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Politicisation of Young Tibetans in Canada


Fondation Pierre du Bois
pour l'histoire du temps présent

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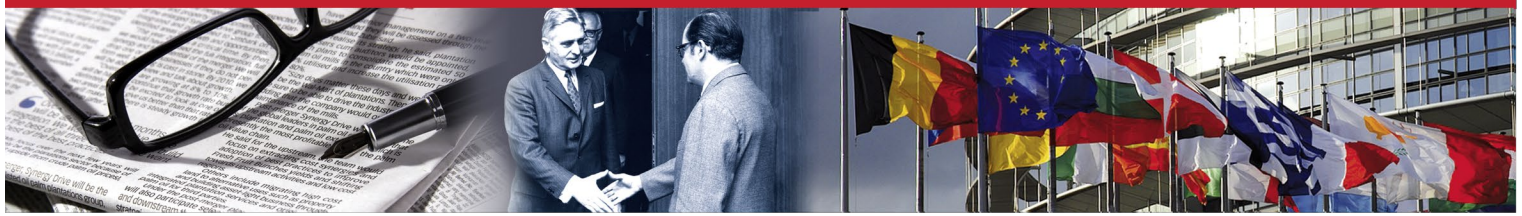
Politicisation of Young Tibetans in Canada

Tibetans in Canada, and especially in Toronto, where the vast majority of them is currently located, are highly mobilised on a wide range of issues, including the cause of Tibet, the defence of migrant and refugee communities, Black Lives Matter (BLM), human rights and the global climate crisis. This was the conclusion I reached during my fieldwork in Toronto in September-October 2019. I wanted to understand how such a young refugee community had been able to get mobilised so fast. And more precisely: Where does this interest in both Tibetan and non-Tibetan issues come from? How come Tibetans are more active in Canada than in many other places in the Tibetan diaspora? What are the various steps Tibetans in Toronto go through to become socially and politically active? I assumed that answers to these questions could first be found in the history of Tibetan settlement in Canada, so this is where this brief essay begins. I will then focus more specifically on the involvement of young Tibetans in the everyday life of the Tibetan diaspora in Toronto, before presenting a few examples of successful participation in local politics.

The Tibetan Diaspora in Canada

The Tibetan diaspora dates back to 1959, when, following the Dalai Lama's own flight to India, tens of thousands of Tibetans left Tibet to seek refuge in India, Nepal and, to a lesser extent, Bhutan. For decades, Tibetans have sought to build a strong Tibetan community in exile, under the leadership of the Dalai Lama and the Tibetan government-in-exile. I have argued elsewhere that the role envisioned for the camplike structure of the settlements, among other things preserving and promoting a Tibetan national identity, has long prevented the Tibetan government-in-exile from encouraging South Asian Tibetans to resettle in a Western country (Bentz 2010). This started to change in the 1990s with the Tibetan U.S. Resettlement Project (TUSRP). The project, according to Hess, started "a craze of occidental longing" for Tibetans in India and Nepal (Hess 2006, 88). Tibetan migration to Canada, which picked up in the early 2000s, can be seen as part of that craze/process of further diasporisation.

Before that, however, the first Tibetans to arrive in Canada came through a programme launched by the Canadian government in July 1970. They were dispatched across Alberta, Manitoba, Ontario, Quebec and Saskatchewan. Their story has recently become of interest for Tibetans in Canada who mobilise around the Chyssem Project [*chyssem*: sense of community spirit in Tibetan], which aims "to create a permanent archival record about the first Tibetans who arrived in Canada in the early 1970s" and, to mark the 50th anniversary of Tibetan



Papiers d'actualité / Current Affairs in Perspective

N°7 | September 2023

immigration to Canada in 2021, “[to include] the Tibetan immigration story as part of the Canadian Museum of Immigration at Pier 21 collection.”¹

