

Between the Lines:  
The Struggle for Tibetan Independence through the work of the Tibetan  
Youth Congress and Students for a Free Tibet by Sarah Fajardo



*Abstract*

This paper is an exploration of the work of two international non-governmental organizations advocating for the independence of Tibet from the Peoples' Republic of China. It seeks to examine the goals and campaigns of both organizations as well as their role within the Tibetan Diaspora and their impact globally. The paper attempts to examine the targeted membership of the NGOs and their effects on the spread of awareness of the cause of Tibetan independence.

## *Introduction*

In addition to history, culture and religion, perhaps the most important point of all is that the Tibetan people themselves ardently desire independence from China. The will of the Tibetan people has been unambiguously expressed on a number of occasions, and it is fully on the side of independence for Tibet-the overwhelming majority of Tibetans understand without independence they have no guarantees for their future. The core of the solution of the Tibetan issue is Tibet's independence.<sup>1</sup>

-Thubten Jigme Norbu

Although this sentiment could perhaps be regarded by some as a radically inclined activist, this quote represented closely many of the opinions voiced to me over the course of this research. I was first introduced to the political situation in Tibet when I arrived in Dharamsala, India, in September 2005 with the Tibetan Studies Program through the School for International Training, a semester study abroad program. After five weeks of living with a Tibetan family in a home-stay, S.I.T. took our group to Tibet, where we observed first-hand the situation socially, politically and environmentally in Lhasa, Kongpo, Lamaling, Namling, and Shigatse. After staying in the politically charged and politically expressive environment of Dharamsala, the level of freedom surrounding expression of views was startlingly repressed in Tibet. I became curious about the independence movement within and outside of Tibet as a result, and began to ask questions about the political alternatives available to the Tibetan people. This paper seeks to explore the work currently undertaken in the independence movement and strives to clarify the relationship between the NGO's discussed and the Tibetan government in exile from the perspective of a supporter of self-determination for the Tibetan people.

There were several challenges encountered in the pursuit of this research, and they all informed both the way in which I conducted research and this presentation of the

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<sup>1</sup> Norbu, Thubten Jigme. Tibet: the Issue is Independence, 5

accessible material. One of the greatest challenges that I encountered was my lack of fluency in Tibetan language. This limited my access to a good deal of the existing written material on the subject and also limited my interview subjects to English speakers, or to times when an interpreter was available. The interview subjects spanned an age-range of mid-20's to late 60's, and the majority of the subjects were Tibetans born in exile.

Another recognized problem with this study is the low number of interviews with female participants in the organizations surveyed, which is not numerically or influentially representative of female participation in either organization.

The atmosphere in Dharamsala, India was both divided and united by political opinions when I returned in June, 2006. After I arrived, I realized that there appeared to be a division between the political agenda of the government in exile and the political agendas of the Tibetan Youth Congress and Students for a Free Tibet. These two NGOs are currently pursuing a status of complete independence from China, while the government in exile is seeking an autonomous status within China. Many community members to whom I spoke responded to this division in politics by electing to support both the government and the NGOs in their work towards what appeared to be divergent goals.

This support within the community of both options indicated a desire for a change in the current political situation of restrictive governing by the Chinese Government from within the community in exile. The dual support of the government and NGOs indicated the desire of the Tibetan community in exile's for increased access to self-governance and independence within Tibet. The support of both independence and the Middle Way presented a community unified in a desire (at least idealistically) for a change in the

political status in Tibet, and also a double pronged approach to the achievement of that desire.

Members of both the Tibetan Youth Congress and Students for a Free Tibet stated that their work was not actually oppositional to the government's work but instead complimentary. The presence of an independence movement compliments the work for autonomy by creating a spectrum of political options. Although the presence of several advocates pursuing different options presents a disparate political front for the Tibetans in exile, it also broadens the base of support and awareness globally through different venues. The work of TYC and SFT brings international attention to the cause of an improved political status for Tibet, and their ideal of independence serves to frame the exile government's stance as moderate, thereby hopefully helping the government's negotiations with China.<sup>2</sup> The support of the government in exile, His Holiness the Dalai Lama's spiritual leadership, and the work of the members of the independence movement and various associated support groups are all different paths through which information about the political situation in Tibet is disseminated.

