

“NOT IMPORTANT:” AN ANALYSIS OF THE TIBET PHOTO SERVICE MEDIUM  
FORMAT NEGATIVES AT THE TIBET MUSEUM

by

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## **Abstract**

“NOT IMPORTANT:” An Analysis of the Tibet Photo Service Medium Format Negatives at the Tibet Museum

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This thesis approaches a body of 1,428 6x6 cm gelatin silver acetate negatives in the Tibet Museum’s photographic archives in Dharamsala, India. This material, labelled “not important” by an archivist at their collecting institution, contains images of the Tibetan community in exile, made by the Tibet Photo Service (TPS) studio between 1962 and 1987. The practical component of this project involves arranging and rehousing the negatives for accessibility and preservation purposes. The theoretical component of this project provides a contextual framework for the TPS medium format negatives, unpacking the reasons behind their exclusion from care and display. Additionally, it engages the negatives as sites of “articulation and aspiration” of the Tibetan exile community. The objects and their images are recontextualized from material that is “not important” to social and political documents that serve as a subjective historical record of the foundational years of the Tibetan community in India.

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## Introduction

From 1962 to 1987, the Tibet Photo Service (TPS) studio filled the role of community photographer in the Tibetan refugee settlement of Dharamsala in India. During these foundational years of the Tibetan community in exile, the TPS photographers provided photographic services for the town; making pictures for identification documents, taking family and group portraits, and photographing the exile settlements and their community gatherings.

Though they were never officially hired by the Tibetan government-in-exile, the Central Tibetan Administration (CTA), the TPS photographers were often asked to provide them with photographs.<sup>1</sup> In the late 1980s, the exile government expanded the reach of their Department of Information and International Relations (DIIR) by hiring their first official staff photographer. This led the Tibet Photo Service to suspend its own production of photographs in 1987. That same year, the studio donated their negatives to the DIIR.<sup>2</sup>

In 1998, the DIIR began a project to open the Tibet Museum and a photographic archives, which would preserve and exhibit the photographic documents from the exile administration. However, over twenty years later, in 2019, the TPS negatives had yet to be accessioned into the Tibet Museum's collection. While most of the collections material had been intellectually arranged and physically rehoused by the Tibet Museum's archivists, the TPS negatives were still housed loosely in no particular order in the boxes the photographers had donated them in. A white label had been adhered to the front of one of these boxes by the archives staff. In capital letters, it read "NOT IMPORTANT." This box, along with ten other

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<sup>1</sup> Bhutok, interview by author, Dharamsala, July 7, 2019.

<sup>2</sup> Bhutok, interview by author, Dharamsala, July 7, 2019.

boxes containing TPS medium format negatives, were stored together in a cardboard carton, placed on the floor in the back of the archive.

This thesis addresses this material, which consists of 1,428 individually-cut medium format acetate negative frames from the Tibet Photo Service, made between the years of 1962 and 1987. This thesis includes practical and theoretical components, each with related research questions.

The practical component of this project involves physically and intellectually arranging the TPS medium format negatives to improve their accessibility. The method of arrangement attempted to place the material in chronological order. This practical component also involves rehousing the TPS medium format negatives for preservation purposes. This section provides a methodology for arranging and housing a collection of individually-cut negative frames with no particular order, through close attention to the material aspects of the photographic objects.

The theoretical component of this project establishes a contextual framework for the TPS medium format negatives. First, it examines the institutional motivations of the Tibet Museum and its photographic archives to address the question: why were these objects dismissed by archivists as “not important” and consequently excluded from care and display? Next, it provides a historical analysis of the TPS medium format negatives. In this section, the material is engaged as sites of “articulation and aspiration”<sup>3</sup> in the lives of members of the Tibetan exile public. The negatives are recontextualized as social and political documents, which serve as a subjective record of the foundational years of the Tibetan community in exile.

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<sup>3</sup> Tina Campt, *Image Matters: Archive, Photography, and the African Diaspora in Europe* (Durham; London: Duke University, 2012), 6.

