wen Cheng princess
brought the skilled craftsmanship of textiles, pottery, and architecture as well as
innovative ways of farming to the highland. I assumed a relationship of harmony has
been going for 1300 years between Tibetans and Chinese.

When I started studying in the U.S. in 2007, I encountered alienating realities.
During the Beijing Olympics, while the news of Tibetan demonstrations in China came
up in the States, a series of “anti-Chinese rallies” occurred in my university community. I
was stunned to see American students, including my American friends, protesting against
“China” and “Chinese Students” on campus. “Free Tibet” signs were written on their cars
and “Chinese Get Out” slogans were being shouted. I felt my identity as Chinese was
challenged and that my unquestionable reality about China and Tibet was so fragile in the
face of “anti-Chinese rallies” on an American university campus.

Beginning to suspect what had happened during my education, I started to read
books related to Tibetan history. One required book from my World Religion class was
the stories of shared trauma between the Jewish people’s experiences in the holocaust
during World War II and Tibetans in exile during the 1950s Chinese take over of Tibet.
When the class asked me what my response was towards the book, I was at a loss for
words. I was afraid to share what I had learned back home. And I deeply felt that my
beliefs about China as a unified nation-state were again violated. I struggled about what
to believe. Experiencing unease and troubled curiosity, I was introduced to a few
overseas Tibetans by my classmates. I felt anxious when walking with them because “my
people” made their grandparents and parents living overseas into the “Tibetan diaspora.” As the Chinese media described, they were “separatists.”

After a few “Hellos” and “How are yous” I was completely puzzled by my own inner struggles and didn’t know what to talk about. To my surprise, they openly shared with me about food, Tibetan butter tea and momo (Tibetan dumplings). I was inspired by the food because that’s what connected with my family. During our conversations they told me, “I don’t know much about our land, Tibet seems so far away.” They also shared with me their longing to return, “Home is there, but we are unable to return. No matter what happened in the past, the future is more important to us. We just want to go home.” Waves of sympathy overcame me. At that moment I felt that my mother’s eagerness to go back to Lhasa shared their heartfelt desire to return. The difference was their longing to return was mixed with shards of unspoken sorrow.

After a few moments of stepping outside of my “imagined community,” I felt humbled and contradicted by the different versions of stories. When confronting the questions of history, it turned into alienated community stories. Different communities are creating stories about Tibet’s pasts, and many of the accounts have separated us from walking into the other’s world.

**Political and Ideological Representations**

Stories of the past between Tibet and China have been presented in many different versions. In the complex social and historical situation between Tibet and China, organizing in and about Tibet is highly politicized. The political debate started with the 1959 takeover of Tibet by Mao’s Red Army. Today, the Chinese government insists that
the Red Army liberated Tibet from a peasant slavery system in the 1950s. However, the
Tibetan government in exile in India as well as various international human rights
organizations designate the “Chinese liberation” as the Chinese occupation. During the
2008 Beijing Olympics, a series of demonstrations started in Lhasa, the capital of Tibet,
and spread over the whole Plateau. This March 10th Tibet Uprising drew the world’s
attention. Many Chinese (mainly from Han ethnic group), waving the flag of “One China,
One family,” participated internationally in the protests against the “Tibetan riots” and
the “Western media” during the Beijing Olympics (China Daily, 2008, April 20). The
ethnic group tension between Han Chinese (the largest ethnic group in China) and
Tibetans has become more difficult to reconcile since then.

Existing research on Tibetans’ organizing has identified three main sources of
ideological representations. They are the Chinese government, “the West,” and the Dalai
Lama (Ono & Jiao, 2008; Hartnett, 2013). Typically, Tibetans have been portrayed as
sympathetic victims, and the voices of the three Tibetan communities (Kham, Amdo, and
Utsang) within the current Chinese nation-state boundaries have been left out of the
public conversation, especially with regards to their resourcefulness and agency to
represent themselves (Yeh, 2009). Such concern calls for rethinking what Tibetan
organizing does or can achieve today.

**The rhetorics of Tibet.** Tibetan communities are largely (mis)represented in
public discourse. Media discourses predominantly generate a series of representational
dichotomies between the Chinese governmental discourse that Tibet should remain as
part of the Chinese territory, and the other conceptions related to the Western
humanitarian ideology that advocates Tibetan freedom and independence as a state. A number of studies that have examined media discourses associated with Tibet have focused on the highly politicized nature of the nation-state issue of Tibet and China. For example, Huang and Fahmy (2011) conducted a comparative content analysis of photos from the 2008 anti-China/Olympic protests in four major US newspapers and four major Chinese newspapers. They identified three representational dichotomies: suppression followed by pro-Tibet demonstrations vs. riots and restoring order; pro-Tibetan independence slant vs. pro-Chinese government slant; and non-violent demonstration vs. violent action. These “either-or” ideological barriers portray Tibet and Tibetans as a politicized subject.

In addition to describing Tibetans as politicized subjects, other public discourse has portrayed Tibetans as vulnerable victims. Likewise, Tibetans’ agency and resourcefulness to create change in their community are absent in public discourses. Ono and Jiao’s (2008) analysis of 89 New York Times articles reveals the image of China as the authoritarian ruler who modernizes and dominates the powerless Tibet. In such discursive struggles between China and the U.S., Tibetan communities are deliberatively silenced.

Besides the two ideological and political representations, researchers have identified another representation of Tibet from the 14th Dalai Lama. Hartnett (2013) analyzed multiple rhetorical strategies by contrasting the Chinese Communist Party’s (CCP) patriotic rhetoric of communist modernity, the Tibetan independence groups’ testimonial rhetoric of catastrophic witnessing, and the Dalai Lama’s discourse as the
conflicted rhetoric of Buddhist care. In the rhetorical productions of the 14th Dalai Lama, Hartnett (2013) pointed out that his Buddhist “middle way” calls for infinite patience toward one’s oppressor, but appears to be incapable of motivating sustained grassroots and international efforts on behalf of his people. The Dalai Lama’s “middle way” approach was first conceptualized in a speech on September 1987. In the speech, his Holiness addressed sentimental attitudes towards history and his concern for the future of Tibet:

The past four decades, which witnessed the invasion and consequent occupation of Tibet by Communist China, have been the most difficult and tragic period in the long history of our country. … And today when we commemorate the twenty-eighth anniversary of our National Uprising we once again remember the brave Tibetan people. … Today there is greater danger than ever before to the survival of our people, our religion, our culture and our country.

Even the Chinese themselves, who have an ancient civilization, are deprived of individual freedoms. They are living in a state of great anxiety about the present changes and uncertainty of the future. It is my hope that they too will gain the inalienable rights and freedoms that are basic to all human beings. (Dalai Lama, 1987)

Scholars took drastically different views on the Dalai Lama’s rhetoric about Tibet. For instance, Yu (2010) analyzed and questioned the Dalai Lama’s discourse on Tibet. Yu first questioned why the “west” embraced the romantic Tibet (e.g. Shangri-La, the lost horizon and the nomadic Tibetan culture), and he contested the Dalai Lama’s speech on
Tibet. Yu believed that it is essentially problematic for Dalai Lama to address the Tibetan people as “we” because the “old Tibet was a Caste-like social system, and it is impossible for Dalai Lama (the ruling party) to identify with Tibetans who were peasant slaves before the 1950s. Based on Yu’s observation, such “Tibetan people” have been created within the discursive sphere, and doing so enables ethnic Tibetans to act on behalf of the Dalai Lama.

These competing ideologies have created different realities of Tibet; however, the voices of the Tibetan communities and people have been left out of the public conversation. Truthfully, Tibet encompasses many geographical locations, languages, and dialects as well as religious practices. The political discourses at a macro-level have centered on “Little Tibet” in India and Tibet today within the Chinese nation-state boundaries. By understanding the diversity of Tibet and its languages, we can better make sense of organizing in Kham Tibet. The first question that needs to be answered is simply “Where is Tibet?”

**Where is Tibet?** Tibet cannot be defined by its geographic boundaries because Tibetans live in India, Nepal, Bhutan and China etc. It is important to distinguish the “political” Tibet and the “ethnographic” Tibet (Godstein, 1997), while acknowledging that the boundaries between “political” and “ethnographic” can be blurry. The political Tibet is largely understood by the “mapped” geographic locations within the Chinese nation-state boundary. To many Chinese citizens or even to the international publics, Tibet is known as “Xizang”\(^4\) province,” namely, the Tibetan Autonomous Region (TAR)

\(^4\) *Xizang*: A Chinese term for “Tibetan Autonomous Region.”
on the map of China. This political conception of Tibet has overemphasized on the Utsang area, and has excluded Amdo and Kham regions since the 1920s (Li, 2012).

Ethnographic Tibetan communities can be found in India, Nepal, Bhutan etc. in addition to the three ethnolinguistic communities—Kham, Amdo and Utsang within today’s Chinese nation-state boundaries (see Appendix A for a map of Tibetan ethnolinguistic communities). The latter three communities have a variety of languages based on their customs, sects of Buddhism, and geographic locations. The political and religious center of Tibet is located in Lhasa, inside the Utsang ethnolinguistic community. The Amdo area overlaps with the Gansu and Qinghai provinces of China. The Kham region is located in the east of the Tibetan plateau, along with parts of the Sichuan, Yunnan and Qinghai provinces in China. Yudru Tsomu (2012) noted that the well-known fable of Shangri-La in Lost Horizon by James Hilton is likely to be in today’s Kham area.

Overview of Dissertation Chapters

I have provided background and a rationale for why I chose to study Tibetan teachers’ and community members’ organizing activities in Kham Tibet. Next, I offer an overview of the dissertation chapters:

Chapter One, “Introduction,” has explained how the purpose of the dissertation evolved and emerged. This chapter also offered a historical background and my brief discussion of different views on Tibetan history. Then I reviewed literatures addressing Tibetans’ organizing and how some communication scholars have portrayed discourses
related to organizing in Tibet. At the end of this chapter, I called for my readers to recognize Tibetans as mindful and resourceful social change agents.

Chapter Two, “A Hybrid Dialogic Perspective: The Inbetweenness of Zhuang Zi and Martin Buber,” presents a meta-theoretical chapter on eastern and western conceptions of dialogue. First, I contextualize a dialogical perspective for studying Tibetan teachers’ and community members’ organizing in Kham Tibet. Then, I describe the intertextuality between the Daoist text Zhuang Zi and the dialogical philosopher Martin Buber’s I and Thou. In doing so, I identify four characteristics of this meta-theoretical account of dialogue, which include: boundless bound, purposeless purpose, embodiment, and being while becoming. This meta-theory does not seek to generalize ways of how humans make sense of the world. Rather, it suggests a fluid perspective to study communicative practice, and proposes a way to capture meaning-making processes more holistically. Engaging this hybrid perspective also serves as an enactment of my subjectivity as a person and a researcher.

In Chapter Three, I describe my investigative learning process, a dialogical ethnography. To relate a conscious understanding of my own positionality, I first explain the five rituals from Chinese culture as my fundamental ethical guidance for conducting this ethnography. Next, I explain how the conception “active passivity” has guided my practices before, during, and after the fieldwork. Then, I share how I evolve into a co-actor in the Tibetan community in Kham Tibet. Last, I present a narrative sympathetic understanding guided by Bakhtin’s (1984) “Discourse in the Novel” in the doing and
writing process. Performing this emergent approach gives rise to the following four narrative chapters that exemplify the four central characteristics of dialogue.

Chapters Four, “Boundless Bound,” describes my experience of observing the sky burial at the Larung Buddhist Academy. I use a flashback technique to narrate the four stories that became interconnected through the dialogical theme of “boundless bound,” while observing vultures competing for the dead bodies. The four stories, 1) “Why is my culture buried in the museum,” 2) “Why we are we grouped as No.2,” 3) “One culture’s rhythm is another culture’s noise,” and 4) a conversation in the cave, comprise significant events in Tibetan teachers’ and community members’ lives. The core of the four stories shows their understanding of interdependence of all beings and things, as well as the environment. It also reveals that how Tibetan teachers and community members make sense of the “boundless” through cultivating freedom and happiness for themselves by experiencing them from within.

In Chapter Five, “Purposeless Purpose,” I first narrate the story of a Tibetan teacher, Dolma, who finds her purpose in starting a nonprofit organization to support the under-resourced Tibetan students. Next, I describe Dolma’s practice of relating across persons from different ethnic, social-economic, educational, and national backgrounds. In addition, I also tell the story of how a Chinese male businessman Badeng Tashi’s purpose emerged from being a tourist to actively preserving Tibetan language and culture by his photographs in the Kham area. A local-international organizing network has emerged from these seemingly purposeless practices. Thus, these stories echo the second central character of dialogue “purposeless purpose.”
Chapter Six, “Embodiment,” explores the process of how two persons with contradicting worldviews come to starting an embodied dialogue. I first describe my unpleasant encounter with a Tibetan teacher Tsering. Then, I reflect on how these experiences prevented me from entering a genuine dialogue with the other. Next, I narrate a dialogic moment between Tsering and I in a teahouse that involves four rhythmic silences. These silences occurred during the two dialogic partners’ internal dialogizing process with attempts to speak the other person’s language. An embodied moment between Tsering and I encompasses regarding each other as a whole being in presence, and acknowledging each other’s differences even though we are from strongly contrasting cultural backgrounds. Last, this embodied dialogue between Tsering and I created relational transformation that was contemplated by Dolma’s observation.

In Chapter Seven “Being while Becoming,” I describe a dialogical moment between Tsering and the Han Chinese teacher Xuyuan in a public place. A dialogue has created a context for the two dialogical parties as well as the audience to continuously reflect and to become. Next, I also narrate two stories “I swallowed the paper with my language” and “This tree symbolizes the past, present, and future of our language and culture.” These stories reflect the process of the Tibetan teachers’ concern for language and culture, past and present, in their ongoing efforts of being while becoming. Moreover, two other stories: “The survival of our culture is a narrow footpath” and “Language is like Dharanis” further captures the struggles and changes in Tibetan language and culture-and the tension between tradition and modernity. They illustrated how Tibetan teachers and community members recreate new vision for the future of
Tibetan language and culture in their ongoing practices. Last I share a story of a *thangka* teacher Dondrup’s efforts to preserve Tibetan traditional art by actively learning and sharing with Chinese artists, and also by teaching the younger Tibetans this special skill despite the fact that *thangka* painting methods are considered a secret of family heritage. These lived events have shown the concurrent and creative nature of dialogue, “being while becoming.”

In Chapter Eight “Discussion,” I first summarize the main contributions of each chapter. Then I will describe how a hybrid dialogical approach helps us to understand the processes and the potentials of Tibetans teachers’ and community members’ organizing in Kham Tibet. I next outline my limitations and describe the significant contributions that this project might offer to a broader understanding of communication scholarship as well as field practices for Tibetan languages preservation. Last, I map out three brief plans for future research and practice that continue the theme of this dissertation.

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5 *Thangka* is a type of Tibetan Buddhist painting with embroidery, usually depicting a Buddhist deity or scene.
Chapter Two: A Hybrid Dialogical Perspective: The inbetweenness of Zhuang Zi and Martin Buber

The single adequate form for verbally expressing authentic human life is the open-ended dialogue…To live means to participate in dialogue: to ask questions, to heed, to respond, to agree, and so forth. In this dialogue a person participates wholly and throughout his whole life: with his eyes, lips, hands, soul, spirit, with his whole body and deeds. He [/she] invests his[/her] entire self in discourse, and this discourse enters into dialogic fabric of human life.

--Bakhtin (1984, p.239)

To explore the processes of the Tibetans teachers’ and community members’ organizing serves is to make sense of the dynamic and fluid nature of communication. Following Karl Weick (1969), many communication scholars have called us to study organizing as process-centered and time-varying nature of practices in organizations (Farace, Monge, & Russell, 1977; Papa, Singhal, & Papa, 2006). Besides that, organizing also requires people to perceive they are connected in some way. This particular conception of organizing process involves relating, a communicative process that connects individuals. In the organizing and relating processes communication is central both to the medium (human organizing) and the product (organizations and communities, as well as the environment in which the organizations and communities are embedded). Accordingly, this dissertation research explores how Tibetan teachers and community members organize through communicative relationships to preserve their mother tongue.
because it is through such organizing processes that local Tibetan community can be built, constituted, and even transformed.

**Contextualizing A Dialogical Perspective**

Barrett (1998) suggested that new models and metaphors are needed for organizing due to the unprecedented scope of changes organizations (or communities) face. The philosophy of dialogue offers a holistic and humanistic understanding of Tibetan teachers’ and community members’ organizing processes. Primarily, a dialogical perspective is meaning-centered and recursive, which captures the ever-changing and generative nature of organizing activities. Dialogue also proposes a self-reflexive and generative process for people to meet, share realities, and engender possibilities for change. In the context of Kham Tibetan communities, the organizing processes involve relationship building between Tibetans and Han Chinese. More importantly, a dialogical perspective enables different individual bodies to share realities. It is key to create a space for individuals with differences to negotiate the differences and expectantly “make a difference.” Hawes (1999) indicated that dialogue produces possibility for social relations with structures that are circular and self-referential rather than linear and merely self-preoccupied. Krippendorff (1999) also suggested that in dialogue, a process that is never completed, participants remain open to redefine themselves in response to each other. In dialogue members who are involved in the organizing processes are co-participants that continuously (re)create themselves and their environment, acknowledging and ultimately transcending the differences.
Zhuang Zi and Martin Buber

The territory of dialogue has already expanded internationally and shed light on communication between social/cultural groups and institutions (Xu, 2013; Guo & Hu, 2013; Hoover, 2011; LaFever, 2011; Keaten & Soukup, 2009; Simpson, 2008; DeTurk, 2006). This dissertation’s theoretical development and application of dialogue focused on plurality, mutuality, and a critical perspective to transformational change has been drawn from three well-known dialogic thinkers: Buber, Bakhtin, and Levinas. However, existing theory and practice in communication studies has not given enough acknowledgement to Eastern philosophy. As Miike (2007) pointed out, “Dialogical communication thinkers would claim that they have long shed light on empathy and other-directedness…And yet, their Western ideas on ‘human communication’ have not directed thorough attention to non-Western perspectives” (p. 276). With acknowledgement of the Eastern philosophical influence, I propose a hybrid perspective between Martin Buber’s (1987) *I and Thou* and the Daoist text *Zhuang Zi* to make sense of Tibetan teachers’ and community members’ organizing.

Zhuang Zi lived in the second half of the 4th century B.C.; and Buber is the most well-known 20th century philosopher of dialogue. The identifiable first meeting between Buber and the Daoist master Zhuan Zi was Buber’s publication of two volumes of translations, that is, selections of Zhuang Zi and stories of *Liao Zhai Zhi Yi* in 1910 and 1911 (Eber, 2008; Herman, 1996). Later in Buber’s life, he reedited *Zhuang Zi* and translated a large amount of ancient Chinese text including *Lunyu* (Analects), and *Dao De Jing* to German (Macfie, 2003). In addition, Herman (1996) has detected a few
thematic resonances between Zhuang Zi and Buber’s *I and Thou*: a primordial teacher, the creation and transformation, the non-knowing and non-doing.

Considering that Zhuang Zi’s text is written on a high level of abstraction and with paradoxical language uses, very few detailed interpretations of Zhuang Zi and Buberian philosophy are offered in communication scholarship. The text of *Zhuang Zi* has been studied in ancient Chinese rhetoric. Communication scholar Lu (1998) briefly pointed out that the Zhuang Zi and Martin Buber shared common ground in the philosophy dialogue. More scholars in other disciplines (e.g. philosophy and religious studies) also have identified the common ground in philosophical perspectives between Buber and Zhuang Zi (Eber, 2008; Werblowsky, 2002; Herman, 1996). However, the sharedness between the two conceptions in dialogical philosophy is not fully presented. Jonathan R. Herman’s (1996) *I and Tao* included Buber’s German translation of selected chapters of *Zhuang Zi* and discussions of the shared ontological, epistemological, and cosmological aspects between Buber and Zhuang Zi. In a book review of Herman’s *I and Tao*, Allison (1998) pointed out that Buber’s commentary on *Zhuang Zi* as “proto-dialogic” remains unclear in Herman’s description. With an emphasis in communication, my intertextual analysis will describe how Zhuang Zi and Buber share a dialogical tradition by offering four central characteristics of dialogue.

**Four Central Characteristics of Dialogue**

The hybrid philosophical framework of dialogue I describe identifies four central characteristics of dialogue as composing the major thematic resonances between Zhuang Zi and Buber. They are: (I) Boundless bound (the cultivation of immanent freedom); (II)
Purposeless purpose (dialogue as a process and context for a purpose to evolve); (III) Embodiment (giving ourselves to the dialogic situation, acting the non-action); and (IV) Being while Becoming (creativity in momentary transformation). These four central characteristics intersect and give rise to each other. More importantly, this hybrid perspective will guide my field study of Tibetan teachers and community members’ organizing, which recognizes the meaning-centered, unresolved consequential nature, and the creative potential of human communication.

**Boundless bound.** The first central characteristic of dialogue, Boundless Bound, deals with the interconnectedness among beings and things, as well as their interdependence with the environment. Even though there is interdependence (and/or constraints), this character of dialogue seeks possibility to cultivate immanent freedom. Both Buber and Zhuang Zi shared this hermeneutic unit in their texts. In Zhuang Zi’s *A leisurely and Blissful Journey*, he first used metaphor to imply that the journey of life is always bounded or constrained by the things/beings as well as the environment that we are interconnected with. The metaphor described a gigantic bird named *peng* always bounded with the wind while flying cross the ocean:

If the wind is not massive, it [the bird, *peng*] will not have the strength to support the big wings. Therefore, with the support of the wind from below and with its back to the blue sky and without encountering the slightest resistance, the *peng* flies ninety thousand *li* southward. (Inner chapter, p.24, translated by Wu, 2008) Zhuang Zi used the story of *Peng* flying across the oceans and having to depend on the wind to imply the interconnectedness of everyday life. Similarly, humans cannot separate
themselves from the environment they live in. All things and beings have certain bonds with each other. Meanwhile, Zhuang Zi indicated that such boundlessness might arise when wandering with a heart of immanent freedom even though we are always bounded and constrained by the environment:

If one could live by the law of nature, ride on the changes of the six qi [energies], and wander in the illimitable, he would have depended on nothing, therefore, a superior man seeks no self, a spirited man seeks no merit, and a sainted man seeks no fame. (Inner Chapter, p.27, translated by Wu, 2008)

Zhuang Zi emphasized especially the possibilities of seeking the boundless within the bound. From this text, Zhuang Zi focuses on how immanent freedom is cultivated with plenty of imagination: forgetting the self, seeking no merit, and no fame. One way to interpret the text is to connect the meaningful metaphors of the bird peng to our daily practices. As humans we are bounded with our earthly desires. The question is: how do we transcend the desire for objects (which Buber refers as the It) and become bounded with “nothing”?

More precisely, Buber’s explanation in I and Thou brings Zhuang Zi’s abstract analogy down to earth. Buber’s (1987) writes, “Every It is bounded by others; It exists only through being bounded by others. But when Thou is spoken, there is no thing. Thou has no bounds.” (p.4) Both Buber and Zhuang Zi share the idea of cultivating a dialogue with others to seek the possibility of boundlessness in the bound. Buber and Zhuang Zi also had the same concern with how the freedom “from” the others limits the freedom
“to” be the self. Lu (1998) pointed out how Zhuang Zi and Buber’s views on freedom are in common:

Zhuangzi’s ideal speaker is a free person—free from limitations, illusions, and deceptions. Such freedom allows an open, inclusive, and transcendent mind capable of absorbing and harmonizing different opinions. ...In this way communication will be a shared, humane, and a complete experience. This view is similar to Martin Buber’s philosophy of the genuine dialogue in which one sees oneself not as a separate individual, but rather as part of the “essential We” that lies in the sphere of the “between.” (p.250)

In this sense Buber (1987) explored how the relationship of I-It constrains us from freedom combined with the moments of I-Thou relationship as the process of cultivating the immanent freedom for the beings in dialogue:

It does not know the reality of spirit; its scheme is not valid for spirit. Prediction from objectivity is valid only for the man who does not know presentness. He who is overcome by the world of It is bound to see, in the dogma of immutable process, a truth that clears a way through the exuberant growth; in very truth this dogma enslaves him only the more deeply to the world of It. But the world of Thou is not closed. He who goes out to it with concentrated being and risen power to enter into relation becomes aware of freedom. And to be freed from belief that there is no freedom is indeed to be free. (p.58)

The central meaning for boundless bound recognizes the interconnectedness of beings and things even while it aims at cultivating the immanent freedom in the hearts
and minds of individuals. It is not freedom from the social structural or a micro-level relational structure; what Buber and Zhuang Zi advocate is the freedom to be the self—and the belief that the immanent freedom can be cultivated. Buber (1987) says, “Destiny and freedom are solemnly promised to one another. Only the man who makes freedom real to himself meets destiny” (p.48). Many times we are members of social/cultural groups that carry the already-made labels and restrictions by socially constructed rules/norms from institutions. To cultivate freedom (for self and others) in dialogue is a difficult struggle. Freedom is always associated with power and dominance. For instance, Paulo Freire (2000), who shares much of Buber’s dialogical perspective, noted:

The oppressed, having internalized the image of the oppressor and adopted his guidelines, are fearful of freedom. Freedom would require them to eject this image and replace it with autonomy and responsibility. Freedom is acquired by conquest, not by gift. It must be pursued constantly ad responsibly. Freedom is not an ideal located outside of man; nor it is an idea which becomes myth. It is rather the dispensable condition for the quest of human completion. (p.65)

The voice to the self from seeking the immanent freedom can serve as a connection to others, and that is how solidarity is created to challenge dominant and unjust social structures. Following the teaching of Buber and Daoism, through offering dialogue and by sharing realities, we find the voice of freedom for ourselves by experiencing it from within.

**Purposeless purpose.** The second central characteristic of dialogue, purposeless purpose, deals with the problematic of the intentionality of why we start, get involved, or
end a dialogue. The questions are: Who is facilitating the dialogue? How is the context of
dialogue framed? And how would the “relational” or “task” goal be achieved? These
questions are central to communication scholars as they emphasize the emergent nature
of communication. Most often we enter a dialogue not really knowing exactly what to
say. Purposeless purpose explains how dialogue serves as a process and a context for
purpose(s) to evolve.

In *Zhuang Zi*, the problematic of intentionality is frequently presented in the
mythic tales. Zhuang Zi approaches intentionality in a dramatized way:

The Yellow Emperor wandered northward from the Red Sea, climbed Mount
K’un-lun and gazed toward the south. Upon his journey home, he lost his
enchanted pearl. He sent cognition out searching, but he did not find it. He sent
clear-sight out searching but he didn’t find it. He sent Thought-power out
searching, but he did not find it. Finally he sent Aimlessness out, and he found it.

“Strange but true,” spoke the emperor, “that Aimlessness had the capacity to find
it.” (“School of Chuang Tzu”, 29/12/18-20, cited from Herman, 1996, p.44, p.45)

Zhuang Zi’s paradoxical and oxymoronic language in the anecdote of how Aimlessness
had the capacity to find the pearl goes along with the notion that I-Thou meeting is not
achieved through seeking. In other words, it involves the possible relational
transformation without clear-cut purpose or the attitude of assertion in thought-power.

The Aimlessness that found the pearl is consistent with Buber’s description of the
process of meeting Thou in dialogue. The clear-cut purpose can restrain dialogue. In
dialogue two or more agents enter the dialogue with their own purposes. Yet since they
are open to take one another’s perspective, their original purpose is possible to change. And the purposes they brought into the dialogue can be altered or subverted by the ecology of dialogue. When the parties involved in dialogue know the exact goal they want to achieve, real dialogue is impossible to evolve. Buber started the discussion of I-Thou relationship with “All real living is meeting” (p.11). Through meeting the evolving dialogic process involves the purpose of finding a purpose:

It is a finding without seeking, a discovering of the primal, of origin. His sense of _Thou_, which cannot be satiated till he finds the endless _Thou_, had the _Thou_ present to it from the beginning; the presence had only to become wholly real to him in the reality of the hallowed world. (Buber, 1987, p.80)

The real meeting requires self to stay fully in presence with the dialogic other in the meeting. Buber’s understanding connects with Zhuang Zi’s notion of primordial/presence intelligence. In the fable of Aimlessness Zhuang Zi believed that an authentic transformation/aesthetic whole cannot be achieved with cognition, clear-cut purpose, and strong thought-power. The achievement is through meeting in the wonders. Buber (1987) echoed Zhuang Zi and further clarified the process:

The relation to the _Thou_ is direct. No system of ideas, no foreknowledge, and no fancy intervene between I and _Thou_. The memory itself is transformed, as it plunges out of its isolation into the unity of the whole. No aim, no lust, and no anticipation intervene between I and _Thou_. Desire is transformed as it plunges out of its dream into the appearance. Every means is an obstacle. Only when every means has collapsed does the meeting come about. (p. 12)
Particularly, the ideas of “finding without seeking,” “no anticipation,” and “no fancy intervene” between I and Thou share and explain Zhuang Zi’s abstract sense of Aimlessness in finding the pearl. In Buber and Zhuang Zi’s teaching the purposeless serves as a way of depoliticizing the mediation in the world that prevents us from being “real” in the moment, such as preexisting assumptions of cultural groups formed and constructed by public discourses. When I meet you, before I talk to you, I’ve already seen you as your social/cultural group’s representative image in the media, or somebody else who told your stories. These “fancy[ies] intervene” between an actual relationship and prevent me from meeting Thou. In the modern world institutions train us to prepare clear-cut objectives and planned ways to reach the task or relational goal. While we focus on these highly mediated purposes, it makes it difficult to meet Thou. Buber (1987) stated the downside of meeting with clear-cut purpose:

The self-willed man does not believe and does not meet.... Without sacrifice and without grace, without meeting and without presentness, he has as his world a mediated world cluttered with purposes. His world cannot be anything else, and its name is fate. Thus with all his sovereignty he is wholly and inextricably entangled in the unreal. He knows this whenever he turns his thoughts to himself; that is why he directs the best part of his spirituality to averting or at least to veiling his thoughts. (pp. 60-61)

Both Buber and Zhuang Zi’s views on purpose focus on the communicative process—dialogue as a process that provides a context for purposes to evolve. In particular, Buber’s “the aim of relation is relation’s own being” (p. 63) has shared the
Daoist ideal—returning to the primordial state of being. In exploring organizing across differences, relational building requires an evolving purpose for two or multiple parties to get into the dialogue. Many scholars have called for treating the relational other as unique being; Zhuang Zi and Buber both provided this guidance.

**Embodiment.** Embodiment serves as the third central characteristic for dialogue, which focuses on how a dialogic moment occurs. Embodiment is an essential part of dialogue, but it can only be articulated or understood retrospectively. It is a principle in the dialogical philosophy for both Buber and Zhuang Zi. First, both texts *I and Thou* and *Zhuang Zi* use a tree to describe the process of embodiment. In *Zhuang Zi*, one chapter on Holy Tree relates:

> When the carpenter came home, he dreamed that the oak tree appeared to him and spoke to him, “What is it with which you compare me? Is it the elegant trees? The whitethorn, the pear tree, the orange tree, and other fruits-carriers, as soon as their fruits have ripened, are plundered and insultingly handled. Large branches are cracked, small ones broken off. These trees thus harm their own lives through their worth. They cannot complete their allotted spans, but perish prematurely in the midst of their journeys, since they are entangled in the surrounding world. So it is with all things. For a long time it was my goal to become useless. Several times I was in danger, but finally I have succeeded, and so it came that I now am rich in use. But were I to have been of utility at those times, I would not have the great abundance of uses that I do now.
Besides, we both belong, you and I, to the same class of things. Do away with this passion for blame. Is a worthless man the right person to talk about a worthless tree? (Inner Chapters, 11/4/64-73, Cited from Herman, 1999, p.28)

A tree can be seen as an object, a piece of wood, or a boat made from the wood. When the tree is approached as a whole, a unity, it provides the idea of cultivating this attitude, and it will prepare us to move toward the beginning of *I and Thou*. If I am bodily over against the tree, I have an immediate emotional connection with a tree, an immediate relationship. If I experience it directly, I do not have to see it as a tree. I do not know what I felt until I leave the embodiment. I look back and feel that the tree enjoyed nature with me; both of us were breathing the fresh air, standing in between the heaven and earth.

In Buber’s (1987) *I and Thou*, the discussion of the embodiment of the tree indicates the dialogical moment as bodily over against:

Everything belonging to the tree is in this: its form and structure, its colours and chemical composition, its intercourse with the elements and with the stars are all present in the single whole.

The tree is no impression, no play of my imagination, no value depending on my mood but it is bodied over against me and has to do with me, as I with it—only in a different way.

Let no attempt be made to sap the strength from the meaning of the relation: relation is mutual.
The tree will have a consciousness, then, similar to our own? Of what I have no experience. But do you wish, through seeming to succeed in it with yourself, once again to disintegrate that which cannot be disintegrated? I encounter no soul or dryad of the tree, but the tree itself. (p.7-8)

In the relation with Thou, the I’s “bodied over against” mutuality (including two or more parties in dialogue) arises simultaneously in space and time. Humans are living in the world with beings and things. We can easily perceive a tree as an object or imagine the ways of its various functions. Buber and Zhuang Zi’s direct relation with the tree highlighted the authentic relationship between beings and things. Buber (1985) explained in detail how embodiment occurs:

I can neither experience nor describe the form which meets me, but only body it forth. And yet I behold it, splendid in the radiance of what confronts me, clearer than all the clearness of the world which is experienced, I do not behold it as a thing among the “inner” things nor as an image of my “fancy,” but as that which exists in the present. If test is made of its objectivity the form is certainly not “there.” Yet what is actually so much present as it is? And the relation in which I stand to it is real, for it affects me, as I affect it. (p.10)

The way to become a whole being in a dialogic relationship is through the moment of embodiment. It encompasses spontaneous and direct action with another, yet acting as if it is non-action—we become selfless bodies in the dialogic process. And the dialogic agents involved in the process are not able to realize whether such a moment is
happening. We can only make sense of the dialogic process after we leave the dialogue. This is what Zhuang Zi called “non-action” (Wu Wei 無為).

Zhuang Zi confined Lao Zi’s idea of non-action to “principles of reason in the guidance and justification of one’s actions, but rather leaving space for one’s mind to roam freely, attend to the total situation, and act instinctively and spontaneously” (Lu, 1998, p.242). Non-action can be understood as acting as if it is not an action because dialogic agents are not able to realize how the embodiment process starts because they are in the dialogue at a specific moment. Carrying out non-action involves a spontaneous organic meeting. Buber (1987) notes the process of becoming a whole being as an activity of doing nothing:

This is the activity of the man who has become a whole being, an activity that has been termed doing nothing: nothing separate or partial stirs in the man any more, thus he makes no intervention in the world; it is the whole man, enclosed and at rest in his wholeness, that is effective — he has become an effective whole. To have won stability in this state is to be able to go out to the supreme meeting.

(p.77)

In this real supreme meeting, we seek the possibility of transcendence. The process of becoming a whole is temporary and formless in nature. Dao cannot be found but achieved; the transcendence comes in a flash— “As for Tao, there is actuality, there is reliability; there is no doing, there is no form. It can be transmitted but cannot be received, can be gotten but cannot be seen” (“Inner Chapters” 16/6/29, cited from Herman, 1996, p.170). Similarly, Buber writes, in meeting Thou, “I can neither
experience nor describe the form which meets me, but only body it forth” (p.11). In the
process of human communication, by acting the non-action, the real meeting will occur.
It will momentarily drive individuals who are involved in a dialogic process to see each
other as a more unique and holistic being. However, in experiencing such dialogic
moments, embodiment can only be realized retrospectively.

**Being while becoming.** The three central characteristics of dialogue: boundless
bound, purposeless purpose, and embodiment constitute and enhance the process of being
while becoming—creativity in momentary transformation. Being while becoming
captures the overall recursive nature of dialogue; it is always doing and undergoing—a
creative and generative process. Both Zhuang Zi and Buber accentuated creativity in
reveals, in meeting, its essential nature as form” (p.26). Creation comes from the form-
giving momentary transformation. For instance, Buber’s account of *I-It* and *I-Thou*
relationship transformation explains the ever-changing form-giving process. The process
is endless and emerges from meaningful dialogue, as Buber (1987) also refers to the
dialogic process as a form-giving:

> In art the act of being determines the situation in which the form becomes the
work. Through the meeting that which confronts me is fulfilled, and enters the
world of things, there to be endlessly active, endlessly to become *It*, but also
endlessly to become *Thou* again, inspiring and blessing. It is “embodied;” its body
emerges from the flow of spaceless, timeless present on the shore of existence.
(p.14)
Relationship with the Thou in presence cannot be named nor realized at the moment; but when we approach it retrospectively, the I-Thou relationship transforms into I-It, which can be eventually named (articulated by language). The body is brought into existence and always in the process of awaiting or re-entering another I-Thou relationship. Buber further (1987) writes, “Through the Thou a man becomes I” (p.28). The self in dialogue is always a regenerative and recreating process with beings and things.

Both Buber’s philosophy and Daoism share this ontological principle. As Herman (1996) pointed out, Buber’s observation of Dao is not simply in the primordial beginning but a “creative energy immediately pervasive and totally embodied in all temporal or spatial configurations” (p.140). Creativity occurs when we see beings and things in a different vision. In Zhuang Zi’s text that describes creativity in a subtle pseudo-dialogue between Confucius and his student Yen Hui, the discussion shifts from politics to cultivating self-realization as the primordial source of creativity:

“Look at the window. It makes it such that an empty space is animated by scenery; but the landscape remains outside. Were this not so, we would have a contradiction for ourselves, as if one thing at the same time could stand still and run away.”

