

Project Report

Mediating the Tibet Resettlement Project in Canada: An Assessment of the Impact of New Media on Religion and Diversity

Dr. C. Helland (PI), Dr. A. Halafoff (Research Associate),

1. Project Goals;

This project explored two key aspects concerning the Tibetan Resettlement project in Canada. The first research question examined how the Tibetan community used various forms of media to promote the peaceful and supportive acceptance of Tibetan Buddhist refugees into Canada. The second aspect of the research examined how the Tibetan Resettlement Project used various forms of new media to socially construct “Tibetan Buddhism” and forms of “Tibetanness” for the Canadian public to consume.

2. Researchers and Students Involved;

Primary Investigator: Christopher Helland, Dalhousie University

Research Associate: Anna Halafoff, Deakin University

Student Research Assistants: Jennifer Yakamovich (BA Honours Religious Studies 2015 MA Candidate), Rinzin Ngudup (MA 2015/ PhD Application to Dalhousie Fall 2017)

3. Rationale;

Beginning in the early 1970's a large number of Tibetan refugees began immigrating to Canada. Within thirty years, Canada held one of the largest concentrations of Tibetans outside of Asia (estimated in 2006 to be 4,300 and growing). In 2007, The Dalai Lama met with Prime Minister Stephen Harper to discuss refugee issues and the Tibetan situation. In December of 2010, based upon this earlier dialogue, the Canadian Government announced that they would allow for 1000 displaced Tibetans living in India to immigrate to Canada under a special temporary public policy of the Immigration and Refugee Protection Act. By March 2011, applications for permanent residence were being accepted and the resettlement process began in earnest. Although the Government has allowed for the relocation of these displaced Tibetans, they are providing no material support or forms of social assistance. Each person entering the country must have preapproved sponsorship to ensure their physical needs (including health care), language training, work placement, and housing will be met for a minimum of one year. Although the Canadian Tibetan Association has been active in sponsoring the refugees, the large number of those being granted permission to relocate has challenged them to move beyond the

Tibetan community and expand their outreach for support. With the creation of the “1000 Tibetans” campaign and a focused media effort by the Canadian Tibetan Association, an increasing amount of financial and material support is coming from non-Buddhist religious organizations (particularly Christian and Jewish groups) and the general public. Although the Tibetan refugees are deeply religious and committed to the Tibetan Buddhist Tradition, they have been able to promote their cause in such a way that they are being welcomed, supported, and accepted into Canada by competing religious groups and the secular public. This new immigration is significantly increasing their immigrant population and adding to the religious mosaic of the country.

The project examined how a particular religious diaspora within Canada has harnessed social media to promote respect, acceptance, and support for their community as they significantly increase their immigration. The research also explored how “mass media” and various news media were used by the Tibetan community to support and promote their cause. When promoting their cause, what aspects of the Buddhist tradition were promoted and what were hidden? Did they oversimplify their representation of Tibetan Buddhism by displaying a strong relationship with the Dalai Lama (and thereby relying upon his charisma and high level of public support) or did they present the complexity of the tradition, different schools of practice, and the various lineage holders? How did they deal with negative issues that arose on social media dealing with concerns over gender inequality, democratic reform, and counter-movements?

4. Methods;

The first phase of this research provided a detailed evaluation of the media resources used to promote the resettlement project within Canada. The identified material is being coded and examined through content analysis. This includes news and television reporting, print media, internet activity, social media (Facebook and Twitter). Semi-structured in-depth interviews have been conducted with members of the Tibetan Associations in Canada that have been actively engaged in promoting the resettlement project. The interviews have examined their views concerning media use, its benefits, its reach, and also its possible negative aspects. Interviews were also conducted with Dr. Lobsang Sangay (Prime Minister of the Tibetan Government in Exile) and Dr. Thubten Samphel (former Minister of Information for the Tibetan Government in Exile).

5. Ethics, permissions (include any delays);

Approved through Dalhousie REB certificate #3026

6. Summary of Activities

1) An Initial literature review was conducted by Jennifer Yakamovich examining current material on Tibetan resettlement and immigration.

2) Jennifer Yakamovich examined media stories and any news mentions of the Tibetan Resettlement Project in Canada (48 news stories in total). Stories were coded for content analysis.

3) Rinzin Ngodup examined online social media, including websites that promoted the Tibetan Resettlement Project in Canada. Websites, Public Facebook Groups, and Twitter mentions were coded for content analysis.

4) Interviews were conducted by PI with members from the Canadian Tibetan Association, Canadian Tibet Committee, Central Tibetan Administration, and Project Tibet Society.

5) Helland and Halafoff are currently reviewing all material.

7. Provisional Findings;

As the final interviews were completed in September of 2016, we are still developing our conclusions concerning the mediating of the Tibetan Resettlement Project in Canada. Some initial findings show the reliance of the Tibetan community of the charismatic and popular image of the Dalai Lama, the role of multi-faith and multi-cultural organizations in supporting their cause and the “homogenizing” effect of media representation in presenting a concept of “Tibetaness” to the Canadian public. Media was also used by Canadian Tibetan associations in countering negative criticisms of the Dalai Lama by Shugden Buddhists and protestors, in many ways to present a unified image of Tibetan Buddhism strongly linked with the charisma of the Dalai Lama.

8. Outputs;

Helland and Halafoff are co-writing an article for *The Journal of Contemporary Buddhism* on this case study. Material from the case study will also be used by Helland in a forthcoming book examining Digital Religion and the online activity of the Tibetan Diaspora Community. Helland may be presenting a paper at the upcoming ISSR Conference.