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Religious, Ecological, and Historical Politics in Inner
Asia, followed by Varia

Miss Tibet. Representing Tibet and Tibetan culture on the global stage

Miss Tibet. Représenter le Tibet et la culture tibétaine sur la scène mondiale

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Pema Choedon

- 1 Regarded by some as “low-brow culture” (Banet-Weiser 1999, p. 6; King-O’Riain 2005, p. 204) and deemed a site of women’s oppression – and thus antifeminist – beauty pageants have been widely studied from different perspectives and within different academic disciplines. Scholars like Sara Banet-Weiser (1999) and King-O’Riain (2007) have argued that beauty pageants are multifaceted arenas linked to issues of nation, ethnicity, culture, gender, and race. King-O’Riain argues that beauty pageants are “cultural forms of collective self-identity”, which can be “a site of action and interaction generating a process of cultural production that is deeply linked to claims to cultural authenticity, race, gender, and identity” (King-O’Riain 2007, p. 75), making it an arena that “embodies production points of cultural identity” (*ibid.*). Likewise, Cohen and Wilk are of the opinion that, “beauty contests are places where cultural meanings are produced, consumed, and rejected, where local and global, ethnic and national, national and international cultures and structures of power are engaged in their most trivial but vital aspects” (Cohen *et al.* 1996, p. 8).
- 2 Against this general theoretical backdrop, this article will explore how the Miss Tibet pageant encodes different cultural meanings in the transnational Tibetan diasporic community, in particular with regard to the Tibetan political struggle and Tibetan women’s empowerment. In doing so, the Miss Tibet pageant becomes more than just an arena of entertainment (which it is of course) but also a “reflection of larger social forces” in the community (King O’Riain 2005, p. 204). The article further suggests that in the Tibetan diaspora, the Miss Tibet pageant is even presented by some as a medium for promoting the Tibetan national struggle on the global stage through showcasing Tibet’s “traditional culture” in the form of dance, song, appearance, deportment, and dress, alongside the adaptability of Tibetans to globalised modernism. This is similar to the argument espoused by Cohen *et al.* (1996, p. 2) that beauty pageants are about “choosing an individual whose deportment, appearance, and style embodies the values

and goals of a nation, locality, group". As we shall see, the Miss Tibet pageant has, in this perspective, become a medium not only for advocating women's empowerment, but also for reinforcing a homogenous Tibetan national identity which can transcend significant regional differences.

- 3 Different kinds of beauty pageants around the world have been distinguished by scholars. Some are "mainstream", organised by the state or some other dominant stakeholders, while others, considered "ethnic" or "indigenous" pageants, have emerged in response to these mainstream iterations (McAllister 1996; Banet-Weiser 1999; Lieu 2000; Schackt 2005; King-O'Riain 2005, 2008), generally as a validation of women of minority or marginalized ethnicities and their culture (King-O'Riain 2008, p. 79). For instance, the first Miss Black America pageant in the USA was staged in 1968 as "a break away action" to respond to the exclusion of women of colour from the Miss America pageant (Craig 2002), while in Ecuador, indigenous pageants such as "Chonta Huarmi" (Chonta Palm Woman) in Archidona and "Sara Nusta" (Corn Princess) in Otavalo are part of a larger effort by indigenous political organizations to "seize control of and separate out of the larger society" which is primarily dominated by those of European decent, in an attempt to make a clear cultural distinction from "the larger" society (Rogers 1999, pp. 57-58).
- 4 As a pageant within a community of political refugees, the Miss Tibet contest has had, since its inception, a decidedly political agenda, somewhat similar to that of the Hoa Hau Dai Contest through which the Vietnamese diasporic community in the USA has attempted to promote its "imagined nation" and political identity (Lieu 2000). Clearly, by using women's bodies as symbols of a collective identity or as a medium through which to express the political or other collective concerns of a minority community, beauty pageants can serve different purposes, as defined by those communities themselves. However, pageants can also be state-sponsored "minority cultural shows", with very different agendas. This was exemplified by the Miss Tibet pageant in 1992 in Lhasa, Tibet (McGranahan 1996), which was designed to showcase the benign and emancipatory policies of the Chinese state towards a "national minority"¹.
- 5 As King-O'Riain observes, within a beauty pageant, a "cultural script" may be enacted and evoked by statements by participants such as, "It isn't about beauty, it's about culture", and "I don't want to win, I just want to participate to serve the community" (King-O'Riain 2008, p. 75). The fact that there is "something more" than glamour and glitz going on in a beauty pageant is at the root of their enduring attraction for ethnographers (Cohen *et al.* 1996, pp. 7-8), and also adds to the experience of both audience and participants themselves.
- 6 The empirical material for this article has two main sources. The first source are the opinions of the "viewed subjects" regarding their lived experiences as participants – and in some cases, as winners – of the Miss Tibet pageant. Extensive online interviews were conducted in both English and in Tibetan, between August and November 2020 with ten former participants (aged 21-38) in Miss Tibet pageants from 2002 to 2018, including some winners. The second are the perspectives of "viewing subjects"², collected by means of an online questionnaire which probed the purpose of the Miss Tibet pageant, its contribution towards maintaining cultural traditions, and views concerning the controversial bikini or swimsuit round of the pageant³. Obtaining viewing subjects' opinions on these issues through an online survey made it possible to arrive at a better understanding of patterns in the outlook on the pageant among

interested Tibetans who were not themselves participants. Sixty-two Tibetans from different walks of life and living in different parts of the world responded to the online survey, between August and December 2020. Forty-five of these were from India, four from Nepal, and thirteen from Europe and North America.

- 7 The respondents from India lived in Dharamsala as well as in different Tibetan settlements, such as Bylakuppe, Mungod, Ravangla, and Hunsur. Of the respondents, twenty-eight were men while thirty-four were women. I divided them into three age groups: 14 to 30 years (thirty-four respondents), 31 to 40 years (fifteen respondents), and over 40 years (eight respondents). Five respondents did not give their age. When analysing the result of my survey, I could not find any significant difference between the age groups in the answers. The same is true with regard to where the informants lived⁴. Responses to the online survey conducted for this research obviously reflect only a small sample of public opinion. However, as Michael Burawoy argues, “Insofar as meaning, attitudes, and even knowledge do not reside with individuals but are constituted in social situations” (Burawoy 1998, p. 12), similarly, the respondents’ opinions on the pageant are inevitably embedded in larger social contexts. Moreover, he argues that a micro-level ethnographic account can be used to understand larger social structures (*ibid.*, p. 5).
- 8 In addition to these two main sources of data, I also interviewed the director of the pageant, Lobsang Wangyal, during a short fieldtrip to Majnu-ka Tilla, Delhi, and again in Dharamsala, India, in 2019. I also interviewed a few other Tibetans. Finally, I will refer to my own experience, having myself participated in the Miss Tibet pageant in 2015, carried this title for a year, been to an international beauty pageant representing “Tibet”, and having observed the pageant in 2016 as the outgoing Miss Tibet.