“So you may use your ears and eyes that they communicate the world to you, but you should banish all false knowledge out of your mind.”

“Then the supernatural will come to you and dwell near you; how should man thus deny you?”
“This is the way to regenerate creation.” (Inner Chapters” 8/4/1-33, with portions omitted, translated by Herman, 1996, p.25-26)

This conversation reveals Zhuang Zi’s understanding of the cyclic process of creativity in dialogue: it arises with different angles to view reality in another world, to take a different standpoint. This process involves unlearning—“banish all false knowledge" out of your mind.” Creativity occurs in the web of authentic relations, and is not experienced as selflessness; and it then gives rise to that experience—we can see reality differently. This is what we call self-transformation. One of Zhuang Zi’s tales about “dreaming as a butterfly” has an implication of creative thinking. After the dream, Zhuang Zi questioned himself, “Now I did not know if I was thus a man who dreamed he was a butterfly, or am I now a butterfly who is dreaming that he is a man” (Inner chapters, 7/2/94-96, Herman, 1996, p. 21). Zhuang Zi’s dreaming about a butterfly offers another worldview that this world can be seen differently if we take a different perspective. A Daoist communication scholar Cheng (1987) further explained how reality is reconstructed through perspective taking:

One should not confine oneself to the common belief in reality and should liberate oneself toward the creative possibilities of understanding reality. Consequently, one moves toward the creative grasping of reality, for reality understood in a certain way is reality constituted in a certain way, and understanding or seeing is a way of constituting reality. (p.37)

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6 The translation from Chinese to English is false knowledge; however it does not refer to absolute false knowledge. The original term indicates false knowledge as presumptions of reality.
In this light the creative process centers on decentering the self, and allowing the other to happen to the I. Buber (1987) also specified an analogous way of grasping reality:

Certainly the world “dwells” in me as an image, just as I dwell in it as a thing. But it is not for that reason in me, just as I am not in it. The world and I are mutually included, the one in the other. This contradiction in thought, inherent in the situation of It, is resolved in the situation of Thou, which sets me free from the world in order to bind me up in solidarity of connexion with it. (p.93)

More specific than Zhuang Zi in describing the dialogic process, Buber (1987) reemphasized the dialogical process as a relational process with high connectivity and edifying individuality:

In pure relation you have felt yourself to be simply dependent, as you are able to feel in no other relation—and simply free, too as in no other time or place: you have felt yourself to be both creaturely and creative. You had the one feeling then no longer limited by the others, but you had both of them limitless and together. (p.82)

The process of creativity in momentary transformation relies on the cyclic state of being while becoming. This central characteristic of dialogue emphasizes communication both as a process and an outcome of relational events.

This meta-theory of dialogue addresses the interconnectedness of beings/things (as well as their interdependence with their environment), the problematic of intentionality, unrealizable dialogical moments, and the cyclic process of dialogic transformation. This understanding of dialogue involves a hybrid perspective in studying
philosophical foundations between the East and West by offering dialogue between Buber and Zhuang Zi. The intertextuality between the Daoist text Zhuang Zi and Martin Buber’s *I and Thou* shows that philosophical views across geographic boundaries can be shared and consummate each other. More importantly, this hybrid perspective to study communication recognizes the meaning-centered, unresolved consequential nature, and the creative potential of human communication. This meta-theory seeks to capture and understand the “ongoing flow” and “ever-changing” qualities of human experience, but does not aim to essentialize or generalize to all Tibetan teachers’ and community members’ communicative practice.

**Research Questions**

My dissertation employs this hybrid dialogical perspective in attending to Tibetan teachers’ and community members’ organizing for language preservation in the Kham area. In the Tibetan teachers’ and community members’ organizing processes the central problematic lies in building relationships across the group boundaries of the “self” and the “other.” In this context I believe the hybrid dialogical perspective could provide a lens for further learning. In the context of Tibet the competing grand narratives have created barriers that prevent meaningful relationships (e.g. friendship and partnership) building. As Rawlins (2009) indicated:

What one community regards as bigotry another community may narrate as upholding the necessary boundaries between the community and those who should be excluded. Unfortunately, through such community stories, ranging from
dyads to larger social groups, the other becomes marked as the other that is
devalued and dehumanized. (p.51)

Especially between Han Chinese and Tibetan ethnic groups, the “self” and the “other” are
largely demarcated by exclusive community stories. In their organizing processes, groups
of Tibetan teachers and community members’ (both Tibetans and Han Chinese) could
possibly co-create new stories when working towards Kham language preservation
through friendships or partnerships across difference (ethnic groups, educational levels,
and social class etc.). Such friendships and networks of friendship can provide ethical
implications for broader political activities (Rawlins, 2009).

Besides the problematic of the self-other relationships in organizing, another
concern centers on the question of what Tibetan teachers’ and community members’
organizing can achieve. Since organizing is a generative activity, possible social
transformations could occur. Social transformation includes the ways in which
individuals and groups find their own voices in action, and ultimately co-create worlds
with others through communication. Communication at the interpersonal and small-group
levels has considerable emancipatory potential (Ruesch & Bateson, 2008). With these
concerns, I address two overarching questions that frame and guide this research:
RQ1: How and to what extent do Tibetan teachers and community members build
relationships across differences in their organizing processes for Kham language
preservation?
RQ2: How and to what extent does dialogue occur in the Tibetan teachers’ and
community members’ communicative practices?
In sum, this chapter presented a meta-theoretical perspective based on eastern and western conceptions of dialogue. I first contextualized a dialogical perspective for studying Tibetan teachers’ and community members’ organizing in Kham Tibet. Then I presented the intertextuality between the Daoist text *Zhuang Zi* and the dialogical philosopher Martin Buber’s *I and Thou*. This meta-theory does not seek to generalize ways of how humans make sense of the world. Rather, it suggests a fluid perspective to study communicative practice, and proposes a way to capture meaning-making processes more holistically. This meta-theory evoked two questions guiding my research to understand the process of Tibetan community organizing. Engaging this hybrid perspective also serves as an enactment of my subjectivity as a person and a researcher.
Chapter Three: A Dialogical Ethnography: Performing an Emergent and Aesthetic Approach

It is not sufficient to know the personal but to know—to speak it in a different way. Knowing the personal might mean naming spaces of ignorance, gaps in knowledge, ones that render us unable to link the personal with the political.

--hooks (1989, p.107)

Who Are You to Do This

As a Chinese national, colleagues and friends in America and China have frequently questioned my research interest in Tibet. In a research methods class I attended last year, one of the graduate students walked up to me and asked a series of questions after I presented a few ideas from my research on Kham Tibet. She started with a first question, “You are Chinese, not Tibetan, right?” I responded, “You are right. I am ethnic Chinese and a Chinese national.” She felt puzzled, “Why are you doing research on Tibet?” After I shared my personal and family connection with Tibet, she posed another question, “So, are you pro-free-Tibet or not?” I was surprised that such a question was asked right after I presented my view that rejects dichotomies to the class. I repeated my view, “This is not an ‘either-or’ answer; it is involved with a long political history.” I explained to her very patiently by talking about the history between Tibet and China beginning 6000 years ago. But she did not want to wait for me to finish the explanation and asked me another question, “Have you watched the movie, Seven Years in Tibet? Tibetans are so sad! Cannot you believe that! And Brad Pitt was banned from entering China because of that movie. Do you know that? Your government is such a
I felt offended, not by her criticism about the Chinese government, but by how powerful the media discourses are. I had not had time to clear up my thoughts, and responded, “I haven’t watched the movie. But my research will not reinforce the ‘powerless Tibetans’ image.” The conversation ended up nowhere as the class started. I could not ease my feelings and started to reflect on my positionality as a Chinese—about why I am involved in research about Tibet.

To relate a conscious understanding of my own positionality, in this chapter I first explain the five rituals from Chinese culture as my fundamental ethical guidance for conducting this ethnography. Next, I describe my investigative learning process as “a dialogic ethnography” that involves: 1) engaging active passivity in discourse collection and co-creation, 2) evolving from an ethnographer to a co-actor, and 3) developing a narrative sympathetic understanding in the doing and writing process.

**Five Rituals in Practice**

“The Asian Women of Chinese ethnicity travelling to India to document stories of widows in Benaras! This is the face of new imperialism. The white man is replaced by another signifier of the gaze.” This post from a professor I knew astounded me. As an “Asian Woman of Chinese ethnicity,” am I not escaping from the colonial “gaze?” Admittedly, I am a Chinese woman, not Tibetan. However, I do tend not to compete in climbing the ladder of vulnerability with “the white man.” Compared with identity politics, I believe that personal ethical criteria deserve more attention.

Ethnography is a personal and professional discipline. An ethnographer brings the self to the field with both personal ethical values and professional knowledge. What
constitutes the ethnographer’s “culture” is the first question that needs to be answered (Agar, 1996). I am an ethnic Chinese and have been studying in the United States for seven years. Such learning experiences constitute the value of my research ethics today. Traveling between cultures has constructed the body that I bring to the field today.

Guillemin and Gillam (2004) proposed two types of ethics that are involved in qualitative research: procedural ethics and ethics in practice. Procedural ethics refer to ethical standard that are created by institutions such as the Institutional Review Board. More importantly, the ethics in practice emphasize how the researcher enacts his or her values in the unforeseen situations in and outside of the field. My everyday life ethical values have been highly influenced by Chinese culture. As I look back upon the ethical criteria that govern my everyday life practice, the basics are the teaching of Five Ethics that originated from the Han Dynasty. The Five Ethics, also called Confucian Five Norms, are Ren (仁, Humanity), Yi (義, Righteousness), Li (禮, Ritual), Zhi (智, Wisdom), and Xin (信, Integrity). These five rituals have been regarded as the core of Chinese traditional ethical values for cultivating the self in both personal and political life. These five ritual practices provide guidance for me to act in my everyday life. These criteria also provide me with value judgments in my field practices.

Ren (仁, Humanity), can also translate as benevolence towards others. Ren in Confucian classics often is used in the context for kings of states and ministers to bring an empathic heart to their fellow people. And it has been useful in many contexts because the Chinese word ren (仁) is a character with two symbolic meanings: a “human” and “two.” These two facets of meaning signify that humanity is enacted by the complex self-
other relationship. *Ren* is a general standard of ethics but includes many aspects of social life with others. Zi Gong, one of the brilliant students of Confucius, asked Confucius how to describe *Ren*. Confucius answered his question as follows:

Now a man of virtue [ren], wishing to be established himself, seeks to establish others; wishing to be enlarged himself, he seeks also to enlarge others. To be able to judge of others by what is nigh in ourselves; this may be called the art of virtue [ren]. (Analetics, n. d., 6:30, translated by Legg)

The self and others are so interconnected and the value between the two is co-constructed. In the practice of ethnography, the role of *ren* means having a heart for the other, and also holding a willingness to be judged by others. Thus, I the ethnographer, can generate and respond to the value of myself as an other and to others as selves.

*Yi* (義, Righteousness), often focuses on moral rectitude. I view *yi* as highly relational ethics that can be translated to the practice of doing ethnography. *Yi* inherits meanings of morality and justice that interweave with strong ties of interpersonal relationship (family, friends, and other partnerships). However, the justice here is different from the universally defined justice in western society (e.g. universal human rights). In Chinese culture, *yi* is used with other Chinese characters like *ren-yi* (benevolent righteousness or benevolent justice) or *qing-yi* (affective righteousness or affective justice) (Hwang, 2000). The core of *yi* emphasizes doing justice based on highly interpersonal ties. It largely depends on relational commitment. Doing ethnography also is a highly relational approach; what is meant by doing justice has to be negotiated with participants actively and affectively.
I interpret \textit{Li} (禮, Ritual/Rites) as sensibility and observance of situational rituals. In \textit{Analectics}, Confucius (2009) stated the details of how to act with ritual in a conversation with his student Yan Yuan:

Yan Yuan asked about Goodness. The Master said, “He who can himself submit to ritual is good. If a ruler could for one day ‘himself submitted to ritual.’ Everyone under Heaven would respond to his Goodness. For Goodness is something that must have its source in the ruler himself; it cannot be got from others.”

Yen Hui said, “I beg to ask for the more detailed items of this (submission to ritual).”

The Master said, “to look at nothing in defiance of ritual, to listen to nothing in defiance of ritual, to speak of nothing in defiance of ritual, never to stir hand or foot in defiance of ritual.”

Yen Hui said, “I know that I am not clever; but this is a saying that, with your permission, I shall try to put into practice.” (12:1, p. 145)

I would change the translation of “submission to ritual” into “act properly with ritual.” In Confucius’s teaching, respecting pre-established customs and social norms is central for “Goodness.” In ethnography, I translate this Confucian ethical value in doing fieldwork: respect others’ rituals, be sensitive to situations, and expose my genuine ignorance.

\textit{Zhi} (智, Wisdom) does not refer to how much one knows, rather, \textit{Zhi} indicates an active attitude of doing and learning. Doing ethnography involves the attitude of learning and unlearning with participants in a specific space. An ethnographer primarily enters the
field and participates in ritualistic activities to learn “another’s” cultural practices. More importantly, we need to cultivate an attitude of unlearning as well. In Confucius’s teaching, unlearning involves humbling the self to learn and a willingness to acknowledge our own constraints:

The Master said, even when walking in a party of no more than three I can always be certain of learning from those I am with. There will be good qualities that I can select for imitation and bad ones that will teach me what requires correction in myself. (Confucius, 2009, 7:21, p.87)

Such an attitude to learn and unlearn embodies reflexive epistemology. Zhi also suggests that a ethnographer needs openness to expose his/her vulnerability, to listen with the other, and holding a willingness to be changed.

Xin (信, Integrity) refers to one’s loyalty to one’s speech, often emphasized in the consistency between one’s speech and action. When I started to learn how to speak as a child, I was taught by my family that one must keep one’s word, and act faithfully to one’s word (言必信, 行必果 yan bi xin, xing bi guo). What is more, the value of integrity in Chinese culture always prioritizes practice over speech. As Confucius and his fellows had discussed ways of being an ethical person, the conversation goes, “Tzu-kung asked about the true gentleman. The Master said, he does not preach what he practices till he has practiced what he preaches” (Confucius, 2009, 2:13, p.17). In this study, I made a conscious choice to “act with Tibetans,” rather than hijack their voice. These are the primary cultural ethics governing my everyday communication practice in living a life with others and also in my writing.
A Dialogical Ethnography

To examine Tibetans’ organizing for preservation of their mother tongue, community building, and transformative social change, I engaged in investigative learning methods, which sought to embody a dialogical ethnography. Dialogical ethnography is fundamentally a meaning-making process with participants in the field. It involves an ongoing attempt to place specific encounters, events, and understandings into a fuller, more meaningful context. My journey of doing and writing this ethnography consists of three major parts. First, I understood the process of planning and doing dialogical ethnography centers itself as an “active passivity” (Rawlins, 2003) in discourse collection and co-creative processes with others. Second, my role evolved from an ethnographer to a co-actor through a dialogical hybridization process over the three-summer experience of being-in-the-world with my interlocutors. Last, a dialogical ethnography involves a narrative sympathetic understanding in the doing and writing process.

Active passivity in discourse collection and co-creation. Ethnographic research is a never-ending process of encounter and being encountered. As I reflected on the past three-year experience of planning and doing this ethnography, the principal approach that stood out throughout the practice was an attitude of “active passivity” in both my planning and doing. Rawlins (2003) suggested that a practice of “active passivity” in ethnographic research involves active listening, (un)learning, and responding to others as an ethical and mindful communicative practice. He explained:
Hearing others is not a passive enactment of being-in-conversation. Hearing voices, it says something about you that is critical. It identifies you as someone who has postponed speaking, someone who is reserving and respecting the space of talk for another. It announces you as someone potentially open to the other’s voice, at least in this moment when he/she is speaking. Listening in this way is committed, active passivity. It is an opening in practice, conscientious listening. (Rawlins, 2003, p.122)

This practice of listening created various opportunities for me to learn and to meet. It was an attentive process of respecting the other, unlearning my own trained incapacities, and an enactment of my own situational sensitivity.

Primarily, my coming to this research idea was started by listening to taxi drivers’ stories when I first visited Lhasa in 2009. And I became interested in learning why the taxi drivers could not speak their own language, from the policy level to the ground level. Further, I continued to hear my Tibetan students and colleagues sharing concerns of losing their language when I was working with a Tibetan international nongovernmental organization during my volunteer teaching in Yunnan in 2012. These were moments in which I realized that hearing others’ concerns and voices was an important way of knowing.

In the past three years, I have visited three schools in Kham Tibet in *Lu Ding* and *Kang Ding* (see Appendix A). Many Tibetans I spoke with had shared with me their concerns regarding the two sites as highly “Hanized” areas. The two sites are the centers of the Kham area, and constitute the main educational districts in Kham Tibet where
Tibetan languages are the instructional language in school. In order to explore how Tibetan teachers and community members organize for language preservation, I have combined the following practices for discourse collection and co-creation in this investigative learning process: 1) assembling a collection of archives and relevant texts, 2) being a sensitive observational participant in my interlocutors’ life events, and 3) performing in-depth qualitative interviews.

Archival and textual collection. To contextualize my ethnographic work, I gathered available and accessible texts, materials, and documents pertaining to the history and development of the Tibetan ethno-linguistic community in Kham Tibet since the 1950s. These works included a linguistic history of the Kham area, Tibetan language textbooks, Tibetan language-preservation archives, and participants’ diaries in paper or on social media related to language preservation.

Sensitive observational participation. To deepen my understanding of the social context in which communicative dynamics between, among, and across Kham Tibetan communities occur in the process of language preservation, I joined my interlocutors’ life events as a sensitive and observational participant. Being a participant made my life “in the present” available to my participants. I started to learn Tibetan in 2012 and was named by my Tibetan teacher Tenzin as “Gyesang Nima,” a Tibetan name. Being named in Tibetan and trying to speak Tibetan to enter a given world was my first step in the journey of becoming the other – other than myself. I entered the field again in 2014 with basic Tibetan conversational skills. Being able to speak Tibetan with my participants in
their presence enabled me to enter another’s world and to continue to hear their responses and voices, as Rawlins (2003) suggested:

Being present to the other is a path to becoming other than ourselves. Can we come to experience speaking with others more and more as placing our knowledge and our projects, our selves in question? Learning the most meaningful questions to ask arises from listening, learning, and responding to the questions being posed to self. To question others is to place ourselves in the ethical position of striving to hear their voices, their responses. (p.123)

I visited different sites in the Kham area through attentively hearing my participants’ suggestions. By being a participant in my interlocutors’ lives, I heard many suggestions from them about where to visit if I wanted to learn about their organizing for language preservation. Many Tibetans recommended I visit the Larung Buddhist Institute in Sertar. I followed their suggestions and observed sky burial (described in a scenario in Chapter Four). Thus, I actively heard their stories and voices in the field. Most of the time I was listening to what they would like to share with me. Sometimes their conversation brought me to different places—the dinner table, monasteries, chess practices, and the thangka painting classrooms—where I learned new ideas about these persons’ experiences and their organizing practices for Tibetan language preservation.

I also participated in the Tibetan teachers’ and community members’ group meetings, ritualistic gatherings, community performances, and informal family conversations from May to August 2014. Dated field notes with headnotes were kept during the participant observation period. Daily reflection memos were also recorded
along with the field notes. My participation not only enabled me to gain localized knowledge of Tibetan communities in Kham Tibet, it also paved the way for recruiting more participants for in-depth interviews.

**Qualitative interviews.** To understand how Tibetans in Kham organize to preserve their mother tongue and experience relationship-building across differences, I conducted in-depth qualitative interviews that focused on garnering stories and experiences from Tibetan teachers and community members working towards mother tongue preservation. The number of interviews was not planned by a procedural research agenda based on quantity but on my belief that I should listen to those “who want to be heard.” Based on my experiences in Kham in 2012 and 2013, a group of Tibetan teachers and community members were recruited to participate in the interviews. Also, because I spoke the same Sichuan dialect as Tibetans in the Kham area, I was be able to listen to participants telling their stories for insights into how they build relationships, partnerships, and make meaning of their lives in their sociocultural worlds. I formally interviewed forty participants, and the interviews were audio-recorded (ranging in duration from thirty minutes to approximately three hours) with the participants’ permission. Even so, the interview process was ongoing and persistent. For instance, I entered into conversations continuously with some interview participants with whom I lived and worked. Other participants’ interviews were recorded in different places on different occasions (e.g. in the office, on a basketball court, in a tea house, etc.), with their permission.

I planned my well-worded semi-structured interview protocol (see Appendix C), which followed my training in ethnographic methods before going to the field again in
2014. My intention was to interview forty people in the Kham area. In order to be rigorous following my training, I also planned to speak to Tibetan teachers and community members with different ranges of age, diverse dialect areas, and education levels. Again, I was hyperaware of my role as a researcher in the first few weeks in the field. When I spoke with Tibetan teachers during the first two weeks of my visit, I used an American institutional procedure and made my researcher’s identity visible.

However, the role of researcher appeared to be awkward and intimidating from my participants’ responses. The procedural routine for interviewing was considered awkward. For instance, at the beginning of my first interview with the Tibetan teacher Dolma, she was quite nervous and kept saying, “I am just a teacher. I don’t know much about what you want to know. I can find another senior, knowledgeable teacher to answer your questions.” I comforted her and explained that it was not about educational level and what I wanted to know was her experiences with Tibetan language preservation. I also presented my IRB consent form and explained how this form could protect her privacy and identity. But she refused to look at the consent form and responded, “This is so awkward. I trust you. And there is no need for another person to protect my privacy.”

During the interview, I asked many questions from the protocol; however, these formalized ways of presentation made it difficult to understand a person’s lived experience. Dolma kept saying during the interview: “I am not knowledgeable” and tried to call a senior teacher for help. My formal hour-long interview with Dolma didn’t capture her experience of Tibetan language preservation at all. Similar situations occurred with my other interlocutors; they said that they were not knowledgeable at all and tried to
take me to the senior teachers. The true moments of learning Dolma’s experience came from a few everyday life experiences. For instance, in a scenario I describe in Chapter Five, Dolma took me to the town center and mailed her student’s *thangka* painting to a donor who financially supported her under-resourced students, allowing them to stay in school. It was during this activity together that she told me she wanted to run a nonprofit in the future. I started to understand that their “organizing for language preservation” was taking place in their daily practices.

Building the mutuality of regarding each other as persons through sharing stories was most appreciated by my Tibetan participants. When I shared my experiences during the past two years with my Tibetan students and colleagues, I started to be accepted by Tibetan teachers and their community members (students, family, and friends). Gradually I realized that the Tibetan teachers around me welcomed me gradually, and many of them invited me to join meals and activities. These were the lived moments when they shared their stories with me as a person, not just a researcher. I reflected on my double-consciousness in the field and planned to change the ways I presented my interviews. I began to ask myself: Am I interested in how they answer my questions or am I interested in understanding them and myself as persons first? With these reflections during the first few weeks, I started to unlearn my methodological training by regarding my participants as persons first. Soon my semi-structured interviews became unstructured (See Appendix D for a list of person-centered questions). With my awareness of the central questions for the research, I started by telling my interlocutors: “I am interested in learning something about you. What would you like to share with me?” With my ongoing efforts to hear their
voices, my participants shared interesting and/or downhearted stories about their life world. I believe they responded to me primarily as a “person” rather than responding to me in my role as a professional researcher.

**Becoming a co-actor.** With the attitude of active passivity in planning and doing activities in the field, often I was not aware of my role and purpose as a researcher when I was *with* Tibetan teachers and community members. Brought into the field by my Tibetan teacher Tenzin, I was at first easily getting around among Tenzin’s closest friends. However, since I was a Han Chinese, gaining the trust of others in the field took time and continuous effort. Through living with Dolma and others, I began to become “Gyesang Nima” through such togetherness. And through teaching English in a Tibetan classroom, I became the *ghege*\(^7\) Gyesang in my students’ eyes. While I was travelling between the counties in Kham and *living with* different Tibetan families, my identities as a researcher, a Han Chinese, and a graduate student from America gradually elapsed. Sometimes the meat dishes ordered for me during Tibetan Buddhist festivals (and for me only; in these festivals, Tibetans refrain from eating meat) could not even remind me of who I was after a few months. Retrospectively, there were moments when I realized I was a social other, different from persons who had no idea of what I was doing. For instance, when I encountered some Tibetans at the bus station, they immediately hid their pendant with a

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\(^7\) *Ghege* is the Tibetan term for “teacher” or “professor.”
Dalai Lama portrait in their *chubas*. Similar moments made me aware of who I was in Tibetan strangers’ eyes.

Walking with Tibetan teachers in the schools I visited, I was often being seen as the other in the eyes of the Han Chinese teachers. When my Tibetan interlocutors and students shared with me stories of their hardships, I listened with empathy. Especially after I co-experienced a major incident in the field (described in Chapter Four)—a Tibetan student I taught was publicly humiliated by a Han Chinese teacher during a speech contest—I started to understand my togetherness with Tibetans was not just “being with,” but “being for” as well. I could feel a sense of exclusion just by the quick, uncomfortable glances at me from Han Chinese persons of my own ethnic group. The co-experience of vulnerability gave rise to my understanding that the togetherness of “being for” was my responsibility. Todd (2004) understood “being for” the other as the potential to create ethical community across differences:

> When I feel-for the Other, I am in the state of exposure, a nakedness Levinas would say, that makes me susceptible to the Other’s need. Thus, my feeling-for is a disinterested, non-ego-invested feeling that emanates only through the encounter with the Other, as opposed to being generated from within the subject. It is the supreme example of “being moved,” “being touched,” and “being affected.” That is, being becomes inextricably bound to feeling through a passive encounter with difference. In this sense, a responsible community would entail a mode of feeling

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8 *Chuba* refers to traditional Tibetan clothes. In the old days chubas were made from woven cloth as the basic garment of the Sherpas. The modern Tibetan chubas in Kham continued to follow the traditional style, a long sleeved robe tied with a sash or a belt.
that does not seek to end our differences, but one that has generative potential to sustain modes of relationality across difference. (p.347)

This idea of being-for the other was born from experiencing the vulnerability together with Tibetan teachers and students. Even though I am a member of a dominant group, with the group I chose to stay in service for, such experiences generated the possibilities that difference could make.

Through continuously learning the Tibetan language and sharing the lives of Tibetans, I evolved into a co-actor. With experience in the field, I reflected on Krone and Harter’s (2007) call for communication scholars to act as public intellectuals, as a major co-actor for Kham language preservation. With a better understanding of my role as a co-actor, I can use my social privilege and knowledge to create better conditions for Tibetan communities through teaching and preserving Tibetan language and culture. A co-actor is not just a social label, but a practice with sacrifice and risk. I had no regrets about having done so—risking my identity and sacrificing my political correctness in a social environment full of constraints.

Additionally, to call someone a co-actor speaks of love for the people and the world we co-created, as Freire (2000) suggested: “Dialogue cannot exist, however, in the absence of a profound love for the world and for the people” (p. 89). From my field experience, this “love” has been mutual in the world of togetherness. I have observed and been affected by Tibetans’ love and care for living beings. If my Tibetan participants saw a tiny bug crawling in the middle of the street, they would try all means available to return it to nature. Similar scenarios are presented in Chapter Five. And other times, I
spoke of love with people by reading an earnest prayer poem of blessing sent by some Tibetan friends. One of the prayer poems I received was from Tsering (a character in the Chapter Six), which goes as follows:

May the blessing from all the roots of compassions and virtue
In my three lives: the past, present, and future
Endow you and all living beings with the ultimate peace and happiness

In addition, the field experience changed the way I view the world in a broad sense. Tibetans believe the ultimate happiness is from living a life for the other even in a moment of life and death. During a field trip from one school to another, I experienced a severe car crash on the plateau. Both car drivers’ family members were hurt, but they jumped down and immediately started to care for each other’s injured passengers without blaming each other. A group of strangers who could not even speak Chinese stopped and offered me a ride to a hospital in the nearest town. I would still remember the feeling of love and care for the other from strangers in Tibet.

Reflecting on the process of loving as a co-actor in the field, I would say it involves ongoing struggles to create a new self by being “with” and being “for” the group I am committed to serving. It includes a willingness to sacrifice and take risks, and by speaking the word of love in the relationships of “encounter” and “being encountered,” of “touch” and “being touched,” and of “affect” and “being affected.”

**Narrative sympathetic understanding.** In this section, I describe the process through which I tried to make sense of the discourses I collected and co-create a narrative sympathetic understanding. A narrative understanding includes an attitude of respect for
persons’ stories as lived experience and involves the author’s effort to view these discourses as an ongoing meaning-making process. Based on Bakhtin’s (1981) “Discourse in the Novel,” I offer here the four principles from my learning with my participants on Tibetan language preservation in the process of writing as co-authoring. First, I describe how I created thematic classifications based on the meta-theory of dialogue. Then, I show the steps of my authorial choices to re-emplot the discourses based on hindsight. Third, I present my accountability of creating the upcoming narrative chapters with distance from the field. Last, I present my reflexivity by discussing how different languages and voices were orchestrated in the following four chapters.

Themes. Along with the discourses collected and co-created from the field, the audio-taped interviews I conducted first were transcribed into 270 pages in three languages: Chinese, Tibetan, and English. All my field notes and memos across three years and my interview transcripts were double-checked for accuracy prior to beginning my analysis. I then performed an inductive, interpretive analysis to identify meaningful themes in the various discourses (Lindlof & Taylor, 2011). Thematic analyses were conducted to identify trends embedded in the collected discourses guided by the meta-theory of dialogue. That is, I identified discourses according to particular themes related to topics of interest and organized them into categories by using headings and subheadings. Under the headings of these categories, significant discourse units (a passage, a participant’s experience, a conversation, or a story, etc.) were examined based on the four central characteristics of dialogue—boundless bound, purposeless purpose, embodiment, and being while becoming. These four thematic categories were identified,
interpreted, and refined by constantly comparing and contrasting the examined discourse units.

**Hindsight and re-emplotment.** When the discourse units were laid out under each thematic category, I observed that different units within the same thematic category were interconnected and in dialogue with each other. I struggled with how to create a way to present my interlocutors’ life worlds holistically in my writing. Living with the contradiction of following a “rigorous” interpretive method and how to create meaning in presenting my participants’ ongoing lived life, I made an authorial choice of presenting the four thematic categories as four narratives to constitute an ethnographic novel. Bakhtin (1981) defines novels as “a diversity of social speech types (sometimes even diversity of languages) and diversity of individual voices, artistically organized” (p.262). In other words, a novel is the orchestration (both the act of composing and the product of the composition) of a site for multiple worldviews and languages to be in dialogue with each other (W. K. Rawlins, January 26, 2015). This authorial choice was also influenced by the wisdom of Gelugpa Tibetan Buddhist master Tsongkaphpa. He suggested that in order to understand one’s presence, we need to look over their past; and to foresee one’s the future, we need to be able to understand one’s presence in the present, which constantly becomes the past. Master Tsongkaphpa shared the wisdom of a narrative understanding of coherent life in a process of constant and cyclic change. A narrative sympathetic understanding also can serve as an analytical practice of examining collected discourses (making sense of the past) and for co-creating discourses (continuously
engaging in dialogue with participants). In “Storytime, Recollecting the Past and Projecting the Future,” Crites (1986) noted:

So all new things come into existence out of the future, become present and pass over into the past where they achieve clear enough definition to be re-collected: understood. That is also true of new possibilities of the existing self. To the extent that they transcend the self-possession of the existing self, they take form out of the future. (p.167)

With the authorial choice to write for the others’ becoming, I was more attentive in locating my understanding of the relationships among each discourse unit—how these persons’ stories speak to each other in dialogue.

The connections I developed between each discourse unit can be understood as hindsight. According to Freeman (2010), hindsight refers to the process of looking back over the terrain of the past from the standpoint of the present and either seeing things anew or drawing “connections” (p. 4). Hindsight deals with a retrospective sense-making of the past, and more importantly, serves as a way to actualize the meaning of the stories told in the past. Interestingly, such hindsight didn’t meet me until a moment in which I walked down Union Street in Athens (Ohio, where my school, Ohio University, is located) upon returning from Tibet. I raised my head and saw a group of hawks circling in the blue sky above this small Midwestern town. The large birds reminded me of a few major events that occurred during different periods of my field experience. Yet I came to realize the significance of their appearances only when I was away from the field. After that day I consistently noticed the hawks circling every morning and afternoon. These
birds brought my thoughts back to Kham Tibet every time I saw them. The group of hawks also reminded me of a Tibetan song in Chinese called “Silver Condor,” created by a Kham musician, Yadong. I started to reflect on the occasions in which I heard this song in the field—in Tibetan teachers’ offices, tea houses, and public buses. Then I reorganized these discourse units under each theme into a sequential timeline. In doing so, a very notable turning point appeared from the life events that my participants shared with me, and I experienced with them. What I have described here was the process of how I recollected the discourse units under each thematic category, noticed their interconnected significance, and re-emplotted them with hindsight. This hindsight was inspired by a re-viewing of the large plateau birds and the song “Silver Condor” from a distance of place and time.

An ethnographer is also an author who writes for his or her participants’ past, as well as their becoming. Merely presenting a discourse unit and a researcher’s interpretation can be a reductionist act that creates little meaning in the interlocutor’s ongoing life. I considered my authorial choice to be an ethical communicative practice. A discourse unit, a passage from a participant, or a piece of a person’s experience doesn’t become a lived story until it joins the stories of others. Frank (2005) drawing on Bakhtin (1981), suggested that,

The research report must always understand itself not as a final statement of who the research participants are, but as one move in a continuing dialogue through which those participants will continue to form themselves, as they continue to become who they may yet be. (p.966-967)
My re-employment was a conscious representation of the participants’ culture, as well as my culture(s) as the ethnographer. Frank (2005) further observed that one’s self-story is never just a self-story but becomes a self/other-story. In addition, Freeman (2010) connects our “self” story with a larger collective story: “Insofar as the narrative unconscious is operative in one’s history, there exists the need to move beyond [original emphasis] personal life in telling one’s own story, into the shared life of culture” (p. 97). Freeman also says “my history, indeed ‘my life,’ is not mine alone” (p.122), which echoes with Gadamer’s assertion (1975), “History does not belong to us, but we belong to it” (p. 245).

These authorial choices and practices also were shaped by the meta-theory of dialogue in creating the upcoming four narrative chapters. Consequently, each of chapters four, five, six, and seven present how my lived field experiences could be characterized by one central frame of dialogue. Accordingly, the four chapters present a narrative sympathetic understanding of experiences and events co-created by me as the ethnographer with my interlocutors.

**Accountability.** The accountability of this work first comes from my understanding of the author’s distance from the field. Primarily, writing this ethnographic novel at a distance from the field was a practice of contemplating from *without* after attempting to dwell within these persons’ worlds and worldviews in Kham Tibet.

Distance is an authorial practice that makes the work our own. As Bakhtin (1981) stated:

The authoritative word demands that we acknowledge it, that we make it our own; it binds us, quite independent of any power it might have to persuade us
internally; we encounter it with its authority already fused to it. The authoritative word is located in a distanced zone, organically connected with a past that is felt to be hierarchically higher. (p. 342)

From Bakhtin’s suggestion, understanding discourses collected in the past call out the need to be objectified through distance. And my recollection of these events in hierarchy (as *Its*) was organic and unavoidable. In Buber words, “Every *Thou* in the world is by its nature fated to become a thing, or continually to re-enter into the condition of things” (Buber, 1987, p. 17). The discourses I respectfully collected became distanced from their moments of lived co-creation and thereby became *Its* for me as the ethnographer to use reverently to make sense of past moments of meeting.

As an ethnographer and author, I believe that the process of distancing ourselves enables us to relearn the cultures of others and our own. By traveling back and forth in the field many times over the past five years, the dislocations and relocations of culture I have experienced have enabled me to live in the medium of cultures and languages. These dislocations and relocations of culture created an opportunity for renaming, according to Bakhtin (1981):

> The author distances himself [or herself] from this common language, he steps back and objectifies it, forcing his own intentions to refract and diffuse themselves through [the] medium of this common view that has become embodied in language. (p.302)

By standing at a distance and viewing Tibetan culture and my own culture, I was able to see the discourses from my experiences in the field from a different angle. I was able to
utter the worlds they disclosed in different languages, and through a shifting of identity in being the “other,” I believe I have been granted deeper insights into what constitutes meaningful cultural learning.

**Reflexivity.** The reflexivity of this work is closely aligned with a related multi-languagedness (heterology) and multivoicedness (heterophony). An ethnographic novel embodies reflexivity based on the author’s orchestration of multiple languages and voices from the collected and co-created discourses. The composition of the following four chapters was also guided by Bakhtin’s (1981) principle of heteroglossia, which consists of a deep rendering of how to orchestrate multi-languagedness (heterology) and multivoicedness (heterophony) in the ethnographic novel.

On one hand, the multi-languagedness of the writing calls for a new understanding of translation, moving away from the static belief that meanings are lost in translation. The following chapters include three languages: English, Tibetan, and Chinese, and accomplish an intense practice of translation. In addition to the glossary I have provided at the end of the dissertation – which includes different ways to interpret and explain Tibetan languages in English – the accountability of translation across different languages can be understood as engaging “difference” across languages. According to the editor of the *Dictionary of Untranslatables* (2014), Michael Wood, such engagement means that even if they are working in the same language, people from the same linguistic community could, and would, describe and interpret the meaning differently. Some examples include the English words, “soul,” “spirit,” and “truth,” etc. Wood later explains what he meant by “untranslatable”: 
Nothing is “untranslatable,” you could always translate it somehow. You can patch it up. You can fix it. Translation is not an art of perfection, it is not copying; it is rendering in one language something that began in another language. You will always get there in some way. But there is a sense with many words that when you’ve translated them, you just felt that you haven’t done the job, even when you've done the best job you could. It’s not that there is something essential in the other language that you can’t translate, but there is something interesting that you are really missing. If you know the other language, you feel that you haven’t got it into the new language. It's that residue, the sense of something missing, it’s not quite what gets lost in translation, because it wasn't found in the first place. But it’s some difference you treasure. (Cited from *The World in Words*, 2015).

