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Journeys into Exile:  
Tibetan Women Refugees and the Migration  
Experience

A thesis presented in partial  
fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of

Master of Philosophy  
in  
Development Studies

at Massey University, Palmerston North  
New Zealand

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2001

## **Abstract**

Focusing on refugee theories and concepts, this study utilises a qualitative research approach to analyse the migration experiences of a group of Tibetan refugee women living in exile in McLeod Ganj, Dharamsala, India. The study examines the reasons why the women left Tibet, risking their lives to make the arduous journey across the Himalayan Mountains into exile, and explores their past, present and future hopes, the difficulties they have faced, and those that they are facing today.

Data for the study were collected through various methods, including in-depth interviews, Participatory Rural Appraisal (PRA), and Capacities and Vulnerabilities Analysis (CVA), stimulus pictures, informal conversations and personal observations while in McLeod Ganj, Dharamsala, India.

The Tibetan refugee movement is examined within its own socio-political context through an exploration of the historical background of the Tibetan refugee situation, including China's presence in Tibet, and the ways in which this presence has affected Tibetan refugee movements. The Literature Review examines the various migration and refugee theories and concepts that have emerged within academia, and assesses the conceptual gaps that are present within the existing literature.

Focusing on contemporary Tibetan refugee movements, this thesis considers the question of why, after more than fifty years of Chinese occupation, Tibetans are still leaving Tibet to live in exile in India. The study then puts forward two models of refugee migration based on the patterns of migration expressed in the data.

## Acknowledgements

I wish to express my gratitude to the many people who have each played a valuable part in helping and supporting both this project and myself over the past year. Most importantly, of course, are my respondents in Dharamsala who shall remain anonymous, who with trust gave their time and stories, which have formed the basis of this work. Without them, this study would not have been possible. Additionally, my appreciation goes to the translators who enabled me to comprehend the women's stories, and made it possible for them to be heard in the following pages.

In New Zealand, I would like to thank my supervisor Dr. Barbara Nowak for the valuable feedback she gave, the time she took to proof-read and offer suggestions and advice, and most especially for her words of encouragement to: "Just keep going!" In addition, I would also like to thank Professor John Overton for his support over the past two years of my postgraduate studies at Massey University.

My thanks to the research funding providers the Asia 2000 Foundation (Asia 2000 Scholarship) and Massey University (Massey Masterate Scholarship) for the financial support they made available to the project, enabling me to travel to India to complete the research, and to cover the major expenses of the project over the year. I also wish to thank Workbridge for providing Naturally Speaking software and the hardware to support it; I'm proud to say that I have "typed" this thesis myself!

On a personal level I wish to thank Annette Dunnage-Roy and Alan Roy for exceeding their parental responsibilities, assisting with proofreading the ever-expanding copy, transcribing, artwork, and for supporting and encouraging me throughout the year. I would also like to express my gratitude to the Wall family for their words of encouragement over the last couple of years. Finally, my special thanks goes to Andrew Wall for his support, encouragement, patience, and love; you have given me the confidence to continue.

## Song of Exile

Exile is the emptiness - for however much you bought  
with you, there's far more you left behind.

Exile is the ego that shrinks, for how can you prove  
what you were and what you did?

Exile is the erasure of pride.

Exile is the escape that is often worse than the prison.

Exile is xenophobe - for every single one who likes you,  
you'll find ten in whom there is nothing but hate.

Exile is the Xanthippe nagging you for thoughts unthought  
and for words unspoken.

Exile is the infinitive you can't help splitting -  
the intention that is never equalled by the execution.

Exile is the invasion that can never succeed -  
for you can never conquer your inhibitions -  
it is the incubus riding your pillow.

Exile is the loneliness in the middle of a crowd -

Exile is longing never to be fulfilled,

it is love unrequited, the loss never replaced -

the listless, loveless, long wait for the train

that never arrives, the plane that never gets off the ground.

Exile is the end and never the beginning -

Exile is the eruption whose lava stream carries you away -

it is the eternity measured in minutes, the eyes

that never enjoy the familiar sight,

the ears that listen to alien music.

Exile is a song that only the singer can hear

Exile is an illness that not even death can cure - for how  
can you rest in soil that cannot nourish you?

Exile is the warning example to those who still  
have their homes, who belong.

But will you take heed of the warning?

From Tabori (1972: 9).

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## Glossary

AFWIC	African Women in Crisis Umbrella Programme
Barkhor	The octagonal street encircling the Jokhang in Lhasa, a holy pilgrim circuit.
CCP	Chinese Communist Party
Chubsang	A nunnery in Lhasa.
CIA	Central Intelligence Agency
CVA	Capacities and Vulnerabilities Analysis
Drebu Lingka	The ground below the Potala.
GDP	Gross Domestic Product
Gutsa	Name of a prison in Lhasa, Tibet.
ICARA I	1 <sup>st</sup> International Conference on Assistance to Refugees in Africa
INS	Immigration and Naturalisation Service (United States)
Jokhang	The holiest shrine in Tibetan Buddhism.
Lhasa	The capital of Tibet.
Norbulingka	“The Jewel Park”, the summer residence of the Dalai Lama.
NZ	New Zealand
OAU	Organisation of African Unity
PLA	People’s Liberation Army
Potala	The palace and winter home of the Dalai Lama.
PRA	Participatory Rural Appraisal
PRC	People’s Republic of China
TAR	Tibet Autonomous Region
TCV	Tibetan Children’s Village School
TIPA	Tibetan Institute of Performing Arts
Tsampa	The staple food of most Tibetans: pre-cooked barley flour, which is mixed with butter or tea to form soft balls.
TYC	Tibetan Youth Congress
TWA	Tibetan Women’s Association
UN	United Nations
UNDP	United Nations Development Programme
UNHCR	United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees
UNIFEM	United Nations Development Programme for Women
Yuan	Unit of Chinese money, equal to approximately 4 Indian rupees.