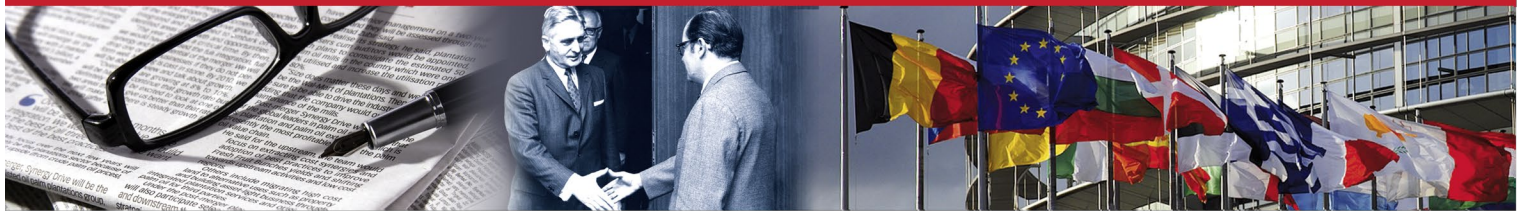
Yet this initial small group of Tibetans did not grow much in the following years, or even decades, and it was not until the early 2000s that Canada received an influx of new Tibetans who came, not as part of any scheme, but spontaneously. This spontaneous arrival of new Tibetans happened mainly because Canada was perceived as a better location than the United States (Logan 2010, 39-40; MacPherson, Bentz, and Ghoso 2008). These Tibetans were not dispatched across Canada. Many of them chose to settle down in Toronto – in 2016, out of the 8,040 Tibetans living in Canada, 6,035 lived in the Greater Toronto Area, including 5,430 concentrating in Toronto City (2016 Canadian Census). These figures were re-estimated at 8,000 (Ontario) in 2020 (CTA 2020) and it is quite safe to assume that the Tibetan population in Toronto is still growing. The reason for that is, as Logan notes, that: “Toronto was a popular destination for the new arrivals because it is the largest Tibetan settlement in Canada and now one of the largest outside Asia.” There seems indeed to have been some kind of virtuous circle at play from the early 2000s onwards. Toronto soon was at the heart of a chain migration process: the more Tibetans came to Toronto, the more Toronto attracted new Tibetans (Logan 2010, 42-43). Even the Tibetans who were part of the second organised resettlement programme, the 1,000 Project, settled down in Toronto between November 2013 and July 2018. And, in Toronto, it is fair to say that all these Tibetans first came to one neighbourhood in particular – Parkdale.

Parkdale has numerous Tibetan businesses and restaurants, mainly on or around Queen Street, which is the neighbourhood’s main artery, and is officially home to 2,360 Tibetan-Canadians (2016 Canadian Census). This “Tibetan ‘hub’ in Toronto” (Logan 2010, 1) has become known as “Little Tibet” (e.g. Loriggio 2008). Parkdale, as researches conducted on the neighbourhood have confirmed, has a long tradition of being an attractive area of settlement for newly arrived low-income immigrants (Whitzman 2009; Whitzman and Slater 2006). Relatively affordable rental housing and good accessibility by public transit to downtown Toronto may thus explain why new Tibetans were, just like many other newly arrived immigrants before, literally pouring in the neighbourhood in the 2000s. Another reason, as explained before, may be that some earlier Tibetans had already settled down there. This makes of Parkdale a neighbourhood where Tibetans can develop a sense of community – through networking, socializing with friends, family, and the broader Tibetan community (Logan and Murdie 2016). However, the neighbourhood is going through a gentrification process, which is slowly affecting the Tibetan community as well (Whitzman 2009). A noticeable consequence is that, if low-income housing is still available, homeownership is now almost impossible. This seems to have prompted some Tibetans, as I have noted during my own fieldwork, to move to other areas of Toronto, such as Saint Clair (north of Parkdale) or Etobicoke (west of Parkdale). Etobicoke is indeed where another cluster of Tibetans is forming – with 1,475 Tibetans registered in Etobicoke Lakeshore (South Etobicoke) (2016 Canadian Census). This can be explained by the presence of the Tibetan Canadian Cultural Centre (TCCC), which has rapidly become the main Tibetan space in Toronto (Logan and Murdie 2016, 107).

