

The Dalai Lama in American Documentaries: Symbol, Politics and American
Mirroring

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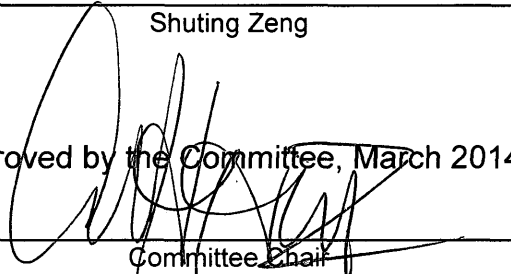
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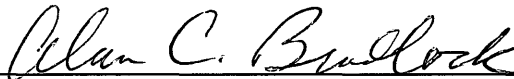
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ABSTRACT

Recent American documentary film productions on Tibet frequently present the Dalai Lama as the symbol of Tibet. *Ten Questions for the Dalai Lama* (2006) is a personal travelogue of an epiphany-seeking American, *When the Dragon Swallowed the Sun* (2010) discusses violence in the political activism for Tibetan freedom, and *Compassion in Emptiness* (2011) is a straight record of the Dalai Lama's last speech during his tour in America in 2010.

This paper analyzes the symbolization of the Dalai Lama, his affect in his presentation, and his self-positioning between America and China's ideological opposition. Despite the three documentaries' nonnegotiable stand on Tibet's political right to be independent, their uncritical presentation of the Dalai Lama as the virtuous symbol of Tibet and Tibet as a spiritually and historically immaculate utopia fail to be intellectually investigative and politically convincing. Accompanying the hagiographic portrait of the Dalai Lama is a flattening and fragmenting of Tibet. The fantasization of Tibet becomes another form of Orientalism that serves for American mirroring and self-satisfaction.

Key Words: Documentary, Tibet between China and America, Performance and Politics

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The spectacle is not a collection of images; rather, it is a social relationship between people that is mediated by images.

-- Guy Debord, *the Society of the Spectacle*¹

Introduction

The construction of a virtual Tibet was started in the early twentieth century by the British government, which sponsored documentaries that presented Tibet as a land of myth awaiting the colonization-civilization and a land that “is not a part of China.”² The cinema in Tibet was intended by the British government to “record indigenous customs for anthropological research and to disseminate information of an educational nature among natives,” with the “indigenous” and “native” here both referring to Tibetans.³ These early cinematic activities were also highly inter-cultural since both Tibetans and the British government contributed to the construction of Tibet in cinema: The rituals of Tibetan Buddhism instead of everyday life in Tibet were presented for the interests of both Tibetans and the British government. For Tibetans, they expected a place within the cinema for Tibetan Buddhism; for the British government, presenting Tibet in an inoffensive way was practical diplomacy that allowed Britain’s continuous access to Mt. Everest.⁴ With a memorable scene of

¹ Guy Debord, *the Society of the Spectacle* (New York: Zone Books, 1995), 12.

² Peter H. Hansen, “Tibetan Horizon: Tibet and the Cinema in the Early Twentieth Century,” in *Imaging Tibet: Perceptions, Projections, and Fantasies*, ed. Thierry Dodin and Heinz R  ther (Boston, MA: Wisdom Publications, 2001), 92 and 103.

³ Hansen, “Tibetan Horizon,” 97.

⁴ Hansen, “Tibetan Horizon,” 92 - 97.

a Tibetan eating lice alive, *Epic of Everest* (1924) is an early presentation of Tibet that contrasts the natural beauty of Everest to the savage and backward life of Tibetans.⁵ Offended by the film, the Tibetan government withdrew permission for future Everest expeditions by the British, which was at first given in exchange for British weapons against the increasing Chinese military threats.⁶

Films on Tibet were not only made by the British government. *OSS Mission to Tibet* (1943) is an American documentary on Tibet that gives a matter-of-fact, non-fantastic introduction to Tibet, for example, the peaceful exchange of gifts between America and Tibet and a brief overview of Tibet's geography, history and culture.⁷ However, *Lost Horizon*, a fictional film made in 1950, portrays Tibet romantically as a land of catharsis and miracles.⁸ In the early attempts at British colonization and in the post-WWII Euro-American imagination, Tibet is characterized either as a land of myth and barbarism or a land of epiphany and bliss. After 1950, when China took over Tibet, the pure fantasizing of Tibet as Shangri-La became problematic: China's occupation of Tibet belies the Hollywood fairy tale of Tibet as a protected, isolated land and makes it technically difficult to continue the same depiction of Tibet. When Tibet lost its independence, the virtual Tibet constructed in the cinema came to a clash

⁵ Marc Abramson, "Mountains, Monks, and Mandalas: *Kundun* and *Seven Years in Tibet*," *Cinéaste* 23, no. 3 (1998): 8.

⁶ Hansen, "Tibetan Horizon," 93.

⁷ *OSS Mission to Tibet* or *OSS inside Tibet*, directed by Llia A. Tolstoy and Brook Dolan, made in 1943 (Rockville, MD: Yak&Yeti Books, 1997), videocassette.

⁸ Ronald Colman and Jane Wyatt, *Lost Horizon*, Directed by Frank Capra, released September 1, 1937(Culver City, CA: Sony Pictures Home Entertainment,1999), DVD.

with the actual one existing as a political entity. In the face of invasion, Tibetans in exile demand a presentation of Tibet that exceeds its unique cultural and religious value: Tibet must also be an independent nation-state. Films on Tibet start to incorporate the political aspect of Tibet and combine it with the romantic Tibet. In their mediation, the romantic can serve the political, and the previously accumulated cultural capital of Tibet as Shangri-La on the screen can be applied to the construction of Tibet as a nation-state. However, the romantic can also deny the political, since it can be difficult to negotiate the fantasized with the real.

1959, the year the Dalai Lama was exiled from Tibet, was another time of complication of Tibet as a utopia. Yet a Tibet brought to wide media notice by China at the same time stimulates new presentations of a Tibet before China's occupation. Recent years have seen many film productions on Tibet, whether big-budget Hollywood productions or personal productions such as the numerous Youtube videos made in Tibet and India.⁹ Many films on Tibet present the Dalai Lama as the god-king, spokesman and symbol of Tibet. For example, *Kundun* (1997) directed by Martin Scorsese is a hagiographic bio-pic of the Dalai Lama's life before he was exiled to India, and *Seven Years in Tibet* (1997) is a film adaption of Austrian adventurer Heinrich Harrer's popular 1950 memoir about Tibet and his friendship with the Dalai Lama.¹⁰

⁹ Many Tibet-explorers and supporters go to India since the Tibetan Government in Exile is located in Dharamsala, India.

¹⁰ Tenzin Thuthob Tsarong and Gyurme Tethong, *Kundun*, directed by Martin Scorsese, released in 1997 (Burbank, CA: Walt Disney Studios, 1998), DVD. Brad Pitt and David Thewils, *Seven Years in*

The hagiographic tendency in relation to the Dalai Lama as a figure in general is also shown in documentary films. *Tibet: a Buddhist Trilogy* (1979), a British film made after the end of British colonization and the Chinese annexation of Tibet, is an ethnographic documentary on Tibet with a poetic and worshipful narrative of Tibet, Tibetan Buddhism, and the Dalai Lama, with the trilogy consisting of “the Dalai Lama, the Monasteries and the People,” “Radiating the fruit of Truth,” and “the Fields of the Senses.”¹¹ In *Angry Monk: Reflections on Tibet* (2005), the writer-director Luc Schaedler of Switzerland sorrowfully yet reverently recounts the life of Gendun Choephel, an unorthodox Tibetan monk who explored a more open and less religious future for Tibet.¹² *My Reincarnation* (2005), a documentary made in Italy by American director Jennifer Fox, tells of the estrangement of an Italian-born son from his father who is a Tibetan Buddhist master in exile, and, finally, of his acceptance and inheritance of his father’s discipline.¹³ *The Sun Behind the Clouds: Tibet’s Struggle for Freedom* (2010), directed by Tibetan filmmakers Ritu Sarin and Tenzing Sonam, centers around Tibetans’ demonstrations around the time of the 2008 Beijing Olympics, the Dalai Lama’s middle-way agenda, and Tibetans’ frustrations

Tibet, directed by Jean-Jacques Annaud, released in 1997 (Culver City, CA: Sony Pictures Home Entertainment, 2004), DVD. Heinrich Harrer, *Seven Years in Tibet* (New York: Dutton, 1954).

