

## ***The Politics of Sorrow: Unity and Allegiance Across Tibetan Exile***

Tsering Wangmo Dhompa  
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In *The Politics of Sorrow: Unity and Allegiance Across Tibetan Exile*, Tsering Wangmo Dhompa highlights the story of the Tsokhag Chusum, or Group of Thirteen in the 1960s. This group consisted of Tibetan leaders primarily from Kham and Amdo regions, which are less represented in the mainstream discourse of exile due to their contested history. She emphasizes that the story of Tsokhag Chusum is crucial for understanding the challenges of Tibetan nation-building in exile. Their goal of strengthening ties with their regional communities and protecting their unique cultural and political identities was often viewed—especially by centralized groups like the Tibetan United Association (Chigdril Tsogpa)—as a threat to overall Tibetan unity. Using both primary and secondary sources, along with personal connections (including her late mother’s close ties with the Thirteen), Dhompa’s account combines scholarly research with personal stories, allowing for an in-depth look at exile politics.

Dhompa’s book is a first of its kind, at least in the English language, which narrates the stories of the Thirteen. She writes about numerous individuals who have never received due credit for charting

their own paths and building successful settlements or monasteries. In fact, as she writes, their stories and their lives have been consigned to the footnotes of exile history. These individuals and the group have been vilified, castigated, and swept under the carpet.

Dhomba identifies two competing visions of the Tibetan nation: the dominant, unified, and state-centered approach promoted by the exile government through the United Party, and a sidelined vision promoted by the Thirteen, which focused on regional identity and autonomy but was often seen as narrow or backward, misunderstood, and accused of regionalism (p. 16). Instead of taking sides, Dhomba provides a fair critique of both views. She highlights the ongoing tension between unity and diversity that continues to influence Tibetan political discussions in exile. This book sheds light on the marginalized narratives of the Tibetan struggle for belonging and democratic self-governance in exile. Highlighting this period of exile history, which is traumatic for many and also deemed unnecessary by others, is crucial for the development of a healthy democracy. Her book has been published at the right time, as tensions between unity and democracy still affect the exiled Tibetan community. Regionalism is still considered a disruption to unity among Tibetans. The Thirteen were among the first to be blamed by the ruling exile elites for fueling regionalism and weakening unity. Therefore, sharing their side of the story is an important way of acknowledging their struggles and sacrifices. The book offers a platform for alternative perspectives within the exile community, which is essential for the growth of a mature democratic system. Tsering Wangmo Dhomba's book is significant as it reinforces principles of equality, justice, rights, and plurality—values essential for a mature democracy. Her book, with its alternative, dissenting narratives of exiled Tibetans, is a must-

read for everyone, especially Tibetans, many of whom have a skewed understanding of the Thirteen. She explores the process of nation-building of the Tibetan state in exile and the resistance it faces from the group of thirteen through three key events: the oath of unity (1960), the student protests at Ockenden, and the assassination of Gungthang Tsultrim, as well as the meetings between the Central Tibetan Administration (CTA) and the Thirteen.

A complex tale of Tibetan nationalism, *The Politics of Sorrow* draws attention to the marginal narratives amidst mechanisms adopted by the Tibetans to bring unity and secure the nation. The preface and introduction provide a brief overview of the theme of unity and regionalism in the Tibetan exile world, beginning with the assassination of Gungthang Tsultrim, contextualised within the politics of exile, which in turn shapes the ‘politics of sorrow.’ The Thirteen perceived unity as suppressing intracultural and religious differences and lesser-told histories, which the United Party interpreted as a sign of their resistance to modernity and change. The master narrative of a nation mobilises a community by privileging a particular practice as its constitutive principle, which shapes who belongs and who doesn’t (p.28). Thus, the aspirations of the Thirteen were termed as regionalism, an act of disunity, which did not have a place in the new polity and the new form of citizenship.

Chapter 1 discusses democracy in exile and its interaction with the pre-1959 socio-political value system of the Khampas and Amdowas, which was termed as challenging the reforms introduced by the CTA. Dhompa writes about the great oath of unity made by Tibetans in Bodh Gaya in 1960, when a lack of unity was blamed for the loss of their country (p.47). The great oath was the first step in building a united nation

in exile and this unity was difficult to embrace. Chapter 2 discusses the dominance of the CTA representatives in work units and settlements and the discrimination against Eastern Tibetan Refugees. The latter was accused of being anti-government and un-Tibetan when demanding that separate settlements be looked upon as separate sources of traditional authority. Dhompa writes about the United Party's association with Gyalo Thondup, elder brother of the Dalai Lama, and their domination upon the exile society through imposing a singular Tibetan identity by privileging Gelug teachings over other schools of Tibetan Buddhism. The United Party created a split in the Chushi Gangdruk whose nationalism recognized regions and nations as complementary and not competing projects (p.40). Many of the founding members of the Thirteen were also members of the Chushi Gangdruk.