In my field practices, when I asked my Tibetan participants how to translate the Tibetan word, *dangbe*\(^9\), the majority of them immediately responded, “Oh, it is not translatable.” Then they continued to speak of the meaning, “But it looks like a group of Chinese idiom, such as…” or “It feels like a song, each even line ends with a very smooth rhyme.” Reflecting on these occasions, I realized that ethnographers need to see the issue of translation across languages in a new light. That is, it is the difference in translation that we should be able to appreciate and celebrate when we are trying to represent languages and worlds of the other.

\(^9\)Dangbe refers to a group of Tibetan idioms with a harmonious rhyme at the end of each line.
On the other hand, I also reflected on the process of orchestrating multi-voicedness as an ethical responsibility. First, as an ethnographer and an author, I have discovered my own voice in the process of doing and writing this ethnography. The role of “I” in the upcoming chapters is a character in these stories, just as the narrator as an ethnographer’s body was the site of research and living. As Crites (1986) explained:

The ‘I’ who speaks and recollects is a thoroughly bodily presence, but the self it recollects out of the past, which ‘I’ own as my own, is indeed unphysical, not because it is a soulish substance but because it is a narrative recollection of what no longer physically exists, is no longer present. In the I-me formulation, I is the narrator, me is the narrative figure in the life story. (p.162)

Moreover, in the writing process the voices of the character “I” are not just one. My words are inherently double-vocied, as Bakhtin (1981) explained,

Behind the narrator’s story we read a second story, the author’s story; he is the one who tells us how the narrator tells stories, the author’s story; he is the one who tells us how the narrator tells stories, and also tells us about the narrator himself. (p.314)

In addition, the characters in the following chapters became alive with their voices in their unique expression of languages. The stories I chose to show in the upcoming chapters from my participants’ life world were integrated with my intentions and their intentions. Sometimes even these voices were co-existing in a dynamic tension. I used quotation marks in the conversations and the various narratives to present the degree of otherness as it was intended by the speaker and as it required an
acknowledgement of difference. Indeed, multi-voicedness in the ethnographic novel cannot be separated from the diversity of languages itself, as Bakhtin (1981) said:

The language used by characters in the novel, how they speak, is verbally and semantically autonomous; each character’s speech possesses its own belief system, since each is the speech of another in another’s language; thus it may also refract authorial intentions and consequently may to a certain degree constitute a second language for the author. (p. 315)

In addition to my reflexivity regarding my own writing, I was also attentive about including how my interlocutors described me in their daily utterances. These discourses showed how the ethnographer as a person in the field was contemplated by the participants. In the following chapters, notably my interlocutors called me “Gyesang Nima,” “ghege Dongjing,” “American female Ph.D.,” “companion,” and “sister,” etc. These languages represented the definition of how the others define their relationships with me in the moment.

Last, I also reflected on my description of each character and how I gave up my “authority” as an author in listening to my participants’ responses to my descriptions about them. I have negotiated with my participants regarding their names, as well as in referring to the places they were coming from. At the very beginning, I changed all the participants’ names and other names according to my authorial intention—to protect their identities in the highly politicized environment. However, one of my phone conversations with a participant alerted me about reflecting on my own intentions.

“I switched your name and your hometown’s name.”
“What? Why did you do that?”

“To protect you… as the Institutional Board Review told…”

“No, you’ve already changed my name. Keep the place where I came from! I am not happy about this. It meant nothing to me if you changed my hometown. That’s not me anymore.”

Before the conversation, I wasn’t aware of how much many of my participants cared about the places where their social identities were formed, so I chose to keep the real name of my participants’ hometowns. In writing the following chapters, I have included the understandings and ideas of my participants out of respect for their language and identity.

In conclusion, this chapter discussed the practices that guided my processes of fieldwork and interpretation. First, I considered my role as a researcher and how it informed the ways I have made meaning of my field research. Since the issue of Tibet is highly political, I have included my personal experience of negotiating political issues in the process of preparing and doing this research. Second, I have included my understanding of ethics in practice based on my understanding of my Chinese cultural tradition of doing ethnography. Third, I presented the details of my investigative practices. These constituted a dialogical ethnography that included: 1) active passivity in discourse collection and co-creation; 2) the process of becoming a co-actor; and 3) representing the others’ worlds with a narrative sympathetic understanding. In the following four chapters, I will share the narratives of my lived experiences of trying to
understand how Tibetan teachers and community members relate across difference and organize to preserve their languages.
Chapter Four: Boundless Bound

“What in Life Is More Significant than Birth and Death”

The sweet wind of plateau rain and grass mixed with the smell of yak dung blew into my face. Flocks of large plateau birds were circling overhead and constantly diving down to spy upon the fenced area in the middle of the mountainside. Gradually, hundreds and thousands of vultures gathered along the slope. A sulfurous smell started to flow in the air. Three silver vans stopped by the dirt platform positioned near the crest. An urgent undertone made its way up the slope, “Here they come, here they come!” Two Tibetan men in dark chubas with white collars emerged from the van and worked together to lift a body roughly wrapped with yellowish brown shrouds. The two men carried the wrap and laid it onto the middle of the fenced platform. Another crowd of Tibetan men gathered at the back of the truck, clustered around to carry a wooden coffin, and also laid it down by the side of the wrap. Soon after the two groups of Tibetan men stood beside the fence, more and more vans arrived—ten more yellowish wraps were removed from them and placed in an orderly row at the center of the platform. When two men in camouflage coats and red caps strode up from the caves towards the row of wraps, the Tibetan men circled around the fence and immediately stepped aside, creating a path.

Each camouflage coat carried a gleaming twelve-inch long knife under the bright plateau sun. The brightness somehow blinded my eyes. I had to narrow my eyes and look elsewhere. Solemnly escorted by a group of red gown and red cap lamas, the last wrapped body arrived. The group of holy men bowed to the two camouflage coats with hands folded. As soon as the red gown lamas stood aside with the Tibetan men in the
front circle, one of the camouflage coats lit a fire of the scraps of colorful paper next to
the last body the lamas had brought while chanting the mantra, “Om Mani Pe Me Hom,
Om Mani Pe Me Hom”… The camouflage coat took out a handful of colorful prayer
papers full of scripts and sprinkled them on the body. When the brown smoke wafted up,
the two camouflage coats moved into the center of the platform and chanted loudly with
the knives in their hands. The surrounding lamas were echoing the chant of the
camouflage coats.

I stepped closer to the circle that was approximately 15 feet away from the
wrapped bodies, standing with the red gown lamas and Tibetan men. A lama in a faded
red gown stepped towards me; it was lama Pema, whom I had met when I first arrived at
the burial site. I assumed the front circles were all Tibetans, recognizable by their
burning-red cheeks. The Tibetan men standing next to me stared at my face with a
strange look for a second, but soon turned back and rejoined the chanting choir. I turned
around and noticed the scattered groups of travelers moving closer and closer to each
other. I could barely see the five Han Chinese travelers with whom I had squeezed into
the same small van. Our driver Gesden was sitting on the thick grass far away, chatting
with a group of other Tibetan drivers. Two hours before, with the noonday plateau sun
beating down on the top of our heads, Gesden drove us up onto the mountain from the
north of the Larung Buddhist Institution. He parked the car on a spot of firm grass and
then jumped out to smoke. The five Han Chinese travelers negotiated with Gesden, and

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10 Om Ma Ni Pe Me Hom is the six-word Sanskrit mantra that is most commonly chanted in prayers among Tibetans.
he agreed to wait for us for 20 yuan\textsuperscript{11} (approximately 3 dollars) per hour until we finished observing the sky burial.

Many preconceived notions of the sky burial from the Han Chinese travelers had been shared during the ride from the main lobby of the Larung Buddhist Institution to the sky burial site—such as how the auspicious date was chosen for the burial, how the rotten bodies were chanted around the holly stupas for 108 circles before the burial, and how the birds could be coaxed to eat the bodies. The group also discussed whether we would still be able to eat anything after seeing this “barbaric” practice. This group of six persons on the van was freshly formed, with all of us from the Han Chinese area. Two among the group self-identified as Tibetan Buddhism believers.

Scraps of paper full of scripts were burning into ashes. The smoke was filling the air while the two camouflage coats cut open the bandages on the wraps one by one. The front circle started to cover their noses tightly with their hands and pieces of clothes. Soon twelve naked dead bodies were laid out in prone positions. One of them—a newborn baby’s body—lay at the end of the row with such bright and fresh pink skin and some new brown hair blowing in the wind, as if it were just sleeping. Now it had to begin its long exile from the world of living. An emaciated corpse sent by the red gown lamas, with its articulated structure of the spine covered with putrid green skin, might have suffered from difficulty eating or performed a long life-ending fasting. Near the green bony body was an extremely swelling belly with dark blue broken veins under the skin.

\textsuperscript{11} Yuan is the name for Chinese currency.
Other bodies of grotesque shapes and sizes were arranged side-by-side. The center of the platform looked eerily like a beginner sculpture classroom.

My five Chinese companions claimed that they would love to witness this practice at the closest distance. However, like many tourists they had quietly moved back to a more comfortable distance. Finally, the two camouflage coats started their operations. They first peeled off the head skin with matted hair, and then the skin from all over each body. As they worked, pieces of human skin were thrown to the side, revealing burgundy muscles. When the skins were peeled off, the two camouflage coats quickly walked up toward the body’s head, and knocked off the head heavily with the knife spine. One piece of vertebrae was taken out from the neck and given back to the relatives. Then the two camouflage coats delicately amputated the body’s four limbs.

A potent stench, like sulfuric brimstone, burned the nostrils of the crowd. The suffocating, putrid odor of rotten meat resembled an un-plugged refrigerator in the heat and humidity of mid-summer. The fetor wafted out, nearly thick enough to see, as observers grabbed pieces of cloth to stuff their noses and mouths. I covered my face with a red feather print bandana and felt the need to drink antiseptic. The Chinese tourist crowd moved much further away from the dirt platform fenced by brown wood blocks. The sacred birds, approximately half the size of a human each, desperately stared at the pile of flesh and bones. Two of the vultures gradually sneaked closer to the circle; each one snatched a piece of flesh but was caught red-handed by the Tibetan men. Following the two thefts, one of the Tibetan men immediately took off his cowboy hat and attempted to wave at the vultures. A voice rose from the operation’s center, “Soft! Soft!
Don’t hurt them!” The Tibetan man stopped his attempt, stood in the face of the sneaky meat picker, and began to sing the mantra loudly with his arms wide open in the air, “Om Ma Ni Pe Me—Hom! Om Ma Ni Pe Me—Hom! Om Ma Ni Pe Me—Hom!” The two thieves immediately swallowed the piece they had robbed in the eye of the public and nervously returned to the awaiting crowd of birds.

It was a long wait for all of the bodies to be dismembered. When they were finished, the two camouflage coats waved and whistled at the vultures, which apparently signified the right time to offer sustained life to other beings. From dust to dust, flesh to flesh, nothing should be wasted. When the front circle started chanting and holding their chanting beads in the air, lama Pema, dressed in his faded red robe, began chanting the mantra while cycling through his wooden prayer beads, “Om Ma Ni Pe Me—Hom.” A chorus of “Om Ma Ni Pe Me—Hom; Om Ma Ni Pe Me—Hom,” echoed from all directions. The grand mantra, chanted from the surrounding mountains and echoing the non-stop choir in this center, struck a deep chord in my heart. I couldn’t help moving my lips with my palms folded together, following their rhythm, and murmuring, “Om Ma Ni Pe Me—Hom!” Following the singing, the hundreds and thousands of hungry feathered observers marched like an army down the slope on a path opened by the observing crowd.

When the birds rushed into the pool to compete for pieces of flesh, lama Pema stopped chanting and spoke to me, “Bomola¹², How did you feel about this?”

I responded immediately, “Death can be very spectacular!”

¹² Bomola means “the respected young lady.”
Lama Pema smiled at me and said, “Sigh— are you still troubled by the worldly matters?”

I answered without a second thought, “Oya\textsuperscript{13}, many!”

Lama Pema’s eye narrowed and asked me, “Still? After you’ve witnessed all this?”

I responded honestly, “At this moment, none, but something agonizing will come soon after this moment.”

“Ha-ha, after you’ve seen sky burial! Here, we came naked, with nothing, and now that we left naked, with nothing. It is all the ultimate emptiness.” Lama Pema stopped to chant, “\textit{Om Ma Ni Pe Me Hom}.”

“I… I don’t know.” I mumbled with a choked voice as I tried to give a response to lama Pema of what I got from whole sky burial scene.

“We come to this world naked, leave this naked like this. Pieces of our flesh and bones will feed the sacred birds… Oh, \textit{Bomola}! What on earth can make you unhappy? What cannot be given away? What cannot be given away!” Lama Pema said, as he watched my twisted forehead, laughed and walked away with his chanting beads.

\textsuperscript{13} \textit{Oya} stands for “Yes,” “right,” or “Sure.”
Standing with the crowd of red gowns and dark chubas, away from my fellow Han Chinese travelers, I looked up at the blue sky at the incoming birds swooping down, fighting for space to grab the flesh. I stood still, questioning myself, “What cannot be given away?” Memories of the past two months suddenly flashed back into my head in a dim procession.

“Why Is My Culture Buried in A Museum”

My Tibetan language teacher Tenzin picked me up from the bus station after a 12-hour ride from Chengdu. Along the bus ride on the national highway NO.318 to Kham Tibet, the driver kept playing the same album from Tibetan singers singing their folk songs in Chinese:
A place where the sun rises
Silver Condor
Ah...came to the ancient village
People outside of the snow land from everywhere
Fairy stewardess landed
On the road where the ancestors didn’t finish walking
Ah... Condor
The change of earth is in a flash
Ah...appearance
Ah...thick vast mountains
Ah...road afar
Who is flying freely between the heaven and earth
Ah... Condor…(Yadong, 1995)

With flocks of plateau birds soaring and circling overhead, I arrived at the school situated at the foot of an eastern Kham mountain. Three thousand students from different counties of Kham Tibet were attending school here. Among the two hundred teachers and staff members in this Kham Tibetan school, forty of them were Tibetan. The school was newly built in 2010 following the new Chinese bilingual education policy. The modern buildings were painted in yellow and white. The roofs of the modern buildings were designed to resemble the top of an ancient Tibetan watchtower. The names of the teaching buildings and dormitories were marked in large black font of both Tibetan and
Chinese characters. It was one of the largest Tibetan schools at the eastern gate of the Tibetan plateau.

Tenzin’s friend Dolma, a female Tibetan language teacher, hosted me in her room at the teachers’ apartment building. She was very generous to share her bed with me for the duration of my stay. As described by Dolma in perfect Mandarin, the school was working on the bilingual-education model—Tibetan language and thangka art classes were taught by Tibetan teachers, other courses (Chinese, math, medicine, education and all the major courses, etc.) were taught by Han Chinese teachers. This school primarily served middle school to college-age Tibetan students, mixed with 10% of the student body from Han Chinese, Yi, and Qiang ethnic groups.

Every morning around 7:30 a.m., Tenzin would shout in front of Dolma’s balcony in Tibetan, “Gyesang Nima (my Tibetan name)! Get up! Time for morning Tibetan class!” I always answered in Tibetan, “Yaya\textsuperscript{14}! Ghege!” and got up quickly. Tenzin planned to take me to the museum that was located in the basement of the school in the afternoon. In the morning Tenzin usually spent two hours teaching me basic Tibetan in his office. I had continued the Tibetan language learning that I had started three years before when I met Tenzin during my voluntary teaching of Tibetan students in Kham. Tenzin was my first Tibetan language teacher, and he gave me a Tibetan name. As a Tibetan tradition, Tenzin was not only a friend to me, but also my guru\textsuperscript{15}, my spiritual teacher. In some ways Tenzin and I were mutually student/teacher to each other as I also

\textsuperscript{14} Yaya means “yes,” “right” or “sure.”

\textsuperscript{15} Guru is a term that is commonly used when Tibetans refer to their spiritual teacher/master, or their very first teacher in school. Guru could also refer to a high ranking and knowledgeable lama.
helped him with learning English. This teacher-student relationship was salient and respected because Tibetans perceive such relationships as the medium of wisdom as well as the guidance to enlightenment.

While waiting for Tenzin in his office, someone kicked the door open—Dorjee, a 24 year-old Tibetan language teacher cracked in, sighing deeply. Seated but slapping his own thigh really hard, he harshly said, “They pissed me off! Pissed me off!” As a head teacher of the tourism major, Dorjee had taken his whole class to visit the basement of the school building, which housed the “Intangible Cultural Heritage Museum.” While slapping his thigh, Dorjee was very mad—“My students! I just took them to our Intangible Cultural Heritage Museum! I was extremely upset. They were taking pictures with their cellphones all the time. I asked them not to take pictures, just listen to the student commentator who was explaining. Something like, how our unique cultures were formed based on these artifacts…so many things on display. ‘Do you know what the names of these things are? Their function?’ I asked them as I pointed at the black tent and yak skin rain cap to my students. They completely forgot their tradition! Forgot where they were coming from! …But they didn’t listen to me at all. This is cool, and that is cool! They were running here and there, taking pictures with these things. This— really upsets me! They behave as tourists! The heart of tourists! It is their culture! They were just like, ‘Oh, just looking around.’ Only one or two students were listening.”

Dorjee’s face contorted, and he kept blaming himself for not guiding his students properly, “They don’t even know… Why is our culture buried in the museum? Hopeless…We Tibetans are hopeless!” Dorjee walked by the window of the office,
facing the basketball court. The school-wide tournament was in full swing. I stood by Dorjee’s side at the window; a collective cheering voice went up from the crowd in Mandarin, “Class two! Beat them! Class two, no friendship in the game!”

Dorjee walked back to his seat, and deeply sighed, “I worry. They are more and more Hanized. Since 2008, this autonomous state has been working on different education models for Tibetan students. For example, the 9+3 model – nine years of compulsory education plus three years of special/technical secondary school – and the 3+2 model is the three-year high school with an added two-ear associate degree.” Dorjee walked around the office with his hands locked behind his back while the waves of cheering in Mandarin were flowing into our ears.

Tenzin and Dolma showed up at the door; it was the time for me to visit the “Intangible Cultural Heritage Museum.” Dolma was leading the way, “The museum wasn’t completed when you visited last year. We’ve got more stuff!” I invited Dorjee to go together, but he didn’t want to be there again. “I don’t want to see my culture locked in the museum,” Dorjee said. Tenzin said nothing but smiled at Dorjee. Soon Dolma was walking ahead of us, jumping up and down, “It was always locked on the ground level. But some tourism major students need to practice their oral exam today, practicing explaining this stuff to tourists, you know! We don’t have to borrow the key from the uncle guard!”

Lead by Tenzin and Dolma, I walked into this cultural heritage museum in the basement. We first reached at the Tibetan Medicine Hall, featuring different shapes of surgery tools laid out in neat order, locked in the fine glass exhibit boxes with red
wooden frames. Dolma was trying to introduce me to how these tools were used for surgery in the old days. We passed the thangka Hall and then reached the south corner. Different styles of Tibetan calligraphies were hanging on the wall along the hallway. A copper statue was sitting in dust. I walked close by—it was Thonmi Sambhota, the leading bureaucrat scholar who created Tibetan scripts in 7th Century AD during the rule of the great Tibetan King Songsten Gampo. I pointed at the statue, and tried to say something. Tenzin walked up to me and said, “Well, the introduction here said Sambhota created the Tibetan language, but what I learned from graduate school was different. My guru said something different—Sambhota worked on the unification of Tibetan language… some contemporary Tibetan scholars also said so.” I nodded as I checked the introduction of the statue. The introduction was in both English and Chinese, saying Sambhota was the inventor of Tibetan language during the Tang Dynasty16. A few students were following me to see the statue because I seemed like a new face. One Tibetan student said to me, “Ghege, can you read the English introduction for us? We are really eager to learn English!” I hesitated, but satisfied their request. A round of applause started as soon as I finished reading the long introduction in English. I thanked the students and walked away quickly. Tenzin saw the strange look on my face, smiled, but said nothing.

A group of us left from the south entrance where Mr. Sambhota’s statue was placed. While walking out, we bumped into the tourism major students’ teacher, a Han Chinese teacher Mr. Jin, “Oh, is this a new teacher?” Tenzin nodded, “She teaches

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16 Tang Dynasty (618–907 AD) was an imperial dynasty founded by Emperor Li Yuan.
English to the learning community.” I immediately greeted in Mandarin. Mr. Jin stared at me from head to feet, very confused, “You don’t look Tibetan…but why…?” I nodded at Mr. Jin, but I quickly was dragged away by Dolma—I had no time to explain since it was the closing time for this “Intangible Cultural Heritage Museum.” The guard, Uncle Liu, greeted us from the guardroom, “Teachers, I will need to lock the door soon.”

“Why Are We Grouped as No.2”

Tenzin tried very hard to accommodate me during the first few weeks of my arrival. He was always worried I might be under the weather or could not get used to the food. During weekends, Tenzin took me to the weekly office “Fun Weekend” at the tea house in the town center. Sitting in the corner of the tea house balcony, colorful guiding flags fluttered among the many visitors moving into the town center plaza. Soft music started:

People outside of the snow land from everywhere
Fairy stewardess landed
On the road where the ancestors didn’t finish walking
Ah… Condor
The change of earth is in a flash. (Yadong, 1995)

A middle-aged lady in a dark red chuba came over to our table and invited us to join their dinner. Yak meat, boiled potatoes, and buttered tea were served on the table already. Tenzin and others waved at me, and I politely joined their dinner. I sat next to Tenzin, wondering why we “strangers” were invited to the feast. Pleasant conversation started about a pilgrim trip to Lhasa. The chuba lady passed me a piece of yak meat with
bone and said, “More tender with bones!” I thanked her and stuffed my mouth with oily fresh, boiled soft yak meat. Laughter constantly burst out around the table with everybody speaking Sichuan dialect. It was such a scene of harmony. While talking about her pilgrim trip to Lhasa, the *chuba* lady paused for a while and put her right hand on my shoulder—“I don’t care if you are Tibetan or Chinese! Since we are sitting at the same table! It is the good Karma that brings you to us. I want to share this with you! When my son and I went on pilgrimages to Lhasa, we took a flight from Chengdu! We were exhausted after ten hours’ bus ride to Chengdu. A huge crowed lined up outside the security checkpoint. I thought I should take a rest after we entered the checkpoint…too many people! When my son and I walked closer to the checkpoint, we heard someone shouting at us, ‘No.2, No.2, this way!’ Well, I don’t know anything about ‘No.2.’ We stayed in line and passed our ID to the security officer. As soon as she saw our ID—‘Are you deaf! No. 2 should line up there!’ She pointed at the other long line towards the other service window. I cannot believe my eyes. I had to start another long line again? I wanted to argue with her, I noticed the difference between the two lines. The shoes\(^\text{17}\) of ‘No 2’ were on the security check belt! My son took the luggage silently and walked towards the ‘No. 2’ line as if he was used to it. When closer to the line, I can recognize…No. 2, the faces of Tibetans! They were clumsily removing their shoes, silver belts, and heavy jewelries…but the group in the line we were in, no one had to take off their shoes! They walked inside all with shoes! It is just because of the ethnicity column ‘Zang’ (Tibetan)

\(^{17}\) Passengers don’t have to take shoes off to enter the security checkpoints in Chinese airports.
written on our ID? Why are we grouped as No. 2? Why did they only make us take shoes off?”

“Mother, no need to mention! It is too common!” The son tried to calm her down.

“I am sorry…” I tried to comfort the lady.

“Girl, I must tell you! Dislike it or not! I am no terrorist or separatist! I am a loyal communist myself! I am one of the first Tibetan communist members in my village! But why don’t they treat us like citizens! People who made up the rules like this are the real separatists themselves! Why were there riots and the so-called terrorist attacks in 2008! Funny, that could be the consequence of how we Tibetans have been treated. Last month the news reported the Uyghur riot in Yunan Province! And the media said it was a terrorist attack! Thirty people were killed in a bus station! How terrifying! We Tibetans are people of peace! Look at how we were treated differently from Hans Chinese. That’s why there were riots—we and the Uyghurs have no equal rights! The ones who made the rules are the real separatists!” The chuba lady threw the bones on the table and continued, “Sadly, I got to know, the Uygur ethnic group are the ‘No 1’ in the security checkpoints, and we Tibetans are ‘No 2.’ Han Chinese ID holders can enter the checkpoint freely without trouble. I cannot stand this unfairness because even Chairman Mao said that we ethnic minorities were all equal people! I shouted at the security guards, ‘I am a Chinese citizen, why cannot I enter the checkpoints equally? Tibetan terrorists can hire Han Chinese to conduct the terrorist attack! You idiots!’ My son dragged me away and asked me not to create trouble. But I still scolded the wooden-headed security people!” The lady stirred.
Hearing this, Dolma shared her story: “Yes, similarly, my mother and I experienced the same thing. What was worse was when we reached Lhasa, we were not able to live in the hotels where we wanted to stay… It was really sad. My mother’s health was not in good condition. I saved some money during the semester and wanted to book her a nice and comfortable hotel in Lhasa. It takes a lot of energy to pray during the day. I just wanted her to rest well. We actually planned three weeks in Lhasa and wanted to visit all the holy monasteries. You know what happened after we got off the plane! We located a nice hotel, and I was very excited because it was my first time to visit our holy city! I couldn’t wait to visit palace Potalla! When the staff ladies in the hotel saw my mother, she was wearing a dark colored chuba. She came towards us, ‘You Tibetans cannot live here…because the city security police said so… Here are the other hotel options. Tibetans without a Xizang province (Tibetan Autonomous Region) ID can only live in these areas…’ We left the hotel; I held my mother’s hands and walked a long way to another hotel… it was nasty and full of people. The smell of sweat and animal dung filled the air… but we had no choice!”

It was a long moment of silence. Six people sitting at the dinner table spoke nothing. At the moment I felt extremely upset because my people made “their life” so difficult since today we were equally “Chinese citizens.” The chuba lady faced towards me, “Girl, I don’t care if you are happy with our stories or not. I heard you are an American Ph.D., I guess you don’t have to hear this boring talk in America.”

“I am willing to…” I tried to explain, but I was cut off by another Tibetan female teacher, Yangjin, “Talk some other things… Let’s eat, eat!” Yangjin winked to me with her
left eye, speaking silently with her lips, “Sorry.” I shook my head and smiled at her to show that I was feeling comfortable of our conversation.

“Yes, yes, let’s eat!” The chuba lady waved towards the food with both hands in the air. In a moment everyone’s hands were on the table—fried potatoes, boiled yak meat, and barley bread. The chuba lady said to Dolma, “I knew your mother. I should have hooked you up with my son. But it is too late now!”

Danzhen, the chuba lady’s son, worked as a journalist in one of Chengdu’s TV stations. He had worked there for more than 10 years. Danzhen shared his story while using a Tibetan silver knife with a tiny turquoise stone to peel the meat from a bone. I could never tell he was Tibetan because he was wearing a bright colored polo shirt, Nike shorts, and speaking perfect Sichuan dialect, “Now I run this teahouse. It has been two years. I am tired of the outside world, being a Tibetan, in the outside world.”

“Chengdu is a good place!” I was trying to get some points for my hometown.

“Well yes, I love Chengdu. But the nature of my job was travelling. I was the cameraman. I travelled 80% of the time on my job. I think I have been to all parts of China, every corner with my co-workers! I was the only Tibetan in the crew. Everyone treated me nicely…before 2008. It was such a dramatic change. Normally people don’t recognize me as Tibetan because I have a light skin tone and speak Chengdu dialect. But after 2008, some people even in my crew thought of me differently. Once I got angry at one of the scene-men because he did nothing but smoke with coworkers. I scolded him. Then he shouted back at me, ‘Who you think you are! Don’t you think you can scare me,
you barbarian Tibetan!’ I was irritated! ‘Yes I am Tibetan, but I know your work better than you do!’ My friends dragged me away and eventually stopped the fight!”

“Were your friends Tibetan too?” I asked.

“They were Chinese, mostly. I was the only Tibetan who worked there. The year of 2008, it was the time…” Danzhen lit a cigarette and the group came to silence again.

“You guys know that I needed to travel a lot. But whenever I landed in a place after a long trip, I wanted to sleep. Every time I arrived in a hotel, they forwarded me to ‘register’ in the local police station. They dare not to take me because “Zang” is written in my ethnicity column on my ID. No matter how much I explained, I had to force my feet to go to the local police station. Sometimes I just wanted to have a bed and lie down. But the policemen were questioning me with all kinds of questions! I was exhausted by the life like that! I told them to stop harassing me because I had to work tomorrow morning! But they didn’t care; they must question you until they could guarantee that you are ‘safe’! I loved my job…” Danzhen lit another cigarette.

“So you don’t travel now?” I asked as I put down my chopsticks. No one was eating around the table at that moment; everyone was listening attentively.

“I quit this job I really loved in 2010, because that was too much for me. When I left my job, my friends in my crew felt really bad; we liked working with each other. But you know, that’s not the life I wanted—I used to love travelling, seeing different places and people, and recording them with my camera. What made me leave was the endless interrogating in the police station, I couldn’t feel happy. I usually got exhausted by the police and had to get back to work mode as soon as I left the police station… I didn’t
think my pictures were good any more… so I had to quit. Now you see, this teahouse. My mother and I are taking care of it… And enjoying it.” Danzhen smiled.

“Yes, the flowers on the balcony are very beautiful! As beautiful as the ones in Norbulingka\textsuperscript{18} Summer Palace. You have a designer’s instinct!” Dolma praised.

“Haha, Dolma, originally I wanted to introduce you to my older son, Danzhen, this is him.” The chuba lady pointed at his son, “But it is too late now, he is going to get married in August!”

“Oh, really!” everybody on the table became cheerful, “Congratulations, Tashi Deleh!” Tenzin stood up, and sang with the teahouse music:

Condor ah…
Condor ah…

I have bid farewell to yesterday,

Found the light of life. (Yadong, 1995)

“One Culture’s Rhythm Is Another Culture’s Noise”

“The sky is so blue.” Those were the first words I said when I opened up my eyes. The noonday plateau sun baked my face. I looked up to the sky; the darks dots moving around the clouds, soaring and circling over the mountain top as usual. Someone was shaking my shoulder, “Are you okay? Are you okay?” Two Land Rovers’ front ends had smashed into each other down the by-pass, and the white smoke was rising. It was more than a hundred yards from me. Lying on the edge of the highway, I spoke to the Tibetan man who had dragged me out from the white Land Rover, “Please find me another

\textsuperscript{18} Norbulingka is a palace in Lhasa.
vehicle…I need to go back.” “Back to where? Are you okay?” The Tibetan man propped me up, and passed me his water bottle. “Speech contest…my students are having speech contest on Monday.” I raised my head, wishing that I was a silver condor, and could ride the wind freely across the plateau.

With the help of the Tibetan man, I returned to Tenzin’s school from the field trip. Three weeks ago I accepted the invitation from Dorjee, to serve as the Chinese speech coach for the incoming “Annual Bilingual (Chinese-Tibetan) Speech Contest.” I told Dorjee that I had been a public speaking teacher and optimistically took the job. Standing on the balcony of the fifth floor outside of the office, a large “བོད” (Tibet) sign caught my eye at the ground level garden. It was spelled by approximately fifty plants pots at the center of the garden outside the locked “Intangible Cultural Heritage Museum.” Dorjee very proudly pointed at the sign and said, “The agriculture and husbandry majors did it! That’s hope! Our Tibetan’s hope!”

In the afternoon eight Tibetan students gradually gathered in our office. Dorjee had spoken to me that their Chinese speech was too “dry,” and he was worried that he might not be able to find a way to improve their speeches. And the winning speaker would have opportunity to get a job as a host in the city’s TV station after graduation. This rare opportunity could possibly change a young student’s life. The nine speakers were carefully selected schoolwide.

The last young man arrived at the door and tried to sneak in with a lowered head. Dorjee saw him and started scolding, “Sonam, you are late!” This tall boy stuck his tongue out and smiled with embarrassment. When everyone was seated, I pulled out
Martin Luther King’s “I Have a Dream” speech as the sample speech to talk about the techniques of creating and delivering a speech. I talked about techniques such as creating a clear and specific thesis statement, using repetition, relating to the audience and provided examples from Dr. King’s speech. I also shared with the students how to make full use of the physical space on the stage. Eight of them were quickly writing down the notes. But Sonam looked at me with a pleasant smile and an empty notebook. Soon after I finished my talk, five girls stayed and spoke with me one by one about their speeches. Three of them told me that they would return to me the next day. But Sonam disappeared into the crowd without any trace. Dorjee’s forehead wrinkled again while counting the heads.

The title of the speech contest was already decided, “The Mission and Responsibility of Contemporary Youth.” On a notebook one of the speeches was filled with scrawled Chinese writing with Tibetan translation such as “We must work hard for the country: as Chairman Mao said, the youth of China is like the sun at 9:00 or 10:00 a.m. in the morning,” and “During the anti-Japanese war, the red soldiers fought hard against the enemies for our country and lost their lives. To make our nation prosper is the primary responsibility and mission of contemporary youth!” The five Chinese speeches I worked with were full of political slogans of the same kind and repetition of such slogans as if I were brought back to the 1960s movies. Such speech troubled me because I wasn’t able to see any of their individuality in the language they wrote—it looked like a collection of socialist anthems—everyone was the same again. Their practice speeches in Mandarin were so empty because the language did not connect to their personal stories.
Such language in the speech was unauthentic. While working on their speeches, I was
reminded by Freire’s (2000) warning:

An unauthentic word, one which is unable to transform reality…When a word is
deprived of its dimension of action, reflection automatically suffers as well; and
the word is changed into idle chatter, into verbalism, into an alienated and
alienating “blah.” It becomes an empty word, one which cannot denounce the
world, for denunciation is impossible without commitment to transform, and there
is no transformation without action. (p.87)

Being a speech teacher, I always hoped to assist my students to find their own voices
while they were speaking. I had to think very hard with the eight students about how to
include personal experience or their cultural stories to improve each speech. Two of them
told me in a very low voice, “My Chinese language teacher wrote this speech for me…”

For over two weeks this group moved in and out my office very often and practiced with
me. Dorjee was in a very good mood while seeing these students showing up to the office
again and again. Sometimes he walked around the office and mumbled, “Who wasn’t
here? Sonam never came here!” Tenzin watched us and smiled as usual, dancing to the
office stereo and singing as usual during the office happy hour in between the classes.

The speech contest started at 7:20 p.m. Monday evening. Having just returned
from the adventurous trip that included the driving accident, my jacket was covered with
dust and dirt. I rushed into the auditorium and took a seat in the third row next to Dolma.
Holding up my video recorder, I imagined how my students’ performance would impress
the Tibetan and Chinese judges. The first three girls came up, dressed up in the colorful
traditional pattern *chubas*. I was delighted sitting among the thousand audience members in the giant auditorium. It was quite pleasant to hear the speakers’ close-to-fluent Mandarin speeches. The first three girls successfully delivered their speeches in the center of the stage. The audience clapped softly in a very polite manner but soon fell back into silence.

“Speaker No. 4. Sonam Gyaltsen! Welcome!” As soon as the host finished, Sonam walked up with a white collared top and a gold dragon print *chuba*. I had not seen him since three weeks ago. I was getting nervous because I had no idea what Sonam was going to speak. While walking to the left side of the stage, Sonam spoke with confidence to the audience, “It was the great Karma to bring me to your eye today. Let’s have a round of applause for the Karma that brought us together tonight! Thank you!” All of a sudden, the deadly silent audience started to clap loudly. Sonam walked back a little with the microphone in his hand, stuck out towards the audience, “Everyone, what is the responsibility and mission of the contemporary youth? What is yours?” Sonam moved slowly to the right corner. The audience started to become alive. One lively answer came from the crowd, “To learn!” Soon another a few more answers folded together, and the audience started to shout, “Find a job!” “Feed parents!” The voices from the audience overwhelmed the stage. “Yes!” Sonam walked from the right to the left on the stage, as he repeated the audience responses in a tone with Tibetan accent, “Some of you think about learning, finding a job, and feeding parents! And protecting – our mother, the earth!” The audience responded loudly, “Yes—yes!” Sonam stuck the microphone towards the audience again, “But today, what I really want to speak to you, is not just
me…we, everyone here. We are ordinary but not mediocre. What is our responsibility and mission?” Audience stirred, “To learn!”

“Thank you, my peers! But besides studying, what else can be our mission? The real missions of our life? I synthesized my experiences from life. I’d also like to share with you. Hopefully mine are compatible with yours. First, learning! Second, it is protecting our environment, everything and every creature around us. Third, what do you all think?” Sonam walked to the edge of the stage, hand out with the microphone to the audience. The audience responded with one collective voice, “Gratitude!” “Yes, gratitude! That’s also on my mind! Thank you!” Sonam took the microphone back and continued, “Gratitude, not only to our parents, to our teachers, and to all creatures in the world!” Sonam spoke evocatively, clarified three main points, repeated his thesis statement, and engaged personal experience. I praised myself in secret as a successful public speaking teacher while watching Sonam’s improvised performance with the audience. It turned out to be a beautiful collaboration between the speaker and the audience. I was cheering from the bottom of my heart that Sonam developed his own style—and he practiced everything I taught the other day. And he was such a natural “communicator”—not reciting what was written but actually dialoguing with the audience. Seven minutes passed by so fast, and I looked forward to the final clap—it was as expected—the deafening applause was shaking the auditorium, and refused to fade. I was celebrating in silence, and smiling like a mid-day plateau flower because I had been on the edge of missing the speech contest. The audience stirred, the claps were like the
thunderstorms in the plateau summers. The audience in the back stood up and continued to clap and shouted, “Sonam! We love you!”

