

***The Agendas of Tibetan Refugees:  
Survival Strategies of a Government-in-Exile in a World of Transnational Organizations***



Thomas Kauffmann  
New York: Berghahn, 2015, pp. 226

In *The Agendas of Tibetan Refugees: Survival Strategies of a Government-in-Exile in a World of Transnational Organizations*, Dr. Thomas Kaufmann seeks to understand “How, after more than fifty years of exile, are the Tibetan refugees still able to attract such substantial assistance from Western governments, NGOs, other organizations and individuals, unlike other populations of refugees who are largely or totally forgotten?” (2).

Dr. Kaufmann has carried out a praiseworthy examination of the exile Tibetan community in India. To respond to his research question, over the course of seven chapters, he explains the political history, religion, culture, and current socioeconomic conditions of Tibetans living in exile in India. Briefly, in chapter 1, he compiles historical information spanning more than five decades and describes the settlement and rehabilitation of the Tibetan refugee community in different parts of India. The second chapter highlights the establishment as well as the evolution of the Central Tibetan Administration (CTA) as a legitimate guiding agency of the Tibetan people in exile. In chapters 3 and 4 he presents the key elements of his work that answers his research question. He underlines the CTA’s political and religious agendas that come together to attract international assistance. He then analyzes the reception of these two agendas in the West in chapter 5. In chapter 6, he examines the model of the donor-recipient relationship between the Tibetan refugee community spearheaded by the CTA and the West. He concludes that the Tibetan model of relationships with transnational organizations, although extremely successful for this group, is a difficult one for other groups to replicate (150). In his last chapter, he aptly introduces challenges that this refugee community is facing in light of migration to Western nations since the onset of the “American Lottery” that began in the 1990s, and transformation that this community is facing due to decreasing fertility rates, older adults left behind in settlements, social inequalities, etc.

The central argument that Dr. Kaufmann develops throughout the book is that the Tibetan refugee community has been so successful in attracting financial assistance because it has developed bilateral relationships with international donors, where both parties work as equals. That is, the refugee communities have something to give back

to the international donors in exchange for the assistance received. He underpins this mutually supportive relationship using two agendas, religious and political, which the CTA has set, and which the Tibetan diaspora also follows. The main idea behind both agendas is that the Tibetan refugee community has transformed itself as the ideal receiver by fitting into an image that stands for universal values that are widely appreciated by Western donors. Their diaspora is portrayed as one of a democratic, environmentalist, and non-violent community, turning the Tibetan cause into a just one (chapter 3). Moreover, Dr. Kaufmann asserts that Tibetan Buddhism has been essentialized and commodified, and a mutually beneficial relationship has been conceived on the traditional “*mchog-yon*,” or teacher–student relationship. Thus the teacher–student relationship is built with the Western donors, where the teacher gives spiritual teaching and, in return, the students fulfill the teacher’s material needs (chapter 4). In sum, these identifiable Western democratic principles combined with the promotion of Tibetan Buddhist culture as something that is worth saving not only for the Tibetans but for the entire world, allows donors to eagerly and willingly assist the Tibetan cause and thereby the Tibetan refugees (chapter 5).

The book thus contributes a good deal to both Tibetan studies and refugee and migration studies. That said, we have identified some weaknesses in the book. One set of concerns relates to the study sample. We believe that this book would have benefited from more transparency about who was interviewed.

While Dr. Kaufmann does clarify in the introduction that his study is based on “more than 150 structured or semi-structured Interviews” (8), the reader learns little else about them. We deduce that most of the interviewees were ordinary Tibetan refugees who were not CTA employees. As only (limited) interviews were carried out with CTA members, it is puzzling why the workings of average Tibetan refugees are interpreted as CTA strategies. Furthermore, the analysis relies heavily on document review and liberal interpretation of the Dalai Lama’s presence on the international stage (chapter 4) to support claims about the CTA’s religious and political agendas. We think Dr. Kaufmann’s conclusions would be more valid if he had discussed these findings

with key individuals from CTA's Department of Religion and Culture as well as the Department of Information and International Relation, and then reported back to the reader the outcome of those consultations.