¹¹ *Tibet: A Buddhist Trilogy*, directed by Graham Coleman, released in 1979 (Bath, BA, England: Orient Foundation for Arts and Culture, 2006), DVD.

¹² *Angry Monk: Reflections on Tibet*, directed by Luc Schaedler, released in 2005 (New York, NY: First Run Studio, 2009), DVD.

¹³ *My Reincarnation*, directed by Jennifer Fox, released in 2010 (New York, NY: Zohe Film Productions, 2012), DVD.

over the failure to gain Tibetan independence.¹⁴

This paper is going to discuss three American documentary films on Tibet that differ in their negotiation and presentation of the political and the romantic Tibet and the Dalai Lama. *Ten Questions for the Dalai Lama* (2006) (hereafter *Ten Questions*) is an essay film made by independent filmmaker Rick Ray. Given forty-five minutes to meet the Dalai Lama, Ray asks ten questions across many levels. For example, his second question is why westerners seem to be quicker to anger compared to people in Tibet and India who seem to have “endless patience,” and later he asks about humans’ relationship to the environment, and about the Dalai Lama’s outlook on the Middle East.¹⁵ The film made out of Ray’s personal pursuit presents natural landscapes with the camera’s capture of a bamboo forest, a limpid stream, and a sunrise on the mountain, the beauty of which in his opinion contributes to the uniqueness of Tibetan philosophy. The director is a romantic traveler, a spiritual disciple with his concerns about the relevance of happiness to wealth and his hope in the omniscient Dalai Lama.

The second film to be analyzed is a documentary themed on the Chinese occupation of Tibet and the exiled Tibetans’ independence movement. Directed by Dirk Simon, *When the Dragon Swallowed the Sun* (2010) (hereafter *When the Dragon*)

¹⁴ *The Sun Behind the Clouds: Tibet’s Struggle for Freedom*, directed by Ritu Sarin and Tenzing Sonam, released in 2010 (New York, NY: Zeitgeist Films, 2010), DVD.

¹⁵ Other questions include: “Why did India seem a much richer country on some level than America?” “To what extent should cultures be preserving our traditions, the way of life, and so on, and their religious practice, and to what extent should they reach out and embrace the outside world?” and “at what point do you give up violence? At what point do you confront something that is truly evil in the name of doing what’s right?” He asked about the Dalai Lama’s idea about China, his description of Tibet, and his opinions about Ghandi and himself.

focuses on the tensions between China's violence towards Tibet and Tibetans' non-violent reactions, between the Dalai Lama's non-violence policy and some Tibetan elites' willingness to use violence, and between the peace-lovers in China and the violent Chinese government. The film focuses on the Tibetan political activism before the 2008 Beijing Olympics to expose the tensions, and presents how the Olympics is politicized by showing the political demonstrations and contestations around it. In the talking-heads interviews, political elites debate over the inefficacy of non-violence and the use of violence, and discuss possible tactics to gain Tibetan independence. However, with oversaturated music, over-sentimentalized political scenes and bumpy shifts between different sentiments and locations, this film fails to be consistent and thus persuasive with its pro-Tibetan stand.

The third documentary *Compassion in Emptiness* is a straight recording of the Dalai Lama's speech "*Awakening the Heart of Selflessness*" at the Radio City Music Hall in New York City, the last speech he gave in the United States in 2010. The camera mainly remains on the stage where the Dalai Lama and his disciples are seated, but the shifts of angle and focus, scale and composition presents a specific Dalai Lama. The presentation filtered and framed by a camera is an extraction and abstraction from the subject that formulates a certain perspective.

Historical, religious or cultural as they are, all three documentaries also attempt to be political. Different as they are, these three documentaries consistently present the Dalai Lama positively and defend Tibet's right to be independent by

presenting China as the invader and the Dalai Lama as the de facto leader of Tibet. Yet they all fail to ground Tibet as a politically independent entity while building up the image of Tibet as culturally and spiritually exceptional and isolated. The exceptionalism and isolation of Tibet, ironically, becomes the obstacle for Tibet to exist in the geopolitical world and achieve recognition as a nation state.

A personal visual travelogue, a political inquiry, and a religious speech, these three documentaries all elevate the Dalai Lama's symbolic importance as Tibet, and connect him to the lost Tibet with their poetic, political or religious appeals. This paper will analyze the three documentaries' cinematic narratives by which they deliver their messages and form their styles. The paper will especially focus on the Dalai Lama as a symbol and as at once a voluntary and an unwitting performer in these documentaries' presentations. His verbal conceptualizations of non-violence, nationality and Tibet, and his kinetics on stage are integral to the formation of a virtual Tibet in the present. However, this paper does not intend to be an attack on the Dalai Lama. The Dalai Lama is a performer since he is captured and framed by a camera, which replicates and represents his presence. Besides, all people are performers, since one makes sense and communicates by adopting socially recognized formulae which don't belong to any single person only. Performance is not simply repetition though. It is a personal creation and interpretation, and thus innovation of the formulae. In that sense, everyone is a performer and a performance does not mean the absence of truth and reality. Therefore, performance analysis is a perspective on

the Dalai Lama rather than a definition or judgment. Also, this paper is more about the presentation and symbolization of the Dalai Lama than the Dalai Lama himself, though fully separating the personal, individual Dalai Lama from the public, political Dalai Lama would be impossible.

The Dalai Lama: The Reincarnation of Tibet

In cinematic depiction, the Dalai Lama is many times automatically equalized to Tibet. The Dalai Lama is both the religious and political leader of Tibet. At the moment of Tibet's danger, he actively tells the story of Tibet's culture and history and conveniently represents Tibet's sovereignty. The Dalai Lama as the leader of the Tibetans in exile gradually turns into the leader of the whole of Tibet in western society. Political symbols cannot avoid assuming some form of propaganda for ideological construction. And political symbols that arouse admiration and enthusiasm and harvest faiths and loyalties, according to Asha Kaushik, are the "miranda," the symbols of sentiment and identification in a political myth which can have more significant influences.¹⁶

The Dalai Lama's participation in or the presentation of him in film productions contributes to his influence as a miranda. Many films on the Dalai Lama or Tibetan Buddhism tell the story of reincarnation. In the beginning of *Kundun* (1997), the Dalai Lama is a mischievous kid with an unusual imperious manner who

¹⁶ Asha Kaushik, *Politics, Symbols, and Political Theory : Rethinking Gandhi* (Jaipur: Rawat Publications, 2001), 31-33.

is confirmed to be the new Dalai Lama after he successfully identifies the thirteenth Dalai Lama's articles. Reincarnation means the spirit's continuous existence in another bodily medium. The Dalai Lama is a temporary vessel for a permanent spirit. Within the Tibetan community, he is a reincarnation of a faith and power system. Outside the community, he becomes the reincarnation of Tibet for many. This reincarnation happened when Tibet as a sovereign state died in 1950, and for proponents of Tibet as a nation-state, it is urgent to have a Tibet that is still moveable and presentable. Presenting Tibet in cinema is a project to salvage the real Tibet with the virtual one, and the presentation often starts from a legend about reincarnation. A legend can also pave the way for exceptionalism, especially a legend that designates the lineage of a country's or a culture's leadership.