Historical and cultural context

- 9 Before discussing the Miss Tibet pageant, it might be useful to sketch the history of the Tibetan diasporic community, sometimes also referred to as the Tibetan exile community, and its political agenda. Approximately 100 000 Tibetans fled Chinese-occupied Tibet after the escape of His Holiness the Dalai Lama to India in 1959. Today their descendants are scattered around the world from North America to Europe and Australia, but still mostly concentrated in India where the Tibetan government in exile, now known as the Central Tibetan Administration (CTA), has its headquarters in the small town of Dharamsala in the Himalayan foothills in the state of Himachal Pradesh.
- 10 Tibetans in the diaspora continue to struggle for “free Tibet”, although over the years, the goal has changed from campaigning for complete independence to the “genuine autonomy” of what is now regarded in the diaspora as the three traditional Tibetan provinces now incorporated in the People’s Republic of China. This shift, known as the Middle Way Approach, was proposed by the Dalai Lama in 1988 in the hope of arriving at a peaceful resolution of the Tibet issue through negotiations with the Chinese government. Although there are Tibetans in the diaspora who continue to demand complete independence for Tibet, the majority now accept the Middle Way Approach.

The setting

- 11 The Miss Tibet beauty pageant appeared in the Tibetan diaspora in India when Lobsang Wangyal organized the first Miss Tibet in Dharamsala in 2002. Lobsang Wangyal is active in the diaspora community as a cultural entrepreneur, and is the founder not only of the Miss Tibet pageant, but also of the Miss Himalaya pageant, as well as the Tibetan Music Award.
- 12 The pageant's precursor was a cultural event Lobsang Wangyal had organized in Dharamsala two years earlier. At that time, he said, he realized that there were few contributions from women in art or other forms of creativity in connection with festivals in the Tibetan diasporic community. His ambition, therefore, was to contribute to changing this⁵. The first Miss Tibet pageant staged in exile garnered widespread media attention around the world with lofty titles such as "Pretty independent" (*Time*, Baker 2002), "Miss Tibet off to controversial start" (BBC News 2002), and "Miss Tibet generates lively Yak among exiles" (*The Guardian*, Harding 2002). The first ever Miss Tibet recalled that the representatives of the media were more numerous than the general audience, especially in the swimsuit round. Although Miss Tibet resembles many other beauty pageants around the world, it also has its own unique features – there are only a small number of participants, there are no big sponsors, and the judges are without experience from similar events.
- 13 Since its establishment the Miss Tibet pageant has become one of the most popular modern cultural events in the Tibetan diaspora organized by Tibetans and with only Tibetan contestants, complete with bikinis, crowns, firecrackers, loud music, and excited audiences. It is also widely followed and commented on in social media. The winners and other prominent contestants have become public figures and have often gained considerable social media followings. The climax of the event is the final night when the silver crown is placed on the head of the winner. Her triumphant look, holding the crown with one hand and waving like a queen with the other, mimicking western beauty pageants and beaming through flashlights blinding her but highlighting her face as she gazes into the boisterous audience, captures the night and becomes the topic of talk and discussion for many days and months in the Tibetan diaspora community around the world, and especially in India.
- 14 In the Tibetan diasporic community, the Miss Tibet pageant may be considered an expression of modern folk culture rather than being a centralized and institutionalized event. There is no backing from the CTA or any major Tibetan organization in the diaspora. Although in 2010 the director of the Miss Tibet pageant tried to develop a collaboration with Kingfisher, a large Indian national company, and again in 2018 with Engaged Entertainment based in New York, these initiatives were not so successful and did not continue. The pageant therefore has only been able to continue because of the participation of the young Tibetan women participants themselves who are their own sponsors, small donations from individuals in the Tibetan community and westerners who view the pageant in a positive light, and personal investment from the director himself.
- 15 The Miss Tibet pageant has eight rounds of performance, beginning with a press conference where the contestants are called upon to speak out in front of an assembled media pack made up of local news reporters, some Indian national reporters, and the diasporic Tibetan community reporters, who interview the contestants about their

motivation and hopes of winning the pageant. Generally, these young women have never spoken in public before. The most controversial round is the subsequent swimsuit round to which I shall return below. It is followed by a talk and talent rounds, for which the contestants have been given a topic on which to present a month or two earlier. The remaining four rounds all take place on the finale night: an introduction round in which the contestants introduce themselves to a larger audience and give an extempore speech generally related to Tibetan issues; followed by a ramp walk in western gown, and finally a cat walk in traditional Tibetan costume. The pageant ends with a further interview round. Altogether, the Miss Tibet pageant takes from four or five to ten days, depending upon the funding available⁶.

- 16 The contestants must fulfil certain formal criteria such as having a Green Book⁷, which proves that one is a Tibetan in exile and that a small tax to the CTA has been paid. Other criteria are that they must be between the age of seventeen and twenty-five (recently the age has been extended to twenty-seven). They must have a minimum height of 165 cm (which from my own experience as a contestant I know is not followed strictly), and lastly, they must be unmarried. The number of contestants has always remained low, and sometimes there has only been a single contestant, who is then declared to be the winner, as was the case in 2013, 2014, and 2018⁸. The highest number of contestants so far was in 2017, when ten participants entered.

Controversy surrounding the Miss Tibet pageant

- 17 With regard to the controversy beauty pageants regularly arouse, Cohen *et al.* have stated that, “[...] beauty contests are almost always [...] riven by scandal, discord, and dispute. There is always a division between frontstage and backstage, a rupture between the objective selection of a winner in the main event, and all the other interests that both contestants and viewers know are influencing the outcome: the commercial, the class-based, the personal, the political” (Cohen *et al.* 1996, p. 7). Since its advent in 2002, Miss Tibet has been no exception to this. It has been a hotbed of dispute, with several exile Tibetan leaders opposing it. In 2002 Samdhong Rinpoche, the then Prime Minister of the CTA criticized the first pageant as “un-Tibetan” and “against Buddhist principles” (Wangyal 2011). On another occasion he was recorded saying, clearly directing his criticism towards the Miss Tibet pageant, that “Tibet is respected because of its spirituality and its cultural traditions in the world. The Tibetan cause stands on that basis [...]. Just imitating western culture will never help the Tibetan cause [...]. We are firm believers in the fact that the body is the home of the conscience [...]. Beauty is skin-deep and there can be no such contest of individuals wherein inner virtues could be put to the test” (Walker 2004)⁹. More recently, when asked about the Miss Tibet pageant in a conversation with one of the participants of the 2011 pageant, the then CTA Prime Minister, Lobsang Sangay, responded, specifically targeting the bikini round, “Not that I am against Miss Tibet but I feel uncomfortable to see Tibetan women in swimsuit”¹⁰. In contrast to these views, in 2016 and again in 2017 the Dalai Lama allowed his picture to be taken with all the participants (Miss Tibet 2017)¹¹.
- 18 Others, among them lay people, have criticized the Miss Tibet pageant as “ill-timed, undesirable and uncalled-for” (Harding 2002). A 67-year-old man who lives in Dharamsala, expressed the view that, “Yes, this is a democratic society but the young

generation should remember that we don't have a country, we don't have a home, we are refugees – all we have is our tradition and religion. They should focus on conserving and nurturing that” (Pokharel 2017).

- 19 When I interviewed Dolma Yangchen, the Director of Tibetan Women's Association, she argued, without openly opposing the pageant, that women's beauty should not be defined by outer appearance but should be measured on the basis of capability and skill. She further maintained that young Tibetan women can “channel” their talents to other more meaningful platforms,

Why do young and educated girls unnecessarily participate in the beauty pageant which is laden with controversies? Why not exhibit their talents elsewhere? I feel that young Tibetan women should take on specialist studies and through hard work should compete with women from other countries for higher position [...]. The beauty in the Miss Tibet pageant is someone else's creation [...]. I find no importance in it because you lose your way at some point¹².