*The Dalai Lama and the Middle Way: the Exile Government's Stance on Independence*

“The Dalai Lama is the key to Tibetan issue”  
-Dhondup Dorjee, General Secretary, TYC CENTREX

The Dalai Lama's position as the head of one of five sects of Tibetan Buddhism and historically as the political head of the government of U-Tsang Province in (Central) Tibet lent him the responsibility of leadership of the Tibetan exile community once he escaped into exile in India. Before the invasion of Tibet by the Chinese in 1950, the Dalai

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<sup>2</sup>This idea was discussed with members of SFT NY, 7/19/06

Lama administered the government in Tibet's capital city of Lhasa, with both lay and religious officials managing the bureaucracy of the state.<sup>3</sup> An assessment of the intertwining of Tibetan Buddhism and the functions of the state is far beyond the scope of this paper, yet is an important component of his leadership role. His religious role is as both a practicing monk and head of the major religious sect in Tibet and is augmented by his status as the head of the government.<sup>4</sup> The combination of these spheres of influence instilled in him ultimate authority in both realms: if one disagreed with a policy on political grounds, his religious authority could remain unquestioned and therefore affect opposition.<sup>5</sup> The Dalai Lama remains both the ultimate figurehead of the exile community and an impassible political figure because he holds such authority within the community. With the exception of TYC and SFT, his political authority is therefore generally unquestioned and supported when he does wield it, and there are few other comparable political figures in the Tibetan community.



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<sup>3</sup> Ardley, 11

<sup>4</sup> Arley, 12

<sup>5</sup> Norbu, Jamyang. Tibet the Issue is Independence, 28

When the Chinese overthrew his government in 1950, the 14<sup>th</sup> Dalai Lama, Tenzin Gyatso, was 15 and assumed the role of advisor to the Chinese-run government set up in Tibet to lend the council legitimacy. In 1959, Tenzin Gyatso fled Tibet prior to an alleged planned assassination by the Chinese. An estimated 80,000 Tibetans<sup>6</sup> followed him into exile in India, where he currently resides. The Chinese portray him in political propaganda as the leader of a “splittist clique” and as a rebellious and outlawed figure detrimental to the Communist regime. In both the exile community and within Tibet, the Dalai Lama is still revered and beloved for his wisdom and guidance.

Once settled in exile, the Tibetan community continued to look to the Dalai Lama for leadership and support. He established a government soon after his arrival in India in the form of a democracy with a parliament, retaining His Holiness as the head of the government. Written into the Tibetan Exile Government’s constitution is a clause which allows for his removal by a vote, safeguarding the possibility of his unwanted domination of the political structure.<sup>7</sup> The *Kashag* (Parliament) is elected on the basis of representation by the three provinces in Tibet: Kham, Amdo and U-Tsang, and also includes elections of monastics based on the religious sect to which they belong. Descendents from the provincial areas vote for representatives from the same area, with two seats of ten votes reserved for women (ballots without votes for women are invalid). If a child has a parent from two different regions, the child can decide which region for which the wish to vote.<sup>8</sup> In its inception, the government in exile provided many services for the Tibetans in exile and organized schools, community health projects and

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<sup>6</sup> Tibetan Youth Congress pamphlet, pg 1

<sup>7</sup> Ardley, 43

<sup>8</sup> Tsering, 7/10/06

management of the settlement camps, and was revolutionary in Tibetan governance for its encouragement of voter participation.

As the Dalai Lama and the issue of Tibet grew to be more widely known and more popular in other parts of the world, his popularity as a pop-culture spiritual guru grew and awareness of the Tibetan independence movement was spread globally. This was accompanied by a spread of Tibetans in a wider diasporic network in many countries. The government in exile adopted liberal policies appealing to Western political views<sup>9</sup> and fostered relationships with other countries. Although the exile government remained officially unrecognized by all other countries in the world, many governments recognized the Dalai Lama's community authority in representing the Tibetan people specifically in a religious capacity.

