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"Be Like Water"
Adjustment Practices of Tibetan Immigrants to Paris

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Abstract

This paper attempts to explore how integrationist immigration discourses play out in real life, by examining the different multilinguistic approaches used by Tibetan migrants as they adjust to life in Paris. I explore how social values become emotionally embodied over time as we learn language, meaning that those who speak multiple languages must negotiate multiple, simultaneouslyfelt realities on a day-to-day basis. An awareness of the mechanisms behind the acquisition of languages and their associated value systems can therefore help us to understand how acculturation happens within immigrant communities. I give a brief overview of the Tibetan and French sociocultural milieus, and highlight the complexity, variety and importance of multilingual narratives in the wider context of migration policy-making. Specifically, I examine instances of *code-switching* to reveal potentially "sticky" moments of emotional charge for a given term, indicating points of connection forged with the new country, or else maintained with the old.

Keywords: Tibet, France, multilingualism, emotion, code-switching

Introduction

In a world which is today interconnected as never before, in both the concrete and virtual realms, the "global community" has quickly discovered that, rather than coming to share a singular reality, we are splintering off into innumerable competing echo chambers. While many of us struggle to piece together a coherent grasp of reality within this chaos, governments, in turn, are scrambling to seize control of both national and international narratives. The apparent global lurch towards conservatism can thus be understood as an attempt to re-establish stability by reinforcing borders both metaphorical and literal, in a stark rejection of the new and fluid "contours of belonging" promised by globalization (Letizia 2014; Croucher 2018).

In the midst of this battle, immigration has emerged as one of the defining concerns of our age, often cast as a failure to integrate with central nationalist values. However, the "problem" of immigration can be better understood as being one of competing, linguistically-bound realities (Kuhl et al 2005). The multiple, structurally-diverse languages used by the vast majority of the world's immigrants create a swirling maelstrom of affective ties and core beliefs which cannot suddenly jackknife into new configurations upon arrival to a new land. In effect, immigrants must learn over time to inhabit multiple alternative realities, understand in which contexts they can evoke them, and accept that the complex

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process of recreating a sense of belonging in their new country (or indeed, of maintaining one with their old) may never fully be realized.

This is certainly the case for the Tibetan diaspora in Paris, who are caught between a host nation which demands ideological integration *à la française*, and a "home" nation which is built around the fight to one day return to a free Tibet.[1] In the former case, French Revolutionary values of *Liberté, Égalité* and *Fraternité* ("Freedom, Equality and Fraternity") are regularly invoked by both sides of the political divide to attempt to carve out the boundaries of the "in-group" and the "out-group." Explicitly supremacist colonial-era ideologies of *assimilation* are somewhat softened by France's commitment to human rights – indeed, the French consider their country to be the "birthplace of human rights." However, in an increasingly heightened environment of racial tension (in particular following a decade of Islamist terror attacks across the nation), the question of what it means to be French, or how to successfully integrate, is now one of the most pressing issues facing the country today, one which will be a deciding factor in national elections for the foreseeable future.

It is into such an environment that Tibetan migrants are arriving. Since the invasion of Chinese forces and the escape of the Dalai Lama across the Himalayas to India in 1959, a steady stream of Tibetans have left their now-occupied homeland, finding refuge first in Indian settlements, the largest of which is in Dharamsala, which today functions as the *de facto* capital of the Tibetan community-in-exile, as the location of the headquarters of the Central Tibetan Administration (the CTA – formerly known as the Tibetan Governmentin-Exile). Tibetan communities have also relocated to Nepal, Pakistan and Bhutan, as well as the United States, Switzerland and France, with Paris itself estimated to have at least 8,000-10,000 Tibetan refugees, although official figures are impossible to verify (Robin 2020; Simon 2023). Despite many Tibetans having never set foot on Tibetan soil, community identity is outwardly very coherent, based around a shared narrative of suffering, persecution and a fight for independence and religious freedom. The personal experiences of community members who make their lives in France are much more complex, however, with many torn between competing, often mutually exclusive narratives related to belonging, cultural heritage and emotional performance. These individual stories and, crucially, the ways in which they are being told, serve as important testimonies to the kinds of challenges, boundaries and adjustments made by the Tibetan community in Paris on a daily basis, as one participant named Yeshi puts it (M, 25 yearsold; L1 Hindi, L2 Punjabi, L3 Tibetan, L4 English, L5 French; 2 years in France)[2]: "I have four different people in my head – it's like a wave coming on you, like brainstorming."