- 20 Dolma Tsering, the first winner of the Miss Tibet pageant in 2002, who now lives in Canada recalled with bitterness that, “the Tibetan community was furious” when it took place. As she remembered it, Samdhong Rinpoche, who as noted above was the then Prime Minister of the CTA, said, “Tibetan women wearing swimming costume and having a beauty pageant was against Tibetan culture, Tibetan religion and Tibetan history”¹³.

- 21 Not only conservatively-inclined Tibetans, but also some feminists who are referred to as “women's right militant” (*bud med thob thang 'thab rtsod pa*) have expressed opposition to the pageant, accusing it of promoting the objectification of the female body. Feminism is a new concept to the Tibetan diaspora, and there is no consensus about what it means. The term “feminism” generally has a negative association in the community, and is viewed as an unwanted foreign import; Tibetan women who consider themselves feminists are deemed as “copying western ideas” and regarded as “radical”. There are also examples of some men making fun of feminist claims¹⁴. Since the concept, feminism, is new to Tibetans, a series of terms have been coined in Tibetan to express it, for example “female struggle-ism” (*mo rtsod ring lugs*), “woman-ism” (*bud med ring lugs*), and “female character-ism/ condition-ism/ position-ism” (*mo chos ring lugs*). These terms are, however, neologisms and are still uncommon in everyday speech (Baimacuo & Jocoby 2020, p. 2). “Feminism” is also indicated by other Tibetan terms such as “gender equality” (*pho mo 'dra mnyam*), “women's empowerment” (*bud med nus stobs gong 'phel*, lit. “expansion of women's strength”), “women's rights” (*bud med kyi thob thang*), etc.

- 22 Feminism gained prominence with the launching of the website Tibetan Feminist Collective (*bod kyi mo rtsod ring lugs lhan tshogs*) by a few young Tibetan women living in India and the USA. In 2017, the Tibetan Feminist Collective attacked the Miss Tibet event's format as reflecting “western standards of beauty”, asserting, “Holding up skinny women with fair skin and straight noses on a pedestal holds us back as a society, although it is not limited to our particular group. We Tibetans vary immensely in terms of physical features – something to be celebrated and embraced” (Pokharel 2017).

- 23 In an interview with the author, one of the founders of the Tibetan Feminist Collective, Tenzin Kesang (who had by then had left the Collective), expressed the opinion that, “According to me, feminism is something personal, one defines it according to one's life. So, I don't think I would want to define the Tibetan feminism”. She believed that it

is not something “concrete but something that can evolve according to what we’ve learned, what we’ve experienced and what we think is important for our community”¹⁵.

- 24 On the other hand, Tenzin Pelkyi, another of the founders of the Tibetan Feminist Collective, said in an interview that after interacting with and observing the contestants, “I think women who enter the pageant, are doing so for feminist purposes because they want to show that Tibetan women are independent and forward-thinking, and this is how Tibetan women can exist in our community”. She also felt that the most important thing was “that they feel that they have agency and that they are the ones who are determining their womanhood and their identity”¹⁶. Such views are often shared by participants who do not necessarily define themselves as feminist and who are also reluctant to define themselves as such.

- 25 With regard to physical criteria, Tenzin Pelkyi said that it is ridiculous to have mandatory physical measures as that would mean judging a Miss Tibet by the criteria of an American beauty pageant which are “always about women who are thin, tall and conventionally attractive. There is no body diversity” (*ibid.*). One of my online survey respondents, a 28-year-old woman from India, argued along similar lines that,

The beauty pageant in itself is the root of many beauty-related stereotypes. The need to be perfect is something that creates a mindset where anything less than what the beauty queens display is thought of as inferior. The beauty standards that we have grown up watching have somehow made us all feel insecure in some way or the other.

- 26 Likewise, Dechen Wangmo, one of the participants in the 2016 pageant, questioned the body criteria of the pageant. She said that she agreed with the feminists’ view of the pageant, and asked, “[...] if we think everyone is equal, why should we give our bodies’ measurements while applying? Why do we make certain criteria?”¹⁷.

- 27 The bikini round – the main source of controversy surrounding the Miss Tibet pageant – is highly divisive. It is tempting to see this as a clash between tradition and modernity. But such a simple dichotomy cannot account for the way in which the bikini round has divided opinion within the diaspora community. The bikini round is supported by many Tibetans on cultural reformist grounds, saying it provides women with an arena in which to oppose the conservative ideal of a modest woman – about which more will be said below – reflecting a modernist, anti-conservative motivation. Meanwhile, among those who have criticised it, there are not only those whose arguments based on a conservative or traditionalist outlook, but also others who oppose it on modernist or feminist grounds.

- 28 In my survey, only six out of sixty-two respondents were completely opposed to the bikini round, while two expressed neutrality. Of those who were opposed to it, a young man said the pageant should be about Tibetan culture and that the bikini round was “against our culture. I feel like we are trying to copy western culture by wearing extra open clothes”. Two women respondents said that the bikini session was not necessary for the pageant to be successful, while a third said that, “The pageant is about talent and intelligence, not related to bikini or the swimsuit round”. Although he felt that the bikini round was a part of the pageant, another respondent said that there were “expectations and judgement from the audience, which shouldn’t be the case”. He thought that this round hampered rather than empowered women. A young woman answered that although the true objective of Miss Tibet is to empower Tibetan women by recognizing who they are as a person, “it has been following a stereotypical pattern

and objectifies women in many ways. It is a good initiative but should not be limited to a certain beauty type. It should welcome beauty in every form – both inside and out”.

- 29 This point was emphasized by another respondent who had witnessed the pageant and wrote that there were people who made derogatory remarks about the participants, particularly regarding their face and body. Eleven of the respondents, although having a positive outlook of the bikini round, still had reservations. For instance, one of them wrote that, “Yes, it should be there but it should be done in such a way that there is no vulgarity”.

Meanings imbued in the Miss Tibet pageant

- 30 One can see that the Miss Tibet pageant as a whole has been given different meanings by both participants and by general public in the Tibetan diaspora. The variety of views it elicits supports the statement by Cohen *et al.* that,

[...] beauty contests are not just about femininity, or beauty, or even competition. They evoke passionate interest and engagement with political issues central to the lives of beauty contestants, sponsors, organizers, and audience. (Cohen *et al.* 1996, p. 2)

- 31 No amount of controversy has been able to stop young Tibetan women from participating and audiences watching the Miss Tibet pageant, and perhaps controversy itself has ensured its survival, precisely because the controversy it arouses has connected it to issues and struggles within the Tibetan diasporic community which extend beyond the immediate purview of the contest. For instance, Tenzin Dawa, one of the participants in 2016 who was seventeen at the time, said, “It was a kind of a revolution for our community. It means so much more to me than just showing my external beauty”. Dolma Tsering, one of the participants in 2011, said, “If it was only about physical beauty I wouldn’t have participated”. Such attitudes are underpinned by two arguments frequently made by former contestants. First, that the pageant empowers young Tibetan women (this view was expressed by all but two of the viewed subjects interviewed), in particular by being an arena for role models encouraging young Tibetan women to be bold and confident. Secondly, that the pageant should serve to contribute to the preservation of Tibetan culture and promote the political cause of Tibet internationally (this was mentioned by all but one of interviewed participants). In this vein, Tsering Kyi, Miss Tibet 2003, who escaped to India in 1999 and now works as a news presenter in the Tibetan section of Voice of America, empathically pointed out, “I don’t consider the Miss Tibet pageant only a beauty pageant (*mdzes ma ’gran sdur*) [...] Nor do I consider it as a stage for women’s empowerment (*bud med skyed nus stobs gong ’phel*) [...] Being a Tibetan in exile after leaving behind my home and family in Tibet, for me, it is an aspect of our political struggle (*bod mi’i ’thab rtsod*)”¹⁸.
- 32 Turning to the viewing subjects, it might be thought that the general attitude in the Tibetan community would not be favourable to the project; to my surprise, however, the great majority of the respondents, irrespective of age, had a positive outlook on the pageant, as mentioned above. Even women who considered themselves feminist were generally in favour of it.
- 33 The respondents ascribed two distinct cultural meanings to the pageant. First, they considered it to be important for empowering young Tibetan women. When asked to

answer the question, “What is the purpose of the Miss Tibet pageant?”, almost half of the respondents (thirty-three out of sixty-two) stated that they believed that the Miss Tibet pageant was above all a platform to empower Tibetan women or, more specifically, to enhance women’s talents, intelligence and personality and create a positive view of Tibetan women, serving to “create positive outlook towards women”, “to give platform to women to showcase their talents and knowledge”, “to boost self-confidence and respect to Tibetan women”, or “to give an opportunity to young Tibetan women to explore their personality and talent”.