Documentaries on the Dalai Lama are seemingly less emotional in their argumentation than the hagiographic bio-pics, but they ultimately evoke strong emotions with their basis in logical and political appeals. "Everyone, whether educated or uneducated, or rich or poor, whether black or white or yellow, even blue or green, sing!" says the Dalai Lama in the opening of the documentary *Ten Questions*. The film's self-introduction – "Part biography, part philosophy, part adventure and part politics, '10 Questions' conveys more than history and more than answers -- it opens a window into the heart of an inspiring man" -- guarantees a passage to the heart and wisdom of the Dalai Lama.¹⁷ The director's narration threads between a

¹⁷ "About", the Website of the film "Ten Questions for the Dalai Lama," <http://www.thedalailamamovie.com/about/index.html>

brief history of Tibet and the Dalai Lama and the director's travel and interview with the Dalai Lama in India. "I have heard that His Holiness did not suffer fools easily, and was quick to dismiss people he did not feel were genuine and sincere. . . . I knew that if I was to be repelled by the Dalai Lama after this long personal journey, it would probably be the most humiliating moment of my entire life. I was determined not to let that happen," says Ray's mellow, deep voice with an ill-disguised complacency, which indicates he did get to meet the Dalai Lama without being expelled by him.

Walking through the streets and crowds in India, Ray relates what he sees as their happiness to their Buddhist philosophy of life. In his medium shots of the Indians bathing in the Ganges River and the close-up shots of kind and genial Indian faces, Ray reflects on distance and difference: "I told His Holiness that everywhere I've been in the world, including India, I always noticed that happiest people I met were the poorest. You could go into the worst slums of Calcutta or Bombay, and see far more smiles on people's faces than you would see among the rich and privileged." A few times Ray himself appears in front of the camera, mingling with the passers-by on the dusty street. When tourism has replaced adventurism, epiphany seems approachable, and a filmmaker-pilgrim models for viewers, feeling at ease with the surrounding sacredness.

Rick Ray's documentary does not provide a hi-fi picture quality, and the forty-five minutes Ray got with the Dalai Lama is edited and shortened to less than twenty minutes in the documentary. The film's poeticness creates a richness in emotions yet

looseness in format: When using the considerable amount of second-hand materials that help make up his film, such as the clips of the Dalai Lama's speeches or of the Chinese Liberation Army's attack on the Tibetans, Ray does not annotate them with a specific date and location or the original sources of the clips from which he cites. A poetic narrative without rigorous investigations, *Ten Questions* strengthens the audience's pre-conceptions of the Dalai Lama and Tibet rather than establish new knowledge.

Compared to the personal *Ten Questions*, *When the Dragon* intends to be expository and objective. Its main theme might be articulated as "violence or not?" The Dalai Lama serves as a reference point when the Tibetan elites take different sides on the methods to gain Tibetan independence. The interviewees are active Tibetan freedom activists and figures of power and influence in Tibetan Government in Exile (TGIE), for example, Samdhong Rinpoche, the former chairman of the parliament of TGIE, Tenzin N. Tethong, the president of the Dalai Lama Foundation, and Kalsang Phuntsok Gorkdukpa, the president of the Tibetan Youth Congress.¹⁸ Tenzin Tselek is in the Students Peaceful Movement for the Tibet Cause, and lhakpa Kyizom is from the Active Non-violence Education Center. Not only Lobsang Sangay, the prime minister of TGIE and also a law school graduate from Harvard, but also other interviewees show the skillful use of the western political language. Their discussions of freedom as innate human need and democracy as the mode Tibet

¹⁸ Other interviewees include Jamyang Norbu and Lhasang Tsering, both of whom are writers and political activists.

should move towards and their analyses of China's strategies are straightforwardly political and secular. To some leaders at TGIE, the Dalai Lama's non-violent approach has failed to evoke any response from the Chinese government or lead to any substantial progress towards regaining Tibetan independence. They are provoking a violent reaction to the violence imposed by the Chinese government. Scenes of Tibetans' desperate and angry protests are presented along with some Tibetan elites' matter-of-fact yet determined voices for approving the use of violence.

Atrocity is dominant in the presentation of Tibetans in exile. They are presented as angry, tearful, frustrated and desperate in the face of the Chinese occupation. The feet that have walked hundreds of miles from Tibet to India, the faces that have experienced torments from the Chinese government, and the bodies that have been through extreme physical hardships are captured as close-ups. The horrifying scenes together with the dramatic music seem to say: In the face of this seemingly intolerable violence caused by the Chinese occupation, the non-violence principle can be interpreted as cowardly and impractical.

When the Dragon documents the 2008 pre-Olympics torch relay in San Francisco and Delhi, India as the stage for Tibetan-Chinese confrontations. With the March 14th Riot in the Tibetan Autonomous Region,¹⁹ the warm-up events for the

¹⁹ Zhidong Hao, "Sovereignty, Ethnicity, and Culture: The Tibetan Issue in an Institutional Perspective," *Journal of Contemporary China* 21, no. 73 (01, 2012): 131-147. Tibetan Autonomous Region (TAR) is the Tibetan area under the Chinese rule of China. In 1951 when China and Tibet signed "the Seventeen Point Agreement for the Peaceful liberation of Tibet," Chinese government the Tibetan Autonomous Region and promised full autonomy to the Tibetans, though whether this promise,

2008 Beijing Olympics, and the Magnitude 4.8 Wenchuan earthquake in July, western media gave China and Tibet concentrated attention, and their reports tended to relate one event to another with frequent references to China as a rising power with a problematic human rights record.²⁰ *When the Dragon* shows the simmering confrontation between the Chinese and Tibetans during the Olympic torch relay in the style of journalistic reportage. The international involvement is shown collectively in the amount of white people who join the Tibetans' fight for independence. White people are participants, referees and the self-representation of the film with its sympathy towards Tibetans and its accusation of Chinese government's violence. Such an exposure of the film's subjective viewpoint in a form of the uncontrollable direct cinema is an attempt to objectify a subjectivity which sides with Tibet.

The handheld camera's jerky and off-focus tracking without any voice-over captures the confrontation in a form that matches its feeling of urgency and danger. *When the Dragon* presents the side of the Chinese, even though the voices of Chinese tourists to the U.S. is their arguments in support of the sovereignty of China upon Tibet, their accusations of the Dalai Lama as a liar and sly politician, and their

which can also mean shared sovereignty between China and Tibet, was realized is always in controversy.

²⁰ Kent A. Ono and Joy Yang Jiao, "China in the US Imaginary: Tibet, the Olympics, and the 2008 Earthquake," *Communication and Critical/Cultural Studies* 5, no. 4 (2008): 406-410. Also, refer to Gerald Korson, "Will Olympics bring human-rights reform to China?" *Our Sunday Visitor*, August 24, 2008. In this report illustrated by a photo of George W. Bush with a priest from a Catholic church in Beijing, the author reported the religious oppression upon religion in China and how both the American government and the religious figures in China hope the Olympics will expose this part of the human rights record to the world and pressure China to make change on that.

testimony on the economic development and the improvement of living in Tibet. Both the Chinese and the Tibetans are portrayed as fervent and angry protesters, though the larger framing of the film (for example, the title sets Tibet as the sun swallowed brutally by China the dragon) encourages the viewer to interpret the Chinese anger as the savageness of “goons and thugs” and the Tibetan anger as the sacred bravery of a great ethnicity.²¹ Yet the shiftiness in the narration discounts both the political and artistic appeals of this film and makes absent an assertive statement.

In *Compassion in Emptiness*, a straight record of the Dalai Lama’s speech at an American university, the camera serves nothing more than a frame: No special effects or dazzling editing are added to what is right in front of the eyes of the audience. This minimalism of visual pleasure foreshadows the Buddhist philosophy of asceticism and, as the title suggests and also the Dalai Lama teaches, “Emptiness.” Still, the entrance of the Dalai Lama into the stage is theatrical and symbolically loaded. His bows, nods and turns are mediated and become sublime after mass media’s ritualistic repetition. At the moment of smiling humbly and winking cutely to his audience, the Dalai Lama turns the modest stage in America into an altar in Tibet.