Political and Social Mobilisation

I have started this analysis by saying that Tibetans in Canada were highly mobilised on a wide range of issues. If we are to make sense of their political and social mobilisation, one of the first things to do, in my view, is to distinguish between the different issues they tackle. I have offered elsewhere a distinction which I found quite useful, i.e. a distinction between two types of mobilisation – inward-looking and outward-looking (Bentz 2022). This is not the usual typology used by Diaspora and Migration Scholars, but there are some overlaps, which I have highlighted here in brackets. I use inward-looking mobilisation to refer to mobilisation for and within the Tibetan community that is concerned with specifically Tibetan issues – the Tibetan community in Canada (“immigrant politics”) or the cause of Tibet (“homeland politics”). This amounts to exploring the process through which young Tibetans in Toronto become Tibetan activists. I then use outward-looking mobilisation to refer to mobilisation happening outside the Tibetan community around non-Tibetan issues that are, for different reasons, of concern for Tibetans (“political integration”). It is this shift of focus, from ethnic and transnational politics to local politics, that is

¹ See <https://www.thechyssemproject.com/>.



Papiers d'actualité / Current Affairs in Perspective

N°7 | September 2023

of special interest to us here. I intend now to look at it through the life trajectories of some young Tibetans in Canada, some of which have become role models for the entire Tibetan community.

We have seen that Canada, and especially Toronto which can already boast of having the two biggest Tibetan neighbourhoods in the country, is a propitious context for Tibetans. Not only do they feel at home, they are also granted a status of permanent residents which enables them to stay there and, in due course, to become Canadian citizens. They also have access to social benefits and health care and, given the situation of the job market, it is relatively easy for them to find employment. This had been noticed before (McGranahan 2018), but was confirmed by many of my respondents. Of course, what interests us here is that all of the above make their life easy enough for them to consider devoting time and sometimes also money to mobilise for Tibet and the Tibetan community.

This is a short list of what they were doing when I conducted my fieldwork. They organise protests, demonstrations and marches, they sign petitions, they pray, they initiate campaigns, they celebrate Tibetan New Year, Tibetan Independence Day (Feb. 13), Tibetan Uprising Day (March 10), the Dalai Lama's birthday (July 6) and Human Rights Day (Dec. 10), they organise film and food festivals (Toronto Tibet Film Festival and Eat for Tibet), they dance (Lhakar²) and they participate in action camps. This seems to happen every year, but special events are also organised for special occasions. A case in point is the major protests organised at the time of the Beijing Olympics in 2008 – for many Tibetans in Toronto, as my respondents recalled, this worked like an awakening of sort.

But the question still remains: why are Tibetans in Canada so mobilised? Is it enough to have time, and some money, to start organising events of various sorts for the Tibetan community or to defend the Tibetan cause? Canada may work as a propitious context for many newly arrived migrants, but why do some migrants jump on the opportunities offered, when others do not? I have argued that this comparatively high degree of mobilisation comes from the politicisation process that young Tibetans go through in Toronto (Bentz 2022).

There are various Tibetan organisations in Toronto, which I will come back to, but, as I have already stated, the Tibetan Canadian Cultural Centre (TCCC) has become the main Tibetan space in Toronto. Parents accompany children there on a weekly basis to follow language and dance classes, but also, even if less regularly, to attend sporting events. Most Tibetan-related events in Toronto, be they political, social or religious, are organised there. Not all Tibetans go to all events, but, all in all, most Tibetans go there at least a couple of times a year. I have shown that this is where children maintain or develop a sense of belonging to the community, while teenagers and young adults learn about mobilisation and get acquainted with mobilisation techniques. There is no denying that those are formative years. The Tibetan Canadian Cultural Centre (TCCC) helps young Tibetans acquire a membership identity, a political awareness, which is centred on the Tibetan community and the Tibetan cause, and the skills needed to become politically and socially active. The role played by political entrepreneurs and organisations, which has often been regarded as central in migrant mobilisation (Adamson 2012, 41; Koinova 2017, 600; Sökefeld 2006, 269-270 and 275-276), is highlighted here again.