This study is, therefore, based on a conception of language as a foundational part of the sense-making feedback loop which exists between a person's inner and outer worlds, a loop which is both enriched and complicated as further languages are added to the equation. In such a framework, language – particularly the spontaneous production of informal conversation – can never be detached from its context, and allows for glimpses into otherwise ineffable events occurring in a speaker's life at that time, particularly those

[1] Clearly, the definition of what and where "Tibet" is has been the source of decades of conflict and controversy, the history of which is outside the scope of the current work.

[2] L1 = first language; L2 = second language etc. Biographical details for each participant are provided where possible, with the number of years in France accurate at the time of our first meeting. Participant names have been anonymized. In the interest of transparency, my immigrant profile is as follows: F, 40 years old; L1 English; L2 French; L3 Spanish; L4 Mandarin Chinese; L5 Swedish; 8 years in France.

which carry emotional charge. The examples cited further below are taken from doctoral fieldwork interviews conducted among the Tibetan diasporic community in Paris between 2020-2023 with 18 individuals (6 females, 12 males, aged between 18-63 years old). I focus on instances of *code-switching* recorded during these conversations, whereby a word or phrase from another language than that in which the conversation is being conducted suddenly makes an appearance, revealing a potentially significant emotional "sticking point" associated with the term (Ahmed 2004). While conclusions about the true motivations behind such language behaviors can only ever be speculative, such switches occur among all multilingual and/or immigrant groups, and are thus of enormous value in highlighting the often-conflicting conceptions of reality baked into the various tongues being used, and how speakers attempt to reconcile them.

Theoretical Framework

The notion that different languages mean that its speakers perceive, understand and interact with the world in different ways is not new, and has ebbed in and out of favor within academic circles for more than a century. Indeed, the debate between linguistic universalism and determinism remains unresolved, one reason for which may be that the prevalence of multilingualism within human society has long been underestimated by postcolonial European scholars and policy-makers alike (see Bhabha 1994, Said 2019 [1974] or much of Fanon's work, for instance 1990[1961]). The so-called "linguistic turn" which emerged during the last century was in many ways a coming-to-terms with the end of empires, and the possibility that those groups which had been summarily Othered for so long had, in fact, points of view and perspectives which were just as valid as any other, and that Western actions had already done much to destroy them.

The post-structuralist, existentialist philosophy of mid- to late-20th century France – of thinkers such as Bourdieu (2001[1982]); Foucault (2009[1966]); Deleuze & Guattari (2004[1980]) – spoke of how culture becomes embodied by (and ultimately imprisons) its citizens, binding and defining us all within the prevailing social system through habitual behaviors, including our linguistic practices (Scheer 2012). More recently, some evidence as to how this process might actually occur has drawn from the field of neurology, particularly neurolinguistics, where advancements in brain imaging have enabled us to understand more (although we are still at the early stages of such work) about the constant interplay between internal (i.e., bodily) and external (i.e., social) forces in the creation, refinement and maintenance of word-concepts within the brain (Feldman-Barrett 2017; Kuhl 2005; Patterson, Nestor & Rogers 2007). This process begins "at mother's knee" (Anderson 2016[1983]:154) as we begin to make synaptic associations between basic objects and sensations, by learning the unique sounds we use to describe them. Even prelinguistic sounds are language-specific – each version of "Motherese" (parental baby talk) is different, and introduces the infant to the particular phonetic boundaries and challenging pronunciations of the child's L1. By the age of around seven months (in monolingual households, at least), children have generally fully locked into their native tongue (Kuhl 2010; Kuhl et al. 2005). As our language skills improve, we refine our mental lexica and learn to contextualize increasingly complex and abstract concepts and sentiments.