- 34 Secondly, twenty-three respondents, in the same way as the participants, said that the pageant is an arena for highlighting Tibetan identity, and for the Tibetan political struggle internationally. They maintained that the platform promotes Tibetan culture and traditions both locally and globally, and that the function of the Miss Tibet pageant is to create awareness about Tibet. One of them wrote, “[the pageant] provides a platform for Tibetan women to speak about Tibet”, while another wrote that it should “represent our country in a glamour world”.
- 35 In the Tibetan diaspora, culture is a very important part of the political struggle and in many contexts is inseparable from that struggle. This is evident from the very beginning of the history of the exile community. Thus, shortly after the first Tibetan mass exodus in 1959, the Dalai Lama established a number of institutions such as the Tibetan Institute of Performing Arts (TIPA) and other cultural institutions to preserve and rebuild Tibetan culture in exile (Wojahn 2016, p. 536). In fact, the political and cultural aspects of the pageant intersect among the respondents. For instance, one of them wrote that the pageant “[...] creates awareness about Tibet, its culture and tradition”, another wrote, “[...] it is an opportunity to showcase Tibetan culture and political movement at a global stage”, while yet another wrote, “the pageant is to remind ourselves and inspire younger generation about our identity, culture, and sense of belonging in an artistic modern way”. For these Tibetans, showcasing Tibetans on a wider global stage, even in a form of entertainment, can help create, sustain and increase awareness of Tibet as a political issue.
- 36 Among these two groups, there were six respondents who saw the platform as equally promoting both Tibetan culture and women’s empowerment. These six therefore belong to the total of fifty-six respondents constituting the two groups referred to above. Thirdly, while the remaining six of the sixty-two had a positive view of the Miss Tibet pageant, they did not point to women’s empowerment or to the pageant’s cultural importance in their responses. For instance, eight of these nine respondents implied that the pageant helps Tibetans to go along with the modern world, six of the eight further arguing that the bikini round should be in the pageant because “it is now the 21st century”. Among the nine respondents some also wrote that the pageant “promotes beauty and talent”, or that it serves “to bring role models in our community”.

Miss Tibet as a platform for women’s empowerment

- 37 The dominant view in the Tibetan diasporic community is that women should be modest and low-key (*nyam chung chung*) in public. During my fieldwork in Dharamsala in 2019, one of my interlocutors, a young Tibetan woman from the USA who at the time had participated in the annual Young Tibetan Conference organized by the CTA, told

me that she was very disappointed with the organizers. In the question-and-answer round, she said, the host, who was a man, announced that women would be given the first chance to speak. When no one spoke, he said – patronizingly, as my interlocutor remarked – that, “even after being given a chance you don’t speak, but you still claim that women are not given any say in the community”. This episode shows that Tibetan women often find it difficult to speak up in a male-dominated forum.

- 38 We shall now take a closer look at how the Miss Tibet pageant is seen to promote women’s empowerment in the diasporic community. Overall, the participants believe this happens because the pageant challenges the traditional social shyness of Tibetan women. A participant in the Miss Tibet 2011 pageant, Ngodup Dolma, said, “I think the Miss Tibet pageant is about women’s empowerment. Since our community is a male-dominated one, the pageant makes a room for young Tibetan women to highlight their talent and intelligence”¹⁹. Most of the respondents in my survey as well as my interlocutors – who were mostly former participants – maintain that the Miss Tibet pageant is an arena where women can be empowered through coming out in public and being vocal about their general concerns such as being role models and inspiring other young women to participate in the pageant. The director of the Miss Tibet contest himself claimed that its purpose is to “empower Tibetan women, particularly young Tibetan women, by giving them the opportunities to come forward, to be themselves. They can show their talents. They can show their aspirations”.
- 39 A participant in Miss Tibet 2011, Dolma Tsering, who also won a local South Indian pageant, Miss Coimbatore in 2010, and who now lives in France, said, “Tibetan women are mostly very shy and that’s why I participated in the pageant to encourage and inspire them to be more confident and courageous [...]. I consider myself a strong and confident woman”²⁰. The lone participant of the Miss Tibet pageant in 2005, Tenzin Nyima, had said, “What I think is that I am the only contestant because Tibetan girls are very shy in nature. Due to shyness, they lack sufficient confidence and this cripples them to come out and face the situation on stage” (NewKerela 2005).
- 40 This characteristic of Tibetan women, namely shyness (*nyam chung chung*), is very similar to a term, *dzangma* (*mdzangs ma*), used to characterize the ideal Tibetan woman. The Tibetan word *dzang* has an interesting semantic range. When applied to men, *dzangpa* (masculine) means “hero” (*dpa’ bo*), “learned” (*mkhas pa*) or “noble” (*ya rabs*). When applied to women, however, *dzangma* means “wise” (*blo gros can*), or “well-behaved” (*spyod bzang can*)²¹. Goldstein lists *dzang* with the meaning “shyness”, irrespective of gender (Goldstein 1975, p. 943). A woman designated as *dzangma* should have eight attributes: even without a husband she does not succumb to misery, she is attached to her husband, she gives birth to many children, she is modest, does not speak much, is honest, loyal, and hardworking (Dungkar 2002, p. 1741). The attribute of a woman of being modest or shy, and speaking as little as possible, is still a prevalent ideal in the Tibetan community, where young women are usually characterized as being shy and less confident in the public arena compared to men. This is one of the reasons why the Miss Tibet pageant is considered by many Tibetans to be a platform to empower young women by giving them a space to come out of their gendered roles nurtured in the community.
- 41 The Miss Tibet 2003 winner Tsering Kyi, who was born in Tibet, emphatically pointed out that in the present Tibetan social environment both men and women in the community are given equal rights and education so it is for women to work hard. She

said that she wished to see women in the Tibetan community showing their capabilities and their capacity for hard work rather than seeking special treatment. Being the lone contestant in 2003, she also argued that her victory came from the fact that others didn't dare to participate and that she, who was able to, did.

- 42 The Miss Tibet pageant is seen as an arena for empowering women as it gives the winner of the contest an opportunity to compete with other women in international beauty pageants. It is believed that an international pageant allows Tibetan women to match their talent and beauty with that of the women of other countries. As one of the respondents wrote, participating in an international pageant is, "to let the world know that our nation's women are no less than women from other countries". Thereby young Tibetan women can "move along with the rest of the world". The Miss Tibet 2016, Tenzin Sangnyi, who now works as a nurse in England, said,

The positive aspect of the pageant is that it obviously empowers Tibetan women by helping them move along with the modern world these days. It helps us to feel that we have a beauty pageant too [...] It gives a platform to young Tibetan women to voice their opinions, to show their skills, their talents, and just to feel that we are also moving along with the rest of the world²².