The Tibetan Canadian Cultural Centre (TCCC) can thus be said to be at the heart of the first step of the politicisation process – the learning phase. The next step is about commitment and involvement. What happens next to these young Tibetans? Some will stay at the centre, as teachers or as members of the executive committee, while others will join associations for young Tibetans. This is when other Tibetan organisations start playing a role in the politicisation process. I will base my analysis on two of the most influential organisations at the time of my fieldwork – Students for a Free Tibet (SFT) and the Tibetan Women's Association (TWA).

Students for a Free Tibet (SFT)³ has a 4,000-strong network of volunteers across Canada. The main activities offered by the organisation are demonstrations, action camps, food festivals and concerts. The main focus of these activities is, as expected, on Tibet, but, over the years, Students for a Free Tibet (SFT) – Canada has also joined many local and global campaigns. Fight against global warming is one

² Lhakar is a political movement that appeared in Tibet in 2008 following the Tibetan uprising against Chinese rule in the context of the 2008 Beijing Olympics. It advocates the weaponisation of culture. To that effect, it can take various forms – with dances being one of the most popular forms of this new cultural activism.

³ See <https://studentsforafreetibet.org/about/> and <https://www.sftcanada.org/>.



Papiers d'actualité / Current Affairs in Perspective

N°7 | September 2023

of them: when I was in Toronto, the organisation had been invited to talk at the Global Climate Strike. Interestingly, this was taken as an opportunity to put in the limelight Tibet's climate crisis and China's responsibility therein, which highlights the compatibility of defending the cause of Tibet and other (non-Tibetan) international causes. Other examples include rent strikes and housing campaigns organised by Parkdale Neighbourhood Land Trust: here again, we can see how a local (non-Tibetan) issue is invested by Tibetans who are also directly affected. Students for a Free Tibet (SFT) is quite popular among young Tibetans in Toronto. This explains why they want to get more involved in the organisation, for instance by offering to spend some time on the board or by starting a new chapter at a local university. The Tibetan Women's Association (TWA),⁴ which is more socially oriented than Students for a Free Tibet (SFT), also plays a significant role for young Tibetan women. If most of its social activities are specifically directed at women and the elderly within the community, some of its political activities are addressed to the whole community. The best example of my fieldwork would be the Lhakar dances organised weekly in front of the Parkdale Collegiate Institute during the summer months.

Another striking feature which may explain the commitment of young Tibetans is the support of the entire community. My fieldwork showed that active young Tibetans are held in high esteem and are very well supported by the Tibetan community. To this support, the parents' role should be added, especially when there is a family history of activism. Young Tibetans then have an extra-incentive to mobilise for the Tibetan community. We may wonder, especially in such cases, whether the choice to mobilise is entirely free. None of the Tibetans I interviewed mentioned social pressure as one of the reasons to get involved, as was the case in other studies conducted in other Tibetan communities (e.g. Lauer 2015 for Switzerland). I would say that inspiration or emulation are more adequate notions than pressure to describe the young Tibetans' desire to get politically active. Tibetan children transform into Tibetan activists. What happens next?