With a gold-color curtain hanging behind as the background, the Dalai Lama and his translator are seated on the left facing the audience, with his disciples seated on the right side facing the Dalai Lama. A documentary of a live speech with its spectators juxtaposes the audience inside the picture with those in front of it. By

²¹ Ono and Jiao, "China in the US Imaginary," 407.

showing the Dalai Lama's effect on the audience on spot, the documentary creates part of its affect. The audience laughs at the Dalai Lama's wise jokes, and the Dalai Lama manifests a good control of the pace of his delivery. Though the camera gives only a brief glance over the fully seated interior of the stadium at the beginning of the documentary, the presence of the Dalai Lama constantly projects the presence of his audience, and his serious and sincere mentoring manner unceasingly parallels his audience's eagerness to listen and learn.

While most of the Dalai Lama's speech focuses on Tibetan Buddhism's philosophy of living, the Dalai Lama intersperses his political opinions among his Buddhist teachings. He shows his love towards America by pointing out how Americans cherish their founding principles such as democracy and freedom, but also his disappointment with an inactive America equipped with such superb values: America still fails to come to help after such a long time. The Dalai Lama also criticizes America's violence: America shouldn't have killed Bin Laden on site. Being critical of America is being American, and the Dalai Lama's kind criticism, similar to yet much milder than American talk-shows' humor, is welcomed by his audience who return with gentle laughter. The Dalai Lama's disciples are both his audience and part of his presentation. The mixture of Tibetan and white faces indicates the connectedness between the western aspiration and the Tibetan fulfillment, and further, the universal values of both. Their pious attentiveness is both evidence of and persuasion for the Dalai Lama's symbolic power.

The Affect of the Dalai Lama: Incongruity, Complexity and Ambiguity

In *Compassion in Emptiness*, the Dalai Lama's succinct political comments are subtly interjected between his Buddhist teachings on the art of living, just as his being is always between being god and being king. The hyphen between "god" and "king" indicates that his two seemingly separable identities are mutually complementary and explanatory. Thus, in the case of the Dalai Lama, the religious or spiritual is always political, and vice versa. As a de-dramatized documentary, *Compassion in Emptiness* shows intensively how the presence of the Dalai Lama empowers his verbal expression. The de-contextualized and simplified compassion or freedom as an idea advocated by the Dalai Lama is so elusive that it be can whatever the audience thinks it is, yet the presence of the Dalai Lama assures that the idea and its realization are probable or valid. His charisma will be transformed into his words' efficacy, and his visibility enables the western imagination of his Tibet.

Jeffrey Alexander explains: "In order to perform a cultural text before an audience, actors need access to the mundane material things that allow symbolic projections to be made. They need objects that can serve as iconic representations to help them dramatize and make vivid the invisible motives and morals they are trying to present. This material ranges from clothing to every other sort of 'standardized expressive equipment.'"²² Text and the rest are mutually complementary and defining.

The Dalai Lama in his Tibetan frock speaks Tibetan-accented English. His every

²² Jeffrey C. Alexander, Bernhard Giesen, and Jason L. Mast, *Social Performance : Symbolic Action, Cultural Pragmatics, and Ritual* (Cambridge, UK : Cambridge University Press, 2006), 35.

action turns into performance and ritual which enlivens the Tibetan spirit to the audience.

Orville Schell recounts a party for the Dalai Lama that involved many Hollywood figures:

The Dalai Lama . . . gazes around at this ocean of glitterati and the sumptuously arrayed tables decorated with more than ten thousand rose, a gift from one of his California admirers, and a sly smile crosses his face. Taking Gere's hand in his own, he chuckles in wonderment and shakes his head in evident disbelief, as if, even after these many years of exile and globe girdling, he still retains the power to be amazed by the incongruities that can arise around his public presence.²³

A world-savvy living Buddha, a homesick leader of a land from which he is exiled, the Dalai Lama is a transcendental figure miraculously presenting impossible yet desirable self-contradictions. Different from American politicians' aggressive eloquence and sophisticated arguments, the Dalai Lama is slow but genuine in words, wise but humble in manner. Tired of the over-elaborate formalities of a church Sunday, many American audiences find the easy-going and fun-loving Dalai Lama refreshing and trust-worthy. In a situation where most people choose to be angry and belligerent, the Dalai Lama preaches non-violence and still befriends his enemy China. In a position which entitles him unchallenged and unquestioned authority, he stays

²³ Orville Schell, *Virtual Tibet : Searching for Shangri-La from the Himalayas to Hollywood* (New York, NY: Metropolitan Books, 2000), 54.

innocent and Plebian, idealistic yet practical. It is this unspectacular spectacle, the unusual usualness that makes the Dalai Lama a riveting and touching icon.

Rituals are a favorite theme in the Tibet- and Dalai Lama-themed films, and a ritual is a liminal performance.²⁴ “Liminality refers to ‘in-betweenness’- to the ambiguous status occupied by speakers/writers, texts or practices which do not fit into obvious categories. . . . liminality describes transitional, indeterminate and ambiguous phases . . . ‘Liminal entities are neither here nor there, they are betwixt and between the positions assigned and arrayed by law, custom, convention and ceremonial.’”²⁵ Tibetan monks’ overtone chanting and mandala making are the rituals which present Tibet’s sublimity and significance beyond the semantics and the cognitive in these films. Chanting transforms the collective distantness of the Tibetan monks into a transcendental approachability of a spiritual medium. The Tibetan mandala is introduced in most Tibetan documentaries as the artistic symbol for impermanence, the artistic incarnation of the four noble truths in Tibetan Buddhism.²⁶ A mandala is a sand painting that takes months to finish but just seconds to destroy. A beautiful piece

²⁴ Richard Schechner, *Performance Studies : An Introduction* (London: Routledge, 2002), 57.

²⁵ “Entry for Liminality,” *A dictionary of Sociolinguistics*, Edinburgh University Press, 2004.

²⁶ Carl Anderson, “Four Noble Truths,” *Oxford Bibliographies Online: Buddhism*, <http://www.oxfordbibliographies.com.proxy.wm.edu/view/document/obo-9780195393521/obo-9780195393521-0054.xml>. “The teaching commonly called the “four noble truths” is the most widely known teaching of the historical Buddha who lived and taught during the 5th century BCE in northern India. The four words that comprise the four truths—Sanskrit *duḥkha* and Pāli *dukkha* (“pain”), *samudaya* (“arising”), *nirodha* (“ending”), and *mārga/magga* (“path”) or *dukkhanirodhagāminī paṭipadā* (“way leading to the ending of pain”)—are recorded in Pāli and Sanskrit in the different Buddhist canons, and the literary traditions have been very consistent in how they remember them.”

of art with a patterned Buddhist allegory on it, the mandala invokes mystery and awe, and it tells how ritual is bound to be vain and effective at the same time. Another ritual, Tibetan prayer, seems to connect the physical to the spiritual in the body's kinetic worship for the Buddha. The Dalai Lama practices the Tibetan prayer ritual at the beginning of *Ten Questions*: Knees on the floor, he is prostrate, pushing his upper body back and forth with his hands and forehead rubbing against the floor. In *When the Dragon*, the Dalai Lama chants to his disciples, with his eyes closed and one hand held up in the middle of his chest. "During liminal moments," as Jeffrey Alexander argues,

Social distinctions are leveled and an egalitarian order, or 'open society,' is momentarily created amongst ritual participants. . . . Through liminality we may return to an idealized state of simple humanity, a community of equals; the dissolution of structure will initiate the erosion of our socially constructed selves, thus allowing us to explore the potency of our "unused evolutionary potential."²⁷

It is this "evolutionary potential" that makes both the performer and audience infatuated by and devoted to the ritual. All these everyday Buddhist activities become presentational and ritualistic in front of the camera. The Dalai Lama in exile is performing his liminal citizenship and leadership of Tibet.