Another concern related to the study sample stems from repeated use of the term "the Tibetans" (76, 78, 79). The frequent deployment of "the Tibetans" seems to encompass all Tibetans living in exile (in India and elsewhere). A place where more nuance would also be useful can be seen (95 and elsewhere) where Dr. Kaufmann reports that "Tibetans tend to represent Western societies as spiritually weak and, as such, willing to receive religious teachings from Tibetans." With little demographic detail on who is included in his study, this, unfortunately, conveys the sense that Tibetans are of the same opinion or act in the same way.

More information on sample selection and demographics of those interviewed, and even greater use of direct quotes from his interviews would help the reader to contextualize provocative claims. With respect to provocative claims, here is another example: Dr. Kaufmann notes (76 and elsewhere) that Tibetans tend to present themselves as impoverished (when they are not) to gain sponsors. We acknowledge that many Tibetan children, monks, older adults with no children, and even families are generously supported by Western donors. One dimension of this set of relationships that Dr. Kaufmann glosses over (that we know from our own research) is that some sponsors choose to continue the relationship with their assigned person even after that person's or family's situation has improved. Such circumstances might lead to the perception that well-off

families still unfairly receive financial support. What is not acknowledged is that there are more Tibetan children and older parents who are supported by their family members. They do not rely on sponsors and may even refuse to do so.

Overall, more circumspection regarding study conclusions, and further consideration of alternative explanations contradicting the central claims the author makes would strengthen this book. For instance, the key point in Dr. Kaufmann's depiction of the Tibetan refugees' (and thereby the CTA's) political and religious agenda is that these processes have been manufactured by the actors to fit with popular Western notions (see chapters 3 and 4). The discussion that this could also be the result of natural processes of change, adaptation, and survival is missing.

Finally, we thoroughly applaud Dr. Kaufmann for his work and think, despite his claim to the contrary, that the Tibetan success model speaks to experiences of other diasporic communities, e.g. outmigration, identity crisis, and the need to persevere politically, religiously, and as an ethnic group. Thus, we see less exceptionalism and more overlap between the Tibetan experience and that of other populations than Dr. Kaufmann, perhaps, allows.

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*Tenzin Wangmo is a senior researcher at the Institute for Biomedical Ethics, University of Basel. She may be contacted at [tenzin.wangmo@unibas.ch](mailto:tenzin.wangmo@unibas.ch).*

*Tenzin Sherab is a PhD student at the University of Fribourg. He may be contacted at [sherab.tenzin@unifr.ch](mailto:sherab.tenzin@unifr.ch).*

### *Forced Migration, Reconciliation and Justice*



Edited by Megan Bradley  
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Cet ouvrage dirigé par Megan Bradley est publié à un moment où le nombre de personnes déplacées en raison de conflits atteint un niveau sans précédent dans le monde. La réflexion sur des solutions durables à la migration forcée est non seulement d'actualité, mais aussi d'une grande utilité. Ceci d'autant plus que l'accent est mis sur l'importance de la justice et la réconciliation dans ce processus.

L'ouvrage regroupe des contributions d'auteurs de disciplines différentes et d'expériences professionnelles variées qui explorent des concepts et théories, ainsi que des situations locales et nationales. Des méthodes de recherche diverses y sont adoptées, telles que des entrevues,

la recherche ethnographique, et l'analyse historique, juridique et philosophique. Les quatorze chapitres du livre sont structurés autour de trois parties examinant les liens entre les notions de déplacement forcé, la justice et la réconciliation, les expériences de la diaspora et des communautés hôtes, et des solutions à la migration forcée. Une attention particulière est portée sur des questions qui, jusqu'à présent, n'ont pas fait l'objet d'étude systématique. Tel est le cas des pratiques religieuses, de l'histoire orale, des interactions sociales quotidiennes comme autant de moyens de réconciliation entre les communautés affectées par le déplacement forcé.