Vogel proposes a model of the activation process among migrants, i.e. a process whereby migrants become highly active in a new country (Vogel 2008b). She stresses the importance of: activities prior to civic organisational involvement, founding immigrants organisations, being recruited for initial activities and intensification of organisational involvement. This is strikingly similar to what happens to Tibetans in Toronto: children follow Tibetan language classes and attend other cultural and sporting activities at the Tibetan Canadian Cultural Centre (TCCC); teenagers and young adults join Tibetan organisations such as Students for a Free Tibet (SFT) or the Tibetan Women's Association (TWA) and are asked to perform small tasks, such as typing reports, handing leaflets and participating in demonstrations and other events; young adults and adults get leadership positions in Tibetan organisations or found other Tibetan organisations. It is this specific background, which I have referred to as the politicisation process that young Tibetans go through in Toronto, that, in this case also, explains why Tibetans get interested, and, more importantly still, politically involved in Canadian affairs. In other words: this is what explains the often smooth transition from inward-looking to outward-looking activism.

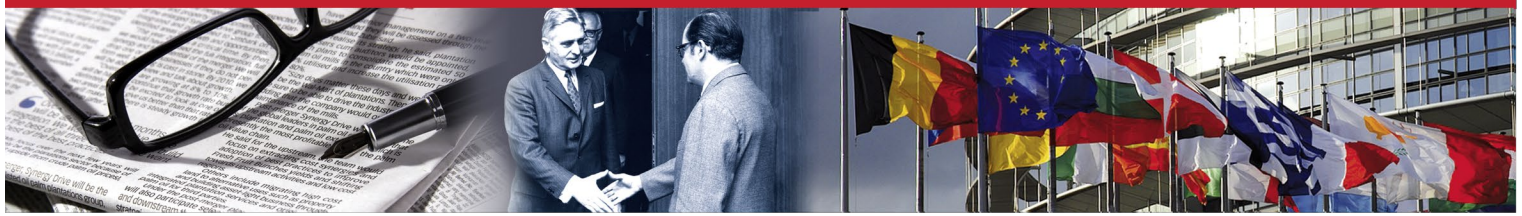
Local Politics

To better understand the involvement of young Tibetans in Canadian affairs, and here, more specifically, in local politics, I will follow the path of three pioneers – Bhutila Karpoche, Kalsang Dolma and Chemi Lhamo, i.e. the first three Tibetan women who ran for office in Toronto.

Bhutila Karpoche, the incumbent Member of Provincial Parliament (MPP) for Parkdale-High Park, is a star among Tibetans worldwide. She was elected in 2018 and re-elected in 2022. She is also a very popular politician in Toronto, as can be seen from various news reports in local newspapers and magazines.⁵ Her career is typical of the politicisation process that young Tibetans go through in Toronto. She went/was sent to follow dance and language classes at Tibetan Canadian Cultural Centre (TCCC) as a child, then got involved with Students

⁴ See <https://tibetanwomen.org/> and <https://www.facebook.com/TibetanWomensAssociationofOntario>.

⁵ She was voted Toronto's Best Local Politician by *Toronto Star* readers, Toronto's Best MPP by *NOW Magazine* readers, and named one of Toronto's Most Inspirational Women of the year in 2019. See <https://www.bhutilakarpoche.ca/>.



Papiers d'actualité / Current Affairs in Perspective

N°7 | September 2023

for a Free Tibet (STF), where she had a leadership role at the time of the 2008 Beijing Olympics. She then became a member of the board at the Tibetan Canadian Cultural Centre (TCCC), a position that she held briefly while working for the team of former Member of Provincial Parliament (MPP) for Parkdale-High Park Cheri DiNovo. She won the party's nomination (New Democratic Party (NDP)) to campaign for the 2018 Ontario General Election and she is now serving a second mandate.

Kalsang Dolma is in a somewhat different situation. She arrived in Toronto as an adult. She got involved with the Tibetan artistic community right away, notably by founding DreBu, an association encouraging Tibetan artists. She also developed a strong attachment to Parkdale, where she became "a settlement worker and community organizer" (Dolma 2018) – she has worked with Parkdale Community Information Centre (PCIC) and Parkdale Community Legal Services (PCLS), both of which address the needs of Parkdale's vulnerable and marginalised people. It is her life as a community activist that led her to local politics. With the help of husband and campaign manager Gelek Badheysang, whose background as a Tibetan in Toronto is somewhat similar to Bhutla Karpoche's, having also been in a leadership position with Students for a Free Tibet (SFT) during the 2008 Beijing Olympics, she ran for council during the Toronto Election in 2018.