The lack of recognition of the Tibetan government in exile coincided with a conflation of spirituality and depoliticization of the Dalai Lama in Western media. The adoption of a non-violent opposition to the Chinese perhaps reinforced the Shangri-la portrayal of the Tibetan cause (a-political, non-violent, moral), which further served to remove the political agenda from publicity. Although the Dalai Lama was popularized in a spiritual context, his political agenda was often ignored. In an interview with [www.phayul.com](http://www.phayul.com), Tenzin Namgyal Tethong stated: “[If] we were to ask the U.S. Government or a Congressman about their position on Tibet, the very likely sympathetic answer will be that they are calling for the Chinese to have dialogue with the Dalai Lama. This seems perfectly fine, but what is lacking in such a position is that they are not addressing any real issues concerning the Tibetan people, and there is nothing we can do to hold them to. In a sense they are avoiding the difficult issues that need to be addressed

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<sup>9</sup> Norbu, Jamyang. Tibet the Issue is Independence, 28

and simply focusing on a process of doing something without any real commitment. It is not that we do not need the U.S. Administration to support dialogue, but that we need them to support the Tibet Issue on a specific principle be it about the freedom of the Tibetan people, the rights of the Tibetan people or the future of the Tibetan people. It should not be just about Tibetans and Chinese talking.”<sup>10</sup> Actual governmental support of the Tibetan issue has not yet materialized in a perceptible way globally.

*Exile Governmental Policy Shift: From the pursuit of independence to the Middle Way Policy*

In the first decades in exile the Tibetan government’s political agenda centered on the attainment of independence from the Chinese government and full political control of the territory with the borders of Tibet prior to 1950. The Tibetan Autonomous Region, as designated by the Chinese, consists geographically of only the U-Tsang province, which was initially considered Central Tibet. Kham and Amdo have since been absorbed into Chinese provinces, and are not under the jurisdiction of the T.A.R. governing body. The independence movement in the government in exile was striving for the reunification of the Tibetan territory and the establishment of an independent government. The government involved in the management of the T.A.R. is currently accountable to the Chinese government.

Prior to the Chinese occupation of Tibet, the country had pursued a path of isolation from other nations which hindered its pursuit of support after the P.R.C. government took over Tibet. Because of Tibet’s lack of international recognition and political allies, the Tibetan people had limited recourses in their pursuit of independence.

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<sup>10</sup> Tenzin Namgyal Tethong, phayul.com interview

The government in exile initially pursued a policy of seeking world support in the struggle for independence, but the avenues for representation were limited.

In the 1979 the government in exile held a referendum within the Tibetan Diaspora to determine the path which government should pursue in attempting negotiations with the Chinese. The Chinese leader had made statements that independence was non-negotiable: “In 1979, the late Chinese paramount leader, Deng Xioping’s proposal to His Holiness the Dalai Lama that ‘except independence, all other issues can be resolved through negotiations’.”<sup>11</sup> The Dalai Lama “gave a favourable response by agreeing to undertake negotiations and decided to change the policy of restoring Tibet’s independence to that of the Middle-Way Approach.”<sup>12</sup> The Middle Way approach was presented in a referendum in the Tibetan community in exile in 1979 that gave Tibetans in exile the opportunity to vote on the future approaches initiated by their government.<sup>13</sup>

In an effort to open dialogue and discussion with the Chinese, four options for the Tibetan community to vote upon were presented. Samdhong Rinpoche, then the Prime Minister in the *Kashag*, presented an option based on *satyagraha*: a movement begun by Gandhi which promoted “truth in action” and encouraged non-violent political involvement. Independence was presented, as was the option of self-determination, whose form and application was unspecified.<sup>14</sup> Another option was the pursuit of

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<sup>11</sup> Exile government pamphlet on the Middle Way, 3

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid*

<sup>13</sup> Dorjee, Tsultrim, 6/12/06

<sup>14</sup> Self-determination for the Tibetan people within Tibet was presented as a option to gain global support for the Tibetan cause by holding a referendum within Tibet in order to determine what status was desired by the Tibetan people (the majority of Tibetans remain in Tibet). This is viewed as problematic as the referendum would have to be administered with the help of the Chinese government, and questions arose as to whether independence would even appear on the ballot within Chinese occupied territory, given that the Chinese were not willing to even broach the topic in negotiations with the Dalai Lama. (Tenzin Tethong)

indigenous status, which would provide Tibetan people with access and rights to the land and the preservation of culture, but could also ultimately deprive them of the pursuit of an alternate political status that would accord them with more political influence. The rights included in indigenous status vary between arrangements, but generally establish a relationship of a “sovereign nation” within another nation, and grant certain freedoms but limit other political rights. This status however, would gain for Tibetans representation within the U.N. and perhaps open up other international recognition.