Emotion words (such as "happy" or "sad") or emotionally charged words (such as "mother" or "fuck") are of particular value in cross-cultural linguistic studies. Their immediate, visceral, full-body charge means that they are often deeply felt and thus indelibly engraved into our memories – we all remember the white-hot scorch of our first rejected kiss, for instance (which might be the prototypical reference point when we look

up "humiliation" in our mental dictionaries). Critics of linguistic determinism (see for instance Pinker 2015[1992]) argue that there exist universal emotions shared by all humanity, although extensive work by scholars such as Lutz (1998), Pavlenko (2005; 2008), Wierzbicka (1986), Tcherkassof & Frijda (2014), Wikan (1989) and many others has shown that, for some communities, even the idea of having an individual experience of emotion is not a given, and can be couched instead as a social event, for instance. Indeed, there are a great many examples of culture-specific emotion words which cannot easily be glossed into other languages. The creation and continued usage of a word in a given language means broadly that it is collectively considered to be of general utility to the speaking community. Importantly, however, given adequate motivation and an encouraging ethnolinguistic landscape (Markus & Kitayama 1991; Landry & Bourhis 1997), a person can learn to create another feedback loop between the proprioceptive and the social realms for a new language's word-concepts. For new terms to be fully understood, therefore, emotional investment through proper contextualization needs to take place (Pavlenko 2005; 2008).

Instances of *code-switching* (or *code-mixing*), where a word (or other syntactical, grammatical or morphological structure) from a different language appears in a conversation, may reveal areas where emotional charge has been weighted differently, so the brain-in-action makes an executive decision to produce what it deems the more appropriate term. A potential indicator of acculturation processes at work within immigrant communities, then, is the extent to which the new country's word-concepts have been absorbed by its speakers, which may be inferred by the ease with which they can produce them in spontaneous speech. Conversely, switches into languages learned earlier in life are suggestive of some resistance to integration, a point of connection maintained with a previously acculturated life.

In addition, code-switching behaviors remind us that the line between conscious and unconscious language choices is not as clear as we might imagine, and that, given that we have learned to use external cues to reinforce our word selection since infancy, we cannot help but be unconsciously influenced by our interlocutor during conversation, including a swift taking-in of the languages they speak, and adjusting switching practices accordingly (Poplack 1980). Given the precarious social position that refugees and asylum seekers often find themselves in upon arrival in a new country, it is also possible that some linguistic choices are made entirely consciously, intended to convey a clear message and (re)iterate a pre-defined social status (in the Tibetan context, see for instance McGranahan 2018; Schröer 2016; Yeh 2007). While all social interactions are performances to some extent, they are especially so in cross-cultural linguistic exchanges with unequal power dynamics, as in the context of immigration. This inequality is in part due to fluency issues, but is also due to how viscerally a language is connected to a felt reality. As one young Tibetan woman, Lhatso, described her experience when she first arrived at her new French high school:

> In discussions with my teachers [in French], I was breaking the image, losing the emotion, there was a lot of loss of meaning from Tibetan. I had to add words, use ornamental words. For example, for "sun" I said, "the one who gives light."

While poignant in its poetry, examples such as Lhatso's show the linguistic burden of immigration, as well as the loss of certainty and the taking-for-granted of the world around us (and our place within it) when using an unfamiliar tongue. Languages which jostle for place in multilingual minds in effect represent competing versions of reality, and learning to accommodate and find space for them all (as was the case for all of the Tibetan participants in this study, whose linguistic profiles contained four or even five distinct, concurrent languages) takes time and the allocation of State resources – not a priority when immigration is such a hotly polemicized subject.