## Chapter 1: Literature Survey

Multiple branches of literature were consulted in order to better understand the social, cultural and material particularities of the Tibet Photo Service negatives at the Tibet Museum. The literature survey first provides a review of the written history of Tibetan photography. Next, it discusses the literature on the institutional power of the archive and the archivist to establish dominant historical narratives, and the writing on the use of photographs as historical sources. Finally, it examines the literature on standards of care for photographic negative collections.

### 1.1 Literature on Photography and Tibet

A large portion of the critical writing on photography and Tibet has focused on the West's depictions of Tibet rather than the photographic practices of Tibetans themselves. Clare Harris, Professor of Visual Anthropology at Oxford University and Curator for Asian Collections at the Pitt Rivers Museum, is one of the few scholars whose writing has focused on the practices of Tibetan photographers. In *Photography and Tibet*, Harris has provided a survey of photographic practices in Tibet and the Himalayas.<sup>4</sup>

In a chapter titled "Photography and the Politics of Memory" in *The Museum on the Roof of the World*, Harris has written about Bhutook, a Tibetan photographer in Dharamsala, whose production of a type of photographic image that she calls "photo icons" combined traditional religious modes of representation with the reproducibility of the photographic medium.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Clare Harris, *Photography and Tibet* (London: Reaktion Books, 2016).

<sup>5</sup> Clare Harris, "Photography and the Politics of Memory," *The Museum on the Roof of the World* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2014), 117–52. For more on Clare Harris's writing on "photo icons," refer to "The Photograph Reincarnate: The Dynamics of Tibetan Relationships with Photography" in Elizabeth Edwards and Janice Hart, ed., *Photographs Objects Histories: On the Materiality of Images*.

Although Harris writes that Bhutok initially made a living in Dharamsala by taking portrait photographs of fellow refugees for official documents, she does not discuss this practice further.

This thesis builds on Harris's writing on Tibetan photography by examining the role of the studio where Bhutok worked – the Tibet Photo Service. It provides a historical analysis of the types of material that the studio's photographers created during the foundational years of Tibetan resettlement in India.

## 1.2 Literature on the Power of the Archive and Archivist

The lack of scholarly engagement with Tibetan photographic practices may be due in part to the dismissal of this material by archival institutions. The literature on the power of the archive and archivist acknowledges their role in the construction of historical narratives through their selective acquisition of archival material.

Building an archive “involves a number of selective operations: selection of producers, selection of themes, selection of procedures – which means, at best the differentials ranking and, at worst, the exclusion of some producers, some evidence, some themes, some procedures,” stated anthropologist Michel-Rolph Trouillot in *Silencing the Past*.<sup>6</sup> Trouillot argued that the assembling of an archive is not a passive act of collecting, but rather, an active process of producing history. He urged those working with archival material to engage with the active processes of omission that are created in the production of historical narratives.

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<sup>6</sup> Michel-Rolph Trouillot, *Silencing the Past: Power and the Production of History* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1995), 53.

Joan M. Schwartz and Terry Cook have emphasized the role of the archivist in influencing dominant historical narratives through the collection of archival material.<sup>7</sup> The privileging of certain stories and the marginalizing of others is performed through the selection and acquisition of material by archival professionals. Schwartz and Cook contextualize archives as sites of social power, where dominance is negotiated and identity can be confirmed or contested. Archives, then, function not as “passive storehouses of old stuff,”<sup>8</sup> but rather, as active spaces in which archivists hold power to represent, reinterpret, and reshape memory and identity in fundamental ways. Historian and archivist Randall C. Jimerson has added in *Embracing the Power of Archives* that by privileging the preservation of some records over others, archivists have a selective power on a society’s collective memory of its past, including – importantly – what will be left to be forgotten.<sup>9</sup> This means that the varied histories of marginalized communities are often missing from archival institutions.