Autonomy, or the Middle Way approach, was presented by His Holiness as an alternative to the pursuit of independence and as a means of opening dialogue with the Chinese. The Middle Way defines autonomy for Tibet as: a territory that would include the three traditional provinces in Tibet; genuine regional national autonomy; a popularly elected government; status as a zone of peace and non-violence; and freedom from human rights violations. This approach waives the right of Tibet to pursue independence as a future political option and designates any international relations and defense responsibilities to the Chinese government.<sup>15</sup> The Dalai Lama is assigned the “main responsibility of sincerely pursuing negotiations and reconciliation with the Chinese government.”<sup>16</sup> Therefore his authority was reinforced by the framing of the political option and the political response.

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<sup>15</sup> Pamphlet on the Middle Way policy

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid*



The voting results of the referendum were surprising in that the Tibetan community in exile (in India, U.S., Europe, Australia, South America, Nepal) voted primarily for an unspecified fifth option. The majority of voters expressed their wish for whatever option His Holiness thought best for their community. According to Tsultrim Dorjee, TYC Centrex General Secretary, “whatever His Holiness do[es], we are going to follow that. So there were 66% of Tibetan people has voted for that. And with that, the exile government made, you know, adopt a resolution that from now, the exile government policy is to opt for genuine autonomy rather than independence.”<sup>17</sup> This was an important indication of the support that the Tibetan community continues to uphold for His Holiness the Dalai Lama, and demonstrates his continued political influence as the elected spokesperson for the Tibetan people.

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<sup>17</sup> Dorjee, Tsultrim, 6/12/06

The selection of the Middle Way approach has not stopped the move for Tibetan independence by some Tibetans and their international supporters; rather it has shifted the arena of independence campaigning from governmental policy to the realm of non-governmental organizations. The two N.G.O.'s that this paper concentrates on are the Tibetan Youth Congress and Students for a Free Tibet. Both are international organizations based in Dharamsala and New York and both were founded with the furthering of the cause of Tibetan independence as their primary organizational goals. They were selected because they are both international organizations with overlapping locations and goals. The differences however, are shown in their representation of Tibetan independence, their campaigns and their roles within the Tibetan community in exile.

*Tibetan Youth Congress: Pursuit of Independence*

“We don't try to represent, we represent.”  
-Kalsang Phuntsok Gordukpa, current TYC CENTREX President

*History*

The Tibetan Youth Congress was first organized by Tenzin Gyeche Tethong, Tenzin Namgyal Thethong, and Lodi G. Gyari in the late 1960's just as the first generation of Tibetan children in exile were graduating from Indian high schools and colleges. According to one of the founders: “The idea came about, that the idea for the need for the young Tibetans to be more involved in the community and also to see how best we could do something good for Tibet.”<sup>18</sup> They called a conference of Tibetan youth from all of the settlements in India: “We assumed 30-40 people would come, but when the conference started we had over 300 people from all over the place. So immediately it

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<sup>18</sup> Anonymous, 6/17/06

became really a subject of great interest and discussion because one, this was not something organized by the Tibetan government or called by His Holiness, you know? It was all young people and furthermore it was on a voluntary basis, nobody was paid or pushing you to do this.” The original concept was to gather young people together to see how best they could benefit the community in exile and further the work towards an independent Tibet.

After the conference it was clear that Tibetan youth needed and wanted an avenue to effect change and act politically. According to an anonymous source, “It was about what the young people did for the community situation so it did right from the beginning have a very strong political element to it, they say whatever sort of mess or situation we’re in, it’s because of our unfortunate political situation and that we are out of our own country. So it became very political and so soon by the third day it became unanimous that we wanted to establish a permanent organization and the focus was going to be the independence of Tibet.” At that time, these goals were in accord with the government in exile’s political stance on independence and the organization was established with the blessing of His Holiness the Dalai Lama.