Sociopolitical Context(s)

Clearly, no immigrant arrives in a neutral space, so an awareness of multilingual strategies used within a given community can offer an idea of how multiple sociopolitical contexts impact the everyday negotiation of these competing realities, and how this affects the construction of individual identities. The experiences of the Tibetan immigrant community in the West offer valuable insight into how such competing value systems are embodied, felt and expressed. All members of this group keenly understand that their status within Western host nations is largely predicated on maintaining the significant amount of goodwill built up by the Dalai Lama and the CTA since the beginning of exile. The relatively positive reputation which the Tibetans hold in France, especially when compared to general attitudes towards North-African Muslims, for instance, is due to their concerted efforts to create consistent narratives which appeal to European national ideologies, fantasies and ideals. Such efforts to maintain their status mean that personal narratives are more often than not subsumed to the dominant national discourses, leaving little room for diversity or dissent.

France

Despite the ongoing absorption of more extreme right-wing discourses into the political mainstream (see, for instance, Ivaldi 2023), France has long defined itself as a land of humanitarian values. It is true that the country can certainly boast some of the world's most comprehensive and humane protections for its citizens in terms of access to healthcare, education, employment and more, and these rights have traditionally also been extended to immigrants (although some argue that, besides being an easy target for budgetcutting during times of economic downturn, such compassion may eventually lead to harsher immigration policies, which risk racialized pigeon-holing and the reduction of individuals into oversimplified victims – see Ticktin 2006, 2011; Wang 2017).[3] French immigration policy is an extension of French national identity, which is based around a number of key ideological influences, chief of which is the French Enlightenment (French *Les Lumières*, literally "the lights") which drove the French Revolution and the modern conception of the French nation. The national motto *Liberté, Égalité, Fraternité* can be seen on every public building throughout the country, including public schools, and indeed, Rousseau's Social Contract is implicit in everyday discourse, and his famous adage "One man's freedom ends where another's begins" (*La liberté des uns s'arrête là où commence celle des autres*) is regularly invoked in a uniquely individualist framing of community.

However, the question of who exactly gets to participate in the national project, and which freedoms can or cannot be accommodated, has long caused tension in the *République* (now in its 5th iteration). The tenet of *laïcité* (roughly translated as "secularism") is technically the fourth pillar of the above national motto, and prohibits the public display of any religious belonging (such as the famous "ban on burqas" which made the headlines in the 2000s) – by relegating all outward signs of religious difference to private spaces, the idea is that nobody's personal freedom is encroached upon, meaning that equality is maintained. Over time, however, what started out as a largely progressive gesture has been reappropriated by the political right, with critics of the policy deploring its degradation into nothing more than an ideological baton used against minority groups (see Tissot 2019;
Raim 2019; Chemin 2016). Undoubtedly, the ideological grandness of the French national

[3] One recent example is the new *Asylum & Immigration Law*, introduced on 27th January 2024, including measures which place further restrictions on making asylum demands, travel and housing permissions for those awaiting asylum decisions, including unaccompanied minors, for instance. (France *Terre d'Asile* 2024)

project in the postcolonial era has created much confusion and frustration for French citizens and non-citizens alike.

Behavioral expectations such as these set out the boundaries of the "in-group" (i.e. those whose values align with our own) and the "out-group" (i.e. those whose values do not – see, for example, Alba 2005). Immigrants are under increasing pressure to understand, internalize and perform these expectations as best they can. The idea of performance-assurvival emerged from queer communities long forced to "pass" (as heteronormative or heterosexual, see Butler 1997), so that the performance of belonging is context-dependent, with language being one of the principal ways in which conformity can be expressed – modern France's overwhelmingly monolingual public landscape is the result of such a history of imposed conformity (Choquet 2017), as are its attitudes to national unity.