A godly spirit in a human body, the Dalai Lama is physically weakening but

²⁷ Alexander, Giesen, and Mast, *Social Performance*, 11.

spiritually steady. He is not to be traumatized or agitated, and refuses to get pessimistic or angry, but his face reveals a sign of unwilling and unconscious fatigue. To frame the Dalai Lama inside a camera is to position him as a performer. In a sense, everyone is a performer since our everyday activity makes sense only by its citation of the previously established formulae.²⁸ The Dalai Lama's success in delivering his message and creating his effect, therefore, is the result of his adoption of the western formula of expression instead of the result of Buddhist magic. His performance is not only his own, and his presentation is a personalized repetition.

To be the reincarnation that embodies the eternal and universal wisdom, the Dalai Lama is inevitably presented as a static, unchanging figure in order to prove that Tibet is steadily a paradise. Yet his steadiness does not contradict his complexity. As a god-king, he proves Tibet is a political entity without denying all the religious and spiritual fantasies the west has projected upon Tibet. As a god-king, the Dalai Lama is an atypical politician for his humble manner and ascetic lifestyle and also an atypical religious leader for his spontaneity and modern view on science and religion. By presenting the complexity in his personality, the Dalai Lama is constantly

²⁸ Eric E. Peterson, "Representation and the Limits of Interpretations," *Literature and Performance* 4, No.1 (1983): 22-26. On p. 23, Peterson writes: "The act of showing and the action of what is shown participate to place something 'out there' and establish a limit to the movement of performance. To show, exhibit, or manifest something – that is, to represent – involves exposing a 'this,' a 'presence' that is distinct from 'that,' an 'absence.' Even this simple presentation of feelings is already representation and a reduction – the movement of performance is limited the way an outline of a figure distinguishes it from a background context of action. Thus, there is no fullness of text or literature apart from any context, no simple presence of performer or audience, no presentation that is not already representation."

negotiating between secularism and religion, between culture and politics. It makes him a figure of myth, and myth is usually intriguing to most people.

This complexity can be seen as ambiguity. In *When the Dragon*, the Dalai Lama shows his worries in his earnest voice over the commercial billboards with Chinese characters and faces, the streets with Chinese-owned stores and tourists, and the shopping malls with consumers moving on the escalators. “Because of Chinese population, and Chinese shops, and Chinese restaurants, you see, the public is compelled to speak Chinese . . . Intentionally or unintentionally, some kind of cultural genocide is actually taking place.”²⁹ Like the words “culture” and “genocide,” many other words the Dalai Lama uses have diverse yet ambiguous connotations.

The word non-violence is another of those words. What does violence mean when the Dalai Lama talks about non-violence? If the Chinese violence is the sensational atrocity susceptible to visual publicity, other types of violence, for example, structural or ecological violence, cannot be visualized as easily. A sensational presentation without exploring other possibilities to reveal the depths of social issues is partial and unfair. The political suppression shown by political prisoners or refugees is unarguably violent. And the industrialization in the Tibetan Autonomous Region is violent compared to a pastoral and primordial Tibet in Western expectation. But looking back, the Dalai Lama’s interest in machinery and industrialization was an important reason why he went to Beijing and met Mao in

²⁹ Rick Ray, *Ten Questions for the Dalai Lama*, 2006.

1953.³⁰ Whether industrialization is a kind of violence, therefore, has to do with which side implements the industrialization, Tibetans or Chinese, and if all accept it. Without investigating the life and opinions of Tibetans who live in the Chinese-occupied Tibetan area, the documentaries choose to unconditionally believe in and endorse what they see and hear from the Dalai Lama, and present the one-sided opinion in the posture of humanitarian righteousness.

Moreover, the visualization of Chinese violence towards Tibet is inadequate to be evidential: Besides the around fifty-second footage of the Chinese Liberation Army's occupation of a Tibetan monastery in 1959 included in both *When the Dragon* and *Ten Questions*, no more immediate material is provided to support their argument of the continuing and even severing violence by the Chinese government toward the Tibetans. The political prisoners' accusations and their wounded feet cannot be validated to be the general situation of Tibetans in China. Yet the generic talking-heads interviews full of political clichés in *When the Dragon* fail to present the interviewees as individual persons with their personal stories. What unites them and makes them all the same is their experience of being victimized by the Chinese government. Ironically, a sensational appeal to set up a political agenda in a documentary like *When the Dragon* may strengthen the Tibetan-ness of Tibetans but sacrifice their humanness.

³⁰ Ray, *Ten Questions for the Dalai Lama*, 2006: "Knowing the Dalai Lama's fascination with modernization and mechanization, Mao invited him to Peking in 1953."

Mirroring: The “Enemy he has Forgiven” and The “Friend he Counts on”

“The story had bigness. It held a mirror up to the thoughts of every human being on earth. It held something of greatness,” commented Frank Capra, the director of *Lost Horizon* (1937), on his own film.³¹ Any imagination is more or less mirroring, since we inevitably take ourselves as the point of reference and see “the other” as the object for comparison. To eliminate the other is philosophically impossible, yet the imagination based on fantasy instead of understanding turns mirroring into a way to fictionalize the world for the satisfaction of the self. Thus, America’s imagination of Tibet as pure fantasy fulfills and re-enforces itself in the reflexive mirroring, which is more a form of post-colonialism than protection. Rick Ray comments on the god-king status of the Dalai Lama in *Ten Questions*: “The only way Americans could make sense of something like this would be imagine the reincarnation of Jesus Christ was sitting in the White House. Such is the power and significance of the Dalai Lama to his people.” The director’s imagination is based on the structural and semiotic equivalence between America and Tibet. It is neither very imaginative nor empirical. It demands Tibet to be essentially American from the beginning.

The reflexive mirroring of America in Tibet is a tradition in the West. When the first Western Christians encountered Tibet, it was heathen, the opposite of Christian civilization. The Christian missionaries criticized the homosexuality among

³¹ Quoted in Nithila Punnen Peter, "Sacred Vocabularies for World Cinema: Transfiguring Ancient Aural and Visual Modalities to Express Sacredness for the Contemporary Age" (Ph.D., University of Southern California: 2007), 23.

monks and Tibetans' lack of hygiene, and were eager to civilize the pagans.³²

However, Tibet is not only the opposite but also the intimate unknown, the dialectical self for the West. From the very beginning, the western perception of Tibet is, according to Rudolf Kaschewsky, “founded upon two poles”:

On the one hand, Tibet is the least accessible, most mysterious and most foreign country of Asia; on the other hand, Tibet is paradoxically the only Asian culture with whom Europeans can identify so much that they seem surprisingly intimate and related – truly a sort of *coincidentia oppositorum*!³³

The intimate unknown allows for assertive imagination and fiction, and this fiction revolved around the purpose of imperial expansion. Tibetan Buddhism was seen as corrupted and sinister by the missionaries promoting Christian enlightenment. An early-twentieth-century missionary account writes: “They live unrestrained lives, and all more or less could be charged with immorality, drunkenness, lubricity and cruelty.”³⁴ However, when China invaded Tibet, both academics and the public changed their critical manner of research to be sympathetic and salvaging: In the 1960s, scholars from European universities traveled to India to work with refugee Tibetan scholars in the translation of Buddhist texts, popular interest in Tibetan

³² John Bray, “Nineteenth- and Early Twentieth-Century Missionary Images of Tibet,” in *Imaging Tibet: Perceptions, Projections, and Fantasies*, ed. Thierry Dodin and Heinz Räther (Boston, MA: Wisdom Publications, 2001), 34-36.

³³ Rudolf Kaschewsky, “The Image of Tibet in the West before the Nineteenth Century” in *Imaging Tibet: Perceptions, Projections, and Fantasies*, ed. Thierry Dodin and Heinz Räther (Boston, MA: Wisdom Publications, 2001), 6 -7.

³⁴ See Note 33.