At that time, TYC’s declaration to work towards that goal complimented the government’s campaign but their organization faced challenges within the community as the first group of its type. Because it was a new organization, TYC had to establish a reputation for itself. According to the current President of TYC’s Central Executive Board, Kalsang Phunsok Gordukpa: “Whenever an NGO comes up you have to convince through your actions and deeds.”<sup>19</sup> The inauguration of TYC was attended by His Holiness: “His Holiness was invited and he came to the opening of the conference and so

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<sup>19</sup> Gordukpa, Kalsag Phuntsok, 6/10/06

he blessed it and graced the occasion... it [the organization] was very unusual because sort of traditionally the Tibetan people or public has always looked to some official leadership whether from His Holiness or the Tibetan government or established monastery or lama or somebody to lead an initiative, and this time [it] came from a bunch of young people.”<sup>20</sup> This independent organization provided an avenue through which young people could express an opinion, organize and work for change in the community. TYC’s alignment with the official stance on independence ensured that this cause was presented as a unified political front through the exile community.

### *TYC and Exile Politics*

The links with the government in ideology were so strong that many members of TYC would continue their political work in the Tibetan community within the government after their elected terms with TYC finished. The organization proved to be an important training ground for political work and was a way to build a positive reputation in the community.<sup>21</sup> According to Tenzin Lekshey, of the Office of Information in the Tibetan Government in Exile, TYC had the “biggest, call it a platform, you were privileged in earlier times, mostly grounded in colleges and universities (most of members are students). Because of the commonality of the ideology [they] were candidates for governmental positions, so people in the 1970’s and 1980’s joined the Tibetan government.”<sup>22</sup> The popularity and presence of TYC ensured that its participants were also well-known within their communities.

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<sup>20</sup> Anonymous, 7/17/06

<sup>21</sup> Tsering,

<sup>22</sup> Lekshay, 6/15/06

This trend reinforced the closeness of TYC and the exile government, yet may have also shifted the growth of the organization. According to Jamyang Norbu, “Its role in Tibetan politics was in the beginning a commanding one, and it saw itself as a kind of loyal opposition to the government. But the Tibetan government did not want any kind of opposition, loyal or otherwise.”<sup>23</sup> Jamyang Norbu claims that the government’s influence on TYC shifted its growth as an organization: “The Cabinet gradually worked at undermining the TYC and for a time was very successful...It did not help matters when a succession of youth leaders used the TYC as a springboard to a career in Tibetan government service, rather than working to transform the TYC in the kind of revolutionary organization that would uncompromisingly struggle for its goal of an independent and democratic Tibet.”<sup>24</sup> Thus, the links between the government and TYC appear dually supportive and conforming at times.

Because TYC was involved in multiple issues within the community in exile and because it appealed to a wide membership base, it became the biggest NGO in the exile community and worked closely with the exile government. Tenzin Norbu Tagpo, former CENTREX President commented: “Tibetan Youth Congress was one of the most important N.G.O.’s in exile, working for not only for the political resolution of Tibet but also to work for the social work among the Tibetan community: on health, on education, on looking after old people, those people who are alone and don’t have any family. And also to work for the democratization of the Tibetan exile community. So it’s not only, we have a political agenda but at the same time we have a lot of other agendas at work.”<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> Norbu, Jamyang. Shadow Tibet, 15

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid*, 16

<sup>25</sup> Tagpo, 6/27/06

This range of activities ensured a TYC a prominent influence within the Tibetan community through their work, presence and visibility.

Tenzin Lekshey explained that TYC was the first NGO to be established in the Tibetan community and had membership from all areas, and of all ages<sup>26</sup>. Because so much of TYC's work affected broad populations within the exile community, they soon gained a positive reputation. According to an anonymous source: "I think in general the public accepted it very well, and this may be the key strength of the organization, that right from the beginning the public had considerable support."<sup>27</sup> TYC involved many members of the Tibetan community in exile in its social projects and sought to communicate through its regional chapters with the exile community.