“Ahek—Ahek,” The judge’s coughing in the microphone broke the long standing ovation. “Now I need to make comments. Be quiet!” The auditorium immediately muted, hushed as if it had been deserted. “This speaker, uh! No. 4! I have to tell you. First of all, you have no decent style of performance!” The judge commented aggressively in perfect Mandarin, “Who asked you to walk around? Who asked you to talk to the audience? Are you doing a talk show? Speech is not a performance!” In the meantime, a buzz arose from different corners of the auditorium. The judge continued with an arrogant and loud voice, “Everyone, who has seen a speaker dialoguing with audience! A good speaker should just stand still and deliver!” The audience fell into complete silence. One Tibetan student sitting next to me spoke in a very low voice towards the Chinese judge in standard Mandarin, “Yanjiang\textsuperscript{19} is both yan\textsuperscript{20} and jiang\textsuperscript{21}!”

The judge’s words were like a vacuum cleaner placed next to my ear. I shuffled around in my chair—Sonam’s performance was exactly what I had coached and encouraged! Sonam stood in the center of the stage, facing the eyes of a thousand audience members and the critique from the judge, a face with no expressions, turned from red to deathly pale. The microphone, in his right hands, was slightly shaking. His shoulders were slumped together. And sadness flew out from his narrowed eyebrows. I instantly packed my video recorder. Every word from the judge was an arrow stabbed

\textsuperscript{19} Yanjiang is a Chinese phrase for speech.
\textsuperscript{20} Yan is a Chinese word verb for “perform” or “show.”
\textsuperscript{21} Jiang is a Chinese verb for “speak” or “deliver.”
into my chest. I wondered in anxiety whether Sonam was feeling the same way I felt. Dolma tapped my leg, “Are you okay? This is abnormal…” I was too overwhelmed by the sudden attack to respond.

“Second, your Mandarin! Who taught you to not pronounce the nose sound ‘ng’? This is in general—an awful speech,” The judge continued his steady harassment, “You should work on your language first before you speak!” Sonam bowed to the judge and thanked him in Mandarin. I looked at Sonam, brimming with tears in my eyes—the words from the judge were an exclamation of surprise and anger. I could not react. Dolma was shaking my shoulder, “Are you okay? Are you okay?” It sounded strange but extremely familiar, as if I was placed back in the moment when the two Land Rovers smashed on the highway a few days ago. I lost my ability to respond. The pain started to emerge in my chest and soon grew into my throat—I wanted to shout for Sonam. I looked at Sonam, his pale face of innocence—it was me, who encouraged him to perform like this. This young man should be completely fine before he met me. “It’s my fault.” I said to Dolma, “I cannot sit here any longer.” Sonam disappeared from the front stage after the judge finished the tedious criticism. I leaped out of the auditorium, looked around the backstage for Sonam—I wanted to apologize to him. But he was not in the back stage!

I rushed to the south corner of the platform outside of the auditorium. A lonely back of a white shirt and gold dragon patterned chuba stood still facing the grand edge of the sky with pink sunset.

“Sonam, I am sorry.” I walked up to him.
“Ghege, it is not your fault. After that day... I really liked that type of public speaking... what you taught was the way I naturally am.” His voice trembled.

“I am very sorry Sonam, gonbamacang,” I stood behind Sonam, “That was the way I learned and taught in the American Universities... I should not encourage you...”

Sonam turned around and faced me. I could see the water of Lhamtso flowing around in his eyes. “Don’t worry ghegela, I am a Kham man, a strong Kham man,” he pointed to the birds circling the edge of the sky in the distance, “I am one of them, flying freely, always, no matter what happened.”

Dorjee appeared from the stairway, “Sonam, you are here! You did a great job, go back and get ready for round two! We have another Tibetan speech! You’ve got to be ready!” Sonam soon walked away with his red eyes. I stepped to the spot where Sonam had stood, facing the sunset and avoided looking at Dorjee. I was on the edge of tearing up when Dorjee made me turn around. I stood still facing Dorjee, tears pouring against my dry flaking cheeks, dropping onto my pants full of dust and dirt. A group of Han Chinese teachers passed by, paused, looking at me strangely, with amused faces.

Dorjee and I stood in the sunset and said nothing. On the edge of the sky, the silver condors were soaring and flying far away near the setting sun.

Walking out of the auditorium with heavy steps, Dorjee and Tenzin accompanied me. Dawa and Yangjin joined us on the way to the teachers’ apartment building. Dawa was a female Tibetan language teacher and walked really fast with her eight-month

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22 Gonbamacang is a Tibetan phrase for “I am sorry” or “sorry.”
23 Lhamtso is a holly lake near Lhasa. Tibetans believe the water of Lhamtso is spiritually pure and clean.
24 Ghegela means “my respected teacher.”
pregnant belly. The two rivers in my eyes would not stop flowing. The scene was planted in my eyes—the young man standing alone on the roof in the sunset after his speech contest. Dawa said to me, “Gyesang Nima, Sonam will be ok. He is a Kham man! He must experience this! If he could not get through this, he could never survive anywhere in the outside world.” Dorjee walked ahead of us with anger in his steps—“That’s a severe personal attack! Those uncivil words should not come from a judge…they never see our students as humans!” While Dorjee was repeating these concerns in a furious voice and walking toward the street lamp, a group of students waddled passed me as if they were practicing beginner ballet on their tiptoes. As soon as the three Tibetan teachers saw the dance, they instantly stopped walking and started to dance on their toes. Yanjing held Dawa’s hand, treading very carefully.

“Why are they dancing?” I asked Dorjee.

Dorjee pointed at the ground without answering me. A dark mass of bugs were moving on the ground in the lights. Thousands of dark bugs crawling on our path scared me right away. More and more students returning from the speech contest started dancing back and forth on their tiptoes. I stepped back very carefully. Soon I clumsily imitated my fellow Tibetan teachers and students. A group of Han Chinese teachers passed by, staring at us with their mouths wide open as if we were performing the odd behavior arts, “Never understood what they do!” They passed us very quickly.

I might not know how the bugs and I were interconnected. And I wasn’t even conscious that I might have taken the life of a few bugs. Dorjee was walking while chanting in his mouth, “Om Ma Ni Pe Me Hom.” I guessed he might have stepped on
some of these bugs. I was still immersed in the bitterness of the speech contest. It was one of my largest “failures” as a speech teacher in my teaching career. Thinking about the life and death of the bugs slightly distracted me from the bitterness.

The next morning Tenzin shouted out from beneath Dolma’s balcony as usual. Namgyal, Tenzin’s housemate, a typical bold Kham male in his 30s, accompanied Tenzin to Dolma’s apartment. I walked out and joined them, heading towards the teaching building. Namgyal was over 6 feet tall and his stern look on his copper face made people feel afraid if he didn’t smile.

Tenzin said to Namgyal, “See those dark signs of sleeplessness beneath her eyes!” Namgyal looked at me, “Oh, I heard what happened last night. What do you think of last night’s speech contest now?”

“Oh I don’t know what to say.” It was a very complex feeling. I didn’t know whether my coaching methods were incorrect or my ignorance of the Chinese “official” ways to make a speech. How could I not know how to give a Chinese speech? I spent all night without sleep. I wasn’t able to figure out what was wrong and only had myself to blame. And my student Sonam sadly became the victim of my experiment. Rogers’s (1994) words came to me in a flash, and I responded to Namgyal, “One culture’s rhythm is another culture’s noise.”

Namgyal and Tenzin paused for three seconds, and soon burst into laughter. While we were walking along the main avenue of the school, Namgyal stopped in the middle of the road—he picked up a piece of green leaf and squatted down on the ground. Tenzin and I were waiting behind him. When Namgyal stood up, a dark brown centipede
was riding on his leaf. Namgyal quickly walked towards the flowerbeds by the main avenue, placed the leaf and the centipede among the plants. I could not believe my eyes, the loving and care from a bold Kham man. It was so contradicting to his look. At that moment as I started to regret making assumptions about Namgyal, Dorjee rushed over to us, patted my shoulder, and asked me about how I felt. I had the same response, “One culture’s rhythm is another culture’s noise.”

Dorjee paused, and then spoke with a loud angry voice, “I am going to create noise that destroys everything! Will shake the heavens! And those guys will hear no rhythm!”

I laughed. Namgyal walked back to our crowd. Tenzin smiled at us as usual. I asked Namgyal why he wanted to place the centipede in the flowerbeds. Namgyal explained that all of our lives (before life, current life, and afterlife) were very connected to nature—animals and plants, “I was just worried someone might step on it (the centipede). It will be so sad if the innocent life is taken.” Tenzin continued, “The centipede might be the brother, mother, or even father of any of us in our before or next life. The connection is salient and invisible because it encounters us. And we encountered it on this avenue at this moment…”

Namgyal said to Tenzin, “I think Gyesang Nima should visit the Larung Buddhist Academy in Sertar...it will help her Tibetan language learning.” Tenzin nodded.

Deep in thought, I started to wonder about the invisible connections between things and beings and how we were bound together. The first beam of sunshine rested on
me; I looked up at the sky and saw the silver condors flying around the burning morning clouds.

The condors reminded me of Zhuangzi’s “A Happy Excursion-bound,” with the bird Peng flying across the ocean and yet bounded with the wind. I walked with my feet touching the ground, while the ground was touching my feet. Our lives are always bounded with something. Like the silver condors, how can we fly freely over the clouds without earthly bounds?

**A Conversation in the Cave**

As Namgyal suggested, I took a two-day bus ride and arrived at the Larung Buddhist Academy\(^25\). Namgyal also wanted me to see the sky burial. The ritual was only open for outsiders in the Larung Buddhist Academy in Sertar. Before I set off, he advised me, “When you are observing, please think of nothing, just try to give yourself to the practice,”

“It is not very good to hold some presumed assumptions about sky burial, I know you can try.” Tenzin spoke to me in the same way.

As Namgyal and Tenzin encouraged, two other Han Chinese teachers from this Kham school also were excited to visit Sertar. They both wanted to learn something about Tibetan Buddhism. On the way to Sertar, I noticed several police checkpoints were

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\(^{25}\) According to Khenpo Sodargye Rinpoche (2014), in 1980, wanting to revitalize Dharma and benefit all sentient beings, Jigme Phuntsok Rinpoche established Larung Gar Wuming Buddhist Academy at Larung Valley near Sertar, Sichuan Province, China. This site was chosen because of its history as a sacred place in Vajrayana, where monks went to achieve “rainbow body” (a high level of spiritual achievement) and realize the “four karmas.”
guarded with armed soldiers. I remembered that Tenzin had shared with me his overnight in one of these checkpoints when he visited Sertar in 2009. It was a sensitive time. He was genuinely hoping to visit the Buddhist institute but taken to the police station. Our bus first had a flat tire, and the engine broke down on the road on the way to Sertar. We eventually had our feet on the ground around midnight. When we jumped off the bus in the darkness, none of us were able to see anything. The driver told us the electricity of the whole town went out. I had to use my phone’s torchlight to look for the road signs and to locate where our hotel was. Five passengers and I eventually navigated to the hotel by the bilingual street signs in both Chinese and Tibetan. The next morning, I joined the five passengers group and climbed into a van with excitement.

Taking this ride from the foot of the mountain in Sertar, all the houses and monasteries were red. Large red monastery buildings were well-proportioned among the red houses. Larung Academy has been the center of Nyingma Buddhism, one of the four canons of Tibetan Buddhism (the other three are the Geluk, Kagyu, Sakya). Nyingma implies ancient and old in Tibetan language. In the old days, the Nyingma lamas wore red robes and caps. The sect of this school was also called the Red Hat Sect. When the ride reached the feet of Larung, the gigantic red monasteries with golden tops were shining in the plateau sun. Choeje (King of Dharma) Jigme Phuntsok Rinpoche’s\textsuperscript{26} giant portrait was on the top of the two major monasteries. Jigme Phuntsok Rinpoche was the incarnation of the great terton Terchen Lerab Lingpa, who was a teacher of His Holiness the Thirteenth Dalai Lama (Khenpo Sodargye, 2013).

\textsuperscript{26} Rinpoche refers to a high-ranking lama, tulku, or a living Buddha.
“Ajo\textsuperscript{27}, Demu\textsuperscript{28}!” After I greeted the Tibetan driver Gesden in Tibetan, he started chatting with us with fluent Sichuan dialect and soon switched to Mandarin to chat with the others from northern China on the way to the sky burial site. Gesden said that he could raise his whole family just by taking tourists to the sky burial site during this season. It was good money. While we were riding up to the mountain, a storm started.

Gesden also told us that the lamas from Larung Buddhist Academy announced that today’s sky burial should be around 2 p.m., and we were heading there too early. The other five Chinese tourists in the same van admired how accurate the lamas’ auspicious prediction could be, even without weather forecast technology. Soon the Mandarin group started to debate about whether the internet was available on the mountains of Larung Academy. During their debate, Gesden was speaking on his phone in Tibetan but immediately switched back to Mandarin in responding to the Mandarin speaking group, “We’ve all got this! What do you guys think of us?” He took out his red phone cover, “Lamas and jomos\textsuperscript{29}, they all have iPhones! Ha-ha!” The Mandarin group started to praise the economic development in the Kham area and how the poor Tibetan people in this underdeveloped area could own iPhones.

I walked with this group of Han Chinese visitors towards the sky burial site when the storm stopped. None of us knew what a sky burial looked like. In the distance, we saw a huge statue of a monster’s face with sharp stone teeth. As we walked towards it, the stone-carved monster statue was a cave that collected the skulls of the dead from the

\textsuperscript{27} Ajo means “elder brother (siblings)” or “bro.” Young Tibetan men and women often use the term when they speak to men who seemed older.

\textsuperscript{28} Demu in Tibetan means “hi” or “goodbye” based on occasions.

\textsuperscript{29} Jomo means a Tibetan Buddhist nun.
sky burials. I walked into the mouth of the monster-faced cave. Instantly I felt very cold and could not help chanting the mantra, “Om Ma Ni Pe Me Hom.” Thousands of skulls were organized in rows with a slightly rotten smell in the air. Everyone was looking for where the sky burial site was. We saw a group of people crowded on the other side of the mountain; so instinctively we walked ahead to join the crowd. The mandarin group was hesitating outside the cave, “Oh Buddha, this is so scary! How come you placed a monster here!” My five other new friends were actively trying to take pictures of the skulls with different poses.

Five feet in front of the skull cave, a preaching red gown lama was hemmed in by a huge group of sports jackets. I walked towards the crowd with curiosity.

“Why are you all coming from afar to Sertar? To Larung?” asked a lama dressed in a red robe standing on a rock, circled by a crowd.

“Coming to worship the Lord Buddha, Khenpo Sodargye Rinpoche, and other Rinpoches!” Voices rose from the crowd.

“Oh, really? Is that really what you are here for? Tell me, what do you want from them?” The lama questioned the crowd of their intentions.

“For my parents’ health.” One from my group posted.

“Oh, that is a noble reason for you to visit! You are praying for you parents?” the lama pointed at him.

“What are you doing here? My sisters and brothers? Why are you coming here to Sertar? To Larung?” He kept questioning the crowd.
“Every year, I meet many brothers and sisters here every day; they come here to make merit. How much money did you give to the Buddha and your guru for making merit? Do you know? 50,000 yuan, 100,000 yuan? How much do you want in return? Do you know? My brothers?”

Men and women in the crowd shook their heads, “For repairing the monasteries, doing good!” someone answered from the crowd.

“What does it mean by doing good? You came here from afar to donate us 50,000 yuan or 100,000 yuan for making merit? Does that make us happy? Does that make you happy? Does that make Lord Buddha happy? But I am asking you all, brothers and sisters, why are people coming to donate for merit? What are they asking for from their heart?” He stopped and looked around us. I elbowed in to stay close to the red gown lama. The crowed fell into silence while the lama was speaking.

While he was pausing for a while, someone asked a question, “Where is the sky burial site?” He pointed at a barren platform of 200 square feet, half fenced. The large grey rock where we stood was only 16 feet from the center.

“Oh, sisters and brothers! Do you know why you are coming here? Some people are coming here, using their money! Spending their money! You donate one million for merit, what do you want from Lord Buddha? You want more fortune? More possessions! More things and things! More and more! Is that a heart to Lord Buddha? Some people came to give away 50,000 yuan, and they want more than 500,000 yuan! Oh, this is not the place if you are doing that! I don’t think you are a Buddhist. Many of you should
know why you are coming! If you want to have more things, more brands! Go home, please go home! This is not the place for you!” The lama paused again.

“Lama, I am here to pray for my son’s good fortune! Is that wrong?” One middle-aged Chinese female traveler, who was wearing a North Face jacket and holding a fancy Louis Vuitton handbag, asked. “Nothing is right or wrong! Ask yourself about your intentions! I cannot tell you what is right from wrong. You have to identify yourself! Your intention originates from you! Only you, yourself know!” Lama answered!

“Oh, sister, I want to ask you a question, what does an ordinary Buddhist pray for?” the lama asked.

“Of course, for good reincarnation!” The women were very proud to answer the question. “Haha, sister! For whom! I’ll tell you! We pray for the others, all the others around us! We pray for all the creatures by the teaching of Lord Buddha!”

When the rain started again, I followed the lama to a shelter from the rain in a cave. Three Tibetan women were walking together.

“Lama, what is your name and where are you from?” I asked while walking with him.

“Bomola, I am Pema! I came here to follow the teaching of Lord Buddha! I left home when I was six. I went to Wutai Sacred Mountain for three years! And I went to a monastery in Lhasa for three years. And then I came here until now! I have been following Buddha’s teaching since then.” The red gown lama shared with me about his journey. Three Tibetan women bowed to the lama and folded their hands to show respect.

“Oh, lama, how did you manage to leave home at such a young age?” I asked.
“Oh, I was so young when I was trying to make a decision to leave home. You know what—it was very difficult to leave my parents. I felt really bad to leave because I was worried who will take care of them when they got old. But I came to an understanding that I am leaving to follow Lord Buddha—that I am treating all the parents in the world as my parents, and I am treating all the children as my children. I am praying for them and in service of them. I felt much better all these years…Home is neither here nor there,” Lama Pema put his hands on his chest and said, “It is here.”

“Are you Tibetan?” One of the Chinese women asked.

“Does it matter? I was born in northern China!” Lama Pema laughed.

“So you are Chinese! How did you…?” Another voice in Tibetan came from the women.

“Of course I became Tibetan; my cheek is in plateau red! And I speak Tibetan very well! Larung is a sacred place to learn and follow Lord Buddha’s teaching…” The lama answered.

“Oh, what is the distinction between Tibetan Buddhism and Chinese Buddhism?” One Chinese guy standing outside heard the talk, and entered the cave with a wet jacket.

“They are named as different branches of Buddhism! Chinese Buddhism, Tibetan Buddhism, they are different names! But they are the same! Once you have decided to devote your life to Buddha, it is all the same—you have to find your way to enlightenment! Too many distinct names, branches, and affiliations! But it is also one!” Lama Pema said.
A banner of Bodhisattva Manjushri (also called Wenshu Buddha in Chinese Buddhism) *thangka* was hanging at the most clean and highest area of the rock cave, a pile of dry grass on the ground. Manjushri Buddha was always depicted holding a flaming sword in his right and a lotus flower in his left hand that supports the Prajnaparamita text. The flaming sword symbolizes wisdom that cuts through ignorance, while its flames represent a radiance of wisdom in the darkness of ignorance. Watching the Bodhisattva Manjushri *thangka*, I remembered Wenshu Temple in my city Chengdu that I used to visit when I was a Child—Bodhisattva Manjushri and Wenshu Buddha were the two different names for one Buddha.

Lama Pema continued his public preaching, “This society is losing morality! People want too much. Too many things. And they are losing their ontological authenticity! They don’t know how we are connected to all the beings! See our environment! Our rivers, lakes are polluted by industrialization! Our forests are gone! The lust of human beings is to have more and more things.”

“What can they do to rebuild morality?” I asked.

“You know, the fundamental Chinese ethics is based on Confucianism. What did Confucius say about the Great Good? What did Confucius say about the *Five Rituals*! You are Chinese, right? You should know! Tell me, what is compassion? What is integrity? What is right? What is wisdom? What is kindness? You tell me!” He started to count his fingers.

“Yes, I think they are the basis for being a good person.” I said.
“Now you tell me about Daoism! What did the *Dao De Jing* say about how we should live? How we treat other beings? Some people step on the ants! Some do so without consciousness. Some enjoy stepping on the ants! Enjoy the killing! But do they know that the ants’ lives are lives of being? They don’t know! They don’t see how the ants and humans are connected? It is sad that many of the brothers and sisters are living like this! Like corpses! Can you recite *Three Character Classics*?"

“Yes, my dad forced me to do so.” I responded.

“Great! Now you know the layers of everyday ethics, Confucianism as the basis for Dao, Dao is in-between six wheels of Karma, Buddha’s teaching has gone beyond that…Ultimately, you should know what you should do for the other! If you have no others in yourself, you are worse than corpses! Just these who came from afar to pray for more money! Selfish!” Lama Pema was visibly upset.

“How do you advise people who are having conflicts? Like Tibetans and Chinese?” I kept asking.

“Simple! Simple! If we treat each other as humans, and with love! That should not be a problem! *Bomola*! You are Tibetan right?” He turned to the three Tibetan ladies in *chuba*.

“If I slap you, then you slap back, what can be resolved!” Lama Pema moved his hands.

Each of the three ladies stood smiling.
“If you slapped me in my face, I will put up with your action. I will endure the pain because life is suffering, that is the path of Four Noble Truths. Endless suffering, we would have so many bodies in the six-wheeled reincarnation, that is also endless suffering. Before life, after life, lives after lives, how could this suffering come to an end? We must find our way for renunciation…Bomola, you don’t slap your parents in the face, right? Why cannot we love the others as if they are our parents? Why do we have to fight if there will come up with no resolution! Anger in exchange of anger, killing in exchange of killing, hatred in exchange of hatred! What is left on earth! We are all eaten by the monsters we created! Ourselves!” Lama Pema answered. He paused and continued:

“Sometimes we believe conflict arises because we are different. You are Tibetan, I am Chinese. I am Tibetan, you are Chinese. If we continue to believe that, we can never even step on the way of renunciation. You know when we are the same? And ultimately the same! Soon, you will see why we are all the same during the burial…the sun is out! Let’s go out! I need to pray for them during the burial!” Lama Pema stepped out of the cave.

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30. The Buddha’s first sermon after his enlightenment centered on the Four Noble Truths, they are: 1) the truth of suffering; 2) the truth of the cause of suffering; 3) the truth of the end of suffering; 4) the truth of the path that frees us from suffering.

31. Renunciation refers to actions that ultimately diverge from the earthly desire (an inner state of ultimate happiness and freedom) by serving others. It is a Buddhist ideal mind state of detachment from worldly pleasures and that seeks liberation from contaminated and endless rebirth. It often refers to a centrifugal spiritual path that deviated from the circle of six wheels of reincarnation. It is a path of transcendence to ultimate happiness—to reunion with Lord Buddha in the kingdom of Shangri-La (Buddhist pure land).
Walking out with lama Pema, I wondered how we find our ways towards renunciation out of the endless bound of things and beings, the endless circles of reincarnations, and the endless sufferings. Maybe the way we desired to find is not the way.
Chapter Five: Purposeless Purpose

Having returned from the Larung Buddhist Academy, Dolma spent her Saturday afternoon helping me with laundry. While I was unpacking my backpack, she told me that Qiling, one of her *thangka* students, had been waiting for my return—to resume our Saturday chess ritual. Before I visited Larung, Qiling and I used to play Kham-style chess on Saturdays on the balcony outside Dolma’s office. I don’t know when we started this weekly ritual. We usually sat face to face and used a wooden *thangka* sketch board bridging our laps as a platform. After Dolma’s reminder, I finished unpacking and ran to the classroom. On the way, I thought of my first visit to Dolma’s *thangka* class. The memory was still fresh.

“Why Are You Here”

It was my second day at this Kham school, and Dolma wanted me to visit her *thangka* students. I entered the *thangka* classroom nervously with Dolma. Twenty-inch-long sketch pads stood in front of each desk. In the back of the classroom, a large *thangka* painting of Lord Buddha hung on the wall. In the *thangka*, Lord Buddha was sitting in a pink lotus seat with his left hand holding a bowl. Bright yellow silky khatas\(^\text{32} \) surrounded the *thangka*. A photo of Dolma and her twenty-four students in Kham-style chubas\(^\text{33} \) hung below the *thangka* of Lord Buddha. The ten fresh sketches of the White Tara\(^\text{33} \) were displayed on the wall close to the front door. Next to the ten sketches, a list of “New Tibetan Vocabulary” right by caught my eye. Vocabulary words such as

\(^{32} \text{A } \text{*khata* is a type of skill scarf used as a greeting scarf (for guests and honored persons). Sometimes *khatas* are used to decorate Buddhist statues or portraits.}

\(^{33} \text{White Tara is a female Buddhist deity that symbolizes compassion, liberation, long life, and healing and serenity.}
“coffee,” “ice tea,” and “chocolate” were listed in the first column in Chinese, followed by a Tibetan translation in the second. I stood at the wall for a few minutes and tried to pronounce the Tibetan word, “ice tea.” A student sitting by the door watched me closely, then smiled at me with his tongue sticking out.

Dolma told me that the students were from different areas of Kham and they spoke six different Kham dialects. That was the only information I had. As soon as the class started, I was pushed to the podium. Dolma introduced me as the “American female Ph.D.” Then she asked the students to ask me questions so I could share my experience of Tibetan culture and language. I had assumed a “visit” meant just looking around the classroom, but Dolma insisted that I talk to her students. I looked at her with a deep frown, then hesitantly introduced myself in Mandarin with a Sichuan accent. I had to coordinate this with Dolma because she had introduced me to her students in Mandarin. Two or three minutes of silence followed my introduction. I started to sweat looking at these twenty-four Tibetan students sitting high on straight-back chairs, all staring at me. Dolma had to encourage her students repeatedly to ask questions, “It’s time for you all to get to know someone from the ‘outside’ world. We have been living in isolation most of our lives—it is time!”

A young man in the back stood up, and, with his hands folded, bowed to me, then asked in a low voice, “Teacher, do you have a religion?”

The question stunned me. In the moment, I had to ask myself: Do I have “a” religion? The religious nature of this group almost made me concerned about answering—because *thangka* students were supposed to be highly committed to...
Buddhism. And I was not sure if my answer might offend them, especially since they
didn’t know me yet. I almost tried to avoid eye contact with my audience. I just assumed
everyone in the room was a devout believer in Buddhism. But I had to answer this
question even though the situation could be very risky. I lowered my voice and said, “I
apologize first because this answer might not be clear. I was born into a family with a
religious culture of Chinese Buddhism and Daoism, but I was taught in school to follow
the Chinese Marxist tradition. Growing up, I didn’t know what to believe. Now I really
don’t know whether I have a religion or not. If I have to answer this question, I believe
that there are spiritual beings beyond our physical existence, and I am a practitioner of
Dao. As for Buddhism, I believed in Karma, the Four Noble Truths, and reincarnation,
but I have never followed any religious doctrines. My family used to go to a Buddhist
temple every weekend but now we only visit two or three times a year. Regarding what to
believe, I am learning while unlearning.”

After my monologue, silence shrouded my audience. They stared at me in wide-
eyed amazement. I hesitated and thought I might have offended many of them with that
honest an answer.

“Oh, this is very impressive! I am surprised! How is it you are so genuine even
though you are not a Buddhist?” Dolma cried out from the other side of the classroom,
and added, “Let’s give our American Ph.D. a round of applause!”

Someone asked the first question, and then the students came alive. However,
many of the questions were very difficult. My thoughts became tangled up as the students
stood up, one by one, and asked the following:
Teacher, what do Americans think about Tibetans?”

Teacher, what is meant by “selfish” and “pride”?

Teacher, what does it mean to “afford to take” and to “let go”?

I started to wonder if it was my label, “American female Ph.D.,” that stimulated these unanswerable questions. During this conversation with the whole class, another student stood up, bowed to me and asked: “In this school, some teachers beat students. Have you ever hit your students?” I was astonished by the question and said merely, “What?” I had never expected such a question but immediately said “no” with no elaboration.

I looked at Dolma in the back seats. She nodded at me. It seemed like I was doing a good job. Then this student kept asking, “What do you think about teachers who punish students physically?” Without hesitation, I voiced my strong disagreement with the idea of physically punishing students. The student bowed and thanked me with two palms folded in front of his chest.

“Let’s give our Ph.D. a round of applause!” Dolma said as she clapped in the back. I stood there, still feeling nervous. It was extremely difficult to answer such earnest questions from these young, searching students.

One more voice arose from the clapping, “Teacher, why are you here?”

“Oh…I have come here to,” I tried to think how to explain my research agenda in just one or two sentences in Chinese, “to learn Tibetan and how to preserve a language!”

“Why do you want to do this? Aren’t you Chinese?” The young man in the blue school uniform asked, still standing.
I had no simple answer. That was a long journey. I told him and the class of my personal connection with my mother’s home—Lhasa—all the way up to my volunteer teaching experience with my first Tibetan language teacher Tenzin in 2012. I was aiming for a one-sentence reason, but it took me a while to finish explaining how I came to the idea of language preservation in the process of learning Tibetan. Students were again staring at me in surprise. I appeared to be a Han Chinese educated at an American university. But I didn’t know what I could possibly really be in their eyes on this first visit.

Overall, the first visit was very memorable, and I came to realize that this form of interaction was a typical “Buddhist Public Lecture-Dialogue” style after I returned from Sertar, where the Larung Buddhist Institute is located. This type of public lecture-dialogue was frequently conducted in the monasteries. Particularly, a high-status guru would host open lectures for visitors and believers during Buddhist festivals. Most often, the public lecture was an interaction between a guru and the audience about queries or prayers. The lecture-dialogue usually started with sharing a personal question and then taking questions from the crowd. The guru would listen and respond to the questions based on his own philosophy.

“I Just Wanted to Make a Living, But…”

As I entered the classroom, Qiling was concentrating on his sketches of Shakyamuni Buddha without noticing me. His eyes remained fixed on a ruler he held among a web of pencil lines. I sat by the door and watched him measuring the jungle of lines on the thangka canvas. The composition of thangka was highly geometric. On
Qiling’s *thangka* sketch board, Shakyamuni Buddha’s hands, eyes, ears, legs, and the ritualistic landscapes and backgrounds, such as waterfalls, clouds, and mythical creatures, were all laid out on a systematic grid of angles and intersecting lines. I didn’t want to interrupt Qiling as I remembered that the lamas and *jomos* at the Larung Buddhist Institution had told me that painting *thangkas* was intended to serve as a record of, and guide for, contemplative experiences with the Buddha. The process of painting was also considered a practice of meditation. Suddenly, Qiling’s ruler dropped to the floor. He sighed as he stood up and stared at it. Then he noticed me.

He walked toward me and said, “I can’t even concentrate on my painting these days.” I pointed at our chessboard on the desk. Qiling nodded and started to move two chairs to the balcony. During the preparation, Qiling also said that playing chess might be a way to achieve inner peace when his mind was not at ease. When we were seated, he said, “I am really worried about my older brother. I have not heard from him for a long time.”

Sitting across the chessboard, I saw Qiling’s face more clearly—I noticed a large scar across his left eyebrow straight to his left eye on his tan face. During the game, I got to know more about Qiling’s family. Qiling’s sister married and moved to her husband’s county two years ago. In the same year, his older brother Tudung dropped out of school because he was failing. He left and became van-taxi driver on national highway 318. Tudung was the only breadwinner in the household of five. This work paid for food for the whole family and Qiling’s tuition. However, driving along this highway in the rainy season can be very unpredictable. A few days ago, the news broadcast that fifteen cars
driving the highway were buried by mudslides. Not only the unexpected mudslides and floods during the rainy season, but the extremely narrow, rocky road on the edge of precipices could also be very dangerous.

It reminded me of my car accident weeks ago on the same highway. My heart went out for him. I said to Qiling with my palms folded, “Let’s pray for Tudung.” Qiling smiled and said, “I think he will be well. He taught me how to play chess. And I think he would be glad to know we are playing right now.” Qiling made a chess move and then asked me to make mine. As I was evaluating the consequences of my move, Qiling asked me, “Do you remember how we met?”

My thoughts went back to the moment I heard the name “Qiling” from Dolma right after my first visit to *thangka* class: A student named “Qiling” wanted to speak to me. However, I didn’t remember who he was among the twenty-four students. Hearing his name, I assumed he was Chinese. I was too nervous to remember much about the names of Dolma’s students.

Qiling and I had “met” at the “Patriotic Film Night.” When the sun went down, approximately two thousand students gathered on the playground. Dolma had her *thangka* students sit on the soccer field in front of a giant canvas screen. I sat among Dolma’s students in the dark. As the projector’s blue light started to glow, images of men in green army uniforms began to move across the screen. I then realized that it was the Chinese civil-war movie series. These were what I watched when I grew up. This film showed how Mao’s Red Army marched to areas of ethnic minorities in southwestern China, to spread socialist equality and justice among indigenous peoples such as
Tibetans, Yi, and Qiang. It portrayed Mao as a warm and welcoming leader, supported by all the ethnic minority groups. The film started with a story about a woman of the Yi ethnic group that had joined Mao’s army and married a Han Chinese soldier regardless of the social obstacles. When the couple went back to the Yi village, the Yi girl told her tribe, “We should embrace the policies of the Communist Party! They are like the sun shining on us!” Eventually, the “backward and barbarous” indigenous people were liberated by the party’s policies on ethnic minority areas and the Marxist principle of equality.

The sound from the outdoor speaker in front was extremely loud. I could barely hear other sounds. Students who sat in the front pulled their uniform collars up to cover their ears; some put their fingers in their ears. While I was struggling with the earsplitting sounds of grenades, bombs, and gunfire, a red school uniform slowly approached me. Then he poked me with his elbow and shouted into my ear, “Hi, I am Qiling.” I soon realized that this was the Chinese name I had heard from Dolma.

“Hi, I am Dolma’s ... How are you?” He spoke to me in a perfect Sichuan dialect.

“Hello. I cannot hear you very well! It is too loud,” I said loudly toward his ears, with Mao’s army’s gunfire in the background.

“I always wanted to speak with you!” He raised his pitch.

“Thank you, but why?” I spoke but it was almost like a howl.

“Because ….”

I barely heard what he said. Mao’s army was shooting the Nationalists in the background. The deafening gunfire covered our voices. Other students could not sit still
and started to move backward to make it less loud. Qiling and I moved closer and used our hands to communicate. I pointed at the movie and shouted into his ears, “Too loud! We should talk another time!”

He nodded. We sat side by side in silence through the rest of the movie with the oppressive noise. Following the hour-long ear-splitting suffering, Mao’s army eventually defeated the Nationalist warlords and won the territory together with, and for, the southwestern indigenous peoples.

Thinking about Mao’s army distracted me from playing chess with Qiling. I hadn’t made a move yet. Qiling asked me, “What were you thinking?” I told Qiling that my mind was overwhelmed by Mao’s army during the movie night. Qiling laughed, “Oh, it was too loud.”

I smiled, “Why did you want to talk to me?”

“I was curious about why you are here. Every morning I would see you reading Tibetan awkwardly in the office,” Qiling answered as he stretched his legs. The board started to shake, and the black-and-white chess pieces suddenly got mixed up. We had to restart the game. While we were separating black and white on the board, Qiling stopped to speak to me in a very serious tone, “I just wanted to talk with you because I admired that you were honest with us. Especially that question about your religion. Do you remember that one from my classmate?”

“Of course, but I thought I offended you all,” I said and continued to organize the black pieces.
“No, I appreciated your answer. It was surprising to the whole class. You said that you didn’t know whether you could identify with any one religion. That was very honest.” Qiling said, looking into my eyes with earnestness, “My classmates, many of them, are devout Tibetan Buddhists. And they don’t believe in other things…But I always question…I’d rather doubt.”

“Thank you Qiling, I am in search of my own beliefs too. I grew up and was educated as an ‘atheist.’” I looked at him and regretted that I had assumed he and the whole class were fanatical Tibetan Buddhists. And Qiling’s name—a Chinese name—made me more curious.

I hesitated, “Qiling, may I ask about your name…”

Qiling smiled and said, “Yes, of course! I am happy to share with you.”

“Your Chinese name…” I didn’t know how to ask the question. “You also have a Tibetan name, right?”

“Yes, my Tibetan name is Gelsang Shugden. And my Han name is Li Qiling. That’s who I am. I like my Han Chinese name!” Qiling responded with his eyes on the chessboard.

“Really? I thought your legal name was Tibetan and your nickname was Chinese. I’ve heard your teacher calling you by your Chinese name—Qiling—all this time!” I was surprised by his answer. I found out that Li Qiling was his legal name, used on his identification. After the 1960s, many Tibetans changed their names during the Cultural Revolution. Today, many use a Chinese name because of better local policies if they do not appear too Tibetan. I had made another assumption.
“You can call me Shugden as well. I just prefer my Han name. It was given to me by my grandfather. My grandfather is Han Chinese, from Sichuan. He married my grandmother when he followed the Red Army to Kham. She is Tibetan. Please don’t tell teacher Dolma. Only my closest companions know about my family,” Qiling said, as he started to put the blacks and whites on the board for another game.