The theoretical component of this thesis engages with the ways that the Tibet Museum’s archivists have privileged certain historical interpretations through their selective acquisition of photographic material. Understanding the archivist’s dismissal of the TPS negatives and their exclusion from the collection requires an examination of the Tibet Museum’s institutional motivations and the archivists’ individual processes of selection. Chapter 3 of this thesis will engage with these selective operations within the context of the Tibet Museum.

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<sup>7</sup> Joan M. Schwartz and Terry Cook, “Archives, Records, and Power: The Making of Modern Memory.” *Archival Science* 2 (2002): 1–19.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid, 1.

<sup>9</sup> Randall C. Jimerson, "Embracing the Power of Archives." *The American Archivist* 69, no. 1 (2006): 19–32.



### 1.3 Literature on Photographs as Historical Sources

Photographs can offer valuable records of the documented past. However, the production of images is not a neutral operation. On the subjectivity of the photographer, art critic John Berger wrote that “photographs bear witness to a human choice being exercised in a given situation.”<sup>10</sup> Berger states that the photograph is a message. “At its simplest, the message, decoded, means: I have decided that seeing this is worth recording.”<sup>11</sup> The choice Berger describes is the decision by a subjective actor with a camera to render a particular person, moment or thing significant.

The subjective nature of photographs has often been ignored by scholars of history. In *Eyewitnessing*, historian Peter Burke has provided a critique of historians’ traditional methods of using images, arguing that most opt to use them as merely illustrative of their written text.<sup>12</sup> Burke writes that images should be considered in relation to the social contexts of their production. Ilse About and Clément Chéroux have also critiqued historians’ tendency to employ photography’s hypnotizing reality effect to further their hypothesis.<sup>13</sup> About and Chéroux offer a methodology for scholars of history using photographs that takes into consideration the identity of the photographer, the material qualities of the photographic object, and the historical context in which the photograph was made. Instead of using photographs as illustrative of or

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<sup>10</sup> John Berger, “Understanding a Photograph,” in Alan Trachtenberg, ed., *Classic Essays on Photography*, 1980: 292.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid*, 292.

<sup>12</sup> Peter Burke, *Eyewitnessing: the Uses of Images as Historical Evidence* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 2001).

<sup>13</sup> Ilse About and Clément Chéroux, “L’histoire par la photographie.” *Études photographiques*, no. 10 (November 2001): 8–33.

supplementary to a written history, this thesis employs About and Chéroux's methodology, engaging with the subjective, material, and contextual qualities of TPS negatives.

Feminist theorist and historian of photography Laura Wexler has written that what we can learn from looking at photographs of the past is not “the way things were,” but rather “a record of choices.”<sup>14</sup> Following Wexler, Tina Campt has argued that it is important to understand photographs not only as records of choices but also as “records of intentions.”<sup>15</sup> She wrote in *Image Matters* that “[t]he question of why a photograph was made involves understanding the social, cultural, and historical relationships figured in the image, as well as a larger set of relationships outside and beyond the frame – relationships we might think of as the social life of the photo.”<sup>16</sup> The social life of the photograph Campt describes includes consideration of the intentions of both the photographer and subject of a photograph, reflected in their decisions to make particular kinds of images. Campt asks that we engage photographs “as sites of articulation and aspiration; as personal and social statements that express how ordinary individuals envisioned their sense of self, their subjectivity, and their social status; and as objects that capture and preserve those articulations in the present as well as the future.”<sup>17</sup>

The theoretical component of this thesis engages with the TPS negatives as subjective documents of the past and connects them to a larger set of social, cultural, and historical contexts

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<sup>14</sup> Laura Wexler, *Tender Violence: Domestic Visions in an Age of U.S. Imperialism* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2000), 153.

<sup>15</sup> Tina Campt, *Image Matters: Archive, Photography, and the African Diaspora in Europe* (Durham; London: Duke University, 2012), 6.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, 6.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, 6.

not always visible within the frame of the photograph. The articulations and aspirations of the photographers and their subjects are considered in the analysis of the objects and their images.