TYC not only pursued its political agenda, but also served as a source of education about democracy and social aid for the Tibetan settlements. Tenzin Norbu Tagpo, former CENTREX President and current Secretary of International Relations in the government in exile, commented "Our kind of Tibetan Youth Congress was all educated youth mostly... but we had members in the settlements, old people, I don't know, but one of our most important things [was] politically to fight for the independence of Tibet, that's one. The other thing is His Holiness kind of aided democracy in exile. You know all the old people, they don't have the education of democracy, they don't have the culture of democracy, you have a framework of democracy but then [society needs] the people who are there they are democ[ratically] minded!"<sup>28</sup> Both the government in exile and TYC sought to educate the public about democracy.

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<sup>26</sup>Lekshey, 6/16/06

<sup>27</sup>Anonymous, 7/17/06

<sup>28</sup>Tagpo, 6/27/06

TYC ran and currently runs educational workshops on democracy, youth empowerment, health awareness-raising and other issues as a compliment to their work towards the realization of independence. This also compliments the social services provided by the government, and, according to Dhondup Dorjee, provides another funnel for information to reach the government about life in exile. There is “no distinguishment between people, government and NGO’s. TYC provides humanitarian assistance and [the] central [council pays] visits to regional chapters.”<sup>29</sup> The Central Executive Board of TYC oversees the regional chapters within the individual communities all over India and abroad, and members of the Executive Board visit various chapters. The close contact with regional chapters results in the gathering of information and facilitates communication to the exile government about the needs of the community in exile, through TYC.<sup>30</sup>

In 1979, when the government in exile presented the referendum regarding the future pursuit of a political status, TYC was adamant in its commitment to the cause of independence and pursued a campaign to further that end. Dhondup Dorjee, current CENTREX board member commented that TYC was an “organization established for independence,” and that it must “stay with its aim and objectives.” He stated that “most important is to pass it on to coming generation” and that “we don’t have the right to compromise on their future.”<sup>31</sup> TYC and the exile government at that time diverged in their political pursuits, and TYC became the safeguard of the independence struggle and the organization behind it. Kalsang Puntsok Gordukpa commented that the “Middle Way is fashionable...the Tibetan movement should represent peoples’ genuine

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<sup>29</sup> Dorjee, Dhondup, 6/10/06

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid*

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid*

aspirations...we are forced to experiment with it [autonomy].” He suggested that the Middle Way option is fashioned according to “changing scenarios” internationally and that independence still lies at the heart of Tibetan hopes and aspirations. Tsultrim Dorjee commented “if you ask in the exile community, say in the Tibetan community, if they support for the Middle Way or independence movement and over 99% will say the same thing: ok, they support Middle Way approach because of His Holiness, Dalai Lama, since he’s following that kind of movement, whereas TYC is concerned [with the] independent movement. Because the reason we came into exile is to fight for [the] independent movement in 1959. And the majority of Tibetans who are inside Tibet are fighting for independence, so with that, you know, people support in a way both.”<sup>32</sup> Although TYC does not currently oppose the Middle Way<sup>33</sup>, the organization continues with its own pursuit of independence with expressed respect and loyalty for His Holiness.<sup>34</sup>

The Central Executive Board of TYC is based in Dharamsala and is responsible for coordinating the work of its international regional chapters and organizing activities. Every year there is a general body meeting which organizes the campaigns for the upcoming year and holds elections for the Central Executive Board every three years. The general body meeting is attending by CENTREX and regional chapter members. Most of the organizing and work of the Central Executive Board is done on an transnational level in an advisory position on activities, campaigns and helping to run regional chapters: “mostly because as TYC headquarters, normally we used to... have ten

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<sup>32</sup> Dorjee, Tsultrim, 6/12/06

<sup>33</sup> “TYC didn’t support the exile government’s stand for genuine autonomy but at the same time we didn’t oppose. That’s the thing, because in a democratic society, every Tibetan has the right you know to thought, ok because maybe the government’s policy is that they are just fighting for genuine autonomy, but as far as TYC is concerned, we are just stick to that independent movement.” *Ibid.*

<sup>34</sup> Lekshey, 6/15/06

to twelve kind of calendar activities, and besides we also organize kind of workshops, trainings, seminars, especially for the college students... Kind of youth empowerment, leadership trainings kind of thing. We also conduct human rights and democracy workshops for the Tibetan community. And besides we send circulars to all the regional chapters.”<sup>35</sup> CENTREX, although located in Dharamsala, is not generally directly involved with political campaigning within Dharamsala. There is a McCleod Gange chapter of TYC which organizes most of the activities in that community.