- 43 Another participant of the same year, Tenzin Dawa from New York, supported the pageant as a modern venue for women, arguing that, "I think the Tibetan mindset can be so traditional that it almost steps back on the younger generation. If the world keeps moving and if Tibet doesn't, then it is not good"²³.
- 44 These participants seem to have a feeling that Tibetans are lagging behind in the modern world. A similar idea is also found among Tibetans in my survey when they refer to the bikini round and the pageant itself as not a bad aspect of modern culture, asserting that they "don't live in the medieval period but in the 21st century". These statements show that while pageants are regarded as implying old-fashioned or conservative notions of beauty in most parts of the western world (Banet-Weiser 1999, p. 3), the Miss Tibet pageant is viewed by many young Tibetans, including the participants, as a venue to liberate women from conventional norms and as a modern and innovative medium for the Tibetan national struggle.
- 45 More importantly, regardless of being winners or not, the participants felt that the pageant was an opportunity to do something for their community and for themselves, precisely by breaking social pressure and expectations. Mingmar Dolma, who is from New York, competed in the pageant despite her father's reservations about it. Dolma Tsering's parents wanted her to get married at nineteen and take charge of their small business which, she believed, was the traditional way Tibetans in exile took care of their children, especially daughters. However, she wanted to take control of her life and achieve something that was beyond the standard social norms. The Miss Tibet pageant, she said, helped her in achieving that. Tsering Kyi said that the Miss Tibet gave her a platform for fulfilling her wish (even when she was in Tibet) to do something for her country. These are some examples of how the pageant, however trivial, for many young women has given an agency and an arena on which to move forward.

The bikini round revisited: a means of empowering women?

- 46 In her ground-breaking study on Miss America, Sarah Banet-Weiser writes that, “For this feminist scenario, the objectified bodies of the contestants are the victims, and the pageant producers, directors, and public audience are the perpetrators” (Banet-Weiser 1999, p. 11). Having condemned beauty pageants as a whole as an objectification of women’s bodies, the advocates of “western” feminism consider a bikini session the ultimate example of a patriarchal venue for the male gaze.
- 47 The bikini session of the pageant in the Tibetan diasporic context, however, has a double aspect: although some Tibetan feminists do feel that it encourages the objectification of women’s bodies, most of the participants themselves and the audience of the pageant (based on the sample surveyed) expressed conviction that it actually represents women asserting control over their own bodies. In fact, both viewing and viewed subjects expressed the opinion that the pageant empowers women, and thus some emphasised that it becomes a part of the feminist movement.
- 48 As mentioned earlier, the majority of viewing subjects who participated in the survey (i.e. fifty-three) had a positive attitude towards the bikini round, and out of that number, thirty-three had an extremely positive view on it. They approved of the bikini round for various reasons. Among them, nine related the bikini round to building confidence in one’s body rather than judging its sexual appeal, and seven saw it as a means of challenging the perception of conservative Tibetans. They felt that the bikini round was an expression of freedom to make an individual choice in the face of a conservative community as well as the adoption of a modern way of life that they consider to be normal. As one of my respondents argued, “It is an important round in every beauty pageant because it breaks stereotypes and deals with narrow-minded Tibetan people”. Another respondent wrote, “There is nothing wrong with having a bikini round. We always say we are broad-minded people, so let’s face it. I laugh at people who say they don’t think it’s appropriate. Such people are hypocrites”. One of my male informants said, “If we want Tibetan women to walk shoulder to shoulder with women from other countries in an international pageant, then we should accept the bikini round without shying away. It is surely not easy to walk in a bikini – for that one needs to be courageous”.
- 49 Two thirds of the thirty-three respondents who viewed the pageant in an extremely positive light felt that a bikini round is normal nowadays or that its formalities are “part and parcel of the pageant”, and that hence it should be continued in order to be able to enter international pageants. This resonates with the opinions of the viewed subjects – the participants. One of my respondents from the survey wrote, “It is pretty normal today. So, we should continue with it”. On a personal level, another of my respondents wrote,
- Honestly speaking, it was awkward the first time I saw them. Then the second and the third time I got used to it. I realized there is nothing bad in it as I had been taught to think – instead, I feel proud of them for being bold and confident.
- 50 In an interview with WildfilmsIndia, a public online broadcaster, the contestants of Miss Tibet 2016 unanimously agreed when one of the contestants stated that, “Every beauty pageant has swimsuit rounds. What is so big deal in having swimsuit round in Tibetan beauty pageant?” (WildFilmsIndia 2016). Moreover, Miss Tibet 2002, Dolma

Tsering, disagreeing with Samdhong Rinpoche's statement regarding the swimsuit round, said that as a monk he does not have the life experiences of lay people. Moreover, she further argued that, "When Buddha achieved his enlightenment, he was naked, and when he was born, he was naked. And when we look at the Buddhist deities, gods and goddess like Tara, they are mostly naked. Thus, showing our skin does not destroy our culture or religion. It is just the matter of how you present them". Moreover, Tsering Kyi, Miss Tibet 2003, was of the opinion that being confronted by "modern culture" (*rig gnas gsar pa*) in the form of beauty pageants, a culture that she furthermore believed was not well received in western society itself, it was understandable to have such a view as Samdhong Rinpoche's. She remembered that, "the most difficult part of being Miss Tibet at the time was to change the perception of Tibetans towards the pageant. And I think I did very well". She hoped that by now Samdhong Rinpoche had changed his views, realizing that "the pageant is about beauty that is more than skin-deep".

- 51 Although most of the former contestants supported the bikini round, opinions and experiences concerning it differ considerably. The winner of the 2016 pageant, Tenzin Sangnyi, told me, "I didn't feel in any way that I was doing anything inappropriate or daring. My only concern was to look good and to present myself in the best possible way". For her, being able to wear a bikini in public was a question of being confident and modern.
- 52 A participant of Miss Tibet 2017, Mingmar Dolma, insisted, "I don't think a beauty pageant objectifies women's bodies. I think people who are super old-minded would think like that. They don't know it's 2020". Dechen Wangmo, a participant in the Miss Tibet 2016, said that she was fine with the bikini round. She went on saying that although she does not have a perfect body, "I feel very beautiful in a bikini. I think it makes a difference how you grew up in a community. My family has imposed no restrictions on me". Two former contestants referred to the bikini session as a matter of bodily fitness. Most of them felt beautiful or confident in the bikini session. Tenzin Dawa said, "I wouldn't say that it is completely okay but I also didn't have any reservations. I definitely knew that the Miss Tibet pageant has backlash because of the round but it wasn't something that would hold me back from participating. I will do it if I want to". The strong acknowledgement of the participants, especially the winners, of the purpose of their participation also reflects their feeling of having complete control over themselves.
- 53 One can say the viewed as well as the viewing subjects' opinions in the context of the Miss Tibet pageant do not stray far from Benet-Weiser's observation of beauty pageants. She argues that beauty pageants "[...] rather than operating as simple showcases for displaying objectified bodies, are actually a kind of feminist space where female identity is constructed by negotiating the contradictions of being socially constituted as "just" a body while simultaneously producing oneself as an active thinking subject, indeed, a decidedly "liberal" subject". She further argues that, "This notion of being an actor in the world, of both existing as a body and transcending that body, is the relentless theme of beauty pageants" (Banet-Weiser 1999, p. 24). One of the respondents argued that in fact the Miss Tibet pageant should be part of feminist movement while another emphasized that it "boosts the feminist movement".
- 54 Nevertheless, one cannot deny that there is pressure on the participants to appear according to certain western standards by wearing a bikini. Migmar Dolma, a

participant in the Miss Tibet 2016, from New York said, “I worked a bit hard for the bikini round because people will be looking at me [...]. I felt comfortable wearing the bikini, but was nervous at people looking at me and taking pictures”. Her statement implies that if you don’t comply with a standard of beauty, it is shameful and a point for the onlookers on which to judge you. Tenzin Khaechoe, from India, a participant of the Miss Tibet 2017, told me that she took the bikini round as a challenge because, “All the participants were very confident in the bikini but I grew up in India in different background, hence, I felt it was difficult to appear in a bikini in front of people [...]. I felt the task was done once the session was over”²⁴.