Buddhism boomed as Evans-Wentz's 1927 rendering a Tibetan text was published as *The Tibetan Book of the Dead*, and the U.S. Library of Congress was sponsoring the publication of "thousands of heretofore unknown Tibetan texts."³⁵ In the general picture, the Western understanding of Tibet is not gradual and accumulating. The idea of Tibet has swung between two extremes.

Both *Ten Questions* and *When the Dragon* imagine Tibet and the Dalai Lama to be isolated. Yet any imagination of the isolated, the "deserted" island, is doomed and falsified by itself. Deleuze explains the allegory of "deserted islands":

To that question so dear to the old explorers — "which creatures live on deserted islands?" — one could only answer: human beings live there already, but uncommon humans, they are absolutely separate, absolute creators, in short, an Idea of humanity, prototype, a man who would almost be a god, a woman who would be a goddess, a great Amnesiac, a pure artist, a consciousness of Earth and Ocean, ... Such a creature on a deserted island would be the deserted island itself, in so far as it imagines and reflects itself in its first movement.³⁶

A creature on a deserted island can only be an Idea of humanity. Because the island is absolutely isolated, humans' imagination about it neither derives from any

³⁵ Per Kvaerne, "Tibet Images Among Researchers on Tibet," in *Imaging Tibet: Perceptions, Projections, and Fantasies*, ed. Thierry Dodin and Heinz R  ther (Boston, MA: Wisdom Publications, 2001), 57.

³⁶ Gilles Deleuze, *Desert Islands and Other Texts* (Los Angeles, CA: Semiotext Foreign Agents Series, 2004), 11.

actual encounter and experience of it, nor can it be verified or questioned because of the island's absolute inapproachability. To see Tibet and the Dalai Lama as the completely isolated, uncontaminated and exceptional, is to see them as completely imagined and unimaginable, which will make it impossible to transform them from an Idea to an Actuality.

Deleuze explains further the relationship between the creature and the island where it is from: "But since human beings, even voluntarily, are not identical to the movement that puts them on the island, they are unable to join with the *élan* that produces the island. They always encounter it from the outside, and their presence in fact spoils its desertedness. The unity of the deserted island and its inhabitant is thus not actual, only imaginary, like the idea of looking behind the curtain when one is not behind it."³⁷ When becoming the symbol of Tibet, then, the Dalai Lama becomes an outsider of Tibet too, since he is "put" on an imagined Tibet by the Western imagination instead of truly living on it. Being symbolized, one becomes detached from the entity he is symbolic of. And undoubtedly, the Dalai Lama's presence technically spoils Tibet's desertedness, since this symbolization relating Tibet to the outsiders re-situates the Dalai Lama, "the creature," in a network of connections that go against Tibet's isolation. This symbolization is a process that attaches emotional appeal and political power to the symbol, and also a process that dilutes the creature and kidnaps him into the symbol-public hyphenate.

³⁷ Ibid.

The Dalai Lama is part of the efforts to symbolize himself. Donald Lopez argues that the Dalai Lama is appropriating the West's political projection on Tibet for the independence of Tibet. He gives the example of the Dalai Lama's call for the preservation of Tibetan culture, which is one of the statements "enunciated for the Western consumption" and an offer the Dalai Lama made "to get his country back as part of the exchange." But Lopez points out: "It is unclear, however, why there must be a political entity called Tibet in order for this inheritance to be transferred. Has the Dalai Lama allowed Tibetan Buddhism, like Lamaism before it, to float free from its site in a process of spiritual globalization that knows no national boundaries? . . . Then Tibet is everywhere, and nowhere."³⁸

The Dalai Lama is mirroring the fantasy of America in order to gain emotional and political influence. Lopez further argues that this mirroring is done not only by the Dalai Lama but generally the Tibetans in exile:

The Tibetans stepped into a world in which they were already present, and since their belated arrival – often encouraged by the devotees of Tibet, missionaries of a different stripe – they have merged seamlessly into a double that had long been standing The Tibetans' self-presentation, as in a science fiction film, sometimes merges with its evil twin and sometimes stands alone, while the observer is rarely able to tell them apart.³⁹

³⁸ Donald S. Lopez, *Prisoners of Shangri-La : Tibetan Buddhism and the West* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998), 199.

³⁹ Lopez, *Prisoners of Shangri-La*, 200.

This mirroring, as Lopez points out, endangers Tibet to be everywhere but nowhere, and can possibly kill the actual Tibet by forging an image of the virtual Tibet according to the Western fantasy. To create the spectacle and spectatorship shown in a documentary like *Compassion in Emptiness*, the Dalai Lama and Tibetans in exile may win the audience but lose the independence they want.

The mutual mirroring between Tibet and America also leads to a subtler yet not less significant mirroring, a mirroring of America in China facilitated with the crafty interposition of the Dalai Lama. On China, the Dalai Lama objectifies it as a historically distant invader of Tibet⁴⁰ or perceives it as an oppressive super power that he tries to have conversations with.⁴¹ In regards to America, the Dalai Lama identifies unreservedly with this friend he always counts on. “American nuclear weapons and economic power alone will not create more popularity. I do not admire your weapons. I really admire your principles: democracy, freedom, and liberty.”⁴² While the Dalai Lama’s non-violence policy is controversial among some of the Tibetan elites, they all agree to adopt the American political system when Tibet is free.⁴³ The Dalai Lama’s identity as China’s victim and America’s friend naturally creates or reminds people of

⁴⁰ In *Compassion in Emptiness*, the Dalai Lama talks about China as one of the historical invaders Tibet encountered which has its own problems like population, political corruption and environmental issues.

⁴¹ Dirk Simon, *When the dragon Swallowed the Sun*, 2010. In a recorded public speech in the film, the Dalai Lama talks about his disappointment in the failure of having conversations with China: “I appeal (to China), send some people, some Chinese officials. Come here. Then see all our files. It’s ready to show them. Then, no response...”

⁴² Rick Ray, *Ten Questions for the Dalai Lama*, 2006.

⁴³ Dirk Simon, *When the dragon Swallowed the Sun*, 2010.

the ideological antithesis and antagonism between China and America. When mentioning China, he uses the term Communist China, which is not unfamiliar at all to Westerners. A paragraph from his autobiography *My Land and My People* seems to suggest how Tibetan-ness or Communist-ness is innate and unchangeable:

I had seen splendid evidence that Tibetans, young and old, were too stable in their character and beliefs to be an easy prey for China's indoctrination.

Tibetan boys had been taken to what was called the School of Nationalities in Peking But I was glad to find that the minds of the Tibetan boys had not been imprisoned. They still cherished our own ideals, and their national spirit could not be destroyed . . . In later years, the Chinese started to seize Tibetan babies a few weeks old and take them away to China, in the hope that they would grow up into Tibetan communists.⁴⁴

To the Dalai Lama, one's nationality decides one's quality and personality.

But this belief in the steadiness of Tibetan-ness can easily degrade into rigid and cruel nationalism. If humans share universal qualities and are connected to each other as the Dalai Lama claims in his Buddhist teachings, it seems contradictory to presume the absolute existence of such things as Tibetan babies and Chinese communists, especially when "Chinese communist," the term that seemingly owes one's nationality and his or her political stand to each other, indicates that communism is the innate nature of a Chinese, who is thus doomed to be sinister.

⁴⁴ Dalai Lama XIV Bstan-'dzin-rgya-mtsho, *My Land and My People* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1962), 130.

Anthropologist Carole McGranahan comments: “If the decade of the 1950s was a period of decolonization for many countries around the world, it was ironically a time when imperialism was doubly asserted in Tibet – by the Chinese and the Americans.”⁴⁵ This paper has no intention to disapprove of Tibetan independence. Rather, my critique aims to reveal the inaccuracies and naiveté of the three documentaries due to their belief in a fantasized Tibet, though some of the faults I find may also question the Dalai Lama clique’s credibility since they provide sources and facts to these documentaries. For example, during my research, I found out that the Dalai Lama and many in TGIE claim that 1,200,000 people died in the Chinese invasion, but rigorous scholarly investigation points out that the whole population in Tibet of that year was less than 1,200,000. In response to the question “some foreign newspapers have claimed that the Chinese killed more than 1 million Tibetans. Is this true?” scholar Robert Barnett answers: “No. This is a lie concocted by the Dalai clique. In 1953, the local government of Tibet headed by the Dalai Lama reported that the local population was 1 million. The whole Tibetan population would have been wiped out if 1.2 million people were killed after the peaceful liberation of Tibet in 1951.”⁴⁶

⁴⁵ Carole McGranahan, *Arrested Histories : Tibet, the CIA, and Memories of a Forgotten War* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2010), 38.