I was intrigued by Qiling’s family history and said, “Oh, no doubt you speak good Sichuan dialect!”

“That is also a problem! In our county, we speak a dialect that is neither Tibetan nor Chinese. No… that should be both Tibetan and Chinese\(^\text{34}\). Well, my family speaks Sichuan at home.” Qiling patiently put the black and white pieces on the board and continued, “There is always a problem with my name. I cannot get along with my classmates here. The conflicts are always hidden. One time during a class report, a classmate went up to present his speech on ‘Being Buddhist.’ Okay, it is good to believe in Buddhism. But personally, I am not sure how much I believe in it. Then this guy started to point at my face and said: ‘Some people here use a Chinese name! And they don’t speak Tibetan. It is shame! I don’t know what these people are thinking! We are all Tibetan Buddhist and we need to have our own names in our language! Those who don’t speak Tibetan, those who do not take Tibetan names, should tell us the truth and get out!’ I got really angry! But I had to control my anger. Yes, I have a Chinese name! It was given by my grandfather! On the other hand, I liked being called Li Qiling!”

\(^{34}\) “A dialect…both Tibetan and Chinese” refers to the emergence of Tibetan-Chinese mixed languages. According to Tournadre (2003, April 7), this mixed language in Tibetan is called “ramalugka” [ra-ma-lug skad].
I was stunned again and learned that quite a few thangka students resisted the Han language in the way that was expressed to Qiling. He continued, “I was very irritated at the moment but I kept quiet. I am the only one in class who adopted a Chinese name. My company who knew about my family history got very angry at the speech and spoke up for me immediately, ‘People’s names are like hair and skin! How can you pick on the parents who gave the children their names?’ And I calmed my friend down and said, ‘Don’t get angry. It is not necessary! There is always a problem with my Chinese name.’”

Qiling started another game. We kept coordinating the moves with each other. Half an hour after, it was hard to see who was winning. He continued, “All my life, I think I am Tibetan. But…now, there is always a problem with my Chinese name.”

I stopped thinking about the next chess move and started to listen more intently.

“You know, I have a Chinese name, and I don’t know how to speak proper Tibetan. No one in school played with me or spoke to me when I grew up. I was beaten every day. I had a bloody face…every day. I had to get used to it. I always hid in the corner of the dorm. When I brought food from home, I had to hide it under my bed. But the big kids found it anyway and stole it all. I was left crying alone!” Qiling pointed to the scars on his left eyebrow and continued, “But…it’s okay. I am over it now. I get along with people now. When I grew up, I learned to survive by bribing the big kids. I’d give them dry yak meat, so they would protect me. That’s how I survived! I know I am not good at speaking Tibetan and not acceptable to my classmates. That’s okay. I enjoy my life here.”

“Qiling, I am sorry.” My eyes filled with tears, and I tried to focus on the chess.
“You don’t have to feel sorry for me. I have a companion here who will speak up for me. I wanted to become a thangka master so that I can feed my family. It is a good place for me to be.” Qiling said with smile, “But my literary Tibetan really sucks.”

“We can learn it together. You know, my Tibetan is worse than yours.” I said.

Qiling accepted my proposal quickly and said we should both be tested by Dolma next summer, then added, “And I also want to paint a thangka for you! What is your favorite character?”

“King Gesar35!” I answered without hesitation, “Well, I can wait. How about 10 years?” I knew that Qiling was a second year thangka student, and I had also heard from Dolma that it took at least ten years to become a thangka master.

“You know, I could do it in five years. You don’t have to wait so long! I am always interested in painting. When I chose to be thangka student, I just told myself that this major would help me feed my family. I just wanted to make a living, but I started to realize this is more and more important to me after I started to paint White Tara and Lord Buddha. I feel this is also my culture. This is part of me. I want to speak my own language—Chinese, and Tibetan.”

I nodded to Qiling and we agreed to take a Tibetan language test in three months. Again, the chess game never ended; no one won and no one lost.

“Why is She Here”

I came back from the chess game to Dolma’s apartment. Dolma was sitting on the carpet by the bed, chatting with various people on the iPhone app. I could tell she was

35 King Gesar is an epic dating from the 12th century. It included the heroic deeds of the Tibetan hero Gesar.
chatting with different people because she was quickly switching among Mandarin, Tibetan, and Sichuan dialects. In Mandarin, I heard Dolma communicating with a man about a letter she saw in the office. It was a student’s drop-out letter enclosed in the weekly assignment book. Dolma read the letter:

Dear Teacher Demkar Gyal,

I am very sorry to tell you this. My father didn’t send money earlier this year from the city. I have six other brothers and sisters at home. I cannot stay here and bear to think of their suffering for my tuition. I can provide money for my family with my labor. Please allow me to quit school. Again, I am very sorry. And thank you.

Dolma sounded very upset even though the letter was not from one of her students. It was a student of another head teacher, Demkar Gyal. After she finished reading it, she quickly switched to a Tibetan-accented Mandarin, “Puba, an American female Ph.D., stays with me.”

The man’s voice with the Tibetan accent got really loud and from the other side of the chatting app came: “Why is she here?”

Dolma walked toward me while talking to the app, “She is learning Tibetan culture and language. I don’t know exactly what she does. Here, you talk to her. You both are doing anthropology after all!”

As soon as Dolma put the phone next to my ear, I heard the voice ask in Mandarin with a Tibetan accent: “Why are you here?”
This was not the first time I had faced a question like this. I figured out this guy named Puba was Dolma’s friend from Amdo. They had to speak Mandarin because there was a large difference between the Kham and Amdo dialect. In Dolma’s words, Puba was “doing anthropology.” Assuming he was an academic, I spent the next two hours sharing how I was connected to Tibet and my dissertation research plan.

During the explanation, I thought about lama Pema’s question at the sky burial site: “Why are you here?” One’s intentions should always be examined. In the Buddhist Eightfold Path, acting with the right intention was always considered a priority. Intentions of renunciation, goodwill, and harmlessness were valued. After a long conversation, Puba was satisfied with my answers and showed an interest in what I was doing. In the end, after he questioned me about the details of my research, Puba said, “Bomola, bring your research and come to Amdo next year.”

Dolma really loved to introduce me to her companions from different areas. And by now I have connected with many of Dolma’s friends from Amdo and Kham. She took the phone and continued to speak via the Wechat app. I fell asleep while Dolma was still chatting.

Next, someone kicked me on my feet, and I woke up. It was already 2 a.m. Dolma snatched the covers off me and said, “Wake up! We’re going to Kangding in the morning!” Kangding is the center of the Gartse Tibetan Autonomous Region. It was renamed during the Chinese “land reform” in the Kham area in the 1950s (Ma, 1995; Li, 36 Wechat is an international online chatting app launched by Tencent. It is a text and voice communication tool. The function is similar to WhatsApp.

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2010). The county’s Tibetan name was Dartsedo. It was an important location on the “Tea Horse Road” that marked the ancient tea trade from southwestern China to Tibet.

I went back to sleep while Dolma was preparing some documentation. Her voice was flowing into my ears: “I have to go to the post office, and the bank. Oh, I also want to get you a chuba in the city and stroll around together…”

“I Want to Run My Own Non-profit”

Dolma wore her chuba every Wednesday and Thursday as a few middle-aged Tibetan women who were teachers did. It was different for the younger Tibetan women teachers, Lhamo, Yangjin, and Wangmo. They loved to wear jeans, sneakers, and t-shirts and asked me about the prices of my clothes. They were amazed that t-shirts and jeans of the same brand could be so cheap in America. Everything had become so expensive these days. A pair of Levis was over $120 in the Chinese shopping malls. Yangjin was excited when I agreed to purchase jeans and makeup for her from the United States. In this school, students were required to wear red and blue uniforms from Monday to Saturday. It was very eye-catching when Dolma was walking among the school uniforms in her dark red chuba. She always said that she wanted me to wear chuba, so I was very excited to go on this chuba shopping trip with her.

Early in the morning, Dolma and I took a van-taxi to the post office at the town plaza. Dolma took out some neatly packed up thangka sketches and folded them nicely, and inserted them into an hardcopy envelope with a handwritten “thank-you” letter in Chinese. I was curious and asked, “Oh, to whom will we send these sketches?” Filling out the paperwork for an express mail package, Dolma answered, “Well, actually, I don’t
“I was astonished at her answer, “How is that possible?” I said. Dolma stopped filling out the form: “See, I only filled out the recipient’s address. That is the only thing I know. The street name and his city, Shenzhen. I don’t even know his name.” Then I was even more surprised about how on earth this could be. After Dolma filled out the form and mailed the *thangka* sketches, we jumped into a van, and Dolma started to tell her story of how she met the person to whom she had mailed the sketches.

**A genuine encounter.** “During the summer two years ago, I returned home during summer break. It was the first year I had started working here. I was really upset because one of my students was going to drop out. Normally, that student was the only person who knew how to read and write Tibetan in his family. Of course, a family might have another child they sent to the monastery. But once the child became a lama, he could not visit the family often. I felt very bad when I heard of students dropping out one after another. I decided to visit my *guru* in the monastery. Maybe he could help me through the struggle of witnessing others’ suffering. On my way to meet him, I saw a backpacker standing by the monastery stairs. I greeted him, nodding my head. To my surprise, he folded his palms and bowed to me. I thought he must be a very polite person. He looked like a traveler and might have been a Han Chinese. He was wearing a climber’s sneakers and a windbreaker. But I was not sure. I wondered why he stood by the stairs but did not try to go in, as the other tourists did. I approached him and asked him. He said that it would be disrespectful to enter while the lamas were chanting. I laughed. Yes, I laughed at him because he was looking around like a child when other
tourists just walked in the monastery. Then I said I knew the traditions and it would be
okay; he could walk in with me. That was how I got to know him.

Guiding him around the monastery, I told him that I worked as a Tibetan language
teacher at school near Kangding. I don’t know how we started a conversation about my
students. And at the time I was worried about the student who was going to drop out. So I
shared my worry with him. Many students from the nomads’ and peasants’ area had
difficulty paying for tuition. I told him how I grew up as well. I was lucky because my
family had only my sister and me, and both of us went to school. But my family life
became extremely difficult after my father passed away when I was in second grade.
Taking care of the potato field alone, my mother could not provide tuition for my sister
and me. When we were almost ready to drop out, my uncle’s family called my mother
and said they would wire money to us. I always assumed my uncle’s family was
indifferent to our situation and not treating us very well. After my mother married ‘out,’
my uncle stopped visiting us. This was how my mother described it, and for a time I
didn’t know why.

After the visitor heard my story, he didn’t say much. He asked me for my phone
number, and I wrote it on his arm. I only remembered he said wanted to do something for
us. But he left soon after our conversation.

A few months later, in September, I received his money! It was such a surprise. I
thought he was just saying he wanted to help. And I don’t even know his name. I used his
money to support two students whose families were very poor. I felt bad I didn’t know
who he was. I kept asking after him on the phone all these years and no one knew his
name—he didn’t want to share it, apparently. He lived in Shenzhen. That’s the only thing I knew. He said he just wanted to do something for Tibetans. So many people who ‘donated’ to Tibetans, including the celebrities, desperately wanted to be acknowledged. I really appreciated his nameless merit. I have connected with other individuals like him on Wechat. And I don’t even know when I started to do this. It just happened naturally.”

After Dolma told me her story, I sat there and watched the view outside the window change from meadows to colorful tall buildings. This was Kangding, the center of Kham, located at the confluence of two big rivers. Dolma asked the driver to stop when we arrived at a tall building with a large green sign, China Agricultural Bank. I passed some money to the driver and said, “Ajo, gazhengqie37!” He responded with a smile of surprise, “Bomola, gazhengmaqie38, demu a!” He reminded me of Qiling’s brother, also driving along national highway 318, and I prayed for the brother’s safety.

Dolma quickly walked up to the second floor. I followed her and saw a large glass office where Tibetan women wore the black blazers of the bank uniform. We entered a room with a large sign: “International Banking.” Dolma started to ask a clerk about the exchange rate between Swiss dollars and Chinese yuan. It interested me. I stepped in closer and saw the document in Dolma’s hands—an international wire transfer. Sharing a room with her for three months, I learned that Dolma had this international connection. Dolma then asked me to help her with the English part of the wire transfer. I took a chair next to her and filled out the English section: address, receiver’s name, and amount of money in transit, 800 Swiss dollars. Dolma smiled with pride, “That’s another student’s

37 gazhengqie means “Thank you!”
38 gazhengmaqie refers to “not at all” or “you are welcome.”
year of tuition and fees—and some living expenses!” I looked at her. She was jumping around the room like a child who had just been given her favorite candy. Soon the form was filled out and sealed, and Dolma held her bankcard firmly, saying, “I’m so glad this can help out Demkar Gyal’s student!” Demkar Gyal was also a Tibetan language teacher in our office from Amdo, Tibet. Eventually, I figured out that the 800 Swiss dollars were from the person to whom Dolma was reading the Demkar student’s letter via the Wechat app.

We jumped into another van-taxi to get to the *chuba* shop. Dolma said to me, “Demkar Gyal’s student is dropping out. I’m going to give him this money for that student. Demkar Gyal’s family farm in Amdo had been collecting spare money to support several students in school. But I needed to work on finding more donors for my students. Now I worry about Qiling’s family. They live as halftime nomads and halftime peasants. And his brother has been missing…”

My eyes grew large and I stared at Dolma, “Where did you hear this?” Dolma held her wallet steadily. “From his weekly composition. Qiling wrote about his brother in his weekly dairies… I was really worried. I’ve connected with two donors from India, from my guru’s monastery. I think I will ask them to support some of my *thangka* students. You know the *thangka* tradition. Now the factories can mass produce *thangka* these days. And we are losing the traditional techniques for *thangka*. It was a blessing from Buddha that these kids have had a chance to learn. I am very happy but I worry…”

While Dolma was deep in thought, I was reminded of this interesting channel of teacher-student communication achieved through the sharing of weekly composition...
assignments. Every Saturday, students wrote one page reflecting on their lives and submitted it to their head teachers—the Tibetan language teachers. The teachers would read it very closely and write back with a lot of feedback. I remembered this was a tradition started by Tenzin, my Tibetan language teacher who taught in this school two years ago.

Tenzin told me on the phone how he had found a good way to teach a Tibetan language class, “I told my students to write anything they want in their mother tongue,”

“Do you give students any topics to write about?” I asked.

“No, they can write anything they want, in Tibetan. So by not limiting their topic, I had some students tell me of their worries about losing their mother tongue.” Tenzin continued, “My friends and I try different ways to keep our language alive. We volunteer many hours after work to teach the learning community students Tibetan. At the same time, we are trying to improve our English.”

“How long have you been encouraging students to do so?” I asked.

“I don’t know when I started, maybe ever since I started teaching. My other friends are doing the same. From our students, we realized the urgency of preserving our language.” Tenzin responded.

“What do you and your friends do to preserve it?” I continued.

“In school, we encourage our young to learn Tibetan. We also encourage Han Chinese kids who live here to learn Tibetan language and literature. After class, we sing in our language and dance during our gatherings. I will bring you to one of our gatherings,” Tenzin said.
At this school I often observed many moments when the students shared their compositions with their Tibetan teachers. While the Tibetan teachers were grading their students’ weekly compositions, they would read the students’ concerns to each other aloud. One of the examples was from a composition entitled “I Wanted to Be a Tibetan Language Teacher”:

Whether I had been here or not
My footprint was already left in the snow
I am a humble drop of water from the snow of the Himalayas
In the hope of nurturing my mother land

Now I’ve witnessed the significance of the weekly composition assignment in teacher-student communication. The stories were very personal and fulfilling because it affirmed their dignity. In their teaching the Tibetan language teachers had a good opportunity to see students’ lives outside of the classroom. Dolma also told me on the way that the twenty Tibetan language teachers had been discussing in their monthly meetings different ways to raise funds for students who applied to drop out. During the last one all the Tibetan language teachers donated at least 100 yuan, but it was hard to come up with a long-term solution. Relying on funds from nongovernmental organizations could be politically problematic. The local educational administration viewed nongovernmental and nonprofit organization from overseas with a great suspicion.

While Dolma and I were still chatting about how to raise funds locally, we came to a colorful chuba shop full of Tibetan women. Dolma immediately stopped talking
about fundraising and became excited. Jumping out of the van-taxi, she ran into the 
*chuba* shop and grabbed a *chuba* with a print similar to hers—a long dark dress and a 
bright turquoise blouse with golden stripes. The lady in the *chuba* shop assumed that 
Dolma and I were sisters and offered a discount. Dolma smiled and confirmed the shop 
lady’s assumption. Dolma immediately dressed me with the new *chuba*. Both of us 
walked out of the shop confidently onto the main street of Kangding. Tourists passed by 
and tried to take pictures of us with their long-lensed cameras. The locals were staring at 
us but smiling. Dolma smiled, “Now you are a real Kham girl—Gyesang. Look at the 
Kham men on the street—they are all looking at you!”

I felt a moment of shyness, but walking with Dolma in the *chuba* made me feel 
more and more Tibetan. I started to respond to locals who greeted us in Tibetan. Dolma 
held my hands, “I think it is good Karma from my previous life that brought you to me. I 
am glad I have a Han Chinese friend, and she is an American Ph.D. besides.” When we 
passed a middle school along the river, Dolma said, “Now I think I enjoy being a teacher! 
No, I feel I am more than a teacher.”

I was curious why she said this. I stopped by the river and asked her, “I thought 
you always enjoyed being a teacher. Why did you want to be a teacher?”

“Oh, in college, I just wanted to make a living so I chose the Tibetan language 
major. Becoming a Tibetan teacher can help me find a job easily! I thought. Then, during 
my first year here, I didn’t enjoy being a head teacher. It was so difficult. The problems 
that my students went through were similar to what I had been through. Then I gradually 
found myself good at collecting funds for poor students. In the future I think I will run
my own nonprofit to support poor Tibetan kids going to school.” Dolma laughed and jumped up to the center of the bridge by the main street and said, “Sister, let’s take a picture!”

“I Can Use My Camera to Preserve Tibetan Language and Culture”

After we took a picture at the edge of the river, Dolma and I jumped into another van-taxi and headed back to Dolma’s apartment. Dolma immediately posted the chuba-sisters picture at the bridge in Kangding onto her Wechat friends circles. A voice in Mandarin from Dolma’s iPhone came into my ear, “Who is that standing next to you?” Dolma responded, “Brother Badeng! That is my American female Ph.D., Gyesang Nima. My companion!” I was feeling less awkward about the label “American female Ph.D.” Then “brother Badeng” sent another voice message, “Why is she there?” I said nothing but smiled at Dolma. Dolma smiled back with lips pursed.

When the two of us arrived at school in chuba, the guards, two Han Chinese male teachers in their 50s, looked at me uncomfortably. Walking towards Dolma’s apartment, many Tibetan students greeted me by nodding their heads with secret smiles, “Ghege!” Two Han Chinese female teachers saw and stopped us, asking Dolma, “Are you two dressing up for the performance dance?” Dolma straightforwardly countered, “No, we are Tibetans who enjoy wearing our traditional clothes.” The two Chinese teachers walked away with a smile of embarrassment. Dolma and I looked at each other and laughed with our hands covering our mouths.

As soon as we arrived at the apartment, Dolma started to laugh aloud, “Well, Gyesang Nima, I thought Han Chinese and Tibetans could not be friends.” I was about to
take off my *chuba* and stopped, “Why?” Dolma sat on the bed and said, “I thought the Han Chinese relationship to us is usually like a flash—they come and go very fast.” I approached the bed and sat next to Dolma, “What makes you think that way?” Dolma looked at me with big eyes: “You are my first Han Chinese companion…” A ring tone from Dolma’s iPhone cut off our conversation. The lyrics went: “My encounter with you is the most beautiful accident…”

Dolma picked up the phone and walked onto the balcony, “Brother Badeng…” Half an hour later, Dolma came back to the bedroom with her phone and said, “Brother Badeng wants to talk to you!” I nervously picked up the phone. I had no idea who the “Brother Badeng” was. It was obviously a Tibetan name. The first question from “Brother Badeng” was, “Can you explain to me why you are here?” Hearing “Brother Badeng” speaking in perfect Mandarin, I responded in Mandarin. After I explained my purpose, my dissertation study, on the phone, brother Badeng spoke with me excitedly for a very long time. He narrated his story of a twelve-year connection with Kham.

“I am a Han Chinese businessman. I had been travelling around Southeast Asia because of my work. My parents had worked in Gartse before, so I always felt a sense of connection there. I first travelled to the Gartse in the spring of 2002. A curious traveler, I walked toward the orange- and turquoise monastery with the gold roof. I took a lot of pictures outside of monastery. I was also curious about what was inside. I gazed into the lobby in between the curtains—there were lamas in red robes sitting in orderly rows facing an older lama in a brighter red robe and a tall yellow cap. This older lama was sitting at the very front and leading the chant. As I gazed in, my eye met his. I felt for a
moment both nervous and friendly. He nodded at me and eyed the empty pad next to him, all while his lips were still moving. I immediately got it—I moved quietly toward him and sat at the empty pad. He soon closed his eyes and continued to chant. I sat next to him quietly in the main lobby. After about an hour, he opened his eyes and said in Sichuan dialect, ‘Let’s go home.’ It felt like I was listening to someone I had known a long time. I was wondering what his home was like when he stood up and walked down the stairs. So I followed him to his ‘home.’ It was a very tiny room. We stayed and chatted for a long time. There he introduced himself as the ‘manager’ of the monastery. During the chat, we struggled to understand each other’s language—his Sichuan dialect was not very clear. I understood him as the ‘manager’—the monastery’s deputy head lama. I assumed that was what the ‘manager’ invoked. I took pictures of myself with him before I left.

That was how my attachment to Kham started. Half a year later, I was told by some friends from Kham that the ‘deputy head lama’ of the monastery was in a hospital in Chengdu. I assumed he was sick. And I was very concerned and planned to visit, bringing him the picture I took. I was anxious about his health and hoped he was as well as could be. When I walked into the hospital, it was very confusing. The person in the bed was not him. I became very frustrated with everyone in my presence. I just didn’t know what to say in front of a group of strangers with red robes. It was lucky I had the picture from the monastery. I showed it to this small crowd. Soon they realized that this was a big misunderstanding because of language. The lama in the picture was the ‘script master,’ not the ‘deputy head lama.’ He used the word ‘manager’ because he could not
find a word in Sichuan dialect to express the meaning. The actual head lama of the monastery, Ragar, just reached this hospital to take care of his nephew.

That’s how I got to know Ragar. No matter how far I travelled, I tried to visit him twice a year. During our ten-year friendship, Ragar had shared his worries about the changes in Tibet, modernization and secularization. Many Tibetan intellectuals were worried about similar things—the clash of modernity with Tibetan tradition. They worry their culture will soon be washed away. They see few solutions—just endless construction and more large corporations moving in. He was always standing on the roof of the monastery and looking down at the county at the foot of the mountain, deep in thought. I took a picture of him standing on the roof after one of our conversations. I will share it with you here.”
“Ragar was born in a very traditional Tibetan family. His values were natural and simple. He tried to maintain the old way of life. For example, five years ago, the monastery banned cell phone use. For the lamas in particular, the monastery had implemented a cell phone and television ban. I knew that. But I didn’t know when and how it had changed. Two or three years ago, the lamas were still hiding cell phones when Ragar was there. He had served as deputy head lama of the monastery. Sometimes he had to compromise principles he had worked hard all his life to observe—by allowing himself to communicate by phone to take care of the logistics of the monastery. He had always hidden in his room when using his cell phone. Last year, when I visited, the lamas were
using smart phones in public—laughing and joking about the messages they posted to each other.

Ragar was a rule-follower, very strict with himself. Every time I visited, the changes were more permanent. Ragar had been living amid the struggle during the process of change. But he had the character needed to preserve traditional values and structures. He once said, ‘The children cannot even read Tibetan. How will they be able to read the Buddhist Scripts? Will our faith live on after all these generations?’ He was extremely worried about the younger generation, those who could not read Tibetan at all. It would represent a severe discontinuity in values. There was no grief in his expression, only deep resignation. We’ve been friends all these years, and I felt his struggles along with him.

One day, while I was looking at the pictures I took from the past ten years, I resolved: I will use my camera to tell his stories, and stories of Kham Tibet. When I took these pictures, I relied on my instincts, my passion and love for Tibet. I didn’t know if what I did was right or wrong. I just wanted to do something. I got to know Dolma through Ragar. Dolma always visited her guru and prayed in this monastery whenever she returned home from work.

I visited Dolma’s school this fall. I took a lot of pictures in her thangka class—focusing on how the thangka was created. Dolma had asked me how to connect with more individual donors in order to support more Tibetan students. I started to think about ways to create a fundraising system for Dolma’s thangka students. I talked with her about creating evaluation criteria for scholarships for under-resourced Tibetan students. We
started brainstorming: We could start up a nonprofit. During the trip, I selected a few
good pictures of their *thangka*. Maybe I should first create a photo album with the
*thangka* students’ stories. Now I had some more solid ideas. I could raise some funds
overseas by publicizing these pictures, I realized. As for the evaluation system, I may
need to negotiate with more Tibetan teachers.”

While brother Badeng was sharing his story on the phone, Dolma came over and
cut off the conversation: “I have a meeting; please give me my phone back.” I wondered
how Dolma could have such a meeting so late at night. I passed the phone to her, and she
spoke with Brother Badeng quickly and hung up. She returned to bed and stared at her
phone, typing. I asked, “What is the meeting about?”

Dolma responded, “Oh, I don’t know. We’re just sharing experiences on the
group chat. Now we are just trying to see who’s coming to the monthly meeting
tomorrow. Did you know that the speech contest and performance night all came from
our meeting? We just met. Not much of an agenda. Oh, yes, the bilingual newspaper
should come out tomorrow! The four main editors are Namgyal, Tenzin, Lobsang, and
Tsering. I wish my literary Tibetan was as good as theirs. I wanted to be the editor of the
next bilingual newspaper. We will have another meeting tomorrow. Now they are talking
about it on Wechat.”

I sat by Dolma and saw the Wechat group named “Harmony Bod Zha”³⁹. “Dolma
said, “This is our Tibetan teacher group—around forty people. We talked about
everything here. And we will meet again tomorrow.”

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³⁹ *Bod Zha* refers to “Tibet” or “Tibetan.”
Chapter Six: Embodiment

Early Monday around 7:30, Dolma and I were walking down the avenue to class. Dolma called to the guy ahead of us, “Tsering, Tsering!” He was wearing a brown chuba top and blue jeans with the ends turned up neatly, walking with his eyes staring at the phone screen. I remembered his name from a conversation with Dolma. Tsering was one of the editors of the school’s bilingual newspaper.

“Tsering!” said Dolma, as she ran toward him.

He continued walking and responded without moving his eyes from the screen, “Oh, Dolma! What?”

Dolma smiled and, dragging me by my elbow toward Tsering, said, “I want to introduce you to my companion.” He stopped walking, turned his face to Dolma and said, “Oh, that American female Ph.D.?”

Dolma grabbed my hood, pushed me in front of Tsering and said, “So you have heard about her!”

In that moment, I was squeezed in between Dolma and Tsering.

“Oh, she played basketball with my group last week,” he said, but his eyes remained on the screen.

“Demu…” I tried to greet him in Tibetan in this awkward, sandwiched situation.

“Good morning!” Tsering finally moved his eyes from the phone and responded to me in English. He looked toward the teaching building and said, “I have a morning class. Bye.” Then he spoke to Dolma in Tibetan while I was squeezed in the middle.
After watching Tsering walk away, phone and all, Dolma and I stopped by the tiny grocery store on the first floor of the nearby dormitory. At the counter, Dolma asked for two jujube cakes and said to me, “I’ll eat one and keep the other one for anyone who might get hungry in the office.”

“Oh, that is very nice of you! I’ll buy two of them, too,” I said to Dolma as I took the cakes from the clerk. While we were walking out of the door, Dolma said quietly, “Tsering is the coolest Tibetan language teacher in this school.”

“Oh, really? What do you mean by ‘cool’?”

I put the four cakes in my canvas grocery bag. Dolma took my elbow and we walked out the store.

“Oh, I have to tell you a story of Tsering! Once he punched a student who was not listening to him in the face and made him bleed. Right here! On this avenue! I was in shock, but Tsering was just unmoved while his student was bleeding. He took out his wallet and flipped a bank card at the student’s face and said, ‘Go see a doctor!’ Then he left.

The student was still standing by the avenue, and still in a shock, leaving Tsering’s bank card on the ground. That was too cruel! A lot of teachers and students saw the scene. Tsering is well-known because of this. His students called him ‘First Fan of Batang’.”

“What! He beats up students in public?” I said as I stopped at the scene.

“All the time. Don’t tell anyone, please!” Dolma said.

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40 “First Fan of Batang” is a metaphorical translation from the Chinese in “Batang Di Yi Shan.” The term implies that a person had slapped others across the county of Batang.
She gave me a sly grin and pulled me with my elbow. All of a sudden, the class bell alerted us. Dolma grabbed my hood and said, “Oh, it’s almost 8 o’clock! I cannot be late!” We both ran to the office with the flow of students. Dolma went to teach her class. As I walked toward the office, I passed her classroom, and a question from Dolma’s student came to mind: “Teacher, Have you ever hit your students?”

I was sitting down and thinking back about emotional moments in American academic settings. What I have learned as a teacher is to respect my students and to try my best to “decenter” my privileges as an instructor in all situations, even when I hear emotionally challenging words such as “She should actually teach…” or “She doesn’t speak English.” I never lost my temper or attempted to hit any students. Most of the time I was desperately hoping that my students could understand my struggles. Many times I have swallowed my fear and abandoned my grievances when faced with identity and status challenges as an “Asian woman” teaching in an American university. But I felt extremely uncomfortable as I imagined a Tibetan student’s bleeding face by the avenue.

“That’s How My Tibetan Teachers Treat Students in School”

I spent the whole morning in the office thinking about power dynamics between students and instructors until lunchtime. Tibetan teachers often gather during lunch and share their teaching techniques and relationships with students. Such sharing always occurred in small groups of four or five Tibetan language teachers in tiny restaurants along the street or in a teacher’s apartment.

Dawa entered the office and wanted to cook with me for lunch. Dawa wanted to learn how to make American style food, as she was always interested in Western dishes.
Last week, her parents mailed her 50 pounds of frozen beef from hundreds of miles away. Dawa took me to her apartment and showed me the giant fridge, “We Tibetans don’t eat fresh meat. Eating the fresh slaughtered animal is too cruel. It is disrespectful of the cattle’s suffering. See, we always have fresh meat stored in the freezer and eat it the next day.”

“Yes, that’s the way we eat. Go take one piece to cook today!” said Dawa’s husband Lobsang, also a Tibetan language teacher, as he walked out of the bedroom. At lunch, Dawa asked me why I came here. I shared it honestly: “I am learning about Tibetan language and the preservation of its culture.” Dawa smiled and told me a well-known story from her county.

“In my county, most people don’t know how to read, especially in the nomads’ area. The monastery in our county started language education by giving out free Tibetan language books to the illiterate families. The book was full of images of modern products listed in Tibetan. For example, an image of a camera was followed by both the Chinese word—Zhao Xiang Ji—and the Tibetan translation. We don’t have the word camera in Tibetan. Some people who were educated collected these new words and translated them. We have to learn these new words from time to time. We know many words [from the outside of Tibet] in English, but we don’t know them in Tibetan. Tibetans, more often than not, try to live within our own tradition, but by adapting other languages—we still have to follow the developments from the outside.

Every family, well, every household, has one book from the monastery. Each household hopefully has at least one person who can read. One Tibetan young man, who
was educated in the Tibetan schools in the city, tried to speak Tibetan when he returned home for vacation. This boy’s apa and ama were illiterate. The only thing the boy could do was to teach the parents how to read words. For example, he would quiz his parents the day after he taught them new words.

He asked his parents as if he were a teacher, ‘You know? It’s time for an exam! Take out that book, look at the picture! How do you read this?’

He said that parents have to answer in Tibetan. The test included words such as fruits and vegetables. They have to name everything in Tibetan. This was exactly what happened in my village! The boy was a primary school student! It was so funny! He took out the book to teach his apa and ama.

First he taught his parents how to pronounce the word, and then he quizzed them! He pointed at the picture and asked apa, ‘What is this?’ His apa said, ‘I don’t know!’ This boy, a primary school kid, immediately took out a stick and hit his father on the shoulder! His apa was outraged and said, ‘How dare you beat me!!!’ The boy responded, ‘Oh! That’s how my Tibetan teachers treat students in school!’

Ha-ha!

His apa didn’t know whether to laugh or cry. So that was the start: Soon many families started to learn Tibetan, but each household really needs one educated child. And many of those children were here! In this school!”

When Dawa finished the story, the four Tibetan teachers sitting in Dawa and Lobsang’s couch all laughed aloud. Lobsang continued telling the story, “That’s how our

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41 apa means “father.”
42 ama refers to “mother.”
language can survive. Our monastery will send the lama to talk to the families in the village informally. They might ask you to read this or that again and again. It is really difficult. Many schools in bigger counties don’t have Tibetan language classes. The children were educated in Chinese. In more than ten major counties in Kham, many schools offer classes that were not taught in Tibetan, like math, chemistry and physics.”

“Bang!” The door suddenly hit the wall heavily and cut off Lobsang’s words.

Dorjee appeared with a gloomy face, asking, “Is there any food?”

“Yes, we’re making steaks!” Dawa took the black pepper steak I made and put it on the table, “Our female Ph.D., Gyesang Nima, cooked for us!”

“Really? Oh, I always want to try some authentic American food! Oya!” Dorjee said.

“What happened, Dorjee? You don’t look happy.” Dawa was concerned. Dorjee walked in and sat next to me, straightened his legs, his fist on his chest.

“My class’s common area was so messy! It’s covered by scraps of paper with Tibetan scripts! Someone must have torn up a book or something. It’s too bad if anyone stepped on these papers with their important words. Bad karma, yes, bad karma! I shouted at them! They’re supposed to take care of the common area! They’re supposed to keep it clean! But that’s not even what I’m most angry about! ‘Don’t you know that when Lord Buddha’s body died, it became Tibetan words and scripts? This is so disrespectful!’ I shouted.”

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43 Common area refers to an area at the school assigned by the dean for general use. School policy requires that each class as a group keep the area clean.
“Don’t worry, Dorjee! Just show them a lesson! Once I find who did that, I’ll just slap them on the face!” Dawa said firmly with her hand in the air.

I thought about Tsering’s slap, and I started to wonder whether Dawa was serious.

Soon another set of footsteps reached the door. Tenzin walked in and asked, “Is there any food?”

“Oh, yes. Your student Gyesang Nima made steaks for us!” Dawa said to Tenzin.

Tenzin hesitated at the door and asked, “Oh nice! But isn’t it Saga Dawa these days?

“We have a guest. It’s okay! Come, come in!” Dawa waved at the door and said, “We Tibetans will always offer our best food to our guests!”

“Oh, It Is Saga Dawa”

The Saga Dawa Festival is an ancient event celebrated by Tibetan and many other Buddhist cultures worldwide. Saga Dawa honors Lord Buddha’s birthday, his achieving enlightenment and his death (and reincarnation). During the month, usually from the middle of May to the middle of June, many Tibetans will refrain from killing animals and eating meat. They also give alms and pray as acts of benevolence.

Returning to Dolma’s house, I saw four heads moving up and down by the window. I leaped to my feet and saw that four students were doing squatting exercises with some excitement outside Dolma’s balcony. They all stuck their tongues out as soon as they saw me.

“They were not listening in their Chinese woman teacher’s class; now they need to punish themselves,” said Dolma, expressing her anger as she walked into the room.
She sat down on the rug on the floor and shared how the “Gang of Four” was caught red-handed in Chinese language class. Dolma even saw one of them light a wrapped paper and pretend to smoke. The four changed seats and moved around the classroom while the teacher was writing on the blackboard. Dolma, still up and down, tried not to make eye contact with the four outside, who were still up and down.

“How many are they working on?” I asked.

“200, which was what they proposed, I didn’t want to force them. I asked them how they wanted to be punished,” Dolma said. “I can’t believe they had such manners in Chinese class. I know they’d never dare to do that in my class. Maybe it’s because I’m Tibetan… Yes, I’m Tibetan, and they are Tibetan, and that means a lot,” Dolma murmured and then shouted to the four students in Tibetan, “Go back to class when you are done!” The gang of four answered energetically, “Oya, ghege!”

Dolma told me that she was so angry that she didn’t eat lunch because of the students’ misbehavior. I walked towards the fridge and tried to look for something to cook for Dolma. I found two huge bags of fine cut pork and asked Dolma if I could use one of them.

“Oh, they are Yangjin’s pork. Mine were the other two pieces,” Dolma said and pointed at two smaller pieces in the right-front corner of the freezer.

“You want to cook some pork? Seriously?” I asked Dolma as I took out one small piece.

“Oh, yes, yes!” Dolma said.

“Isn’t today the first day of Saga Dawa?” I asked Dolma in a low voice.
“What? Um…Oh, it is Saga Dawa! Let’s just eat meat for lunch and start vegetarian meals for dinner!” Dolma put her hands in the air. A nice proposal was made.

I nodded and resolved Dolma’s problem regarding lunch, but Dolma had no time to cook dinner because of her busy schedule as a head teacher. We usually would go to restaurants outside the school for dinner. They were simple and rustic along an unpaved road that was full of sand and dirt. This school was built in the basin surrounded by the mountains of eastern Kham. It was 10 miles from the nearest town center along a turbulent river that crashed its way to the Yangtze River. The national highway 318 was above our heads, where groups of bikers were taking trips all the way to Lhasa. Dolma and I walked to the restaurant closest to her apartment and ordered vegetarian noodles, as we agreed during lunch.