#### 1.4 Literature on Care of Photographic Negative Collections

The dismissal of the value of the TPS negatives by the Tibet Museum's archivists is visible in the lack of effort being made by the institution to preserve this particular material. Literature on the nature of flexible film photographic negatives and their standards of care were reviewed in order to provide proper care to the 1,428 medium format acetate negatives in the collection.

Gelatin silver cellulose acetate film consists of an image composed of fine silver particles bound to a support of cellulose acetate by layer of gelatin. The Canadian Conservation Institute states that acetate negatives are especially at risk to a type of decay of the film base that results in the hydrolysis of the cellulose acetate itself.<sup>18</sup> This chemical reaction, which leads to the shrinkage, embrittlement, and buckling of the gelatin emulsion, is often accompanied by the smell of acetic acid, and is commonly referred to as vinegar syndrome.

Vinegar syndrome can spread quickly within a collection of acetate negatives, and the deterioration it causes cannot be reversed. James M. Reilly, the former Director of the Image Permanence Institute (IPI), provided an explanation of how storage conditions influence the course of this deterioration with his *Storage Guide for Acetate Film*.<sup>19</sup> Vinegar syndrome develops through the build-up of acidity, which happens slowly at first and then, after a certain

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<sup>18</sup> Canadian Conservation Institute, "Care of Black-and-White Photographic Negatives on Film." *CCI Notes* (Ottawa: Canadian Heritage), 2007, pt. 16/3: 1.

<sup>19</sup> J. M. Reilly, *IPI Storage Guide for Acetate Film* (Rochester, NY: Image Permanence Institute), 1996.

point, seemingly very quickly. Reilly specifies that the three factors that determine this rate of reaction are heat, moisture, and acid.<sup>20</sup>

The IPI's *Media Storage Quick Reference*, compiled by Peter Z. Adelstein, provides a guide for collections managers of the ideal temperature and relative humidity levels for acetate film.<sup>21</sup> Adelstein's guide rates frozen storage at 0°C as a "very good" storage environment for the material and cold storage of 4°C as "good" when relative humidity is set between 30% and 50% rH.<sup>22</sup> Increasing the temperature anywhere above this standard is considered by the guide as "likely to cause significant damage."<sup>23</sup>

The use of inappropriate storage enclosures is another way that acid can build up to cause vinegar syndrome. In Chapter 14 of *The Permanence and Care of Color Photographs*, Henry Wilhelm and Carol Brower of Wilhelm Imaging Research, discuss the material qualities associated with various types of sleeves and enclosures for photographic preservation.<sup>24</sup> High-density polyethylene is described as the best low-cost enclosure material for long-term storage of photographic film, as it is both inexpensive and relatively materially inert.

The practical component of this thesis addresses the material needs of the TPS medium format negatives within the context of the Tibet Museum's photographic archives. It takes into

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<sup>20</sup> Ibid, 13.

<sup>21</sup> Peter Z. Adelstein, *IPI Media Storage Quick Reference*, 2nd Edition (Rochester, NY: Image Permanence Institute), 2009.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid, 5.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid, 5.

<sup>24</sup> Henry Wilhelm and Carol Brower, "Chapter 14: Envelopes and Sleeves for Films and Prints," in *The Permanence and Care of Color Photographs: Traditional and Digital Color Prints, Color Negatives, Slides, and Motion Pictures* (Grinnell, Iowa: Preservation Publishing Company, 1993), 485–509.

account the standards of heat, moisture, and acidity levels in order to avoid the onset of vinegar syndrome within the collection.

## Chapter 2: Preservation

The TPS negatives were selected for care in January 2019. At the time they were stored loosely in no particular order inside cardboard boxes. This chapter outlines the steps taken to address the preservation needs of the collections items. It is divided into three sections. The first section provides an overview of the material, and how it had been retained by the Tibet Museum. The next section outlines the process of physically and intellectually arranging the material. The final section describes the rehousing of the TPS medium format negatives into archival enclosures, and addresses the environmental conditions of the storage space of the photographic archives.