⁴⁶ Anne-Marie Blondeau, Katia Buffetrille, and Wei Jing, *Authenticating Tibet : Answers to China's 100 Questions* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2008), 88-89. According to the fifth national census in 2000, the population of Tibet was 2.6163 million, with Tibetan people accounting for 92.2 percent. ... The Tibetans in exile have not said that a million or so Tibetans were killed by the Chinese. They have said that this number of Tibetans died of unnatural causes as a result of the Chinese invasion. They allege that 680,000 of these were killed in conflict or were executed between 1950 and

This paper does not intend to make excuses for Chinese invasion of Tibet. Nor do I want to question religious freedom or the value of spirituality. However, the Dalai Lama as a symbol has become metamorphic, discursive and sometimes questionable. Rick Ray asks why the poor seem to be happier than the rich after his documented observation of the smiley, wrinkly faces on the streets in India, but the scholar Barry Sautman states that scientific research says the opposite: The rich are typically happier than the poorer. Sautman observes the Dalai Lama's diplomatic use of his non-violence policy, and points out his incongruities regarding his implementing of the non-violence principle and thus his discriminative treatment of violence: Upon America's use of force in the Middle East, the Dalai Lama was apologetic at the beginning which was in accord with the American public's sentiment then; on the Indian government's counterinsurgencies which killed "tens of thousands of people," the Dalai Lama seemed to be oblivious. The Dalai Lama was also mostly silent about the violent inclination of some political Tibetan organizations in exile.⁴⁷ Sautman further points out the "priest-patron" relations of the fourteenth Dalai Lama to India and the United States. "The Dalai Lama's only sharp criticism of the United States has concerned India's interests: he has said the 'U.S. attitude towards Pakistan

1979; some 500,000 deaths, they claim, occurred as a result of famines, suicides, and other factors resulting from Chinese policies . . . The exile claims about these unnatural deaths between 1950 and 1979 are unverified. The methods by which these figures were compiled remain unclear, and these claims are not used by most scholars or researchers. However, there are credible indications of very severe loss of life among Tibetans."

⁴⁷ Barry Sautman, "'Vegetarian between Meals': The Dalai Lama, War, and Violence," *Positions: East Asia Cultures Critique* 18, no. 1 (2010): 89-144.

is a disgrace' . . . He supports India's refusal to ratify the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty and its 'right' to test nuclear weapons . . . In 2001, the year he praised the Indian government's 'spirit of nonviolence,' fatalities in India from terrorism, insurgency, and their suppression were 5,839." Sautman also lists many sources of funding from the United States to the Dalai clique, and points out that starting from 1951, the United States has promised the Dalai "full aid and assistance" if he would leave Tibet to lead a resistance from a neighboring country. The Dalai Lama's pro-American stand is obvious too: He refrains from criticizing U.S. foreign policy and has stated that the superior value of American democracy which to him brings freedom to everywhere in the world. As Sautman documents,

He has averred that the Korean War "protected South Korea's prosperity and freedom" and that in Vietnam the United States had "the same aim, the same motivation" as in Korea, but failed. He remarked in 1991 that it was unfair for the United States not to do for Tibet what it had done for Kuwait in the Gulf War.... He regarded the 2001 invasion of Afghanistan as "perhaps some kind of liberation."

It might be hard to imagine the Dalai Lama is as strategic as an ordinary politician, though the documentary *When the Dragon* unwittingly presents a tactical Tibetan government in Exile under the Dalai Lama's leadership. In *When the Dragon*, the interviewed officials and activists for the free Tibet campaign suggest politicians' strategic approaches to the issue: "If you ask the Chinese for an apple, they will give

you a grape...So if you ask for independence, then they may say ‘ok you people I will give you autonomy now. But if you ask for autonomy, they will not give you anything.’⁴⁸ Though the Dalai Lama is not to be responsible for others’ political actions, the Tibetan Government in Exile gains its political legitimacy and efficacy under His Holiness the symbol.

Conclusion

Showing the portraits of the Dalai Lama being sold in an Indian market, Rick Ray narrates that in Lhasa, which is under the control of the Chinese government, any exhibition of the Dalai Lama’s photo is forbidden. “Pictures of the Dalai Lama and mementos of Tibet are the town’s best-selling souvenirs.” It contrast the freedom in India where the Dalai Lama’s popularity is self-evident and the limit of freedom in China. The portraits of the Dalai Lama as commodity remind me of other commodities on Tibet and the Dalai Lama that I saw when I visited Kathmandu, Nepal in January, 2011. In Kathmandu, I went to several book stores listed in the popular travel guidebooks *Lonely Planet* in Thamel, the busiest and richest part of Kathmandu. When Nepal is seen as one of the poorest countries where one can be called a middle-class if he has a motor-bike or a TV, the bookstores surprisingly presented a maturely developed publishing industry: Good-quality books with nice covers were categorized professionally, and there were categories set up specifically

⁴⁸ The comment is from Jigme Yeshi, a member of the Tibetan Youth Congress.

for Western tourists, such as English books on spirituality and travel guide books. These bookstores stood out as expensive and well furnished compared to shops just a few blocks away. They are open more to the rich and mostly white tourists than to the locals. I still remember the half suspicious, half aloof look of the owner of the Pilgrims Book House, a bookstore that specializes in selling books on Nepal, Tibet, India, China, Central and South Asia.

During my visit in Nepal, I stayed with my host family located in Bodha, Kathmandu, an area where many Tibetans in exile live. My host brother Prabin Shrestha gave me many rides on his motorcycle between Thamel and Bodha. During one such ride, Prabin told me: “Sister, the people in Thamel are not good. They are rich and proud. They cheat on tourists and look down upon the other Nepalese.” Prabin worked as an accountant for a local factory and is middle-class in his village since he could afford a TV, a water heater and raising two sons. Such an economic contextualization of Thamel, the stores, and what they sell there, woke up a tourist like me to the thought that there might be a price tag to the spirituality I was seeking here. Or, was I just looking for exotic tourism?

The popularity of the Dalai Lama’s portraits in India also reminds me of another trip I had in Beijing twelve years ago, during which the tour guide tried to sell us a biography of Qianlong, a Chinese emperor. We were taken to different ancient palaces. The tour guide told us of homosexual love between the emperor Qianlong and his official Heshen: “According to the folklore, Heshen was the reincarnation of

Concubine Nian, a lover of Qianlong when he was young.” We were then taken to a souvenir store. The tour guide pointed to the book stack: “You cannot get a biography of Heshen as complete and true elsewhere as what we are selling here. So please seize the opportunity, make a purchase and get to know the real history!” In souvenir stores located inside these historical sites, we could usually find Mao’s portraits too. His corpse is still kept in the People’s Memorial Hall in Beijing, and one old lady in our tour group wept for a long time during our visit there.

The popularity of the Dalai Lama’s pictures can mean, as Rick Ray argues, that the Dalai Lama is the de facto leader that Tibetans admire and recognize. Or it can simply mean that the Dalai Lama has become Mao in the souvenir store or a fancy piece of tourism in a downtown area. The circulation of the reproducible images or other derivative products of a symbol can be irrelevant to who is behind the symbol: It means the means of livelihood to the photo vendors in India or the monumentalization of the founding history of communism in China. Consuming the Dalai Lama’s photo or Mao’s dead body can be a fetish, an idolization that places the symbol onto the altar ready to be worshipped, appropriated and then left behind.