Tibet

Since Chinese Occupation formally began in the 1950s, the Tibetan peoples have continued to leave their homeland and set up communities-in-exile, with the Indian government granting land and refugee status to Tibetans in the Himalayan region. (It remains to be seen how increasingly extreme Hindu nationalism under President Narendra Modi will impact Tibetans' status and rights-to-remain.) There are also sizeable communities elsewhere in Southeast Asia (notably Nepal and Bhutan), where 2nd and 3rd generation Tibetans speak local languages often to higher standards than Tibetan dialects; as well as further afield, to Western Europe and Northern America. The current study focuses mainly on Tibetan linguistic identities, but it should be understood that there are many other important factors which influence community members, including religious, political, economic, administrative, sexual and technological pressures, coming both from inside and outside the community.

The vast majority of Tibetans, however, still remain within what is today known as the Tibetan Autonomous Region (TAR) within the Chinese Mainland (the People's Republic of China or PRC), a vast area which borders and at times crosses into the Yunnan, Sichuan, Gansu, Qinghai and Xinjiang Provinces. Tibetans in the PRC, much like their Uyghur counterparts, are subject to extreme levels of surveillance and restrictions on movement and expression both explicit (e.g., State educational policies equally covering teaching content and language) and implicit (e.g., surveillance on online activity). According to my sources in the region, while public frustration over draconian COVID-19 restrictions in China has led the government to put efforts into the creation of a national "Social Credit System" (Ch. shèhuì xìnyòng tǐxì 社会信用体系) on the backburner, there are nevertheless various similar social scoring systems still being used to varying degrees across the country, meaning that there are few safe spaces for Tibetan people to speak freely and express dissent, for fear of losing travel, investment or other "privileges" due to their low social score, imprisonment or worse. This control extends to the community-in-exile, whose lines of communication to family and friends in the PRC are strained or even cut off, for fear of reprisals by State Police. As Norbu, a Tibetan restaurant owner in Paris I spoke with puts it, "[The Chinese] can't put everyone in prison, but we have [the] prison in our pockets."

Despite the outward display of a unified, homogenous cultural Tibet, these sociopolitical fissures simmer beneath the surface of the community in Paris, where those who have arrived from Nepal or India feel that they have a more legitimate claim to "Tibetanness," often dismissing arrivals from China as too Sinicized or even as being potential spies; whereas TAR Tibetans focus on geographical claims to legitimacy, and see the former

group as having lost their way by embracing the bad habits of the West (such as drinking or smoking) and letting Tibetan cultural and linguistic heritage die out.[4] Furthermore, regional differences across the vast Tibetan Plateau itself (principally divided into the Kham, Amdo and Ü-Tsang regions) mean that provincial identities also play an important role in individual and collective identity construction, both "at home" and within the new country. Given that there are at least 25 distinct main dialects spread over the region, the dialect of Tibet's capital city Lhasa is generally used as a *lingua franca* to help bridge linguistic divides among Tibetans, and is therefore promoted by the CTA to cement both the performance and the feeling of unity (Tournadre & Dorje 2003).[5] The Lhasa dialect is often referred to simply as "Tibetan" – indeed, Dolma (F; 30 years old; L1 undisclosed local Tibetan village dialect, L2 Tibetan, L3 English, L4 Hindi; 3 years in France), mentioned the shock within the community when an ethnic Tibetan cannot speak this language, saying "If you are Tibetan you should speak," so that her (Lhasa Tibetan-speaking) boyfriend had warned her to tell me that "Tibetan" was her first language.