Chapter 3 discusses the genesis of The Thirteen to counter the United Party, preventing the destruction of the other Tibetan Schools. The Thirteen attempted to make Tibetan society more inclusive, especially for minorities like the Bonpos (p.108). The chapter discusses the role of Gungthang Tsultrim and others who formed their own settlements, providing a decentralized understanding of the construction of the exile society. Chapter 4 documents the responses of the United Party through the Seven Resolutions and Supporting Documents. This was “a manual on the duties of belonging to the new Tibetan polity” (p.126). Dhompa dissects each resolution, examining it through the ideas of unity and democracy.

In Chapter 5, Dhompa writes about the revolt by thirty Tibetan students at the Ockenden School in South India, where they accused the teachers of teaching them wrong history and attempting to turn them into

Bonpos (p. 145). The exile state wanted to mold history to serve the larger cause of unity, and this incident showcased the complex biography of a nation navigating through contestation, cooption and marginalization of alternate histories and visions. The incident highlighted nation-making as a social, cultural, and political process (p. 165), and those who did not adhere to the official narrative were branded as traitors.

Chapter 6 provides a discussion of the several meetings that led to the formation of the Thirteen Settlements. This group of Thirteen opposed the United Party by securing their individual religious institutions and settlements, registered themselves as a cooperative society with the Indian government, and chose the Sixteenth Karmapa as their patron with assurance from the Dalai Lama.

Chapter 7 discusses the direct conflict between the Thirteen and the United Party, which emerged after the Thirteen tried to gain Indian citizenship. They mentioned that they sought citizenship to protect themselves from the United Party. This move received criticism from exile officials and parliamentarians, while Indian newspapers portrayed it as the presence of discord in the exile community. Another allegation was the Thirteen's connection to Taiwan. Dhompa writes there was peaceful coexistence between the Thirteen and the United Party shattered by the assassination of Gunghang Tsultrim. After this incident, a pamphlet was published which appealed to the Indian government for protection. It mentioned that the Khampas and Amdowas were politically free, and that the Dalai Lama was curtailed by certain administrators, making him an ornamental head (p.222).

Chapter 8 highlights the meetings that took place between the

Thirteen and the CTA in 1978 after the assassination of Gungthang Tsultrim. The Thirteen discussed their complaints, questioned the authority of the United Party, and attempted to mend relations with the CTA, which meant recognition from the Dalai Lama himself. The author highlights the questions of belonging, recognition, and identity. The initial reconciliation turned to dissatisfaction when the Dalai Lama, displeased with the pamphlet, saw it as a challenge to the government. These meetings offer a glimpse into the discussions regarding the rights and duties of Tibetans as refugee citizens. Dhompa concludes with questions of nationalism and belonging, wherein the nation's values, if broken by its members, lead to their ostracism. The Thirteen received several denunciatory letters sent by different exile organizations, so many of them returned to Tibet (p. 255). The remaining members of the Thirteen published a booklet, justifying their priority as preserving Tibet's ancient culture and religion. They blamed the disrepute upon the handiwork of a few people influenced by Gyalo Thondup.

*The Politics of Sorrow: Unity and Allegiance Across Tibetan Exile* contains a factual error in naming the settlement in Chandragiri, Odhisa as Chattisgarh (p.73). The book is also short on the discussion about the internal dynamism of the Thirteen, for there is in all probability the presence of hierarchy among the group members. Nonetheless, this book is a pioneering work on Tibetan exile nationalism, especially in its examination of dissent and contestations within the Tibetan exile community. While Dhompa writes about the traditional elites from Eastern Tibet, her work can also be placed under the larger rubric of 'subaltern studies', as these individuals and their communities were transformed into the subaltern in the Tibetan exile world. Finally, she writes that national homogeneity, even when it serves a purpose as

important as the Tibetan national struggle, still deserves scrutiny. The book conveys that the Tibet we build in exile must be more than the sum of our fears, which makes *The Politics of Sorrow: Unity and Allegiance Across Tibetan Exile* a must-read for every Tibetan.