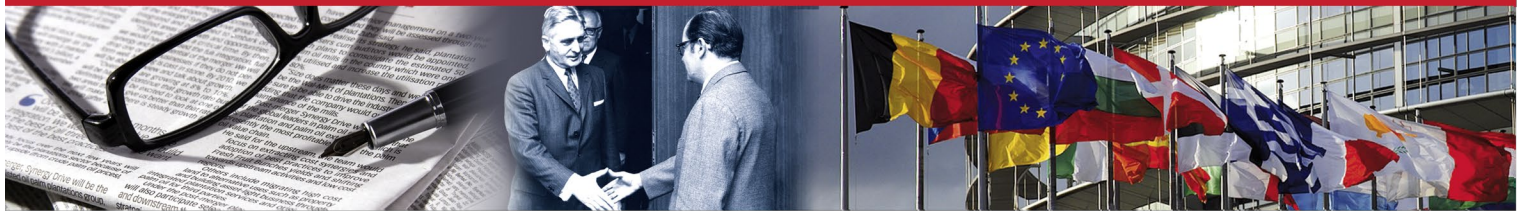
Chemi Lhamo is yet another typical, but younger, example of the politicisation process that young Tibetans go through in Toronto. She was an active member of Students for a Free Tibet (SFT), before becoming president of the University of Toronto Scarborough Student Union in 2019. The move from inward- to outward-looking mobilisation meant, for her, an interest in student politics. She then became a human rights advocate and a community organiser in Parkdale, much like Bhutla Karpoche and Kalsang Dolma before her. This is where, like Kalsang Dolma in the previous election, she was candidate for council in the Toronto Election in 2022.

These three trajectories, to which that of Gelek Badheysang could be added, are, in my view, a testimony to the high sense of political activism among Tibetans in Toronto. The politicisation process that they went through in the Tibetan community has borne fruit – active migrants have become active citizens as the mindset and the skills developed within the Tibetan community have been reinvested in the local community.

What about other Tibetans? They may not be just as committed or may not yet have the same success as these three illustrious predecessors, but they are very much part of the political game, or about to be – not just as a bank of votes, but as players. The National Democratic Party (NDP) started hiring Tibetans in the 2010s (including Bhutla Karpoche). If this can be seen as a strategic move in a neighbourhood whose Tibetan population has been growing fast, the need of the political party seems to have matched a desire on the Tibetans' part to get involved in local political life.

Conclusion

There are many other cases where migrants go through a similar politicisation process (Vogel 2008a). However, what might be different in this case, is the widespread, overwhelming and unified character of the Tibetan mobilisation. Tibetans in Toronto vary from other migrant communities in Canada with a political agenda, such as the Tamils and the Kurds, because the beginning of the politicisation process depends on one main organisation – the Tibetan Canadian Cultural Centre (TCCC). The other organisations, which are joined next, also convey a similar political message about Tibet. Hence the seemingly unified character of the Tibetan mobilisation. But Tibetans in Toronto are also different from Tibetans in other parts of the world where sizeable Tibetan communities can be found. This is due both to the history of Tibetan settlement in Toronto and to the possibilities offered by Canada in terms of status, social help, employment, etc... all of which enable them to develop a relation with the country, and with Toronto especially, that leads them to be first interested and later involved in local politics.



Papiers d'actualité / Current Affairs in Perspective

N°7 | September 2023

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Papiers d'actualité / Current Affairs in Perspective

N°7 | September 2023

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Papiers d'actualité / Current Affairs in Perspective

N°7 | September 2023