There are, accordingly, many pressures to conform to standardized national narratives from the Tibetan community-in-exile, due mostly to the decades-long efforts of the CTA to create an infrastructure of statehood, including the dissemination of the *rangzen lagteb* or "green book" (Tibetan: rang btsan lag de རང་བཙན་ལག་ཏེ།), which is a stand-in for a formally recognized passport, as well as the publication of a National Charter).[7] Tibetan communities-in-exile (and their online extensions, in WeChat or WhatsApp group chats, for example) are hierarchical, as Tibetan society has long been based around important *geshes* or *lamas* – religious leaders who structure, guide and help the laypeople. As these monks have shifted their focus to teaching Western acolytes, exile Tibetans now look to more explicitly political actors, such as the CTA or other community leaders, who work to maintain cultural practices and investment, but also to make sure that these are "correctly" expressed, meaning that any non-Tibetan influences, especially those traditionally associated with Black culture, such as hip-hop or basketball, are much maligned by the older members of the community (Yeh & Lama 2006). Yeshi, an enterprising and erudite young Tibetan man from India (whose quote about having "four different people in his head" is cited in the introduction), spoke of being rejected by Tibetan charities in Paris, even youth organizations such as the Students for a Free Tibet (SFT), when seeking funding for his fledgling basketball association, with the response: "*Qu'est-ce que nous on va gagner avec ça?*" ("What do we stand to gain by that?"). Beyond the discernible squeamishness around Black culture – he also spoke of the unwritten rule (that he gleefully flaunted) that dating white people was fine, but that it was "not OK" to date black or mixed-race people

[4] Due to inconsistencies in Chinese State education policies over the years, some Tibetan students (the *min kaomin* 民老民) have received a bilingual Mandarin/Tibetan high school education; others (the *min kaohan* 民老汉) have received teaching exclusively in Chinese; and others (the *nei di xizang ban* 内地西藏办) were relocated from their home villages to the inner cities, all of which exacerbate linguistic disunity (Yang 2018; see also Zenz 2010).

[5] For a more complete exploration of Tibetan languages, see Tournadre (2014), and for their respective impacts on inter-generational communication, see Simon (2021, 2023) and Yeh (2007)).

[7] Despite these efforts, Tibet is not currently formally recognized as a country by the UN. It became a founding member of the Unrepresented Nations and Peoples Organization in 1991, the same year it published its Charter for All Tibetans-in-Exile. (Member Profile – Tibet, UNPO).

– we see here an example of the ongoing calculations made within the Tibetan community to negotiate the challenges of integration amid competing versions of reality.

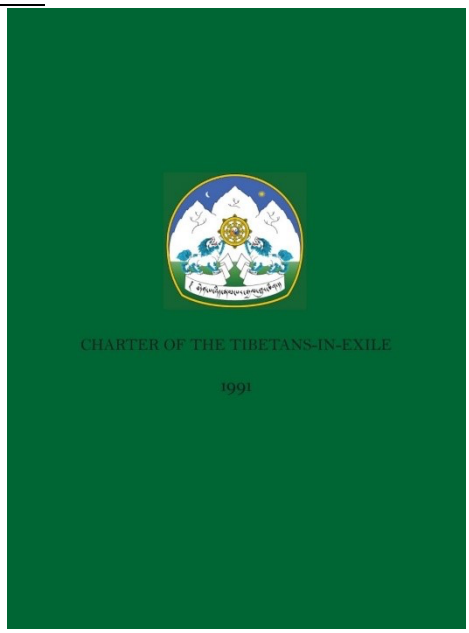

Figure 1: Cover page of the Charter of the Tibetans-in-Exile (1991)

Discussion: *Tibetans in France – code-switching as integration or resistance?*

We have seen briefly how there are a myriad of competing pulls on Tibetan immigrants who have moved to France. We will discuss first some examples of code-switching which show possible evidence of "positive" integration processes (in this case, of key French cultural ideals which were switched into predominantly English-language conversations).

The first example was by far the most common instance of French code-switching recorded by interview participants, and was the use of the word *manifestation* or "protest":

> They [the Tibetan refugees in Paris] do ***manifestations*** every Saturday, but they protest against the Chinese – if you really are a freedom fighter, 70% of Tibetans are working under the Chinese. They pay well (Dolma).