The TYC regional chapters globally take directions from the Central Executive Board and implement campaigns locally in their communities. According to the current CENTREX President, there are three requirements for the establishment of a regional chapter of TYC “1. A set number of people (community): if you’re confident that the number will continue then you have the need...the people must have a desire, understanding to have the organization must come from the people; 2. whether they will be able to carry out directions from Centrex; 3. they have to follow democratic institutional structures...conditions differ from place to place, flexible rules vary according to circumstance.”<sup>36</sup> If these three requirements are met, then the chapters implement a calendar of events as previously mentioned, as well as any other campaigns that are directed by the Central Executive Committee. Communications to the chapters globally occur several times a year and the chapters participate every three years in an election of the CENTREX board.

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<sup>35</sup> Dorjee, Tsultrim, 6/12/06

<sup>36</sup> Gordukpa, Kalsang Phuntsok, 6/10/06

*Students for a Free Tibet: International Work Towards Independence*

Students for a Free Tibet is an international organization which advocates for Tibetan independence through the work of regional chapters run at schools and universities. The mission statement describes the organization's founding perspective: "Students for a Free Tibet was founded in New York City in 1994 by a group of Tibetans and young students and supporters. The concept of SFT was borne from the understanding of the critical role students and young people have played in freedom struggles throughout history."<sup>37</sup> The head office of this now international organization is located in New York City with chapters springing up around the world. The founding principles of the organization are for Tibetan independence at all costs: "We believe every individual has the right to be free. Those who enjoy freedom have the power and also the responsibility to make positive change in the world. We seek to create opportunities to inspire, enable and motivate all people to see that change is possible. We value creativity in every pursuit and we believe it is essential to have fun while working towards our vision of a just and equitable world."<sup>38</sup> The organization trains and encourages young people to become involved in the struggle for Tibetan independence.

The role of Students for a Free Tibet has shifted with the global political climate from an organization supporting a broad issue to a more focused group working on specific campaigns to further their expressed goals. One member of the SFT Head Office in New York commented that in the 1990's there was a time when Tibetan independence was the cause and the support and awareness was strong in the U.S.<sup>39</sup> Currently there is perhaps a smaller audience but SFT is more effective in its organization, according to one

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<sup>37</sup> <http://www.studentsforafreetibet.org/article.php?list=type&type=38>

<sup>38</sup> <http://www.studentsforafreetibet.org/article.php?list=type&type=69>

<sup>39</sup> Anonymous 2, 7/19/06

of the SFT members, because of “institutional memory.”<sup>40</sup> The organization might have a smaller audience or support base, but the effectiveness of their campaigns are perhaps increased because of the growth in experience of the organization.<sup>41</sup> The geographical diversity in chapter location also aids in the dissemination of information. There are currently “650 chapters in 30 different countries...we have really hardcore Tibetans and non-Tibetans.”<sup>42</sup> Tenshue, a member in the Dharamsala regional chapter stated their “focus is complete, complete independence.” With a diverse member base and international chapters, SFT serves to communicate and engage people all around the world.

SFT New York’s major role in the organization is designing and directing campaigns and disseminating information to the regional chapters. The regional chapters “can do whatever they want to do” with the head office’s main role being “communication with some direction.”<sup>43</sup> The individual chapter organizers have the ability to decide on how to run their chapter, which campaigns to participate in, and what activities to engage in. This flexibility in organization allows for variation in campaigning and yet the overall organization provides information and guidelines for work. Officially “SFT New York is international but we do local work too.”<sup>44</sup> Another source from SFT New York commented that the New York head office often supports and aids the New York City chapters if there are local campaigns in the area.