“Boss, I want the potato rice, to go!” A voice, strange and familiar, filled my ears. Dolma and I turned around. It was a guy with neat paints with an iPhone in his pocket. Tsering took his bag from his back and asked, “Ladies, what kind of delicious food are you eating?”

“Vegetable noodles! What choice do we have?” Dolma responded.

“Dolma, you are making good Karma. How about our American female Ph.D.? Care to eat vegetable noodles with us?”

Tsering laughed, walked back to the counter to get his potato rice and said, “You don’t have to eat with us!”
“Oh, the only pure vegetarian is here, Tsering! He doesn’t eat meat at all. I actually really want to eat some beef,” Dolma whispered to me. “Maybe I will just do one veggie meal a day.”

I agreed with Dolma. A new Saga Dawa ritual was secretly created between Dolma and I—one meat meal and one vegetable meal per day. Many times, Dolma and I looked into each other’s eyes and burst into a furtive laughter when the meat dish was brought to our table during Saga Dawa.

If Dolma and I ate in a restaurant with a group of Tibetan teachers, we would always volunteer to order a vegetable dish out of respect for the group. Many times, the group secretly ordered one meat dish and placed it next to me. I felt guilt and appreciation at the same time whenever I saw only one meat dish among five or six vegetable dishes.

“You are Han Chinese,’ the crowd told me. ‘It is perfectly fine for you to eat meat, even with us. We respect your habits as well.’ I put my palms together to thank the crowd and said, ‘Gazhengqie!’”

Dolma didn’t cook much in her apartment except when others visited. Drokar, one of Demkar Gyal’s students, always visited me at Dolma’s apartment during lunch. I got to know Drokar two years ago when I volunteered to teach for a Tibetan NGO in Yunnan Province. Drokar was the most timid student in my public speaking class. I lost contact with her after I returned to the States. When I visited this year, I showed many Tibetan teachers pictures’ of my volunteering.
saw her in my phone pictures. Eventually, Drokar and I met again after two years, and we
laughed and cried.

This little girl had grown much taller. I still remember the first day I saw her—she
stood still, head bowed, and buried her face in both palms in front of me. Whenever I
asked her a question in class, little Drokar always covered her face with her palms, too
shy to speak. Two years after, a new Drokar appeared in front of me.

“Ajee⁴⁴ Gyesang, ajee Gyesang! I am coming to see you!”

Drokar now spoke to me in perfect Mandarin and always skipped lunch in the
dining hall to visit me before afternoon classes. When Drokar was here, Dolma and I
switched to eating vegetables. Drokar was always happy to share her fun moments with
classmates and teachers in the school. At the table, Dolma joked with Drokar: “Girl,
which teacher do you like most?”

“Ghege Tsering! Among all the teachers!” Drokar rattled off, with potatoes in her
mouth, “We love him, all of my dorm, and my friends.”

I instantly put my chopsticks on the table and glared at Drokar. The very word
“ghege Tsering” was now associated with a bloody face and an arrogantly flipped bank
card.

Drokar continued, “Ghege Tsering is a great teacher!”

I was confused and wondered why Tsering was the one Drokar picked to admire
most among the thirty Tibetan language teachers here.

⁴⁴ Ajee is a Tibetan phrase that means “elder sister.” It refers to siblings or women who
seemed older than the speaker.
“Don’t you think so, ajee?” Drokar asked as she turned to me. I picked up my chopsticks and left her question unanswered by asking: “Um, how is your family?”

“My mother and grandmother were circling the Pagoda all this month. They visited the monastery in town today. Ajee, you know? It is Saga Dawa.”

“Woman, Bring Me My Foot-wash Water”

The month of Saga Dawa marched forward very quickly. When Saturday arrived, Tibetan teachers who worked the whole school day could call it a day. Students were “released” at 12 p.m. from school, but they could not go out the school gate on weekdays. On Saturdays, they would dress in their own clothes and walk out legitimately. Many students rode their bikes or took taxi-vans to the town center on national highway 318. Teachers were no different. This Friday, Tenzin told us, we will have our “Fun Weekend” in the town center again.

Saturday afternoon, after hanging the laundry on Dolma’s balcony, Tenzin, Dorjee, and Dawa’s family took me with them, and we jumped into a taxi-van. Twenty minutes later, the van had climbed the twisting mountain road and reached the town plaza. Earlier, Tenzin said it should be a “hotpot” weekend. Dolma took us to the Skewer Hotpot Restaurant near the plaza. Skewer hotpot is one of the most famous dishes in Sichuan. It is a soup pot filled with skewers of vegetables and meat. When Dolma and I entered the restaurant, five tables were occupied by Tibetan teachers. We greeted everybody and bowed, especially, to the older teachers. We were seated and then waited at the boiling pots. Dolma told me that all the Tibetan teachers would have get-togethers
like this as the end of the semester is approaching. This one would likely be the last of the semester.

Five Tibetan teachers were sitting around an s-shaped pot with boiling soup. A divider separated two types of boiling soups: spicy oil soup and plain vegetable soup. The split pot accommodated people with different levels of tolerance for spicy food. Most of us were seated, but we were still waiting for two or three people. A senior teacher, ghege Wangmo announced, “This would be our last get-together of the semester!”

I smiled and ask ghege Wangmo, “What is your plan for the summer?”

Ghege Wangmo responded, “Oh, we travel through the mountains to pick up mushroom and yartsa gunbu in the summer. And after the mushroom season, we ten families join the monastery’s study group!”

I became curious, “Ten families?”

Ghege Wangmo continued, “Ten families in my county, we do things together—help each other with wedding, funerals, and take turns to host each other during festivals. And we join the monastery’s study group together too. Learning Buddhism together, of course, literary Tibetan as well.”

Another Tibetan teacher Yangjin, nodded to ghege Wangmo. I attempted to ask more about the ten-family associations. But Dolma suddenly clapped my shoulder and kept turning her head to the door, hoping someone would enter and fill out our table, then said, “I am so hungry!” But no one moved a chopstick because we still had an empty seat

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45 yartsa gunbu is a type of fungus. It means “summer grass, winter worm” in Tibetan although it resembles neither grass nor worms in appearance. Yartsa gunbu is also regarded as a major seasonal economic product for Tibetans.
at our table. While we were waiting, Tsering appeared, walked in and headed toward my table.

A moment of unease arose. A bloody face suddenly appeared in front of my eyes. I no longer had an appetite for the delicious hotpot. Now, unexpectedly, he was sitting in the seat next to me, as it was the only seat. Tsering passed me his wallet and iPhone and pointed at my bag, asking, “Can you put them in your purse? I don’t have a place to hold them.” I said nothing but took his stuff, putting it in my canvas bag.

Dolma pointed at Tsering and started teasing, “My husband, was there a beautiful bird on the mountain to distract you from coming on time?”

Tsering was too shocked to respond but soon realized, “Oh, yeah, beautiful birds stood in my way. And I cannot keep my eyes from them! Ha-ha-ha!”

Others at the table laughed together. “Eat. Let’s eat!” Ghege Wangmo said.

Dolma didn’t start eating, instead grabbed Tsering’s arm and said, “Heng! You came so late! Didn’t you know we were waiting for you?”

Tsering laughed and gently brushed Dolma’s hand away from his right arm, “It is very difficult for me to imagine you as my wife, Dolma. You are…”

“What! What do you think of me! Tell!” Dolma grabbed his left elbow tightly. Tsering moved his shoulder and tried to pull away.

“You . . . no longer behave like a woman!”

“Why do I not behave like a woman?” Dolma said, trying to seem angry, but her smile betrayed her.
“Get your hand off me and let me tell you! My woman should be very quiet! Not a bit like you!” Tsering said and laughed.

“Okay, okay. But I don’t know in what corner of the plateau you’ll ever find your quiet girl!” Dolma said, pretending to be grumpy.

Tsering got Dolma’s hand off his arm, shrugged and said, “Uh? Of course I will find my beloved! Many like this are running after me!”

“Okay, if not like Dolma, what does your ideal women look like?” Ghege Wangmo asked, laughing at both Dolma and Tsering.

“Well, my woman…okay, like this: When I get back from work every day, as soon as I say, ‘Woman, bring me my foot-wash water,’ she brings me a basin of water to wash my feet.” Tsering twisted his neck, which then sounded like a morning woodpecker. Then Tsering laughed, and the other Tibetan teachers on the table laughed too. I wet my lips and tried to smile along with the crowd, but it was very hard. I don’t even know how I managed to produce a dim, watery smile in response to Tsering. Then I moved my bowl away from Tsering, slightly.

“Well, she also should cook and take care of everything in the household—cleaning the house, serving the elderly, and tending the barley,” Tsering said and became increasingly somber.

Ghege Wangmo turned to Dolma and said, “Now, see, Tsering doesn’t suit you at all since you don’t cook and can’t do housework. I will introduce you to other Kham men I know.”

Dolma smiled and said, “Yes, please. I am twenty-six! I am a leftover now!”

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With some awkwardness, I put down my chopsticks. I felt sick about Tsering’s imaginary woman. It was nearly intolerable for me to imagine a woman bringing a pot of water to wash his feet. I was silent, immersed in my own world. It wasn’t a good dinner for me. I walked away from the table immediately when I got a phone call. Thankfully, I had a legitimate excuse to get away from Tsering.

Right after dinner, as planned, Tenzin took the whole group to a Karaoke house on a corner of the town plaza. I sat near Dolma as usual. Tsering was sitting on the opposite side of my couch. I avoided eye contact when he looked my way. Then some singing started; it was Han Chinese pop tunes about Tibet, such as “Mount Everest,” sung by China’s First Lady, Liyuan Peng.

Dorjee complained pointedly about the limited selection of Tibetan pop songs in the Karaoke system. “Mount Everest” started playing, and Tsering walked up and took the microphone. The screen showed the words to an old Chinese song named “Lady Yeliya,” about an ethnic minority lady. Lady Yeliya was a beautiful princess in an epic of the northern Gobi Desert. She always wears silky veils and elegant blue gowns in a sand-shrouded castle. She was a virtuous woman and her beauty was more than a fairy tale. It is said whoever married Lady Yeliya would be given everlastingly peace and prosperity in their kingdom. Many tribal kings in and around the Gobi Desert were tangled in wars fighting to marry Lady Yeliya. However, Lady Yeliya remains mysterious. No one has ever seen her face.

The melody sounded familiar and strange at the same time. It got to the point where I wasn’t able to believe my ears. Tsering was singing this Chinese song in a
different language. Staring at the screen for quite a while, I realized the lyrics were subtitled in Chinese. The Tibetan language glowed in Tsering’s singing, and the rhythm was matched perfectly with the animated Chinese lyrics on the screen. The Tibetan language lyrics in “Lady Yeliya” created a Kham aura that lingered in the room and affected the crowd. The crowd echoed Tsering and turned to the chorus in Tibetan: “Yeliya, Lady Yeliya, I will find you eventually.”

Dorjee jumped to the center of the room waving his hands in front of his chest. He would step forward, then turn right or left with the rhythm. Others joined spontaneously with Dorjee. A dancing circle formed instantly, men and women both, swaying and stamping their feet. Soon, Tenzin and others followed, singing Chinese pop songs in Tibetan. Dances continued with songs in Tibetan, and tonight’s “Fun Weekend” came to be the best so far.

After a few dances, I had a few moments of headache, mostly because of the changing weather on the plateau. I told Dolma that I needed to sit out for a while. I walked out and sat on the bright red IKEA couch of the modern Karaoke lounge without seeing someone following me. A voice from the hallway said, “I think my iPhone is still sleeping in your bag.”

It was Tsering. He thought that I was going to leave the Karaoke house. I returned his iPhone and expected him to leave me alone. With no clue, Tsering sat down on the couch and stared at his phone, “Oh, no battery…so, American female Ph.D., what makes you come here?”
“I came to learn about the Tibetan language and the preservation of its culture.” I said, as I always answered this way as a professional.

“I thought you were here just for fun!” Tsering said as he sniggered and put his beloved iPhone away. “Interesting, language and culture preservation… When I was in college, my students’ organization was trying to partner with a nonprofit. It was asking us to record the folk performances, both music and dance, compile them and submit them. We were quite excited about that. We did this with our students’ organization, with students from Amdo, Utsang, and Kham, from different parts of Tibet.”

“Oh, can you communicate across languages and dialects?” I asked.

“Of course, when you learned and got used to the difference. There’s a series of principles and order in pronouncing dialects. You’ve got to know the principles. We got along very well, even though our dialects were different. We spent much of the time during the summers meeting old people in our villages and recording their performances. You know that I am from Batang County, right?” Tsering stopped.

“Yes, I knew Xuanzi. It’s a unique performance of Batang. So what did you guys eventually do?” I was delighted Tsering could talk to me like this.

“Oh…good. You know… well, the American Ph.D. does know all! Anyway, we collected folk performances across the plateau, from three areas. We were so proud of ourselves. It is our cultural heritage. Then I went back to Batang and recorded many types of Xuanzi performances. I was hopeful about the revival of our culture because a

\textsuperscript{46}Xuanzi is a Chinese term for Tibetan traditional performance that combines long-sleeve dancing and singing with the Xie instrument. The dancers circle, hand in hand, dancing slowly while singing fast.
non-profit took it seriously…” Tsering said. Then he scratched his head and explained, “Well, but…they took it... and disappeared.” Tsering put his arms across his chest.

“What?!” I said. I was astonished.

“Actually, they promised to publish a record for us. But they took our recordings and stopped talking to us. They are nowhere to be found now. And we trusted them so much.”

Tsering sighed and then stood up, “American female Ph.D., I need to go charge my phone.”

Watching him holding his iPhone and walking away, my heart clanged like fifteen buckets in a single well. I started to question myself: What does a typical outsider look like in Tsering’s mind—someone who will use them and leave? Is that why Tsering kept ignoring my presence? What am I doing here? Doing ethnography as a professional tourist, just to get it done and leave? Why do I feel not comfortable with Tsering without even listening to his life?

“Let’s Keep It Unnamed”

On the way back to Dolma’s apartment from the town plaza, I got to know some more about Tsering from Tenzin and Yangjin. He was studying Tibetan logics and epistemology (Yin Ming Xue), an area of Buddhist philosophy of language, including a Buddhist speech and debate tradition. Hearing of Tsering’s interest, I kept regretting my avoidance of Tsering every time his name came up—because it was associated with the image of a student’s bloody face and with a Tibetan woman in chuba bringing Tsering his foot-wash water.
I had not seen Tesring for a few weeks after the “Fun Weekend.” But two days after the speech contest, unexpectedly, he appeared in the fifth-floor office. At the door, he took out his iPhone and asked, “Anyone have an iPhone charger?”

Dolma walked over and passed hers to Tsering. I kept my focus on the Tibetan language assignment without looking at him. He grabbed the charger, walked into the office toward my desk and said, “Hey, American female Ph.D., you are working hard!”

Tsering talked to me! I raised my head. He was actually looking at me. He said, “I heard about the speech contest yesterday. Dorjee told me that the speech coach had panda eyes. Now, look here. The coach has panda eyes!” I raised my head and looked at his iPhone and said, “I’m okay.”

Tsering visited our office more often after the speech contest. Sometime he came up just for tea or conversation with a random Tibetan teacher about various students’ situations. I still felt awkward when he was in the office. Sometimes he walked in, and I tried not to make eye contact. He would pass my desk and immediately talk to other Tibetan teachers. When everyone was chatting in Tibetan, I was sometimes lost. I had a hard time understanding what they said. It seemed that they had become used to my presence. Sometimes I could catch a few Chinese words, such as “national civil service exam,” or “graduate program” or “iPhone 6.”

During lunchtime, Tenzin and I were walking from the office to Dolma’s apartment. On the way, we saw Tsering sitting by the garden with a heavy dictionary by his side. Tenzin walked up and started chatting with him. I self-consciously stood behind
and waited quietly. Tsering stood up and looked into my bag full of Tibetan language
textbooks and notes and spoke to Tenzin in Tibetan as if I could not understand.

“Oh, she works really hard! Why is she learning Tibetan? Does she have any
connection to Tibet?”

“Ngy ama y payou Lhasa re”47!” I voiced myself in Tibetan.

Tsering was surprised. His mouth was wide open and he started to stare at me.

Tenzin laughed loudly and said, “See, I taught well!”

I avoided eye contact with Tsering as usual and nodded at Tenzin. At this point,
Tenzin officially introduced me to Tsering in Tibetan: “This is my student Gyesang
Nima! We know each other through some volunteer teaching of Tibetan students in
Yunnan. She has been studying with me since 2012. Ha-ha! Are you surprised?”

Tsering nodded. Then Tenzin also told Tsering that I had a car accident on the
way to Batang to visit two students Tenzin, and I had taught in 2012. I stood next to
Tenzin quietly. Eventually, Tsering began making eye contact with me and asked me
what my major was. I said that I came from a speech tradition, and I wanted to learn
about Tibetan logics from him. I didn’t hesitate to ask Tsering to have tea together, so we
could share speech traditions. Tsering agreed on the spot to share some basics of Tibetan
logics and epistemology when he was not teaching.

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One Saturday afternoon Tsering and I jumped in a taxi-van and headed for the
plaza again. As we were walking past, we saw a group of ladies who were dancing

47 “Ngy ama y payou Lhasa re!” means “My mother’s hometown is Lhasa.”
guozhuang, a Tibetan ritual dance. Tsering suddenly stopped walking, staring at the group by the plaza—old and young ladies wearing jeans and sweat shirts, hoodies, waving their hands over their heads, and lifting their legs with the beat of the Tibetan pop music with the Chinese lyrics.

“Should we join the group?” I said in amusement.

“Guozhuang has lost its soul,” Tsering murmured to himself.

“Oh, why do you say that?” I had assumed the more people practiced this traditional dance, the more it would thrive.

“It becomes a mass exercise for both Tibetans and Chinese here, to keep fit. It should be a practice, a practice of our cultural uniqueness. We dance in festivals on different occasions. We sing in our own language and feel our bodies absorbing energies from the environment while dancing with nature in these surroundings. It is entirely different when people are dancing here. In a modernized town plaza, the performance lost its soul.” Tsering walked faster and avoided watching the crowd moving their feet left and right.

I walked faster, to catch up with Tsering, but I couldn’t help thinking about Helen Phelan’s (2008) suggestion on ritual and community music, on doing identity:

In terms of community music, this approach suggests that the ability of practice to generate a sense of identity resides both in its intrinsic capability for strategic behavior as well as its situational ability to generate meaning within a social/cultural/political context. (p.150)
Phelan believed that improvisational and highly contextualized community music is a creative, organizing process. On her view, in this process people’s identities become ritualized in the ongoing practice. However, in commenting on this show of mass exercise on the plaza, Tsering’s words, “The performance lost its soul,” affected me deeply.

“Well, since you are from America, let’s go to the coffee house,” Tsering proposed.

“Really? Are you sure? You drink tea. Dolma told me.” I felt that I shouldn’t drink coffee if Tsering wasn’t willing to.

“See. Coffee!” He pointed at the sign on a tall building in the plaza, “Zhuo⁴⁸!”

I followed him to the second floor of a brick building at the corner of the plaza. The waitress greeted us and put us in a private room with two face-to-face wooden seats and a glass table in the middle. The orange light bulb gave us some warmth on a windy night. Tsering sat on the other side of the table and asked the waitress for a coffee menu.

I interrupted him and told the waitress to: “Please bring us a tea menu as well.”

“No need, just coffee! We both drink coffee.”

Tsering waved his forefinger at the waitress. I made worried eye contact with him. It seemed the waitress was confused about the contradictory requests. Tsering said, “Coffee!” A few minutes later, the waitress came over but still bought us two menus.

Tsering pointed at my bag and passed me his iPhone and wallet. I placed both in my bag naturally.

⁴⁸ zhuo is a Tibetan term for “let’s go” or “go.”
“I can drink tea with you, seriously. I don’t want you to get caffeinated so you can’t sleep,” I said, “And I am grateful that you…ordered a Kongpao chicken for me at dinner.”

Tsering waved his finger, “Hey, you, American. Tell me which coffee is good.”

“You really want to try coffee? Don’t blame me if you can’t sleep tonight,” I said, and I laughed.

“I won’t blame you. Karma will find you,” Tsering said and smiled.

I ordered Americano for both of us as Tsering was very interested in coffee with an “American” flavor. The waitress soon bought us two cups with the traditional Chinese blue flower print, along with a tiny cup of cream and two packets of sugar.

“Now, you, American, tell me how to drink this coffee,” Tsering said and pointed at the blue print cup.

“Do you want sugar and milk? Or, you can try a sip of plain coffee to see if you like it.” I moved the cream and sugar over to him.

Tsering took the cup, tasted the brown liquid and immediately wrinkled his face,

“Put in sugar and cream! It’ll taste better.” I opened a packet of sugar and passed it to Tsering.

“Thank you! I think I need to put some milk in too.”

His forehead wrinkled again.

While Tsering wrinkled his face, I felt a sudden appreciation, “Thank you for trying! I didn’t know how you felt about this.”
“Oh, this tastes like medicine. But at least I tried.” Tsering said, “Why do you want to learn all this, Tibetan logics and epistemology?”

“Because…well, I don’t know,” I responded, a lame answer. That is an answer I had to think about. “And my major is called communication studies. It originated from speech.”

“Okay. I’m printing this handout for you.” Tsering reached into his pocket and passed me a hardcopy booklet with a Chinese title, “Yin Ming Xue Gai Lun” (“A Brief Introduction to Tibetan Logics and Epistemology”).

“Thank you, Tsering! I thought you were not interested in talking to me,” I said. “Um, I am not very good at speaking, speaking in Chinese, in particular,” Tsering said.

“Oh…” I didn’t really expect an answer like this. I said, “I really appreciate that you can sit here with me and share something I knew nothing about.”

“Oh, no, no, you are American Ph.D. I don’t think I know much about what you are studying nor what you want to learn. You are from a different status [social class and educational level]. I only know the basics of Tibetan logics. I have just been learning,” Tsering said.

“Why are you interested in Tibetan logics?” I asked.

“To get closer to the truth!” Tsering said immediately.

“Um, in my discipline, someone, Wittgenstein, said truth is a language game. What do you think about that?” I can’t help but bring Wittgenstein into this dialogue with Tsering.
“You might know. There is an idiom in Tibetan: Never attempt to debate with someone who studies Tibetan logics,” Tsering answered.

“So you agree?” I asked.

Tsering started waving his forefinger. “I refuse to take a position. In Tibetan speech and debate, once you name it, and define it and give a concrete meaning, you are more likely to lose.”

“Without defining a term, how do you know you and the other party are on the same page?” I asked.

“In a Buddhist tradition, you can define something as infinite, as the object of change,” Tsering said, then stopped.

“What can ‘infinite definition’ mean?” I was very confused.

“It is something that is changing, in time, and in space. The only thing permanent is change,” Tsering said. “That is the basic principle of Tibetan logics.”

“Did it say it here?” I asked.

“Um, I think so. But my Chinese is not good. I learned Tibetan logics in Tibetan. I’m trying to translate what I know. I try to find a word in my brain in Chinese. But sometimes it does not happen.” Tsering struggled to express himself in Chinese.

“Yes, I am with you there! I learned the tradition of speech in English, studying Plato, Aristotle, and Socrates. I sometimes have no Chinese word for many terms I have learned,” I said.

“I tried to share with you one strategy of persuasion in monasteries….What is that?” Tsering was staring at the glass table and drumming it with his fingertips.
In rhythm with this drumming, I began sharing the three modes of rhetoric—but the words that reached my mouth were in English. Sadly, I can’t even translate the word “rhetoric” into Chinese quickly. I grabbed the coffee cup, drank it to the bottom and put it on the table. From afar, and close by, I saw Tsering staring at me in a 45-degree angle with a knitted brow. I looked him in the eye for a second. I was frustrated by my translating process. In my brain, it was as if I just saw blurred symbols of English, Chinese, or Tibetan flashing in a dark, timeless tunnel. The Chinese text lay on the table, between Tsering and me. The light bulb, wrapped in white paper, was hanging over our heads and reflected on the glass table; the orange beams scattered against the glass as if it were an orange light-sphere. Tsering and I sat silently in the rhythm of his fingertip drumming. Hesitantly, he moved his lips and made a few sounds in Tibetan. I tried my best to squeeze Chinese words from my brain but almost vomited an English word, “Rhetoric.” It seemed like the Chinese words were in my mouth, but then I’d swallow them.

Tsering stopped drumming, grabbed the coffee cup and stared at me. “What is that?” he said.

“I am trying to find the right word for you, in Chinese, most likely. You know my Tibetan is still at the first-grade level,” I said and laughed along with Tsering.

“Oh, I am doing the same. I am trying to find a word in Chinese for you. But my Chinese isn’t good enough. I learned Tibetan logics in Sanskrit and Tibetan,” Tsering added. We looked at each other in the eye, laughing.

“It’s okay. Let it stay unsaid.” Tsering said.
I looked at him, wondering what words would emerge in his mind and whether they would share a meaning with mine. I wondered whether he was struggling the same way I was or imagining a similar meaning with different symbols. We both fell into silence again after this short interaction. Then, all of a sudden, someone turned up the folk song from the plaza. Tsering and I turned our heads toward the window at the same time. The music gradually filled our tiny room:

People outside of the snow land from everywhere.
Fairy stewardess landed
On the road where the ancestors didn’t finish walking
Ah…Condor
The change of earth is in a flash. (Yadong, 1995)

Tsering turned back and faced me, “That’s nice music. That Tibetan song is in Chinese, see?”

“Yeah,” I acknowledged.

“As you are Han, I am Tibetan. These things are important to us. It is important for me to say this,” Tsering murmured.

“Sure, I understand,” I said.

“I am not going to associate you with other Han Chinese.” Tsering clasped me on my shoulder, deep in thought, “You know, Tibetan logics originates from Buddhist teaching, from the monastery. But we cannot talk too much about religion.”

“I am sorry,” I apologized. A moment of guilt got to me because my Chinese identity often automatically meant I was a “Marxist atheist” to Tibetans.
“It’s okay. Anyway, I’m trying to share what I know. I’m not blaming anyone,” Tsering said and started drumming his fingertips again. Silence shadowed us again with those orange beams. I felt comfortable with Tsering’s words. I apologized to him on behalf of the Han Chinese cultural tradition. This cultural locus assumed privilege and power many times in its relations with Tibetans. This group identity has become part of me, has recreated and reconstructed me. And I had no way out of my cultural space in this conversation. Even though sometimes I tried to step away from it, it was always there. I felt Tsering might understand why I apologized and what my apology evoked.

“Anyway, my American female Ph.D. friend, I understand we are different. You are more than the person I see here,” Tsering said. “I am not blaming anyone.”

I felt enormously thankful. “Oh, yeah. Tsering, I thought about something that I want to share with you! It has to be a direct translation from English! Oh, uh, I don’t know how accurately I can translate this for you, but I’ll give it a try. It is from your Rinpoche’s speech at Arizona State University.” I took a quote from my notepads:

I think that this is the first time I am meeting most of you. But to me, whether it is an old friend or new friends, there’s not much difference anyway, because I always believe we are the same; we are all human beings. Of course, there may be differences in cultural background or way of life, there may be differences in our faith, or we may be of a different color, but we are human beings, consisting of the human body and the human mind. Our physical structure is the same, and our mind and our emotional nature are also the same. Wherever I meet people, I always have the feeling that I am encountering another human being, just like
myself. I find it is much easier to communicate with others on that level. If we emphasize specific characteristics, like I am Tibetan or I am Buddhist, then there are differences, but those things are secondary. If we can leave the difference aside, I think we can easily communicate, exchange ideas, and share experience. (Dalai lama & Cutler, 1998, p. 2)

“Oh…this is…This is…him! I appreciate that you shared this.” Tsering said, “I wasn’t able to learn much about his speech.”

I put my right hand on my chest and said, “Well, I was educated in a very different way in a Chinese system. Before I went to college, I saw your Rinpoche as a separatist, without knowing any of his work. I now respect him as a scholar.”

“Um…” Tsering said and clasped my shoulder again. He stared at my notepad full of English quotations a long while and said nothing. I looked out the window. The dancing crowd in the plaza had dispersed. Then I looked around; the coffeehouse was also empty. The waitress came in and notified us that it was past closing time. Tsering and I put away the Chinese text of Tibetan logics in silence and walked out of the coffee house.

When we reached the school’s residence building, as if miraculously, Dolma stepped out as soon as she saw Tsering and me.

“How come you two were walking together? What on earth happened to you two?”

“What happened?” I smiled at Tsering.
“What happened? Let’s keep it unsaid…or, read my handouts!” Tsering said and took my bag, dug out his iPhone and wallet, and walked away.

Dolma was trying to press me to learn about what happened between Tsering and I that night, and I answered honestly, “We didn’t talk much.”

It was more like the rhythm of a silence created an embodied space between and Tsering and me. It offered us an opportunity to walk together. I couldn’t sleep. I mediated on the silences in the coffee house and how these moments punctuated our dialogue. I thought of Rawlins’s (2013) questions about reflecting on these silent moments as an ongoing inquiry:

How does silence differently compose the ongoing rhythm of our interactions? Whose intervals for activity and rest carry the day? How do we lean into the cessation of our activities together as well as their resumption? Is it abrupt or graceful? Co-determined or one-sided? My pace or yours? (p.79)

The silences between Tsering and I punctuated how we “unlearn” about the other and rhythmically co-create a space in which we can listen to each other’s voices. Each silence communicates our internal dialogic process with our worlds of words and our imagining of the worlds made of our unspoken words. These moments reveal layers of reality that are like fossils. They have been decomposed and recrystallized over thousands of years, embedded in, entangled with, both of our ever-changing personal and social-cultural histories.
Chapter Seven: Being while Becoming

Pulling luggage, competing for spaces on vans, and bargaining over prices, students of the first two years scrambled to get away on the first day of summer break. They finally could leave the school. The seniors had to stay an extra month to prepare for certification exams in their major. Many students I taught were leaving. They elbowed their way through the avenue toward the school gate.

“Ajee, I am going home!” said Drokar, dragging a piece of gray luggage that was much wider than her body. Then, she was standing at Dolma’s door. It was time to say goodbye. I had to cheer myself up walking with Drokar to the taxi-van outside the gate.

A voice from behind called after us, “Dongjing, I’ll walk with you! I have two kids leaving.” It was Xuyuan, a 24-year-old former Han Chinese teacher. She came to visit her students in this Kham school a week ago. She also had volunteered for the Tibetan NGO where Tenzin and I originally met. Tenzin introduced me to Xuyuan, and in an interesting moment, we shared similar experiences working with Tibetans and learning the Tibetan language. Walking with Drokar along the way, Xuyuan kept asking Drokar how to pronounce the Tibetan alphabet “nga” (ང་།).

Xuyuan had since taken a job at a state-owned business in Chongqing but had remained well connected with her Tibetan students. They also were leaving for the break. Most of them were pulling luggage the size of a person beside the main avenue. I took Drokar’s giant luggage and walked along. When I stopped to respond to the students’ greetings, Drokar tried to take it back. Groups of Tibetan students, one after another,
bowed to me, and said with appreciation, “Ghege, gazhengqie, come to our hometown to pick mushrooms!” “Ghege, gazhengqie, visit our barley field!”

My ears were filled with my students’ gratitude and my nose twitched. Nodding and smiling to students along the way, Xuyuan and I sent our students to the taxi-vans.

Having said goodbye, Xuyuan and I then walked back to school. By the gate, a driver was helping a group load their luggage onto the top of his silver taxi-van. In the crowd, I saw Qiling waving at me: “Ghege Dongjing!” I waved back and walked over. Qiling hugged me and pointed to the driver, “That’s my brother!”

At Qiling’s direction, a man in a sports jacket and jeans loading the luggage turned around. He smiled and greeted me in Mandarin, “Hello! Teacher.”

Qiling hugged me and said, “Ghege Dongjing, don’t forget. We will have a Tibetan language test from ghege Dolma during winter break!”

After watching Qiling’s van drive toward the mountain road, Xuyuan and I went back to Dolma’s apartment without a word. We were each in our own thoughts when four seniors I taught in the afternoon English class came to our room and said, “Ghege, let’s have a farewell lunch together! We also invited ghege Tsering!” The four were also students Xuyuan had taught during volunteering.

“Cultures Encounter the Other, Humans and Other Humans Meet”

In a farm stay restaurant, Xuyuan and I arranged the table in the yard with the four students. We sat down and waited for Tsering. The students insisted that Xuyuan and I decide what to order. About half an hour later, Tsering slowly walked from the school
gate, put his iPhone and wallet on the table and asked, “Have you guys ordered?” The students instantly stopped talking as soon as he sat down.

I introduced Xuyuan to Tsering, and Xuyuan said, “We decided to order eight vegetarian dishes because today is July 7th, your Rinpoche’s birthday.” Tsering and the other students were surprised that Xuyuan and I had decided to follow their ritual.

Tsering nodded and asked the four students about summer break in Tibetan. Three female students answered the questions one by one while passing a rice bowl. The male student was preparing tea for him.

When the dishes were on the table, I started to joke with Tsering: “Ghege Tsering, your students are afraid of you!”

Tsering turned and stared at the four students; they were holding their bowls with two hands, but no one was using their chopsticks because Tsering had not started. Tsering flipped his hands up and down to encourage them to eat, “Ra ma ra49! Ra50!” The male student smiled and started to use his chopsticks. The three others were still waiting.

“They are not afraid of me,” Tsering said as he pointed at me with his chopsticks. I laughed and asked everyone to eat. After I started, the three female students also started to eat, and the table became lively.

“Have you hit them before?” I asked Tsering. He said that he had not slapped any of the four at this table. The students broke into laughter.

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49 Ra ma ra means “let’s eat.”
50 Ra refers to “eat.”
“Well, I don’t hit female students in general. If I wave my palm, as the First Fan of Batang, it must be the end of their world!” Tsering pointed at the three female students on the table and said, “Right?”

“How violent!” The students giggled.

Xuyuan became very curious and asked Tsering whether he had had an abusive childhood. A dialogue started at the lunch table.

Tsering smiled and said, “I was born in a county in Batang. When my amala gave me birth, a lama came to the house to bless me but predicted that my birth would threaten my older brother’s life. My amala was also told to throw me into the ashes and place me outside the house. Then I was abandoned naked outside the door with the ashes. But my grandma picked me up and said that she would be my mother.

My older brother passed away when I was three or four years old as the lama predicted. I have six older sisters, but I am the only son of the family. My apa and ama never hit me when I was growing up. Sometimes they scolded me when I misbehaved. In school, I was always a student who excelled, from first grade to sixth grade. In middle school, my head teacher was a Tibetan who taught Chinese. Her Chinese was excellent, and he was super strict. Sometimes she hit me here, on my shoulder. She was a woman, so she didn’t use her fist. She used the mop. Sometimes my arms couldn’t take it. She hit me on my leg with the mop. I think I excelled in school because of this. Um, without her efforts, my Chinese language would be really bad.

These days, I like to joke with my fellow Han Chinese teachers about who is more Chinese. For example, sometimes I spoke a more literary Chinese than they did. Growing
up, I never really appreciated teachers who never hit me. Particularly, my English teacher. He never hit me. If he was a little stricter with me, I would have had a better foundation for learning when I entered college. If I had focused on Tibetan-English translation in college, I would have had more opportunity to study abroad. In college, many foreign friends were willing to support Tibetans. But you have to have a certificate [in English language proficiency] to study abroad. It’s not that I wasn’t grateful. It is just…not the same type of appreciation…appreciation is at different level.

Now I am a teacher. My students might have fantasized they were slapped by me. I really care about them. They gave me different nicknames. The first was ‘jerk,’ because my requirement is different from the school’s general requirement. Other teachers think it is acceptable that students don’t get up [to attend morning class]. I slap them if they don’t get up. It seems that I am so incompatible with this society…radically different from this environment. So that nickname was, actually, ‘mad jerk.’ These days, my nickname has changed, so I heard. It seems they call me ‘the wild yak of Batang,’ pretty much. But I think that was practical education. Good education only comes from practice. To love students requires two ways. I think. One is being gentle; the other is being rough.”

Xuyuan responded to Tsering, “I wanted to share my story with you. It was a different experience. When I was volunteering to teach Tibetan students in 2011, I didn’t think I should ever punish students physically. I basically didn’t touch a Tibetan student. I can’t imagine how your ‘loving education’ would apply to mine. There was one time, when some young students were caught smoking, and by the rules of our summer program, no one can smoke. It was a rule made by the NGO of Chinese, Tibetan, and
American teachers during the meeting. Then we asked the senior teacher from the United
States to persuade the students not to smoke. But it didn’t work. Eventually we decided
that if we identified another smoking case, we’d have to punish the student by making
them clean up the restroom. It was a very small thing. But that night, a group of Tibetan
teachers attempted to abolish this rule and everyone initially agreed.

They said, ‘This punishment is awful and threatens my Tibetan students’ dignity!’ Their reasoning was that Tibetan students were always discriminated against or
mistreated by Han Chinese teachers, and so this should not continue. They told this story
of discrimination against a Tibetan student by a Han Chinese teacher. The Chinese
teacher got very angry publicly at a Tibetan student for stealing another teacher’s wallet.
And that resulted in no one trusting this student. Eventually this student committed
suicide. I felt very sorry for the student. But setting up the rule against smoking was a
different case. I am a very straightforward person. I said to the Tibetan male teachers,
‘It’s completely unnecessary to raise this decision to punish smoking to the level of
ethnic conflict. All we want to do is help our students, and to solve the problem.’ Some
teachers merely announced the rule in order to make the students behave. No smoking
was also promoted by many lamas and Tibetan Buddhists as well. But the Tibetan
teachers said the intentions [of the Han Chinese and American teachers] were not good.
We had a huge blow-up. The conflict was in fact raised to an ethnic-group level, and it
almost started a physical fight. Another Han Chinese female teacher and I fought with
two Tibetan male teachers, in English. To us, the Han teachers, this [Tsering’s beating
students] is unimaginable. We tend not to speak too much or tend to speak softly to
Tibetan students. Whenever we start [to be more strict with Tibetan students], the Tibetan teachers protest our strictness. It is very difficult.”