This key term reflects on the one hand the central position that France's revolutionary history holds within its national ideology, so that protest is regularly used to create a sense of belonging-through-participation. On the other hand, the Free Tibet movement is not only the most visible element of Tibet in the West, but also helps to concretize a core Tibetan political narrative based on themes of persecution, suffering, independence and pride. The usage here is a clear point of connection between the two cultures, which has been widely adopted by the community-in-exile.

The second instance of integrative code-switching is the word *obligatoire* or "obligatory/mandatory," used here in a discussion about education:

> Westerners have knowledge, education, so 'I can, I am'. Tibetans we don't have. For example French, I was very surprised kind of when I heard your child go to school at 3. Like me I never went until 16. Here it is ***obligatoire***. Here basic education. We have five negative emotions

> – root emotions. 'Proud' is one of [those] emotions – knowledge, money, country, Donald Trump, America First, proud because of country. Knowledge [is] proud of 'I, I, I'. Sometimes it's strange. – Dorji (M; 38 years old; L1 Amdo Tibetan, L2 Nepalese, L3 English, L4 Hindi; 2 years in France).

The difficulties encountered with the French administrative system were a common theme in interviews, with references made to the fact that, for any dealings with the authorities, especially in terms of processing asylum and immigration paperwork, competence in the French language and an awareness of the State's requirements are "obligatory." However, here the use of this switch by Dorji could also be a more positively charged cultural connection point for him, as he had spent most of his life in the discipline and rigidity of

Tibetan monasteries, having left his family home at the age of 9.

Figure 2: Image of Tibetan protests in Paris before the State visit of Chinese President Xi Jinping in March 2019, *Le Figaro*, 24th March 2019

The monastery is also a place of refuge, however, meaning that the move to Europe often has a lasting impact on Tibetans' perception of which spaces are "safe" to express themselves. This was evoked by Gyatso (M, 48 years old, L1 Tibetan; L2 Urdu; L3 English; L4 French; 10 years in France) in a revealing example, where he uses two separate instances of code-switching: first the French *isolé* for "isolated," then the Tibetan *dzogchen*, which refers to the ultimate state of awareness beyond the mind, the highest state for Bön practitioners:

> I am not really talkative [about subjects which I consider to be] nonsense, meaningless. I don't like empty, meaningless [talk]. For me, usually, I don't talk too much [laughs]. With some friends they feel *isolé*. For me, very comfortable to talk, but I would like to speak in Tibetan about philosophy, to teach sutras and discuss tantra and *dzogchen*.

These examples of code-switching could arguably be understood as conscious choices made for my benefit – elsewhere Gyatso spoke of the decision he had taken when teaching Western acolytes not to translate key Tibetan conceptual terms. Alternatively, they could be unconscious instances of emotionally charged terms which have become encoded in the language of the host country (as in the French *isolé*) or else maintained in another (i.e., *dzogchen*). The above examples show how Tibetan speakers are effectively maneuvering between different versions of reality, alternate places and times and indeed, versions of themselves.

Having grown up in a multicultural, multi-religious environment in India, Yeshi seemed at ease in the "brainstorm" of competing linguistic realities in his mind. In the following quote we see the fluidity of code-switching at work in his speech patterns:

> Les tibétains sont considérés ***low class*** en Inde – ***the Britishers had their impact back in the day***.[6]

A clue to the pragmatism behind the Tibetan attitude towards language usage came from a Tibetan businessman named Ngawang (45-50 years old; L1 Lhasa Tibetan, L2 Mandarin Chinese, L3 English, L4 French; 18 years in France). Our conversation began rather abruptly with the following declaration:

> Language is linked to culture – you have to change, you have to be like water, to act like water. Even to introduce yourself you have to change – in Chinese they ask *chi fan le ma?* ("Have you eaten?") [to greet one another]. […] In any society, you have to be like water, transparent but fluid, dynamic but with force. Water is strength, you must be strong. I have to figure it out for myself.[9]

