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Book review of 'Children of Tibet: An Oral History of the First Tibetans to Grow Up in Exile' by Vyvyan Cayley

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The book is limited by the fact that it is not as comprehensive as the title suggests. The greatest attention is paid to the Dhaka cloth of Limbu weavers, but little mention is made of textiles in many other weaving communities in Nepal, such as the Tamang and the Tharu. Furthermore, this book does little to place textile use and production within an ethnographic context and fails to consider the cultural significance of textiles in relation to ritual, gender, and socio-economic considerations.

Nevertheless, *Nepalese Textiles* is a welcome exploration of an otherwise widely ignored aspect of Nepalese society. Those interested in collections will appreciate the extensiveness of Dunsmore's project, especially the detail with which she catalogues textiles, equipment, and production techniques. An extraordinary collection of illustrations enriches the book with images from a variety of archival sources, photographs of weavers and their work, sketches of tools and techniques, maps, and even an appendix of garment patterns. Weavers will revel in the intricacy with which Dunsmore has recorded weaving techniques, equipment, patterns, and designs. Dunsmore succeeds in portraying the diversity of Nepalese ethnic groups and their equally diverse textiles.

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"Maybe you wonder how I preserve my Tibetan identity" remarks Sonam Rapten, an architect in Nepal, to author Vyvyan Cayley. "It is as if you're wearing layers and layers of clothes which you shed as you go from one country to another. Eventually the least important things seem to go out of your life, the superficial things. But the core remains, and that core is Buddhism."

"It's a funny life I've had, isn't it?" asks Jampa Choedon, after narrating her story. "I've had five *amalas* [mothers] and three *palas* [fathers] and still I don't know where I belong. Sometimes I joke about it, but it crosses my mind that when we go back to Tibet. I won't know where to go."

"We don't know in the next five years what will happen," observes K. Dhondup, a writer living in Delhi. "If the Dalai Lama decides to return to Tibet, I think all Tibetans will have to ask themselves what they will do. Politically things are very chaotic. Right now, as I'm talking to you, I'm a very confused Tibetan."

Children of Tibet is a collection of twenty life stories narrated by Tibetans who were either born in Tibet shortly before the Chinese takeover of that country in 1959 or who were born in exile soon thereafter. They are, therefore, members of the first generation of Tibetans to be raised and educated entirely outside of their homeland, as the result of decisions made by their families to follow their leader, the 14th Dalai Lama, into exile. The personal experiences of these narrators, then, cover a remarkably eventful historical span, especially considering that most of them are still only in their late 30's or early 40's. Their memories and current observations regarding life in pre 1959 Tibet, their escape into exile, the hardships endured by their families, their education and vocational training in foreign schools, and their assumption of roles as parents, workers, and, in some cases, leaders in the Tibetan exile community factually and emotionally document an important transitional or pivotal phase in Tibetan history.

The experience of living in exile for 35 years, combined with the knowledge that Tibet has drastically changed during that time under Chinese rule, has heightened and foregrounded the concerns of many Tibetan refugees about the continuity of their linguistic, religious, artistic, and other cultural practices. At the same time, they know that, realistically, they must accommodate to their present circumstances and take full advantage of the opportunities available to them in exile. These oral histories bring to life the intersections of official, communal, and personal efforts of Tibet refugees, and the various individuals and organizations which have supported them, to accommodate both a deeply-felt responsibility to preserve their "Tibetan-ness" and a practical need to adapt to their host cultures.

Cayley makes no claims that the twenty individuals whose stories she has solicited are somehow representative of their generation. She explicitly acknowledges that the choice of Tibetans included was selective: all of the contributors are competent in English (the language of narration) and were willing to share their stories publicly, and all are from "ordinary" backgrounds (that is, from neither the Tibetan royalty nor the aristocracy). Additionally, it is clear that Cayley made an effort to present a group that includes a balanced number of men and women, including one monk and one nun, from diverse places (fairly equally distributed among refugees currently living in Nepal, Dharamsala [the seat of the Tibetan government-in-exile], other Indian settlements, and countries outside of Asia). Therefore, in Cayley's own words, "This has excluded Tibetans of this generation who have little English, either because they were already too old on arrival to receive a full education, or because the isolation of the location in exile precluded a regular attendance at school." There is certainly another book to be written there.

Each life story in *Children of Tibet* includes a black and white photo of the contributor, and the twenty narratives are divided into four sections entitled "Help From the World," "The Activists," "Hard Times," and "Tibetan-ness." (As these descriptions apply to all the narratives, though, the divisions seem quite arbitrary and are only useful as an organizational feature). The book includes a foreword by His Holiness the Dalai Lama, an informative introduction by the author, maps of Tibet and Tibetan settlements in India and Nepal, and a glossary.

This book will be of interest to non-academic and academic audiences alike. It is a valuable contribution to the growing movement to use oral histories as a way of "giving a voice" to informants (now "narrators" or "co-authors") and decentering the researcher without unrealistically denying her editorial role. This book is also valuable because it complicates popular conceptions of refugees as either being "without a culture" (a cognitive leap commonly made from being "without a place") or being mired in the kind of chaotic cultural mish-mash that writers like Pico Iyer warn is just an augury of the homogeneous global culture the 21st-century is ushering in. Rather than being schizophrenic or lost, the refugees included in this collection reveal a uniquely insightful perspective on both Tibetan society and their host societies. Without romanticizing the condition of exile, this book reminds one that precisely because refugees often feel at odds with the status quo, they are sometimes better able to articulate precisely what (and even why) it is. From an area studies perspective, Cayley's book is a refreshing contribution to the burgeoning literature on Tibet, which remains notably (and regrettably) uninterested in the day-to-day lives of contemporary lay Tibetans. Somehow, the narrators reflect on their often unimaginably complicated lives of multiple displacement and tragedy frankly, without self-pity, and often with humor.

The individuals whose narratives appear in *Children of Tibet* have personally lived through the confusion, loss, illness and, in many cases, violence that have accompanied the reluctant acquisition of their current refugee status and still struggle with the ambiguities inherent in being "stateless." Their children, however are second-generation refugees who have never actually left anywhere. They must be taught to remember the experiences of their parents if Tibetans in exile hope to maintain a long-term pro-active stance vis-a-vis the enduring Chinese military and political presence in Tibet. Adult Tibetan refugees widely recognize the need to struggle against self-protective, opportunistic, or simply time-induced forgetting. This is surely one reason the contributors to this book were willing to speak so candidly and thoughtfully to Cayley and, thereby, to the reader. After reading this collection of oral histories from the first generation of Tibetans to grow up in exile, one understands the observation made by the Dalai Lama in his foreword to Cayley's book: "Earlier sacrifices on their behalf have not been wasted."

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