SFT organizers Tenzin argued that SFT’s actions serve to increase awareness about their issues, and also created a more conducive atmosphere for negotiations with

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<sup>40</sup> Anonymous 2, 7/19/06

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid*

<sup>42</sup> Tenshue, 7/5/06

<sup>43</sup> Anonymous 2, 7/19/06

<sup>44</sup> Anonymous 3, 7/19/06

China. SFT's main campaign goals are accomplished through direct action/demonstrations, shaming the Chinese/social ostracism, and education. The head office seeks to "provide the blue print and they're [the local chapters] the ones who start organizing."<sup>45</sup> The goals of demonstrating are to raise awareness and increase education about Tibet, put "direct/indirect pressure on China" and "foster youth leadership." Shaming "really pisses Chinese government off... the Chinese are trying to present it as the action hinders dialogue [when it] actually helps dialogue, creates urgency, helps to take dialogue seriously." One participant stated "we want the exile government to find a solution,"<sup>46</sup> and commented that SFT's activism promotes and facilitates an atmosphere for dialogue.

SFT was initially introduced in the Tibetan Children's Village (Tibetan language school) in Dharamsala in 1996 by young students, in 2000 SFT Dharamsala chapter was started. The Delhi chapter started in 2001, and there are operating chapters in Dehradun and Bangalore as well.<sup>47</sup> Tenshue, of the Dharamsala chapter, stated that "SFT is mainly to get people into action in the Tibetan Freedom movement by raising awareness" and that "SFT India's main focus is non-Tibetans, especially Indian students...Tibetans have always been a part of SFT and are always welcome, but there's always other options [for them] to get into the movement, TYC, TWA [Tibetan Women's Association]...TYC is mostly Tibetan oriented, SFT is Tibetan and non Tibetans fighting for independence."<sup>48</sup> The organizers of SFT Dharamsala are in close contact with the

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<sup>45</sup> *Ibid*

<sup>46</sup> Anonymous 3, 7/19/06

<sup>47</sup> Tenshue 7/5/06

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid*

New York office “we talk almost every day...New York proposes campaigns.”<sup>49</sup>

Students for a Free Tibet seeks to broaden the base of support for the independence struggle through targeting non-Tibetan communities for education and campaign support.



### *SFT and the Exile Government*

The relationship between SFT and the exile government is one of varying circumspection and circumnavigation. According to Tenshue, “SFT is a completely independent [NGO]: we don't rely on the government... because of the new approach [by the exile government] things have gotten pretty passive.” One New York organizer commented that “despite appeals from exile government people inside say they continue to protest... people in the exile government are out of touch with the Chinese leadership.”<sup>50</sup> The exile government has, at times requested for the cessation of campaigns or shaming of the Chinese, but members of SFT New York explained it in the context of the relationship between China and the exile government, in that the Chinese pressure the government to cease protests in order for negotiation to happen, whereas the protests serve to pressure China into human rights and political accountability.

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<sup>49</sup> *Ibid*

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid*

## *Conclusion*

TYC and SFT appear to pursue similar goals of independence yet their targeted audiences and roles within the Tibetan community in exile differ. TYC is a veritable institution within the Tibetan community with a history of a close relationship with the government in exile and a variety of social activities which keep the organization in close contact with the community in which it is present. Students for a Free Tibet is a newer organization whose target group for participation in activism are youth in schools and generally outside the Tibetan community to further support for the cause of independence. Both organizations operate globally with chapters in both Dharamsala and New York, and their influences in the communities differ according to the location and membership base. In Dharamsala, TYC has its head office which operates as a central base for the organization and facilitates communication with the government in exile. Its campaigns are generally run independently, and TYC Dharamsala doesn't generally collaborate with SFT Dharamsala on campaigning. SFT Dharamsala is run by a group of friends who are passionate about their cause and their chapter collaborates and cosponsors events with other NGO's in the community.

In New York the situation is relatively reversed, as SFT's head office is located on Manhattan, and the TYC New York regional chapter is located there. Unlike in Dharamsala, some cooperation in campaigning and managing events occurs, although the organizations maintain autonomy. The SFT head office coordinates its individual chapters and TYC represents its regional members within the area. There are many Tibet support and interest groups located and working within the New York area and they also

help to draw attention to the cause of Tibet. The transnational activism has aided in spreading awareness about the issue of Tibetan independence through the work of these two NGOs.

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