Ngawang was more politically engaged in the Tibetan community in Paris than the majority of the study participants, and was, at times, visibly angry about China. Nevertheless, he made sure to speak excellent Mandarin when dealing with Chinese people, justifying himself thus:

> Speaking Chinese doesn't mean that I agree with China. If somebody doesn't know how to speak their own language, it is a great shame, but if I manage to speak your language, that gives [me] a kind of pride. I show respect by speaking other people's languages – I am still proud, even if it isn't my mother tongue. It is absolutely strategic. I don't feel strange about it, because I know deep down that I'm Tibetan. That's what strength is (Ngawang).

[6] Author's translation: "The Tibetans are considered low class in India – the Britishers had their impact back in the day." We note also that despite his large linguistic repertoire, Yeshi's code-switching only included those languages which I could understand. The term "Britisher" is a colonial-era term used in India to refer to the British Occupying Forces, and its usage here was, I believe, intentional.

[9] Ngawang was aware of my language profile, and his code-switching was also tailored accordingly. His quotes are my translations from his original French.

Figure 3: Detail from a traditional Tibetan *thangka* depicting the Paani (Water) Buddha (Thangka Portal 2025)

Here language fluidity can be considered a ("negative") act of resistance – an affirmation of agency and autonomy in the face of external pressures. Himalayan peoples (including the Tibetans – see McGranahan 2018; Scott 2009; Shneiderman 2010; 2015) have a long, proud history of resistance, although this is generally based on refusal rather than engagement practices, both in a literal sense, by physically disappearing into high mountain ravines when pursued, or else, in more abstract ways, such as refusing to accept Indian citizenship status, not participating in local census surveys or, in this case, by refusing to let their guard down when using the various languages at their disposal (especially with strangers). However, as nomadic groups living in isolated, often treacherous terrains, these same groups also have a long history of using adaptation and integration strategies, especially when using language. Code-switching has long been known in Tibet as "halfgoat half-sheep speech" (Tibetan: ra ma lug skad ར་མ་$ག་&ད་), and while in the past such practices were seen as markers of a good education, they are now increasingly discouraged by the CTA so as to promote a cohesive monolinguistic community which is imagined as "pure," "clean" or "immaculate" (Anderson 2016[1983]; Roche 2014; Thurston 2018a, 2018b; Tournadre & Suzuki 2023).

Conclusion

> (Author) The uncertainty, I feel it too.
>
> (Gyatso) And that's called what? Impermanent. Change, you know? [laughs] Everything is changing, you know?

The particular circumstances of the Tibetan community in Paris demonstrate how every immigrant has their own unique relationships with various realities, which are knitted together from competing ideas about family and the State, the before and the after, the outside and the inside, and so on. While much of social anthropology focuses on the "ingroup" in isolation, this approach cannot be so easily applied to immigrant communities, as so much of their daily reality consists of interactions with a foreign Other. By conducting interviews in non-native languages, my work mimics the confusion, fatigue and performance of immigrant realities, and in doing so, reveals something of the emotionally sticky fault-lines between two (or more) competing value systems at work in individual minds-in-action. Similar future studies focusing on linguistic fluidity conducted by multilingual Tibetan-language speakers would bring much-needed further clarification on the different types of communicative performance which the Tibetans are producing in various social contexts.

Any work into emotion and language production is by its very nature ephemeral, reflexive and subjective, so it is important to try to contextualize a given group's micro- and macrocosmic realities as fully as possible before attempting analysis, and to be mindful of the limitations of this kind of approach. Given the gossamer web which constitutes an individual's relationship with their national identities and senses of belonging, State policies based on overly broad notions of integration or even assimilation are, at best, unhelpful, at worst, potentially harmful. An awareness of multilingual issues, and the multitude of feeling-worlds which they can create, is thus vital for any study into immigration, as it allows us to stand on the bridge between internal and external migrant realities.

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