- 55 Summing up, the viewed subjects as well as those viewing subjects who have sympathy for the former by and large share the view that Miss Tibet pageant empowers women by giving them the agency to break away from social pressure and expectations. Thus, Dolma Tsering maintained that,

[...] “humble girl” (*bu mo nyam chung chung*) is considered as really well-mannered in our community. I think it is imprinted in our brains. I think that’s why it is hard for women to take opportunities such as Miss Tibet [...]. It is hard, you know, you will be blamed or embarrassed if you make mistake. If you overdress, you’re labelled. Your family will be insulted. That is why young women in our community are not willing to take a risk by appearing in the pageant. It is about social pressure, stigma and abuse.

Collective identity and cultural difference

- 56 Although physical appearance is of importance in the Miss Tibet pageant both for the audience and the participants, the pageant is above all an arena linked to the issues of nation, identity, and culture, located in a tangible form in the bodies of the contestants, consistent with King-O’Riain’s argument that beauty pageants are a site where diverse cultural meanings “are given tangible form in the bodies of beauty queens” (King-O’Riain 2005, p. 207). She also argues that,

Beauty pageants are often the subjects of debates about the future of ethnic communities, in part because they are public spectacles that allow women from within communities to voice their concerns but also because they are vehicles for conveying anxiety about collective identity. (King-O’Riain 2007, pp. 79-80)

- 57 At the pageant, especially the finale night, there are thousands of Tibetans as well as non-Tibetans in the audience. Among the Tibetans the pageant generates a sense of collectivity – a feeling of sharing a unique Tibetan culture, and thus being a unified nation as Tibet consisting of the three main regions of Tibet: Kham, Amdo, and Ütsang (eastern, north-eastern, and central Tibet respectively). These three regions also known as “The Three Provinces” (*Chölkha Sum*), constituting a “Greater Tibet”. The Tibetan historian Tsering Shakya argues that, “[...] unification of the entire Tibetan-speaking area under Bod Cholka-Sum’ has become deeply embedded in the political culture of the Tibetan diaspora, where the core of the refugees’ political identity lay in the conception of Tibet as the unity of Kham, Amdo and U-tsang” (Shakya 1999, p. 387).
- 58 Against this historical backdrop, the title “Miss Tibet” communicates a feeling of unity, a culturally and linguistically homogenous nation lost to China but alive in the minds of Tibetans. Moreover, by choosing a winner irrespective of her ancestral region, the Miss Tibet reinforces this shared political identity. In my survey, one of respondents who had witnessed the Miss Tibet pageant asserted that, “It shows Tibet as an independent

nation”; another wrote, “It creates awareness about Tibet and Tibetans”. When Tibetans in the diaspora say “Tibet”, it is this culturally and politically unified Tibet they have in mind. The Miss Tibet pageant is different from mainstream national beauty pageants, however, in that it represents a nation that does not exist in geopolitical reality. The pageant helps to create a nation that exists only in people’s mind, as an “imagined nation”. It functions to reinforce the idea among Tibetans in the diaspora that they share traditions, culture, history, language, and political aspirations.

- 59 One of the reasons why young women continue to participate in the pageant, despite rumours and controversies, is its perceived importance for the political struggle and its cultural promotion. In the Tibetan diaspora, to work for the Tibetan cause is seen as a great achievement, and for many it is a defining purpose of their lives. Tenzin Sangnyi, Miss Tibet 2016, said, “The cultural contribution to our Tibetan community is completely given. If you are in Miss Tibet, we automatically have the responsibility of representing our culture and our language. Obviously, every participant, I am sure, has that feeling or awareness”. She also stressed the importance of “representing our country and by just being on the stage: showcase that we are Tibetan, a refugee”. In other words, being Miss Tibet is in itself an aspect of the Tibetan struggle.
- 60 Many of the participants stated that the prime reason for participating in the pageant was its importance for the national struggle. Miss Tibet 2003 Tsering Kyi was of the opinion that the pageant represents, “the Tibetan culture [*rig gzhung*] that is one of the oldest and richest Asian cultures and a country under the Chinese occupation. Thus, one must realize the responsibility of the pageant and work for our country if one wins”. She also said that the pageant “gives a unique platform not just to showcase Tibetan culture but is also a way to engage in the national struggle [*bod mi rigs ’thab rtsod*]”. Consequently, some of the participants were not satisfied with how the pageant was organized, including what they considered to be insufficient financial and moral support from the community and the CTA. Thus, Dolma Tsering, Miss Tibet 2000, strongly felt that the pageant should be organized in a better way because Tibetans “are different from other national people. Being political refugees scattered around the world we have a greater political responsibility”.
- 61 These opinions resonate with that of a respondent who wrote that the Miss Tibet pageant reminds him that, “Tibet is our country and it will be free”, while another respondent who had witnessed the pageant wrote that, “the Miss Tibet pageant highlights Tibet as an independent nation”. In a similar vein, the Miss Tibet website states,
- To have international support for the plight of the Tibetan people, it is important to have many different venues to create awareness. Once we have established a Miss Tibet competition, we will be able to apply for representation in international competitions... Miss Tibet would be in an excellent position to speak about the Tibetan situation in international forums, drawing attention to the plight of the Tibetan people as well as the brilliance of the lifestyle and culture. (Miss Tibet website)
- 62 These statements illustrate what Jon Schackt, referring to Fredrik Barth, maintains, namely that, “The beauty pageants have become an arena for communication of cultural difference” (Schackt 2005, p. 277); in other words, they rely on the cultural features that an ethnic group or nation wants to use as “signals and the emblems of differences” (Barth 1969, p. 14). Being deprived of geographical boundaries, the Tibetan diaspora invests culture with the utmost importance for their political assertion,

strengthening and unifying cultural elements among themselves and highlighting their difference from the Chinese. Barth argues that ethnic differences are created first, by “overt signals and signs – diacritical features that people look for and exhibit to show identity, often features as dress, language, house form, or general life style”, and secondly, by “basic value orientation”. Miss Tibet succeeds on the local as well as the global stage in showcasing Tibetans’ cultural differences and distinct identity from other countries, especially China.