As the anthropologist Laurie Hovell McMillin observes, Tibetan monks are used to performing a desired self in front of the camera. Their self-presentations fit models of Tibetan-ness in accord with popular Western presentations of Tibetans. However, there are many other stories that have not been told about Tibetans, the ones “that could account for the monks’ interest in baseball and cricket as well as their

ability to move between seemingly alien worlds – the modern crass world of American culture and the apparently ancient, religious world of Tibet – without contradiction.”⁴⁹

Truly, Tibetans can be fans of an American baseball team, a soldier for Tibet, a photographer, a student, and many other roles people are familiar with. The three documentaries analyzed in the paper all choose to go for the typical and familiar. If Tibetan-ness is simply a performance the Tibetan monks voluntarily give and the American audience endearingly accept, and if they are capable of moving between “the “modern,” “crass” America and the “ancient,” “religious” Tibet without any contradiction, I cannot help wondering: is Tibet or Tibetan-ness essentially existent, or is it just invented fiction, especially to the outsiders of Tibet?

Carole McGranahan, the author of *Arrested Histories: Tibet, the CIA, and Memories of a Forgotten War*, focuses on Kham, the easternmost area in Tibet.

Historically seen as the peripheral part of Tibet, Kham is famous for having belligerent warriors.⁵⁰ However, since the Dalai Lama has been preaching Buddhist

⁴⁹ Laurie Hovell McMillin, *English in Tibet, Tibet in English: Self-Presentation in Tibet and the Diaspora* (New York: Palgrave, 2001), 114-115.

⁵⁰ McGranahan, *Arrested Histories*, 3-4. Yet McGranahan focuses on the problematic aspect of these warriors: Despite Veterans’ sentiment that they were and still are in service to Buddhism and Tibet, they are socially categorized as problematic, as inhabiting subject positions and embracing political projects at odds with Tibetan society... In the exile Tibetan community, governance is composed of hegemonies in that political rule is secured through consent. However, the Dalai Lama receives not just Tibetans’ collective consent, but also their collective devotion. He is a highly visible power paired with consent consciously rooted in belief and faith. For veterans, therefore, to request recognition of the resistance war is risky in that they challenge the status quo and thus the Dalai Lama by articulating not just a suppressed past, but also an alternative vision of community (albeit one under his continued leadership).

non-violence and constructing a consistently peace-loving Tibet, the warriors from Kham who escorted the Dalai Lama in his escape to Dharamsala, India in 1959 are deprived of their social identity. They become taboos in the social memory that is forbidden to enter history, which worsens their already difficult life as exiles, a life with very limited political rights and economic sources.⁵¹ This generalization of Tibet as an entity that the Dalai Lama presents and represents may have blurred or eliminated the regional identity of other areas besides Kham, which endangers the cultural preservation which the Dalai Lama is concerned with.

Tibet's history has been flattened both temporally and spatially in these documentaries. *Ten Questions* presents the Dalai Lama and Tibet as essentially separate from America in its economic and social patterns. In *Compassion in Emptiness*, the Dalai Lama presents Tibet as a never-violent utopia, which conceals that in its history Tibet had an army that fought against invasions and invaded others.⁵² In comparison, *When the Dragon* presents a Tibet that is more complex and

⁵¹ McGranahan, *Arrested Histories*, 56-58. In Chapter Two "The Pains of Belonging," McGranahan gives the account of how the political status of a Tibetan in exile who was also a resistance veteran. "Travel between these places (reconstituted Tibetan communities in exile) was limited. Most Tibetans and certainly most resistance veterans had little income. They lived on the margins of society, generating as much sufficing within their own communities as possible but still relying on local markets and services as well as on services provided by the exile government or by India, Nepal and foreign sources of aid. Having neither money to travel nor the security of citizenship if they did travel, they received updates about friends in other towns and countries only when someone did travel between communities. ... Refugees in Nepal and India are not allowed to own property or to open bank accounts, and they do not qualify for government work or often for other jobs either. Rights guaranteed to citizens in these countries are not guaranteed to refugees within them."

⁵² Lopez, *Prisoners of Shangri-La*, 200: "Nor was Tibet, in Georges Bataille's phrase, 'an unarmed society.'" Tibet did not renounce armed conflicts when it converted to Buddhism in the eighth century, or in the eleventh century, or under the fifth Dalai Lama. . . . Tibetans armies fought against Ladakh in

susceptible to the use of violence, yet it still presents the Dalai Lama as a leader completely innocent of violence.

On October 10th, 2012, the Dalai Lama visited the college of William and Mary, and I got the opportunity to listen to his speech in the arena which seated up to 9,678 people for the event. I was assigned a seat on the upper level, from where the people on the lower level, including those setting up the stage, looked tiny as ants, as the Buddhist metaphor says. When I saw mostly students on the upper level, seated closest to the stage were the audience in formal dresses with a sense of their social status. Some students dressed in suits and ties were assisting the event. The formality in their outfits contrasted their young faces. The Buddhist chanting music was playing when the audience was entering the arena, and I overheard a girl laughing and talking to her friends: “What is the sound? It sounds weird!” They were excitedly waiting for the Dalai Lama as if waiting for a blockbuster or a popular talk show. “Spirituality,” the word many people relate to the Dalai Lama, appeared remote. After the welcome speeches by the president of the student assembly and the president of the university, the Dalai Lama entered the stage welcomed by thunderous applause and adoration.

In this speech, China and America are part of the conversation as usual.

“Really nice person on human level,” he commented on the former president George

1681, against the Dzungar Mongols in 1720, in numerous incursions into Bhutan during the eighteenth century, against invading Nepali forces from 1788 to 1792 and again in 1854, against Dogra Forces invading Ladakh from Kashmir in 1842, and against the British in 1904.”

W. Bush and his use of force in the Middle East. “It was a very good motivation but never use force.” He addressed the Chinese Han close to the end of his speech: “Our Han brothers and sisters, many misunderstandings have been put about by the Chinese government; don’t believe them. We respect the Han people; we respect your rich and ancient culture. ... Please study the situation in a more holistic way, take a broader view. While you are here in a free country, take the opportunity to use both your eyes and both your ears and learn about the world we live in. Thank you.” The speech, like the speech *Compassion in Emptiness*, was filled with the Dalai Lama’s vocabulary: Compassion, intelligence, humanity, non-violence, religious freedom, equality, tolerance, words that voice humans’ beautiful wishes and ideals. His words seem so simple and even simplistic, but also form a maze, vague but magnetic, elusive but accepting. I glanced over all the audience present at his speech, the audience that filled up this big arena, and tried to use my compassion to understand their interpretation of the Dalai Lama’s “compassion.” I imagined how compassion will be internalized, combined with what the audience already has, and be reproduced. And, how, in the end, will their compassion lead to outcomes that are similar, different or even conflicting?

Imagine an alternative history of Tibet without China’s invasion and thus an alternative history of films on Tibet. Would Tibet remain isolated and uninterrupted by the civilization happening outside? Would the Dalai Lama be the mysterious ruler of Tibet without having to exposing himself to the mass media? Would the

adventurers or tourists become unstoppable even when Tibet had historically refused to let in foreign visitors? Or, would the fourteenth Dalai Lama bring industrialization to Tibet, which the thirteenth Dalai Lama had intended but failed to do? If so, would Tibet anyways lose its cultural and religious exceptionalism and become just another normal and banal nation-state? As the modernization went on, would the Dalai Lama still want to transform the Tibetan political system into a democratic one? Would he find that modernization or democratization might put the god-king system in jeopardy, or threaten the very fundamental Buddhist values? If it is unnecessary to know about Tibet's past since Tibet is imagined statically as a Shangri-La that is free of any secular investigation into its politics and history, is it, then, important to think about Tibet's future? More questions need to be asked about Tibet. Its history is not less complicated and its culture not less complex than those of any other country.

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