Tsering nodded and said, “In fact, what we Tibetans can’t tolerate is discrimination. In my high school, I had a Han Chinese teacher from Chengdu, a history teacher. We had to memorize many things in his class. He was extremely strict, but knowledgeable too. At first I admired him a lot. But once he spoke publicly to a girl who was not doing well in the class and said, ‘The general IQ of your Tibetan ethnic background can’t ever create anything good. That is why your ethnic group is so backward!’ He didn’t speak to me directly. But that was something…”

Xuyuan shook her head, “That is completely not acceptable. I mean for a Han Chinese teacher for Tibetan students, it was much different and more difficult. I respect my students but I am also afraid of being strict with them.”

Tsering responded, “Right. In my office, some teachers from the Han area do not take the class seriously or manage it very well. I mean they close their eyes to their students’ misbehavior. Very often, students refuse to listen to them [because he/she is Han Chinese]. The Han Chinese teachers complained a lot. If I am working in a Han area, as a Tibetan, I believe that I would come across many disparities. Here, Tibetan students are very faithful to Tibetan Buddhism. Some [Han Chinese] teachers were not mindful of the students’ faith. Sometimes they said things that hurt the students directly, such as ‘religion is ignorant.’

The Tibetan students were offended, but did not show this; no matter how polite they tried to be, they dared not say anything in class anymore. And the [Han Chinese]
teachers too, once they experienced this situation, ultimately gave up. They told me in the office, ‘Uh, I can’t manage Tibetan students, not very well. Just let them be; let them stay at their own village!’ Only some teachers said that. But I feel…not much ownership and responsibility. I always encourage Han Chinese teachers who had negative experiences by saying, ‘We, as teachers, will apologize if necessary. I beat my students, but I apologized to them as well.’”

I turned my chair to both Xuyuan and Tsering and said, “Right. There was another story I heard from some Chinese teachers. One female Chinese teacher bowed toward a student’s desk to explain a question, but she didn’t see that her hip had touched some Tibetan language books on the desk. The student became upset and said, ‘Teacher! Move your butt away from my Tibetan language book!’ She told me she apologized, but she still felt really bad because these books are sacred.”

Xuyuan agreed, “I learned that from volunteering at well. Tibetan students treasure their books and treat their written language spiritually.”

Tsering continued, “Yes, I am glad you understood. Sometimes prejudice can blind us. I had negative feelings like that towards certain *others* too. Going down, down to Chengdu, I looked around…there were Han Chinese everywhere. I felt no one surrounding me was any good, no one except my own people. I felt uncomfortable when seeing that many different people. But after a while, cultures encounter the Other, humans and other humans meet. In the past, [Tibetans] meet Han Chinese only through business or as minors in gangs. They took advantage of each other. But I slowly realized… that it should be different. Gradually, I started to understand Muslim culture
too, by having conversations. I also read the Quran, slowly. In the past, I thought that I could read Tibetan Buddhist-related books only. Soon, many wise and enlightened Tibetans also said it was important to learn about other cultures. It is important for us to know the cultures of other ethnic groups, and possibly integrate it into ours, and to understand the things we are dogmatic about in our culture that we shouldn’t hold on to.

Is our culture really that superior to the others? We cannot judge or criticize them unless we deeply understand others’ cultures. We can’t completely refute others’ culture when we aren’t even willing to understand them. I am going to be prepared! I’ll visit Chengdu for graduate school next semester.”

The four students suddenly voiced themselves together—“Ghege Tsering, you are leaving us for graduate school? Why didn’t you tell us earlier?”

Tsering tried to fake a slap and responded to them, “Chengdu is not too far! You want a fan [a slap] from Batang? Ha-ha!”

Most of the time, the students listened to us very attentively during lunch. They said afterward that it was the first time they had heard a conversation like this. “We couldn’t imagine Han Chinese and Tibetans could speak to each other in such an honest way,” they said.

It was time to leave, and the students bowed and said goodbye one by one. I asked Tsering about his summer plans before he moved to Chengdu. He said he planned to take his parents on a pilgrimage to the holy city of Lhasa, to Potala Palace. After the trip Tsering also planned to organize the college students who were on summer break to teach
children Tibetan in his own county. He said goodbye with palms folded and walked away with his iPhone.

If our real living is meeting, as Buber (1957) says, it is in these “once-occurrence events” (Bakhtin, 1993, p. 2) that they occur, that they shape and reshape our relationships to each other and to our surroundings. We “dialogized” (had a dialog about our inner life) and shared with the *languaged others* our uniqueness in these moments—like a butterfly emerging in its full splendor. In these moments, we situated, embodied, and actualized ourselves and other selves simultaneously. A moment like this was founded on trust and respect and came from sacrifice and risk. The once-occurrence events at the table between the Han Chinese and Tibetan teachers in the Kham school were recreated by sharing stories with each other. In the moments of *being* in the presence of each other, in the presence of the Other, we grow. We continuously *become*.

**“I Swallowed the Paper with My Language”**

I walked to Dolma’s apartment from the farewell lunch. Dolma was waiting with two plastic buckets near the public water pipe by the Teachers’ Apartment Building. Dolma waved at me and said, “Oh, we don’t have any water today. We have to go out again and carry the water back!” Dolma passed me a plastic bucket filled with water. This was our daily activity—the water supply was not stable. Teachers and students both had to carry water home and wash their clothes near the public water pipes. At the water pipe, a group of teachers were waiting and chatting. One in his 70s, in a white shirt and gray pants, holding two porcelain buckets, stumbled towards the water pipe.
“Ghege Norbu!” Dolma said and jumped up and waved at him in the distance. Dulma told me that *ghege* Norbu was a legend. He had survived the Cultural Revolution and had a master’s degree in Tibetan language and literature.

Dolma walked quickly toward *ghege* Norbu and grabbed his buckets. I left the other buckets on the floor and took one from Dolma’s hand.

“You girls!” *Ghege* Norbu said and smiled, “Living together? Who is cooking?” Dolma and I looked at each other and laughed. “No one is cooking! We’ll eat noodles outside tonight,” I said.

Dolma was too shy to say.

“Dolma, you must cook! Or you won’t marry before 30!” he said. Norbu *ghege’s* eyes became very small. “Ha-ha-ha, how about this girl! The American female Ph.D. carries water for us? What an honor!” *Ghege* Norbu said. Then he pointed at my hair and said, “Girl, tie up your hair. This is not good!”

I was anxious and immediately tied my hair up. I was really surprised he knew about me.

“Dolma, how is life living with an American female Ph.D.?” he said and smiled at Dolma.

“She is a good cook! You should visit my house sometime,” Dolma said.

The line of Tibetan teachers saw *ghege* Norbu and politely pushed him to the front. Two male Tibetan teachers helped him fill up the buckets. Dolma ran to the front of the line and took a bucket from *ghege* Norbu. I ran with Dolma and took the other.

“We will walk you back!” Dolma said.
“Ha-ha, good kids!” *Ghege* Norbu said and nodded, “American female Ph.D., are you used to the life here now?”

“Yes, Dolma took good care of me,” I answered. “Tenzin teaches basic Tibetan in the morning. I teach English to the learning-community students in the afternoon.”

“My students told me about the speech contest,” *Ghege* Norbu said. “American Ph.D., are you free in the morning? Before you leave, come to my house and eat *tsampa* 51. Oh, do you drink butter tea?”

“Of course, I like both *tsampa* and butter tea” I said, happily accepting the invitation.

“Great, great!” *Ghege* Norbu said, then stopped us in front of his apartment building. “I say, American female Ph.D., come tomorrow morning. That is my apartment!” *Ghege* Norbu said and pointed at the door with a grassed rug on the third floor of the Teacher’s Residence Building. His shoes were organized in a wooden rack by the green rug.

“*Ghege*, my name is Gyesang Nima. Please call me Gyesang,” I said in Tibetan.

“What? Gyesang Nima! Why a boy’s name! What on earth was Tenzin thinking! I am sure he gave you the name.” *Ghege* Norbu shook his head and said, “Okay, Gyesang, come over tomorrow morning, 7 o’ clock! Leave the buckets here! Dolma, you come over too.” *Ghege* Norbu waved his hand and signaled that Dolma and I should leave.

My alarm went off at 6 a.m. I started to get ready. I tied my hair properly and searched the closet for a pair of long pants. I tried to wake Dolma up, but she told me that

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51*Tsampa* is a type of staple Tibetan food, a dough made by roasted barley flour, usually mixed with the salty butter tea.
she didn’t want to eat tsampa. I quickly put on my sweat pants and walked to ghege Norbu’s apartment as Dolma went back to sleep. I saw him from the window. He was praying and chanting.

“Come on in!” Ghege Norbu said once he heard me knocking.

I walked inside with my shoes off but didn’t know where to sit. Ghege Norbu pointed to the center of the couch with his hand, “Bomo, you sit. I’m going to make buttered tea for you!” He walked into the kitchen. I didn’t sit down but followed him into the kitchen.

Ghege Norbu smiled and said, “I am glad you like butter tea. I don’t know whether my daughter likes butter tea nowadays.”

“Oh, where is she?” I asked.

“She’s studying in Beijing, a sophomore,” Ghege Norbu said with pride. “You should be friends with my daughter; here is her Wechat number.”

“Sure! Does she speak Tibetan?” I asked.

“Yes, of course. She is very good. She’s majoring in Tibetan literature. Um…you girls have grown up in the new China, more opportunities for you all to learn. In my years…it was difficult,” Ghege Norbu sighed. In front of the modern butter tea machine, ghege Norbu told us how he learned Tibetan during the Cultural Revolution. Ghege Norbu narrated his story.

“It was the 1960s. I was still a kid. Just as we were old enough to learn, the Great Cultural Revolution started. We began to learn everything from the Soviets. Some advanced Tibetan intellectuals studied in Beijing. They came back and applied the ‘new
ideas.’ That was a dark time. Learning Tibetan was forbidden. During the Cultural Revolution, everyone was crazy about discarding all the cultural traditions and opening things up for ‘new ideas.’ Marxism-Leninism was the main ‘new idea.’

A lot of Tibetans joined the Red Guards and destroyed their own monasteries because they began to believe that ‘religion is evil.’ Most of the monasteries were robbed and burned—six thousand monasteries were burned down during those ten years. The precious Buddhist scripts, too. During these days, they [Mao’s government] also wanted to legitimate, or delegitimate, language. A lot of Tibetan language books were burned.

Every day, we marched with the Red Guards along the street, protesting against the bourgeoisie. Of course, we didn’t go to school at all. The schools and monasteries were all empty. Education was considered unnecessary—because Tibetan cultural traditions were regarded as backward, and Tibetan Buddhism was regarded as a cult that controlled the innocent Tibetan people. In most areas of Kham, lamas and jomos were forced to go home and do farm work. The Red Guards spread slogans everywhere that said, ‘Buddhism is evil and ignorant!’ And all the Tibetan books were gone. They burned them all. Ashes were flying in the air, every day. Some lamas who hid the books were spied on and drug into prison. The Red Guards tied them up on these carts, labeled them as traitors against the revolution, and paraded them through the streets. That was really frightening. Everyone on the street was scrambling into the anti-bourgeois movement and class struggle. But it was funny—where could you even find the bourgeoisie in this snowy peasant land!
I was very young. But I felt this movement was too extreme. Sometimes I sat down and read Marxism and tried to understand. I found the fundamentals of Buddhist and Marxist ethics were not incompatible—both are working toward the common good. It was similar, sort of the way $4 + 3 = 7$ or $2 + 5 = 7$. The path to the common good was different. I started to doubt this movement. But I knew I could not give up my faith in Buddhism, nor live as an illiterate in my own language. I had to prepare myself to read Buddhist scripts once this mad movement was over. I started to copy scripts from the stone carvings and chanting scripts in the mountains. It was lucky that some lama hid them deep in the mountains. That was the only text left. Due to their efforts, I could learn Tibetan by myself. I copied them in secret. A few other young Tibetans saw me and joined me. Soon, a whole group of Tibetans were doing the same.

In the mountains, I copied words from chanting scripts onto pieces of papers, then cut the papers in small pieces to hide in my inner pockets or socks. During breaks from ‘protesting against the bourgeoisie and capitalism’ on the street, I took them out and read them silently out of the way. One time during lunch, I took the small papers out and read in silence, but one of the Red Guards saw me. He looked at me suspiciously. I was extremely anxious as he was walking towards me. I looked at the pockets in my clothes. It could be dangerous if I hid them there. But I didn’t know where else to hide them at that moment. He kept coming closer and closer—I must not be caught! I thought. I made an immediate decision. I took the piece of paper and put it in my mouth. Oh, it was delicious! That was smart! When he tried to search for something suspicious in my clothes, he couldn’t find anything. It was forbidden to learn our language at that time, but
a few of us were learning that way. The paper was very hard to chew! I told other my Tibetan students, ‘I swallowed the paper with my language,’ and they felt more motivated to learn.”

After Ghege Norbu told the story, he passed me a cup of fresh buttered tea from the machine. We both walked toward the living room. He pointed to another room with the door half shut and said, “Bomola, come, come. Here is my prayer room. Let me show you.”

I was secretly in shock. I had never been allowed to visit a prayer room before. “Really, I can see your prayer room?” I said.

For the past three years, I had visited my friend’s house. “Outsiders” were not allowed to see the prayer room. It was a sacred place that could only be seen by the elder males, the lamas, or the most respected person in the house. I felt honored.

Ghege Norbu walked toward the door, took his shoes off, and pushed it open. I saw a Buddhist shrine. Lord Buddha’s thangka was hanging in the center of the room. The portrait of the Tenzin Gyatso Rinpoche was right under the thangka. To the right of the offering table, five Buddhist chanting scripts were neatly piled. Seven cups of clear water sat in the copper cups in the center of the offering table. Behind the cups of water, a censor sat next to a pile of Tibetan incense. Two electronic lotus lights lit up with pink glow.

“I get up every morning and pray to them for 108 times. And then I chant with my scripts.” The scripts were printed on handmade paper about seven inches long and three inches wide. “I will chant for half an hour when I don’t have class,” he added.
“Oh, Ghege!! Ghe—!!” Someone shouted toward the room. It was Dolma.

“Dolma, come over and eat tsampa!” I said.

“No time, I got up late! Gyesang, let’s go to the office. Time for the final meeting,” she said and waved at me.

“Okay, okay!” I thanked ghege Norbu. Before I left, he insisted on giving me a set of Tibetan incense and a Buddhist scripts book.

“They purify your clothes, and your heart,” he said. “Here you go. Come over again before you leave!

“This Tree Symbolizes the Past, the Present, and the Future of Our Language and Culture”

Rushing into the office, I saw Dorjee alone, practicing Chinese calligraphy on a writing board. Dorjee was the Tibetan calligraphy master of the office. Everyone in the office would write one line when they arrived in the office. Practicing Chinese calligraphy was strongly encouraged by the school officials, and the school distributed free practice boards to every office.

Today, Dorjee wrote on the practice board with a Chinese brush pen: “My heart is no longer a slave to the form of material substance.” It was a line from a Taoist scholar named Tao Yuanming who lived around 500-589 C.E. He chose a life of seclusion rather than serving as a high-level bureaucrat in the emperor’s court. I was very impressed with Dorjee’s literary Chinese. Reading aloud the line from the board, Dorjee invited me to write on it. I wrote a line from Zhuang Zi’s “A Happy Excursion” to continue the
dialogue with Dorjee: “The perfect man ignores self; the divine man ignores achievement; the true Sage ignores reputation.”

Dorjee smiled and told me that he had made a life-changing decision in the past few weeks. During my visit to the Larung Buddhist Institute, I received a text message from Dorjee. He passed the test to be a civil servant in his home county. To be a civil servant was to have a well-paid job, and Dorjee’s parents also wanted him to work close to his home county. So Dorjee was struggling between the choices of working in a government job or staying with this job in order to put himself through school. He wanted to major in Tibetan language and literature. In Dorjee’s text message, he had shared with me his worries about his students who could not speak Tibetan, as well as for the future of Tibetans. The future was extremely uncertain.

Now, coming from Dorjee’s beautiful Chinese calligraphy, “My heart is no longer a slave to the form of material substance,” this affirmation clarified his choice to me—the path of preserving Tibetan language and literature would be liberating to Dorjee.

Dorjee didn’t say much today and walked onto the balcony, staring at the large “བོད” (“Tibet”) sign in the garden outside the “Intangible Cultural Heritage Museum” for a very long time. While I was reading a Tibetan language book in the empty office, my phone vibrated and I received two pictures attached with a word for Dorjee:

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52 Most of the civil servants work in government agencies and departments. State leaders and cabinet members, who normally would be considered politicians in political systems with competing political parties and elections, also are part of the civil service in China.
People there [in my home county] said that the tree was approximately a thousand years old. And this tree is the Goddess of Mercy with a thousand hands. However, it was burned during the Cultural Revolution. And it lost its vitality. It became withered day by day. [In it] I see our [Tibetan] history, but also our [Tibetan] future. This tree symbolizes the past, the present, and the future of our language and culture.

“Language Is Like Dharanis”

Looking at the picture and text sent by Dorjee, I couldn’t say a word. A few minutes later, Dolma, Tenzin and some other Tibetan teachers had gathered in the office and started the final meeting of the semester. Dorjee returned and again acted lively at the
I sat down in the corner and flipped through my Tibetan language book. The next lesson told of a Tibetan prince, Drime Kunden. It was one of the most well-known parts of Tibetan folklore. It had been told by generation after generation of Tibetans:

One day the Prince and his father were walking in the garden. The Prince looked sad and the King asked why he was sad. The Prince replied that it was the suffering of the continuous circle of birth, old age, disease and death that caused his anguish. The King told his son not to worry for others, who were suffering from the results of their own deeds, but to be happy in the richness of fortune. The Prince replied that if he could give away his father’s entire wealth to the paupers then he would be free from misery. The King agreed out of love for his son and the Prince scattered alms upon the people of the world. The gods Indra and Brahma wished to test the Prince’s vow of alms giving. They manifested themselves in the form of two Brahmans begging for alms. The Prince told them he had nothing to give and [so] they asked for the Princess and his two children. The Prince knew he must fulfill his vow but felt great compassion and gave away his wife and children. After Prince Drime Kunden gave away everything including his eyes, the gods revealed their true identities to the Prince, returned what they took from the Princess and promised him future happiness.

I first heard this story from Tenzin’s friend Choden. I met Choden at a public lecture Tenzin and I attended the previous month. Choden was from Amdo Tibet and worked for a nonprofit that had promoted professional development training for Tibetan entrepreneurs in the Kham area since 2010. Choden told me he was into preserving
Tibetan culture and language by organizing community performances. When I first met him through Tenzin, he told me how he organizes young Tibetans in his county to perform a traditional Tibetan opera based on the story of Prince Drime Kunden.

“In this new Tibet, young people kept leaving their counties, going to the university or getting high-paid jobs in the city. In the past few years, I wanted to organize the college students to learn Tibetan language and study Buddhist scripts together, but no one was interested. Every year when I came home during Losar, the Tibetan New Year, I saw huge changes in my county. People were driving luxurious cars to the monastery to pick up the gurus and bring them back to their homes. We used to use horses but things had changed in a flash. At the Losar performances, young people who had returned were competing with each with their brand of athletic shoes—Nike or Adidas. Many Tibetan women who lived in the city were crazy for brands such as Louis Vuitton and Chanel. I could not help but question it. When did my people become so greedy?

Last year, I decided to organize young people in my county to perform the traditional opera, Prince Drime Kunden. The character epitomizes selflessness and the virtue of charity. He is a previous incarnation of Buddha. He gave away his children and wife and all his possessions, to those in need and eventually plucks out his own eyes. I really hoped that the young people could understand good things in our tradition, and what we need to carry on.

When I visited family by family to recruit people to perform, the young people who were educated at college in the city would refuse me in Chinese mixed with some trendy English vocabulary. They were involved with their iPads and watched a lot of
dramas and played a lot of games. I almost lost heart. Using family pressure, eventually I recruited about twelve people. At first, it was very hard to motivate them. I borrowed the costumes from the monastery but I had no money for the guaranty. The costumes were handmade and extremely precious. No one had been using them after the monastery’s performance. They were just sitting in storage in the monastery. I had to promise my life as a mortgage for these costumes.

When the young people saw these costumes, they were amazed by their beauty. I first thought they were motivated by the costumes. Gradually, I began to see they were touched by Prince Drime Kunden’s story and grew into it as performers. I observed their change day by day. No one brought their cell phones to the last few performances. I was also amazed at their ability to learn. Many of them hadn’t spoken Tibetan for a long time. They started to communicate with each other in Tibetan during the practice. I felt very happy. The performance for the county audience was successful last year. The old people in the nearby village walked miles to watch our performance. They were shedding tears they felt so touched to see this new generation performing the traditional opera.

One *apala* said to me, ‘I thought the young people would never return. Now they are back! They are back!’ I plan to do it again this year. We Tibetans have ten famous Operas. I decided to organize the performance each year until I got too old. I thought I would pass the flag to the next generation.

I think I see language the same way as performance. Language is like performance, but repetitive. The young people both performed and became the role in that moment. During the process, they performed the story in Tibetan in the folk style. I
am glad they became more Tibetan through this practice. I knew that they had to leave
and return to their own lives after the performance. But after they returned to their own
lives, there would be more [mental, emotional, spiritual] spaces for them to think about
themselves—their choices of language, values, and faith. They become new people!

Without language, there’s nothing left for us Tibetans. Language is not a thing. It is a
verb, a living activity. Similarly, so is performance. We need to constantly ‘do’
performance too. We are worried about losing our traditional values from the medium of
our language. What is left if we Tibetans cannot speak our language?

Language is like the ‘Dharanis.’ Do you know what Dharanis means? It refers to
the chanted substances—*khatas*, gold, or grains and so on that are stuffed inside a
Buddha statue or the stupas. However, this substance can only have spirit when the lama
chants with our ritual prayers. It has no soul if it is just a thing, an object. If we don’t
speak Tibetan, we are like the empty Buddha statue or the empty stupas that hold no soul.

[When] Language has to be constantly ritualized by everyday utterance, recreated by
practice like performance. Like our identity, it has to be constantly ritualized.”

Thinking of Choden’s story and explanation, I observed the Tibetan teachers’
meeting. Their discussion in Tibetan became a performance in my presence. They were
speaking their language as if it were a “process of ritualized identity in the eye of a
languaged other.”

“The Survival of Our Culture Is a Narrow Footpath”

One day after the final meeting, I started to pack up my books in the office and
get ready to leave the field. Dolma entered the office in anger while her phone in hand,
“How come? How come did Demkar say this to my guru?” Then she tried to show me what happened to her Wechat friends circle. That morning she had posted a few pictures about the Buddhist festival in her home county. It was during an auspicious practice at her monastery that the guru turned the water from a puddle into milk. One of the comments under the picture of a milk puddle was: “What our eyes saw can also reveal the potential of our seeing.”

Dolma was especially irritated by the comment. I looked at the people who commented on her post very closely. One was from Demkar Gyal. Dolma had just raised 800 Swiss dollars for this student. From the Wechat comments, it seemed that Demkar was suspicious about the guru’s “miracle.” An argument started on Dolma’s friend circle on Wechat. Tibetan teachers took two sides—one supported Demkar Gyal’s comments; another group, like Dolma, criticized Demkar’s disbelief of Buddhism. When Demkar Gyal walked into the office, Dolma walked out. Demkar Gyal said nothing but sat at his spot. I approached him and asked him about the response. Demkar Gyal said that he was also a Buddhist at heart. He just felt the need to tell Dolma that seeing was not believing.

I noticed a book named Dhondup Gyal on Demkar Gyal’s desk. A Tibetan male’s face in a pair of large black frame glasses was in the upper left corner of the book’s jacket. I asked Demkar Gyal who this person was. He said, “Dhondup Gyal, the first Tibetan poet who broke through the traditional Tibetan formalist style. He created a free verse.” With a short pause, He continued, “He just began publishing in the 80s. Sad to say, he committed suicide in 1985, waiting for the awakening of the Tibetan people.”
The book was written in Tibetan. I asked Demkar to share with me his most memorable tales of Dhondup Gyal’s work. So he started to share his favorite stories.

“His works have been skeptical about Buddhism. One of my most memorable stories is about a fake *tulku* \(^{53}\). You know, Tibetan people feed real *tulkus* by making merit, by giving gold and food, because the *tulkus* can use these physical things to serve more beings. But the fake *tulku* was walking around and committing a fraud in the nomads’ area, acting as if he were a real one. He stole other people’s property. Some nomads believed he was a real *tulku*. But this one again stole everything from a family. Yet the Tibetan nomads insisted in believing him to be a real *tulku* and continued to feed him. Eventually this fake *tulku* was taken by the police. The police told the nomads that he was a fake, and eventually the villagers had to believe it.

Another work, I believe, speaks to today’s situation, a story named ‘A Narrow Footpath.’ There was a village named Heixia. People had to walk on a very narrow path to get to the town. But another road, a highway, was built close by the footpath. This was a contrast just like tradition and modernity. Whenever the narrow footpath was cracked or flooded, the villagers continued to repair it and refused to walk on the newly built road. It is such a contradiction. The narrow path symbolized Tibet’s parochialism and conservatism—everything unchanged: We cannot really do anything to our cultural traditions. As for the newly built highway, it represents the new science and technology, or the invention of a new culture that is threatening but bringing new perspectives. In this work, he is calling for change.

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\(^{53}\)*Tulku* means “transforming-body” and always refers to a reincarnated Buddha or reincarnated lama.
Sometimes I wondered what he was thinking. He had been skeptical about many things. I think it is the first step, the golden key, to creativity. He made a promise to Tibetans by being critical of our own culture. The world he lived in had many constraints. And the time he lived in was an intersection of tradition and modernity—the 1960s to the 1980s. His work is really an awakening! I think many contradicting points co-existed in his work, and a Buddhist theme—life is suffering. We should study and be committed to Buddhism because Buddhism is the ultimate in renunciation.

Then, in the fake *tulku* story, the reality remains—the *tulku* is identified as fake. The truth is uncovered, peeling off the deceptive skins of evil. How could the police identify whether the *tulku* is real or fake? It was then the time of the [Chinese] government’s policy of recovering religious beliefs after the Cultural Revolution. Persons of all kinds appeared again. The long-oppressed masses could distinguish whether a *tulku* was good or bad. They would believe in any *tulku* that appeared in their lives.

I think there is a reason the story ends with the police identifying the fake *tulku*. The police symbolized a new ideological trend. Dhondup Gyal represented a new organization of beliefs. From this new angle, we get a much different aspect of reality. His critical eye could see through many things. Whether to critique traditions or return to them remains a problem, like what we face today—losing our cultural specificities and language. He believed that he could only remain critical by using other ideas with which to view Tibetan tradition. The survival of our culture is a narrow footpath.

When I was in college, our Tibetan students club would invite a lot of people from other cultures to share their ideas. Our organization was very influenced by
Dhondup Gyal. It doesn’t matter who you are. We all appreciate different ideas and
different angles with which to see things. Han Chinese people, Muslims and Mongolians
came to our weekly meeting. We were very open to their challenges. We sometimes
debated in a friendly way. It was a really good feeling. With this in mind, I have a poem
to share with you, one of the poet’s representative works. The poems were all in eleven
words back then. No one had broken the rule before him. The poem is ‘Kyi! Waterfall’:

The thousand brilliant accomplishments of the past
cannot serve today's purpose,
yesterday's salty water cannot quench today's thirsts,
the withered body of history is lifeless
without the soul of today,
the pulse of progress will not beat,
the blood of progress will not flow,
and a forward step cannot be taken,
Kyi! Waterfall! …

Our people!
A new path is opening in favor of you! (Dhondup Gyal, n. d., p.13)”

Demkar finished sharing the poem and was deep in his own thoughts. The poem
reminded me of what Tsering told me before he left. Tsering shared why he studied
Tibetan logic and philosophy of language: “We cannot merely rely on the glory of our
past nor the others’ knowledge about us. We are willing to hear about the new ideas or
criticism from other cultures. But we cannot grab them and implement immediately without an evaluation. We must weigh these ideas through dialogue and debate.”

“Not Just within, We Must Communicate Out”

In the last few days of my stay, I walked around the Teacher’s Apartment Building trying to say goodbye to Tibetan teachers who were still at school. One of the rooms had its door wide open. I walked toward it and saw many pigments and painting brushes on the desk by the door. Students had left; it was in the middle of the morning. I stood at the door and on a canvas about six feet long, a wide, half-finished thangka covered part of the wall. A man sat on his behind, painting closely with a tiny brush. In the thangka, Lord Buddha was sitting in the dark blue lotus seat, surrounded by white fortune clouds and red, pink, and yellow peonies. The eyes of Lord Buddha had not been added. I appreciated the colors and the precise painting. I held my breath and watched his hand adding washes of ink and color, layer by layer, to a peony next to Lord Buddha’s lotus seat, so as to approach perfection.

After a long while, the painter realized that I was standing by the door, and I recognized him. It was Qiling’s thanka teacher ghege Dondrup. I waved at him from the door. He stood up, put his brush pen inside one of the pigment bottles, and said, “Gyesang! Welcome!”

I smiled and walked into ghege Dondrup’s room. It was equipped entirely as an art studio. On the other side of the wall hung another ten-foot-tall, six-foot-wide, half-finished thangka. The deity was Guru Rinpoche. Ghege Dondrup invited me in and offered me a buttered tea. I looked around. Other than art supplies, there was only one
sleeping pad in the corner of the room. The thangka pigment containers, different sizes of brush pens in boxes, and painting canvases occupied most of the room.

As I started to drink the tea, ghege Dondrup introduced his thangka. I learned that ghege Dondrup was the inheritor of the Langka Jee school, a traditional style of thangka painting. According to ghege Dondrup’s explanation, Langka Jee, the creator of this school of art, meant “the decoration of the sky.” He was born to a peasants’ family in the middle of the 17th century. He created this school by integrating Indian painting styles and the everyday life of Kham Tibet, elements of nature, and ordinary people’s lives and houses. These elements of life were incorporated into the ideals of Lord Buddha’s life. Langka Jee’s art evoked warm feelings in a lot of people. This school of art reflected Kham Tibetan life. Ghege Dondrup was delighted to share his school of art, even as he apologized to me: “I am sorry that my Mandarin is not good. I have not been to any formal schools. I learned with other Han Chinese artists.”

His words surprised me. He continued to introduce me to the techniques of thangka painting. It was very close to the Chinese Gongbi, the Claborate-style painting. Gongbi is a traditional Chinese, realistic painting style characterized by fine brushwork and close attention to detail. Ghege Dondrup said, “The Han Chinese painters I had conversations with were very nice. We shared our work and saw how similar our techniques were. The difference was in the spiritual level of the artist.”

I started to understand how the spiritual element played a large part in thangka painting. In recent years, thangka had become really valuable in the art market. From ghege Dondrup, I learned the process of painting thangka was both an experience of
meditation and a process of creating. He said, “A real thangka master must detach himself from earthly and monetary things. Painting is a spiritual practice—selflessness and a high level of morality. When I was painting Lord Buddha, my heart was focused on goodness and compassion. The painter must have a pure heart. If one has envy and evil in his [or her] heart, the artwork will not have soul. There are two necessities for a normal artist’s work to have Buddha’s spirit. First, a real thangka master invested his virtue in the process of creating the product of his art. Second, the Buddha on the thangka would not be spiritually alive without a tulku’s blessing. My younger brother became a lama when he was twelve. His work would come to embody his virtue. He has been self-disciplined and had a very pure heart to offer Buddha. He painted better thangka than I did. I am just an ordinary person. He is studying in India now. We Tibetans are rooted in Buddhism. These days…it must not be banned.”

I didn’t know what ghege Dondrup had experienced and why he spoke of a “Buddhism ban.” He soon changed his subject and started to explain his concerns about his students.

“Our Tibetans who don’t have a heart devoted to Buddha could not paint a real thangka. My students are still working on their technique: the basics of sketches and memorizing the meanings of symbols. Their generation grew up differently. They didn’t have a chance to get into their real culture. They could not read Tibetan, could not understand the deep meaning of Tibetan tradition, or their own well-educated parents. Many didn’t understand the real meaning of their cultural heritage nor have any intention to communicate their culture out. Their parents’ thoughts were simple: If you know how
to paint *thangka*, you will have an ever-lasting rice bowl. If you paint well, you’ll have a lot of money.

My folk students in the monastery were very different. They understood the deeper meaning of *thangka*. My students here had a different education. They had little understanding of the facial expression, finger gesture, or sitting positions of the Buddha. But these things mean a lot. The details are very meaningful. Children these days didn’t even know the four canons of Tibetan Buddhism. Their beliefs are different. When they grew up, it was in Han Chinese culture, that kind of *attachment*. Culture has changed, mind has changed; following the Han Chinese way, it was easy for them see Buddhism as ignorant beliefs.

Well, it is good for Tibetans to learn science and technology. But it is not really an effective way to cultivate a heart from birth to death. How does science help us make sense of this? Everyone is going to die. But we must be ready. *A Re?* How do you prepare yourself for death, what attitude to take facing death? In the face of death, we are the same—filled with fear. Every one may have this fear. Facing death, how will we make sense of it through Marxist theories? These ideas are too small. Science tells us only you are dead and your kids will inherit your stuff.

No matter what we own, we can take nothing away when we die, leaving the world, as we do, all naked. When I die, I will feel I didn’t come to this world in vain. What I did was small, but it was meant to serve others. That is meaningful to others.

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*A Re?* is a Tibetan phrase means “right?” Tibetans use it very often even when they spoke Chinese.
is what Buddhists think. If I am going to die tomorrow, I think of the Dalai lama, Lord
Buddha, and Guru Rinpoche. That is the way I am.

When I was just starting to learn *thangka* painting with my *apa*, I couldn’t sit for
long and paint. My *apa* asked the monastery about how to deal my situation, and they put
a Guru Rinpoche’s statue into my house. Whenever I became impatient, I looked at Guru
Rinpoche and spoke to him. You see, that was Guru Rinpoche on the wall. I eventually
could paint him. I become what I am through meditation, chanting while I painted. I think
my heart is closer to Guru Rinpoche when I am painting.

My sons were still young. I will definitely pass this on to my sons. I inherited
*thangka* from my *apa*. My *apa* inherited it from my grandfather. My grandfather was a
great master. His art, the positions of Buddha, the instruments used in Buddhist mass,
how they place their hands, all had deep meaning. I didn’t even know much. I have
shared what I know with my students. But these traditional treasures would have been
kept a secret of our heritage. My *apa* and my grandfather would never have taught these
specialties to others. But I think differently. I believe I must communicate this heritage
out, out of our culture to others. I will teach my specialties out, even as the most sacred
way to spiritual enlightenment. To communicate out my methods of craft is to
communicate Tibetan culture. Not just within, we must communicate this out!”

I was very impressed by *ghege* Dondrup’s idea of “communicating out.” It is
extremely rare that a “folk *thangka* teacher” would be teaching in a formal school system
and be willing to share the sacred techniques.
Ghege Dondrup also said that many students really respected the Tibetan teachers, and in his experience, he thought some Han Chinese teachers lacked respect for the students. He said, “Students are humans too. But many of them think of Tibetan students as yaks. However, many students know more than the teachers!”

I got right to the point—the speech contest. I told ghege Dondrup that I was extremely upset about the speech contest. Ghege Dondrup said, “You felt upset? I felt very aggrieved too. I heard the judge’s comments too and felt really hurt. That was such a blow-off!”

“Yeah. And I taught the students.” I said.

Ghege Dondrup was surprised. “Oh! You were the coach? Yaya! Now you and your students have experienced this. Your awareness has advanced! Your students’ lives too!”

I didn’t say anything.

A few seconds later, ghege Donrup shook his head and said, “Well, the discrimination against Tibetans occurs a lot, and the form is the same. It is far too common.”

When it came to the speech contest I could not speak easily. “I think the judge should respect the student as a human,” I said. “I talked to Sonam about keeping his own style!”

Ghege Dondrup suggested, “I think you should to talk to the judge.”

It sounded impossible, and I said, “I didn’t want to even see him. What on earth can I say to him?”
Ghege Dondrup suggested, “You should just have a conversation with Mr. Li. If I were you, I would feel I must go find him. Why? He hit my student in the face with a thousand witnesses. That was not okay. You would have a chance to know him as well. His ideas, or other Chinese teachers’ standards of speech are different. They might not think the way we do. However, attacking students was not good. And we know that in the Kham TV station, they care about the language issue, particularly speaking Mandarin.

If Mr. Li doesn’t understand what you think, you must both communicate. If every year were like this, what would happen to our young people? You can start by respecting his idea. I would say, ‘I want to talk to you about the speech contest. I was the speech coach. What do you think is a good way to coach the students?’ If he says that he doesn’t want to talk about it, I would retain my position and not have a conversation with him at all. But you should not feel upset and act rashly. You should go ahead and have a conversation with him. His apartment is right here. Ask him about the best way to teach students regarding creating speech. Listening to him is the best way. Well, those are just my thoughts. I just want to give you another angle with which to think about this. In the next speech contest, there could be change.”