- 63 The Tibetan political scientist Dawa Norbu argues that, “[...] there can be no self-conscious projection of ethnic or any other kind of identity without the generalized other. For Tibetans Chinese have assumed this function. Their otherness in Tibet provokes the assertion of Tibetan identity and the we/they differentiation” (Norbu 1992). This sentiment can be applied to Tibetans in the diaspora as well, and is visible in the Miss Tibet pageant.
- 64 By participating side by side with contestants in international beauty pageants, the winners of Miss Tibet contribute to and reinforce the differences between “Tibetans” and “Chinese”: they take for granted that China and Tibet are separate nations. Moreover, the sash with “Tibet” written on it is an assertion of Tibet’s cultural and territorial identity and difference from China. Thus, it is not surprising that photos of Miss Tibet with Miss China in international beauty pageants became very popular among Tibetans and have been frequently used by news media in the diaspora.
- 65 Similar to what King-O’Riain maintains, a beauty queen is a woman chosen by the community or a group to serve as “a symbolic representation of their collective identity to a larger, often national audience” (King-O’Riain 2008, p. 74), the winner of the Miss Tibet pageant becomes a global trope of Tibet – a symbolic representation of the Tibetan community to promote a political statement of the existence of Tibet as a nation with a distinct culture. In her personal account of her experience in Miss Asia Pacific 2011 in South Korea, Miss Tibet 2011 wrote:
- We had many problems as well with a few staff from the pageant organizers [...]. In the end, I couldn’t enjoy the beauty pageant at all [...]. I did it on behalf of all Tibetans, to represent our country Tibet, our unique tradition and culture[...]. During the national costume round, I was hiding our national flag inside my national costume, and when I walked the ramp, I took our beautiful and colourful flag out and very proudly introduced it to the audience. (Miss Tibet 2011)
- 66 Similarly, Miss Tibet 2007, Tenzin Dolma, while participating in Miss Earth 2007, expressed that, “[I] feel very proud and happy to be standing with delegates from 85 countries and to be able to speak something about our rich Tibetan culture [...]. I am trying my level best to educate them even more about Tibet” (Miss Tibet 2007).
- 67 Thus, in view of the political implications of the participation of a Miss Tibet, it is not surprising that winners of Miss Tibet 2006 and 2011 were barred, due to pressure exerted by the Chinese authorities, from attending international pageants unless they wore a sash with the words, “Miss China-Tibet”. The Miss Tibet 2006, Tsering Chungtak, was quoted in international news media saying, “I was given a choice either to participate wearing sash as “Miss Tibet-China” or to pull out from the pageant. And I made a decision to pull out from the pageant” (AP Archive 2015). Tenzin Yangkyi, told me in 2016 that she was not allowed to carry on with the pageant as Miss Tibet in the Miss Asia Pacific that took place in Seoul, South Korea, in 2011. However, being a Swiss citizen, she chose to wear a sash with “Miss Switzerland-Tibet” in order to participate.

- 68 In this way, the Miss Tibet pageant gives the women who participate an opportunity to fulfil their responsibility in joining the national struggle, the pageant becoming an agency for young women rather than women becoming victims. For instance, in my survey, of sixty-two respondents, thirty-three were of the opinion that the Miss Tibet helps in creating awareness of their nation and traditional culture. One of them even stated that, “If you don’t use the platform properly, it’s just to gain personal fame, but if you use it properly, we can create awareness about the Tibetan cause”.
- 69 Among my informants, most of the viewed subjects took it for granted that the pageant is a part of a national struggle. Tenzin Younten, Miss Tibet 2018, who had participated in an international pageant said, “[...] being able to represent Tibet is equal to representing a culture that is not taken away from us even though the land is taken away by the Chinese. Our country has been corrupted by China but we are resilient [...]. It is a reminder that Tibet still exists”²⁵. Thus, the pageant serves to demarcate and lay claim to the Tibetan ethnicity – the nation that is under “Communist China”, with a unique culture, distinct from that of the Chinese²⁶.
- 70 Miss Tibet 2016, Tenzin Sangnyi, said, “I thought the Miss Tibet pageant was more about me but I thought the international pageant was more important than me [...]. I spoke about my country and our issues every time I got any opportunity. By taking this title you have the responsibility to represent Tibet, which I think is a great responsibility”. Although there were controversies, problems, and politics in international pageants, the Tibetan contestants were at the end proud that they could represent their country. For instance, Miss Tibet 2002 Dolma Tsering, whose father had been imprisoned by Chinese in Tibet for 2 years, and who has been to two international pageants – one in Malaysia and another in Mexico – emphasized,
- There were difficulties, and sometimes we do not know what to expect from the pageant. Even very reputable pageant productions do things for their own benefit [...]. However, I got a very great opportunity to talk about Tibetan issues and cause [in both the pageants]. I also got a chance to sit side by side with Miss China. There was huge media attention on that. It was a political breach between Tibet and China [...]. In Mexico I didn’t have a good experience, the pageant was disorganized. Still, I was happy to have represented Tibet among 45 nations and won a prize for the best national costume.

Tibetan traditional costume as cultural representation of the nation

- 71 The traditional Tibetan dress for both men and women are called “chupa” (*phyu pa*). However, there are regional differences in its length, back pleats, and other accompanying accessories. According to Namgyal T. Taklha, traditionally “it is cut in only one shape and was generally made of indigenous Tibetan material like *nambu* (*snam bu*) hand woven wool material, felt and sheepskin”. It was only wealthy people who could afford imported materials, such as cotton, silk, or brocade from China and India (Taklha 2018, p. 13). However, in the diaspora the *chupa*, especially that of women, has gone through many changes due to factors such as weather and functionality. Cheap polyester and cotton materials have replaced the traditional woollen material, and the way in which it is worn and stitched has changed over the years.

- 72 However, in recent years there has been a noticeable comeback of woollen materials in the diaspora; these textiles, traditional but with a modern print. In the Tibetan diaspora, women's *chupa* continue to play an important role, so much so that women are often expected to wear one in their work places, especially if employed in the Central Tibetan Administration. As we have seen, one of the reasons for the bikini session being controversial has to do with the idea of Tibetan women generally being imaged in "traditional dress", signifying modesty.
- 73 This is evident in the pageant where the walk in *chupa* is highly valued and – in contrast to the bikini round – automatically lends the pageant a Tibetan aspect. However, there is a marked difference between the everyday *chupa*, which is a modern version of Central Tibetan traditional dress, and the one generally worn in the "traditional costume" round of the pageant. There the contestants wear any regional variety of traditional dress as long as it looks good, or, as one of the participants said, "as long as I look like a Tibetan woman"²⁷.
- 74 The traditional costume round offers a major element for understanding the politically and culturally unified feeling of Tibetan-ness, not just on a local arena but also in an international beauty pageant. The use of a complete set of traditional costume including boots is cherished because it creates an aura of authenticity. This offers a celebration of unity in diversity and in fact, wearing the Tibetan traditional costume marks "cultural authenticity" (Schackt 2005, p. 270; Chow 2011, p. 428). The whole process of preparing for the show in itself becomes a ritual with the purpose of maintaining a feeling of unity among Tibetans. The organizer makes the contestants spend a lot of time in the traditional dress – for instance, after a long session of walk in traditional costumes where the contestants perform Tibetan dance steps, the winner is announced and crowned wearing her traditional costume. This, I argue, is a significant gesture from the organizer's side to emphasise Tibetan identity through the pageant.
- 75 Rogers considers the Ecuadorian indigenous pageant as an example of folklorization because it is "a process in which a social group fixes a part of itself in a timeless manner as an anchor for its own distinctiveness" (Rogers 1999, p. 58). The only part where this happens in the Miss Tibet pageant is the traditional costume walk, where the participants are adorned from head to foot in what they perceive as the traditional dress of pre-1959 Tibet, capturing the attention of the audience more than in any other part of the pageant, from the evening gown walk to the talent round. Among the Tibetans it brings nostalgic feelings of the imagined past – a Tibet that has been created and developed through history books, autobiographies, films, and the memories of their parents or grandparents. The image of a past Tibet materializes through the bodies of the young women in "traditional dress".