I thanked ghege Dondrup and walked out of his apartment. I stood on the balcony and hesitated. I looked up at the sky. The large condors were circling around the mountains in the distance. The apartment door of the Chinese judge, Mr. Li, was half open on the same floor, and the words of ghege Dondrup lingered in my ears: “In the next speech contest, there could be change.”
Chapter Eight: Discussion

In this discussion chapter, I first present the main contributions of each preceding chapter. Second, I describe how a meta-theory of dialogue helps us understand how Tibetan teachers and community members relate across difference and organize to preserve their language. Third, I describe some major limitations of this study. Then I present the contributions this project offers to theory, method, and practical activities. Last, I outline some directions for future research.

This study has examined how Tibetan teachers and community members organize to preserve their languages and enhance their communities by relating across difference in the Kham Tibetan region. In the complex social and historical situation regarding Tibet and China, organizing in and about Tibet is highly politicized. Tibetans and Tibetan communities in China have been regarded as vulnerable victims. Throughout this project, I have shown that Tibetans, particularly Tibetan teachers and community members, are resourceful and active social change agents in working toward the preservation of the Kham languages.

To understand meaningful ways of relating and organizing across differences, locally and internationally, I presented a meta-theory of dialogue from a cross-cultural viewpoint in Chapter Two. First, I situated a dialogical perspective for studying Tibetan teachers’ and community members’ organizing in Kham Tibet. Then I explored the intertextuality between the Daoist text *Zhuang Zi* and the dialogical philosopher Martin Buber’s *I and Thou*. Last, I presented the four characteristics of dialogue arising from this intertextuality, which included: boundless bound, purposeless purpose, embodiment, and
being while becoming. This meta-theory does not seek to generalize ways humans make sense of their lives. Rather, it presents a fluid perspective with which to study organizing practice and proposes a way to capture meaning-making more holistically.

In Chapter Three, I described a methodological orientation characterized as *dialogical ethnography*. First, I reflected on my role as a researcher and the ethical principles that guided me through my field practices. Then I described how my fieldwork was guided by “active passivity” in planning and doing. Third, I shared my struggles living in the medium of a given culture (or cultures) and how I evolved into a co-actor in the Tibetan community in Kham. Last, I discussed writing as a dialogizing process that makes sense of these events in the life world, as well as constituting an ethical choice in ethnographical research. This evolving aesthetic practice gave rise to the subsequent four narrative chapters.

The narrative of Chapter Four started with my experience observing the sky burial at the Larung Buddhist Institution. Reflecting on observing vultures competing for the dead bodies, I used a flashback technique to narrate the four stories that became interconnected through the theme of “boundless bound.” These four stories are lived events that revealed Tibetan teachers’ and community members’ understanding of a visible and invisible connectivity to all creatures, as well as the environment. Meanwhile, the narratives described various ways of how Tibetan teachers and community members make sense of “boundless”—freedom and happiness while living in a social environment with repressive institutional constraints.
With the context provided in the previous chapter, in Chapter Five I told how a Tibetan teacher, Dolma, came to dedicate herself to starting a nonprofit organization in order to raise funds to support further education for students whose families were under-resourced. I described Dolma’s practice of relating across persons from different ethnic, social-economic, educational, and national backgrounds. Seemingly without a clearly defined overarching goal, a local-international organizing network is born and an informal structure of organizing emerges out of her dialogical activities, thereby dramatizing the possibilities of “purposeless purpose.”

Chapter Six offered a picture of what an embodied dialogue looks like in an encounter between two persons from strongly contrasting cultural backgrounds. I first described the unpleasant experiences characterizing my initial meetings with Tsering. I reflected on the different relational events revealing how I was “seen” by this other. Then I described a dialogic moment consisting of four rhythmic silences between Tsering and me in a coffee house. The silences were supportive of our inward dialogizing process when Tsering and I were making the effort to speak the language for the other’s understanding. Retrospectively, the embodied moment of dialogically achieved insight came when Tsering and I started to regard one another as a person in full presence and shared our understanding of each other’s difference, even though we spoke from contradictory worldviews. Last, this embodied moment served as a relational transformation that also was consummated by Dolma’s perceptions and remarks.

In Chapter Seven, I explored a dialogical moment transpiring between Tsering and the Han Chinese teacher Xuyuan through sharing significant stories in a public place.
This moment signifies the last central characteristic “being while becoming.” A meaningful dialogue in a public place creates an ecology for the dialogical parties, as well as for the audience to continually reflect and become. Such moments of being with the other are unresolved; they also create a possibility for those attentively being in the presence of others to become new selves. To further explore what Tibetan teachers’ and community members’ organizing activities can achieve, I narrated two stories characterized by “I swallowed the paper with my language” and “This tree symbolizes the past, the present, and the future of our language and culture.” Respectively, these stories reflect the process of the Tibetan teachers’ concern for language and culture, past and present, in their ongoing efforts of being while becoming.

Moreover, the vignettes “The survival of our culture is a narrow footpath” and “Language is like Dharanis” further captured the struggles and changes in Tibetan language and culture, and the tensions between tradition and modernity. They also depicted the question of how to recreate a new vision of Tibetan language and culture, as the “old ways” are cast in a different light. In doing so, the stories dramatize the practical activities and efforts of thangka teacher Dondrup to preserve a uniquely Tibetan traditional art, not just by communicating within the group, but also by affirming that they “must communicate it out” as well. His narratives exemplified the simultaneous and creative nature of dialogue—“being while becoming.”

A Meta-theory of Dialogue and Tibetan Community Organizing

To understand how the meta-theory of dialogue helps us comprehend community organizing practices in Kham Tibet, I revisit in more detail the four characteristics of
dialogue: boundless bound, purposeless purpose, embodiment, and being while becoming, and how they are contextualized in Kham Tibet. I also discuss how this theoretical perspective guided the emergence of the four narrative chapters on Tibetan teachers’ and community members’ organizing for Kham language preservation. In doing so, I present in detail how the four chapters address the two research questions I raised in Chapter Two. The first question was: How and to what extent do Tibetan teachers and community members build relationships across differences such as ethnicity, language, social class, and educational level in their organizing for Kham language preservation? And the second research question was: how and to what extent does dialogue occur in the Tibetan teachers’ and community members’ communicative practices?

The four narrative chapters interconnected in composing an unresolved ethnographic “novel” from the field about a unique organizing process that is inherently dialogical. Each chapter demonstrated my partial understanding of my interlocutors’ life circumstances and stories while relating and organizing across the challenges of language preservation in Kham Tibet. However, I didn’t intend to demarcate their life stories categorically by the language expressed in this manifested speech. Rather, in each chapter I focused instead on describing one particular characteristic of the dialogical encounters that stood out as the main theme. In addition, under the heading of each major theme, other characteristics of dialogue also were described in order to show the holistic and interconnected nature of each person’s stories.

Relating across difference. The following reflections on the four narrative chapters address the first research question: “How and to what extent do Tibetan teachers
and community members build relationships across differences such as ethnicity, language, social class, and educational level, etc., in their organizing for Kham language preservation?” Relating is an important concept in and component of organizing. According to Deetz and Eger (2014), relating is the process by which individuals connect. The practice of relating across difference gives rise to community formation and enhancement. Community is not just a consequence of encounters with others, but an ongoing practice of encountering others (Todd, 2004).

In organizing for language preservation processes, the four narrative chapters described Tibetan teachers and community activities that involved relating across difference, such as gender, age, ethnicity, nationality, and educational levels. Buber alerts us: “Without sacrifice and without grace, without meeting and without presentness, he [a self-willed person] has as his world a mediated world cluttered with purposes” (p. 60). Such a process involves joy and happiness, as well as risk and sacrifice. The four chapters include various cultural encounters and describe how Tibetan teachers and community members relate across difference.

As Buber (1987) points out, “All real living is meeting” (p.11). My dialogical partner Tsering shared Buber’s wisdom in his response to meeting persons from different cultures: “Cultures encounter the Other, humans and other humans meet.” On one hand, many Tibetan teachers and community member shared this very attitude in meeting persons of difference by acting spontaneously, showing their trust in the other, and regarding persons from another culture as fully human beings. On the other hand, the narratives of Tibetan teachers and community members’ relating across difference
demonstrated their willingness to understand a particular person (even after some unpleasant experience with the persons from a given ethnic group) in the here and now by inviting the person to co-name the past. Therefore, a dialogical attitude also requires a perspective that sees the other in his or her (or their collective) process of change.

The story, “Why are we grouped as No. 2?” in Chapter Four features the chuba lady in the tea house spontaneously sharing her experience of how Chinese treat her and her ethnic group as ethnic inferiors, which might put her in a dangerous political situation if heard by Chinese officials. Even so, she relates this story without prejudice to my identity by saying, “I don’t care if you are Tibetan or Chinese.” This communicative practice does address me as different, but still as a cultural other who is a human being in full presence. In a story of a similar kind, Dorjee spoke to me of his concerns regarding the loss of Tibetan culture and subtly addressed the issue of a “Hanized” people—a matter of postcolonial colonization—in a very direct way, even challenging my identity as a culturally Han Chinese. In Chapter Five, Dolma offered to share her bed with me on my day of arrival—a choice based on the whole-hearted trust of Tibetan culture. In the story of Dolma’s first meeting with the Han Chinese tourist at the first individual dinner for her students, she genuinely treated the person as a unique individual by not judging the person according to previous assumptions. Similarly, many Tibetan students I encountered acted like Qiling and showed a genuine interest in why an “outsider” wanted to join in their lives by asking spontaneous and direct questions. Further, as described in Chapter Seven, ghege Norbu showed me his sacred prayer room during my first visit to his apartment and shared the hardships of learning Tibetan during the Cultural
Revolution. In short, these moments of relating were unplanned and naturally gifted cross-cultural encounters. The Tibetan teachers shared their willingness to know the other continuously. As Tsering said, “Anyway, my American female Ph.D. friend, I understand we are different. You are more than the person I see, here.”

Second, the four narratives also presented another a dialogical characteristic—understanding the person here and now by inviting the other to co-narrate the past. Especially in the story of the speech contest (told across all four chapters), after the Tibetan student Sonam endured a public assault from a Chinese judge, the Tibetan teacher ghege Dondrup related in Chapter Seven how he resented the judge’s discriminatory actions. Meanwhile, ghege Dondrup also showed his willingness to understand the Chinese judge’s action from both a structural and an interpersonal level. With this perspective on change, ghege Dondrup even suggested that I speak with the judge to understand another view, as well as to understand him as a person. This was a lived dialogical moment that transcended labels, stereotypes and ethnocentric barriers. It addressed the complications of power relations in cross-cultural communication, as we were willing to risk our positions, to be humbled, and to listen to the other in a context of conflictual ethnic group history. For another example, recall Tsering’s opinion on how Tibetan teachers relate across difference in their organizing practices: “Is our culture really that superior to the others? We cannot judge or criticize them unless we deeply understand others’ cultures. We can’t completely refute others’ culture when we aren’t even willing to understand them.”
Third, Chapter Six particularly described an embodied dialogue that is a self-regenerating process. The story of the encounter between Tsering and I exemplified central features of dialogue—embodiment, moving away from judgment through continuous reflection in the other’s presence, and genuinely speaking to one another as an individual. Such a process echoes Buber (1987) words: “Through the Thou a man becomes [emphasis added] I” (p. 28). Across these interactions, both Tsering and I dialogized the language we each spoke for the other in the four rhythms of silence, which I characterized as a dialogical moment that transcended difference in order to recreate it in a process of mutual encounter and understanding. Buber (1987) also noted:

Only silence before the Thou—silence of all tongues, silent patience in the undivided word that precedes the formed and vocal response—leaves the Thou free, and permits man to take his stand with it in the reserve where the spirit is not manifest, but is. (p.39-40)

Respectful, other-regarding, silence, as an important character of communicative practice, can enable persons of difference to enter the embodied I-Thou relationship.

In short, relating across difference is a practice of encounter and a genuine manner of invitation in the moment. This practice opened up the possibility of co-narrating and co-naming the world together, a process of organic hybridization. As Buber suggested, “Primary words are not isolated words, but combined words” (p. 3). In relating and organizing across cultures, a meta-theory of dialogue might help us render a moment like this and redeem the basic humanity between historically conflictual ethnic groups, Han Chinese and Tibetans. It also may create space for persons from the
alienated worlds to share stories of their pasts and respect each other’s attitude towards history/story. The process of relating creates and recreates the meaning of difference and ultimately can give rise to a community of relationships. Such a process also illustrated the last dialogical characteristic of “Being while Becoming.” Such community is a responsible community that encompasses a mode of mutual presence that does not intend to end our differences but seeks to generate the potential with which to sustain open modes of rationality and relationality across difference (Todd, 2004).

**Dialogical organizing microcosms.** The present section addresses the second research question: “How and to what extent does dialogue occur in the Tibetan teachers’ and community members’ communicative practices?” As a counterpart to relating across difference, the four narrative chapters portrayed the following five dialogical organizing microcosms in exploring Tibetan teachers and community members’ communicative practices: 1) Dolma’s emergent NGO, 2) local family associations, 3) voluntary summer teaching groups and learning communities, 4) Tibetan students’ organizations across three linguistic communities; and 5) international NGOs that are highly locally connected. These dialogical organizing microcosms, from the local to the international level, were interconnected across the four chapters.

To begin, Dolma’s story of an NGO start-up in Chapter Four emphasized relating across individual donors locally and internationally in support of education for under-resourced students. Dolma’s organizing practice was highly dialogical. It involved an emergent purpose, embodied conversations, and being embedded in the interconnectedness of beings and things. Other Tibetan teachers in the web of meaningful
relationships, such as Demkar, drew on lessons found among local family farmers in the support of students who could not pay for their tuition in Chapter Four. These organizing practices were connected with the young Tibetan student’s teaching of his Tibetan parents at home during summer break by modeling the teacher’s punishment method described in Chapter Six. These communicative practices were also associated with the local Buddhist monastery’s organizing. That is, they distributed Tibetan language books and offered Tibetan language tests to villagers to help preserve their language. These practices were very interconnected with other meaningful organizing events and continuously gave rise to a locally-centered form of community organizing.

Second, another unique local way of organizing has important implications for the process of Tibetan language preservation. A local family association consists of a small group of about ten families (generally neighbors) from the same county who share a communal life. They help each other in their everyday life with everything from taking care of their neighbors’ yaks to major events such as wedding and funerals. They also organize singing and dancing during festivals. For instance, in a follow-up conversation with ghege Wangmo, the family associations organize villagers in from different counties (who speak different Kham languages) to create performances in Tibetan (e.g. traditional Tibetan operas) during Losar, the Tibetan New Year. This local framework was formed historically for survival on the plateau. Today, after the season of picking mushrooms and yartsa gunbu, the ten families gather after work, either in a monastery or in a family’s yard, to learn the Tibetan vocabulary. Usually, a group of Tibetan teachers or a group of students returning from school leads these activities along with the knowledgeable lamas.
from the monasteries. However, this local family association also has been highly influenced by Chinese modernity and globalization. This form of local organizing was only noted among participants from the rural areas of northwestern Kham (e.g. Rural Batang and Derge County).

Third, Tibetan teachers such as Tsering, Tenzin, Dolma and others have shared that they had participated in voluntary summer teaching groups. All the teachers I interviewed had volunteered to teach students Tibetan after work at their school. These voluntary learning communities consisted of students from Han Chinese, Yi, and Qiang ethnic groups. In addition, Tibetan teachers continuously return to their home villages and teach young Tibetans and villagers literary Tibetan every summer during festivals or other gatherings. Many of the young students and villagers were living in very under-resourced conditions. During a follow-up conversation with Tsering in January 2015, he noted that he returned home during winter break to teach Tibetan at the orphanage which was built by a local monastery, along with his college buddies. This form of highly self-recognizing organizing across differences has come into being through the activities of language preservation.

Fourth, students’ organizations also worked in dialogical solidarity to preserve Tibetan language and culture. Both Tsering’s and Demkar’s narratives described how their student groups organized in college. Tsering’s organization partnered with a nonprofit to gather Tibetan students from three ethnolinguistic communities. Even though the nonprofit organization used their hard work unethically, the student organization devoted tremendous efforts to record folk-music performances in the homogenized world
of globalization. In addition, Chapter Seven described Demkar’s student organization in college, which mainly worked on organizing activities with other religious and ethnic groups to achieve an understanding of each other’s values through the dialogical exchanges of speech and debate.

Last, bridging these locally centered organizing microcosms to the international level, Tibetan teachers and community members such as Tenzin and Choden had volunteered for an international NGO that works for language education in Tibet. These international connections influenced both international and Han Chinese volunteers. Han Chinese like Xuyuan and me had joined the organizing process for the preservation of Tibetan language and culture. Tenzin taught in the organization I volunteered to join. We both were new students of the Tibetan language and are committed to promoting mother-tongue education in Tibet in various ways.

Tibetan teachers are the key actors in organizing Tibetans and others to preserve their language and culture. In these four chapters, through diverse practices of organizing networks emerged on both local and international levels from organizing microcosms. In this organizing process, the purpose of preserving language has emerged, and the identity of being Tibetan and being connected to the Tibetan language has been recreated in the process of doing this organizing. More importantly, this process understands the life of language as dialogical, embodied, ritualized, and continually recreated in the process of change. Through my own learning with Tibetan teachers and community members, the organizing process for language preservation constituted a lived dialogue, which I presented across the four narrative chapters.
Limitations

In his *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein (2007) writes, “The limits of my language mean the limits of my world” (p. 88). I believe that the primary limitation in this study would be my inability to understand literary Tibetan. Much of the Tibetan literature in the study was in English and Chinese. I relied on my participants and Tibetan friends to explain the contemporary Tibetan literature that we encountered together (e.g. Dondrup Gyal). In addition, many conversations in Tibetan were translated by my participants, and I lost an immediate opportunity to understand the struggles, tensions, and changes in translating across literary Tibetan, Chinese, and English.

The second limitation in this study is an implicit presentation of language, power, and the problematic of post-colonialism. Colonialism in Tibet was intertwined with historical complexity. Historically, the British started their expedition to Tibet and the Himalayan regions in 1765 and then left in 1947 (Marshall, 2005). And many scholars (e.g. Harnett, 2013) believe that Tibet’s modernity is a form of Chinese Communist colonization. Other scholars might call it *Sinicization*, an assimilation into Chinese culture (Dawa Norbu, 2001; Tien, 1974). According to Goldstein et. al (2006), the biography of the Communist revolutionary Bapa Phuntso Wangye presented another perspective on Communist liberationist ideology, which spoke against the idea of “communist colonialism.” Phuntso Wangye was a self-affirming “Communist Tibetan revolutionary” and embraced this political change in Tibet. Another leading scholar on neocolonialism in China has argued that Communist “ideology” was self-colonization by
groups of Chinese elites in the early 1920s (Choi, 2007). Thus, the presentation of language, power and colonization involves a historical complexity and multiple interpretations that I chose not to address in this study. The varied conceptualizations of colonialism involve multiple facets and manifestations that would take me beyond the primary concerns of this study, which addressed embodied practices by self-recognizing actors in the present. As mentioned in Chapter Three, if colonialism is narrowly and politically defined, this dissertation itself, being in English, and the ethnographer’s national/ethnic identity of being Chinese, could be labeled as a neocolonial or a postcolonial product.

However, given an appreciation of the historical and theoretical complexity of these cultural conflicts, I believe this dissertation can be considered a de-colonial work because of the understanding of my own social locus (coming from a Han Chinese cultural background). First, throughout the research and my shared living with the Tibetans, I practiced “decolonization” by entering the field with a heart for and an openness to learning, as well as assuming, if needed, an ethical position supporting any persons who “speak with” and “speak for” my Tibetan friends, my co-actors, comrades, and companions. I also have been quite attentive to the words my interlocutors used to describe me in defining our relationships. Additionally, I performed my resistance to homogeneity at the institutional level through my critical perspective on the privileged status of a unitary, centripetalized language. I will continue in my commitment to reconfigure organizing forms of knowledge by mapping out the locally centered ways of organizing, rather than imposing an organizing structure on local ethnolinguistic
communities. I further believe that audiences interested in issues of colonialism and language can create their own meanings in the previous chapters.

Contributions and Implications

To conclude, my dissertation has moved away from most of the dichotomies involved in understanding how persons relate and organize in Kham Tibet, both in its theoretical framework and in its rendering of the Tibetan community organizing, the phenomenon itself. I believe my actions have added greater complexities to our understanding of dialogical organizing processes and social change more broadly. In addition, this study understands language as “languaging,” a ritualistic practice of creating and recreating identity and a medium and product of culture. This study also may trigger further scrutiny of unexamined assumptions about the conceptualization of dialogue and community organizing (e.g. marginalization, vulnerability and resistance, etc.).

I now summarize two main aspects of how my dissertation can contribute to communication studies (including the subfield of organizational communication), as well as to Tibetan language preservation from my perspective and my participants’ perspectives. On one hand, from a communication scholar and a co-actor’s perspective, I believe my research could contribute to promote understanding organizing for social change in local communities, promoting understanding between conflictual cultural groups, and ethnic minority language preservation. On the other hand, my participants have provided me with feedback about my dissertation, which extended my vision of how this work might contribute.
First, this study will advance communication theory by contextualizing and extending the theory of dialogue through its application to an investigation of emerging sociocultural activities. Broadfoot and Munshi (2007) reminded us that the sub-field or the discipline of organizational communication has been dominated by Euro-American intellectual traditions that might lead to further colonization, subordination and oppression of native/local/other forms of understanding and organizing in our disciplinary field. They raise a meaningful question, “How do we recover alternative rationalities, worldviews, and voices on the processes of organizing in diverse contexts?” (p. 249). This study will provide an alternative understanding of dialogue and organizing locally and internationally. Particularly, the dialogic organizing microcosms described here could possibly provide ways to understand organizing for social change effectively and practically on a ground level. This study described alternative communicative processes of organizing that are enacted in local communities and provided insights for organizational communication scholars and practitioners on how to learn about and foster meaningful organizing for social change. As such, this research may contribute to the scholarly community beyond communication studies (e.g. to sociology, linguistics, anthropology, and educational theory, etc.) by developing a meaning-centered, holistic perspective with which to study community organizing for social change in Tibetan ethno-linguistic communities. Second, my findings have edifying social implications for reconstructing at the interpersonal and group level the overly politicized grand narratives regarding Tibet, and, more important, for recognizing the potential impact of the Tibetan people as resourceful agents of social change. Third, the practical activities and
experiences of the Tibetan teachers and community members presented in my dissertation also can provide insights for educators, policymakers, and international NPOs and NGOs concerned with the implementation of programs for indigenous and ethnic language and cultural preservation. Therefore, this research may offer values and stances transferable to other indigenous and ethnic groups working toward similar goals.

Besides these generalized implications, I included my interlocutors’ feedback on possible applications of my dissertation. From Bakhtin’s (1984) perspective, dialogue, different from monologue, invites and awaits a response. An ethnographer’s work needs others to consummate the experience. As Dewey (1998) suggested, “The work of art is complete only as it works in the experience of others than the one who created it” (p.110). Beyond my own speculation on what my dissertation can do for the Kham Tibetan community, I asked a variety of readers, including my participants (Tibetans and Han Chinese) and various Tibetan scholars, to respond to the previous chapters. Their responses expanded my understanding of my learning regarding organizing across difference and community enhancement in Kham Tibet. In my opinion, this feedback adds importantly to the potential applications of my research.

In asking these questions, I have encountered three different kinds of responses regarding what my work can “do.” First, many Tibetan readers believed that my chapters provided an outsider’s view that made their organizing practice visible. One of my Tibetan participants shared it this way, “I am surprised. I am surprised at how differently you approach these things in our life. And I myself did not realize that the details of what we do could be as important as they are for our language. Tibetan culture is neither
owned by Tibetans nor by any ethnic group. It is the culture of the world. We are responsible for each other, and for the fortunes of all beings and creatures. In this extra-modernized time, humans are facing a crisis regarding a lack of spiritual understanding. Preservation of the Tibetan language could serve as an alternative way to understand the intrinsic world of humans. Plus, it is important for different cultures to learn from each other, to understand and to respect each other; it could bring about a possible equity and peace across cultural groups. You can see the organizing methods that we were not able to observe. Your perspective could tell us how others could take an entirely different perspective from our own. In adding a different perspective regarding how Tibetan teachers and their communities organize for language preservation, my Tibetan participants also showed a satisfaction regarding my work as the other’s confirmation of their language preservation practices, as well as a confirmation of their identity. It serves as an acknowledgement of difference.” Another Tibetan participant said, “Welcome to the family! You know what? If we cannot not speak this language, we are no longer ourselves, not Tibetans. It is good you acknowledged the importance of Tibetans learning their mother tongue. History and our pasts will be forgotten and substituted for. Sometimes, we are lost in our own identities. Who are we? We are nobody if we are not speaking our language.”

Second, a few readers said that the language I used in the dissertation could serve as an invitation to local educational administrations to better understand the role of Tibetan educators. Most research on organizing in Tibet has taken a strong political stance or used ideographic language such as “freedom,” “democracy” or “independence”
and has had little chance of being used practically in local educational institutions. A critical Tibetan scholar responded to my work, “The many existing works on Tibetan culture preservation have started a race, a competition, of political voices. But many cannot be used. It is hard to say that it works for Tibetans locally. I am glad I don’t see you using too many “isms” or political slogans. Your work is both personal and cultural. What I can see is the function of your work. It is an invitation. And you are a Han Chinese—your identity matters. It could help the local educational administration understand how important the role of Tibetan teachers and educators are in contemporary Tibetan education.”

Third, several Chinese readers, including my participants, shared their feedback and considered my work as a “dominant ethnic group’s reflexivity.” One participant said, “I am very touched by the work. I understand that we Han Chinese historically are a very dominant and ethnocentric people. We regarded ethnic minorities as our attachments. I am glad the new generation of Han Chinese can start to step out of their ethnocentrism and nationalism. This work can become a leading part of the literature that critically examines Han Chinese education and our country’s policy on ethnic minorities.”

Finally, a Tibetan participant said that the Tibetan linguistic usage in my dissertation could remind other scholars who study Tibet about the importance of learning the Tibetan language. This Tibetan participant wrote, “I am not very knowledgeable. You should ask others who have more wisdom. I guess, most importantly, I can read an attitude in your work—a scholar who studies Tibet who is genuinely interested in learning the Tibetan language. Many Tibetan scholars in China
and overseas could not even speak a single word of Tibetan—how dismissive! How can you do research without knowing this group’s language?! Your work could influence our Tibetan students regarding a re-thinking of the importance of their own language.”

In short, a dissertation research project is not just completed but consummated as well, by the interlocutors and readers who have spared some of their time to pay attention to my work. The co-created contributions and implications of this dissertation leave more spaces for others to respond and to continuously make meaning in the life of dialogue.

**Future Directions**

In this section, I map out a few directions that are part of a scholarly continuum that includes my dissertation research. First, I hope my stories of learning Tibetan community organizing can serve as a medium for reconstructing the over-politicized grand narratives on Tibet in the Kham area between persons and small groups and see Tibetans as resourceful social change agents, instead of what they typically have been described as: vulnerable victims. Such labeling has to be taken seriously while representing the voice of the other.

Second, I will continue to refine the meta-theory of dialogue in order to contribute to a meaning-centered and more holistic perspective with which to study community organizing for social change in Tibetan ethnolinguistic communities. To accomplish this goal, I will seek to understand a more locally centered framework of organizing, that of Tibetan Buddhism. In the near future I will be reading literary Tibetan and will be better able to understand the exalted literature of Tibetan Buddhism. By doing so, I can achieve a work of more integrated textual analysis in juxtaposition to my fieldwork. By seeking
more possibilities of hybridity and localization, such a plan will emphasize more praxis-oriented work aimed at enhancing post-humanistic theories.

Last, a short documentary on Tibetan language preservation based on the four narrative chapters will be created in a few months. It could serve as an invitation to educators, policymakers, governments, and international NPOs and NGOs concerned with the implementation of programs of indigenous/ethnic language and cultural preservation. I also will start an outreach initiative for partnerships with disciplines such as education, media studies, sociology, and anthropology and continue to focus on organizing for social change and explore more potential and practical ways of organizing.
Glossary

*a re*: Right?

*ajee*: elder sister or women who seems older than the speaker

*ajo*: brother; bro

*ama*: respected mother

*amala*: mother

*apa*: father

*Bod Zha/Bo*: Tibetan ethnicity

*bomola*: respected young girl or a respected young lady

*chuba*: traditional Tibetan clothes. In the old days *chubas* were made from woven cloth as the basic garment of the sherpas. The modern Tibetan *chubas* in Kham continued to follow the traditional style, a long sleeved robe tied with a sash or a belt.

*dangbe*: Tibetan idioms with a harmonious rhyme at the end of each line

*demu*: hello/goodbye

*gazhengmaqie*: you are welcome

*gazhengqie*: thank you

*ghege*: teacher

*ghegela*: my respected teacher

*Gny ama y payou Lhasa re*: my mother’s hometown is Lhasa

*gonbamarcang*: sorry; I am sorry

*guru*: respected teacher; (first) spiritual teacher
hanized: the process of cultural homogenization from Han Chinese ethnic group. It often indicates the process of ethnic minority groups become Han Chinese

jomo: Buddhist nun

khatas: a white scarf used as a greeting scarf (for guests and honored persons).

Lhamtso: a holly lake near Lhasa.

Norbulingka: a palace and surrounding park in Lhasa, Tibet. It served as the traditional summer residence of the successive Dalai Lamas from the 1780s up until the 14th Dalai Lama's exile in 1959.

Om Ma Ni Pe Me Hom: it is the six-word Sanskrit mantra that commonly chanted in prayers among Tibetans.

oya/ yaya: yes, sure

ra ma ra: Let’s eat

ra: eat

Rinpoche: high ranking lama; tulku; a living Buddha

Tashi Deleh: A blessing and a greeting statement means good luck

thangka: Tibetan Buddhist painting with embroidery, usually depicting a Buddhist deity or scene.

tsampa: dough made by roasted barley flour, a staple Tibetan food, usually mixed with the salty butter tea

tulku: a reincarnated Buddha

Xizang: A Chinese term for “Tibetan Autonomous Region.”

Xuanzi: the Chinese name for a Tibetan music and dance ritual performance
Yanjiang: Chinese word for “public speaking.” Yan refers to perform. Jiang means to speak

yartsa gunbu: is a type of fungus. It means “summer grass, winter worm” in Tibetan although it resembles neither grass nor worms in appearance

Zang: The Chinese word for “Tibet” or “Tibetan”
References


Appendix A: Map of Three Tibetan Ethno-linguistic Communities: Utsang, Amdo, and Kham

Appendix B: IRB Approval

The following research study has been approved by the Institutional Review Board at Ohio University for the period listed below.

Project: Exploring Self-Organizing for Language Preservation and Community Building in Kham Tibet

Researcher(s): Dongjing Kang

Advisor: William K. Rawlins

Department: Communication Studies

This approval is valid until expiration date listed above. If you wish to continue beyond expiration date, you must submit a periodic review application and obtain approval prior to continuation.

The approval remains in effect provided the study is conducted exactly as described in your application for review. Any additions or modifications to the project must be approved by the IRB (as an amendment) prior to implementation.

Adverse events must be reported to the IRB promptly, within 5 working days of the occurrence.
Appendix C: Interview Protocol

Exploring Organizing in Tibet: Language Preservation and Community building
探索自發保護康巴語言和社區建立

Pre-interview ethics statement

Hello. My name is Dongjing. I’m a Ph.D. student at Ohio University. I’m doing a study to learn more about your language and community. This study will be done in three parts. In the first part, I will ask you to answer some general questions to learn more about you and your daily choice of language. In the second part I will ask you to answer a few questions about people you spend time with. Last, I also would like to listen to the stories of how you understand the stories between you and your group of friends, peers or community members. The entire process will take approximately half an hour to one hour.

Before we begin, there are a few things I would like to go over:

- First, are you at least 19 years old?
- Second, in order for me to accurately retain all of the responses you provide in the interview, I will be audio recording this interview. Your name and your identity won’t be linked in any way to any of the information you provide in your interviews. In fact, the only people who will be allowed access to your audio recording will be me and my professor overseeing this research project. Even though this interview will be transcribed, your name and your identity will not be used in the transcript. I would like you to know that you are free to ask me to turn off the tape recorder at any time during the interview. You may also refuse to answer any questions. If you don’t understand my question, don’t hesitate to ask me to clarify.

However, if you do not want your interview sessions to be audio-recorded, I will take notes during these sessions. You can check the box below:

I do not wish my interview sessions to be audio-recorded.
I do wish my interview sessions to be audio-recorded.

I do not wish my interview sessions to be audio-recorded.

You may not, personally benefit from participating in this study except potentially gaining a greater understanding of your story of your language and community. Any responses, oral or written will be regarded with the utmost confidentiality.

Language and literacy accommodation:
Would you like to participate in this interview? [If yes, the consent form will be given to participants] If you would like to, you can take as much time as you want to read through the consent form and I would like to answer any questions you have when you are not clear what is on the form.

Do you have any questions before we begin?

Part I: Demographic Information 簡要資料統計
Your age (年齡)
Gender (性別)
Your ethnicity (民族)
What is your occupation or what work do you do? (你做啥子工作的)
Where are you from? (你來自哪裡)
What is your mother tongue language/dialect? (你的母語方言是啥?)

Part II: Interview Questions 採訪問題
Language
1. In general, what language/dialect(s) do you speak on a daily basis at home? And can you tell me why you are speaking this/these language/dialect (s)?
   大致來說，你平時都那種，或者哪幾種語言，在家說什麼？你可以告訴我為什麼說這些語言或者方言？
2. In general, what language/dialect(s) do you speak on a daily basis at work? And can you tell me why you are speaking this/these language/dialect(s)?

大致來說，你平時都那種，或者哪幾種語言，在工作單位說什麼？你可以告訴我為什麼說這些語言或者方言？

3. What language/dialect do you speak with your friends or peer groups? If you feel comfortable, can you share with me a few things that you guys talked about in your daily life? 你可以告訴我的話，大概都聊什麼？

Friendship and Community

1. Who are you spend time with on the daily or weekly basis? Among your group (friends, peers, and community members), what are the differences that you observe in your group (education levels, ethnicity, and language, etc.)? And how do you negotiate language/dialects to speak when you are hanging out?

你平時和誰比較和的來，可以一起出去吃飯什麼的？在這一群人裡面（朋友，同齡人，或者同社區的人），大家有什麼不同（教育程度，民族，或者語言或者有其他）？在聚會中，你們怎麼樣來商量決定說哪個語言？

2. Could you tell me a story of how your group first got-together? Please tell me about your experience of how your group got started and organized?

你能告訴我這群人第一次是怎麼樣聚起來的？可以告訴我一些你們是怎麼樣開始的經歷麼？

3. Think about a scenario when you were hanging out with your friends, peer groups, and community member, what language/dialects do you speak? Can you share with me what brings your group together? If you feel comfortable, please
4. If you feel comfortable, please share with me a moment you feel most comfortable with your group. 如果你覺得可以，可以告訴我一個你覺得和你的朋友一起聚會，關係最好的一個情景嗎？

5. Have there ever been times when you experienced tensions between you and your group members (friends, peer group, and community members)? Please describe some examples for me. 在你和这群朋友有沒有出現什麼摩擦呢？如果有，請給我講講。

Describe the situation 當時的情況
Who were the main characters involved? 有誰參與?
What about the situation was constraining? 當時的情況有沒有很約束？
What would you have done differently to change the outcome? 如果有機會重來一次，你會改變什麼來改變最終的結果？

Ending
1. What do you find most significant about your group based on your experience? 根據你的經歷，你覺得這個群體最有意義的是什麼？你怎麼樣通過他們來了解（對自己，對他人，對社會？

2. Does your family know about your group (friends, peers and community members)? Have they spent time with them? 你的家人知道他們嗎？他們有沒有和你的這些朋友，同齡人，或者設區的人相處過？

3. Are there any questions that you thought I might ask about your experiences of your group that I have not asked you? 還有什麼我沒有問到的方面，你覺得有必要強調的麼？在這些問題，如果我還沒有提到，你覺得最值得一提的是什麼？

4. Do you have any questions for me? 你對我還有其他問題麼？
Appendix D: A Person-centered Question List

I. Person-centered questions I asked to foster dialogue with Tibetan teachers and community members:

1) I am interested in learning something about you. What would you like to share with me?
2) What does your name mean? Could you share with me the story of how you were named?
3) Are your parents and your grandparents healthy? Where do they live now?
4) Do you have siblings? Where are they now?
5) Would you like to share with me something about your hometown?
6) Could you share with me something about your guru? How did you meet him?
7) Would you like to share with me your most memorable story while you grow up?
8) What do you like to do daily?
9) Could you share with me what you normally do with your friends at home or here?
10) What questions do you have for me?

II. Questions I was asked most often in the field:

1) Why are you here?
2) Your name is Gyesang Nima? Who named you? Why do you have a boy’s name?
3) You are a Han Chinese and an American Ph.D., why are you studying Tibetan?
4) How much money do you earn per month?
5) Are you a Buddhist?
6) Have you ever beaten your students?

7) Why are you holding a water mug everyday?

8) How do you get to know Tenzin (and others)?

9) Why do you want to know this (Tibetan oral performance, Tibetan folklores, and barley products, etc.)?

10) When everyone wants to go to the city, why do you come to rural counties in Kham?

11) Could you tell us about how Americans think about us Tibetans?

12) What do you eat when you were in the U.S.?

13) Comparing with living in America, what do you think about the conditions of living in China?

14) You spoke Tibetan? How did you get to learning Tibetan?

15) Can you tell us about what a graduate-level class looks like in America? Tell us your professors.

16) What do you think about the relationship between science and religion?