Conclusion

- 76 The Miss Tibet pageant is an example of what Banet-Weiser refers to as "[...] the ways in which liberal discourse is operationalized [...] in a particular historical context" (Banet-Weiser 1999, p. 23), insofar as it intends to promote women's empowerment. Moreover, in the context of the diasporic community's commitment to political activism for a "free Tibet", the pageant becomes an arena for highlighting a national struggle. This is evident in Tsering Kyi's statement that, "By telling the story of one

person [such as myself to the world media as a winner] you tell the collective story of Tibetans”.

- 77 Like many other local beauty pageants around the world, the Miss Tibet pageant has become a means to assert a collective identity (McAllister 1996; McGranahan 1996; King-O’Riain 2008; Schackt 2005), in this case an imagined ethno-national identity; in other words, Miss Tibet has become a political statement. The pageant helps Tibetans to imagine their nation through women’s bodies, or more specifically through the contestants’ bodies – in fact, more than just their bodies, but also by what they wear, their speech, and their actions – elements that Barth calls “overt signals and signs” (Barth 1969, p. 14).
- 78 The anthropologist and historian of modern Tibet, Melvyn Goldstein, accepting the differentiation into “political Tibet” and “ethnographic Tibet”, defines political Tibet as the polity historically ruled by the Tibetan government in Lhasa, roughly equivalent to today’s Tibet Autonomous Region in China, whereas ethnographic Tibet is much broader as it includes “ethnically Tibetan areas of Amdo and Kham that today are part of Qinghai, Sichuan, Gansu and Yunnan provinces” (Goldstein 1998, p. 4). Tibetans in the diaspora regard political and ethnographic Tibet as constituting a unit which Goldstein calls, “the heartland of Tibetan Buddhism” (*ibid.*), and it is this that diasporic Tibetans refer to as “Tibet”, distinct from Buddhist populations in the Himalayan regions of Indian, Nepal, and Bhutan.
- 79 Since Tibetans in the diaspora are struggling for the creation of a Tibet that combines both the political and ethnographic Tibet as one united political entity, they have engaged in a process of cultural homogenization where similarities are celebrated and differences downplayed in order to create a unified ethno-political identity. This process has been accurately described by Barth: “[...] cultural features are used by the actors as signals and emblems of differences, others are ignored and, in some relationships, radical differences are downplayed and denied” (Barth 1969, p. 14). Elsewhere I have written that, “This shared culture assists in reinforcing their social as well as imagined territorial boundary, distinguishing them above all from the Chinese” (Choedon, forthcoming). Through what is perceived as a common heritage, the concept of an “authentic Tibetan identity” emerges, and the participants of the pageant attempt to embody this identity, which as Tibetans, they cherish and are committed to preserve for a national, political cause.

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NOTES

1. There is no evidence that the Miss Tibet pageant inside Tibet influenced the diaspora. The director himself vaguely remembered that he had heard that a similar pageant had taken place.
2. I have borrowed the terms “viewed subject” and “viewing subject” from Yiu Fai Chow, “Moving, sensing intersectionality. A case study of Miss China Europe” (Chow 2011, p. 419).
3. Many young educated Tibetans in the diaspora are very comfortable speaking in English. In many cases, they also prefer writing in English than in Tibetan. With regard to the viewed subjects, the language used during the interview depended on what they preferred, a few using only Tibetan, which I have translated into English. To understand their views on the beauty pageant, language was not the focus. Thus, I let them speak in whatever language they were most comfortable with. For the online survey, however, I have used English, but I asked some of my informants to translate the questionnaires into Tibetan for their parents.
4. I contacted each one of them with a personal message in social media to fill in this survey irrespective of what their opinion might be regarding the pageant.
5. Here and below, I refer to the interview I conducted with Lobsang Wangyal on 20 December 2018 in New Delhi.
6. Based on my own experience from 2015 and 2016 and interviews of former contestants.
7. The Green Book is an identity document issued by the CTA.
8. On 2018 the pageant was to take place in New York. However, many of the participants who were from India were not able to attend the pageant as they were refused visas, while a few from the USA pulled out in the end.
9. Walker does not specify whether Samdhong Rinpoche spoke in English or Tibetan. If he spoke in Tibetan, it is not clear who translated it.
10. In the course of a documentary film *Miss Tibet. Beauty in Exile*, directed by Norah Shapiro, released in 2014.
11. In the relevant photos, the contestants were wearing *chuba*, the traditional Tibetan dress. The Dalai Lama clearly was not opposed to the pageant, in contrast to Samdhong Rinpoche who some years before had called it “un-Tibetan” and “against Buddhist principles” (see above).
12. Interviewed July 2019 in Dharamsala, in English.
13. Here and below, I refer to the online interview I conducted with Dolma Tsering on 26 October 2020, in both English and Tibetan.
14. Interviews during fieldwork July 2019 in Dharamsala, in Tibetan.
15. Interviewed in August 2019 in Dharamsala, in English.
16. Online interview 25 October 2020, in English.
17. Online interview 15 September 2020, in English.
18. Here and below, I refer to the online interview conducted with Tsering Kyi on 26 September 2020, in Tibetan.
19. Online interview 10 September 2020, in English.
20. Here and below, I refer to the online interview conducted with Dolma Tsering (participant of Miss Tibet 2011) on 3 September 2020, conducted mostly in English but Tibetan was also used.
21. Bod rgya tshig mdzod chen mo, p. 2333.

22. Here and below, I refer to the online interview I conducted with Tenzin Sangnyi on 22 July 2020, in English.
23. Here and below, I refer to the online interview I conducted with Tenzin Dawa on 12 October 2020, in English.
24. Online interview 6 August 2020, in Tibetan.
25. Online interview conducted on 17 October 2020, in English.
26. This idea was influenced by Mark Rogers' work on indigenous Ecuadorian beauty pageants (Rogers 1999, p. 57).
27. Information obtained from interviews of the contestants and my own experience from the pageant.

ABSTRACTS

Since its inception in 2002, the annual "Miss Tibet" pageant has been a popular cultural event in the Tibetan diaspora. As with other beauty pageants, it has been the object of controversies and opposing opinions, reflecting conflicting trends of conservatism and modernism. It is imbued with different meanings: it has provided a stage for Tibetan participation in international competitive fora, it has drawn media attention to the Tibetan political issue, and for some, it is an important platform for empowering young Tibetan women on the local stage. However, for others it has symbolised cultural obsequiousness and has been opposed on both traditionalist and on modernist feminist grounds.

Depuis sa création en 2002, le concours annuel de Miss Tibet est un événement culturel populaire dans la diaspora tibétaine. Comme d'autres concours de beauté, il a fait l'objet de controverses et d'opinions divergentes, reflétant les tendances contradictoires issues du conservatisme et du modernisme. Il a différentes significations : il a constitué un tremplin pour la participation tibétaine à des compétitions internationales, il a attiré l'attention des médias sur la question politique tibétaine, et pour certains il constitue une plateforme importante pour l'émancipation des jeunes femmes tibétaines au niveau local. Cependant, pour d'autres, il a symbolisé l'obséquiosité culturelle et a fait l'objet de critiques des milieux traditionnalistes d'une part et féministes d'autre part.

INDEX

Keywords: beauty, pageant, Tibetan, politics, diaspora, identity, culture, women, empowerment

Mots-clés: concours, beauté, politique, tibétain, diaspora, identité, culture, femmes, émancipation

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