### 2.1 Initial Condition

During a collections survey in January 2019, a cardboard box was found on the floor in a back corner of the Tibet Museum's photographic archive (fig. 1). Based on markings on its exterior, it appeared to be a box used to ship Britannia-brand biscuits before it was repurposed as a receptacle for archival material. Inside the cardboard box, thousands of 35mm negatives had been stored, piled loosely in no particular order. The 35mm negatives were housed in their original commercial studio sleeves. Many of these sleeves were starting to yellow with age, having been made of glassine – a material that Wilhelm and Brower have suggested should be avoided for long-term storage of photographic negatives.<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>25</sup> Henry Wilhelm and Carol Brower, "Chapter 14: Envelopes and Sleeves for Films and Prints," in *The Permanence and Care of Color Photographs: Traditional and Digital Color Prints, Color Negatives, Slides, and Motion Pictures* (Grinnell, Iowa: Preservation Publishing Company, 1993), 485–509.



**Figure 1.** The cardboard box into which the boxes of TPS negatives had been placed.

Within the cardboard box, below the sleeves of 35mm negatives, was a small orange Agfa-branded paper box. A white label had been adhered to the outside of it. Handwritten in pen, the label read “EXILE 60S/70S NOT IMPORTANT.” Ten other similar orange paper boxes were also stored within the Britannia-branded cardboard box (fig. 2). The eleven orange paper boxes contained 1,428 individually-cut 6x6 cm negative frames. The material was housed loosely in no particular order, and neither the boxes nor any of the negatives inside were further numbered or labelled (fig. 3).



**Figure 2.** The eleven Agfa-branded paper boxes that housed the TPS medium format negatives.



**Figure 3.** The initial housing of the TPS medium format negatives.

These negatives were made by the Tibet Photo Service between 1962 and 1987. As the label correctly identified, the TPS negatives contained images made in the Tibetan exile community in India. The label also made explicit what was implicit by the material's physical housing: that this material was not considered important to the institution. Compared to other photographic material within the archives, which had been intellectually arranged and physically rehoused into archival enclosures by the museum's archivists, the TPS negatives appeared to have been left largely untouched since their donation to the institution.

The majority of these acetate-based gelatin silver negative had no film stock information on the rebate and were unmarked and unbranded. Of the branded film, Orwo was most common



in the collection, though Agfa, Kodak, Ilford, and Indu-branded films were also present in the boxes.

On some of the negatives, parts of the film emulsion or acetate base were missing or torn. On other negatives, parts of emulsion or base from another negative had been transferred onto its base (fig. 4). It appeared that some of the negatives had been stuck together at one time, their emulsions likely softened by the high humidity of the monsoon season and fluctuating temperatures of Dharamsala. Equally, it appeared that at some point, someone handling the material had peeled apart the negatives that had become attached, ripping away parts of the gelatin emulsion and sometimes, their acetate base.



**Figure 4.** An example of emulsion transfer on the TPS medium format negatives.

By the time the material was selected for care, some of the negatives already showed signs of several other types of photographic deterioration. Since there is no record of the TPS negatives entering the collection, it is not possible to conclusively state whether this deterioration

occurred before or after it entered the Tibet Museum's archives. However, an examination of the material in January 2019 revealed that in addition to the rough handling of some of the negatives, several of the frames presented signs of silver mirroring, silver fading, anti-halation, delamination and channelling, plasticizer exudation, and redox blemishes – the results of improper long-term storage of the material.

## 2.2 Arrangement

When the TPS negatives were selected for care in January 2019, they exhibited no discernable order. Arrangement of the TPS negatives was required in order to give the material a contextual framework.

The Canadian Council of Archives explains that *respect des fonds* forms the basis of archival arrangement and description, regardless of the material or medium.<sup>26</sup> The principles state that “records created, accumulated, and/or maintained and used by an individual or corporate body must be kept together in their original order, if it exists or has been maintained, and not be mixed or combined with the records of another individual or corporate body.”<sup>27</sup> This principle, used in archival institutions almost universally, originates from a French Ministry of the Interior's April 1841 circular by Natalis de Wailly, head of the Administrative Section of the *Archives nationales*.<sup>28</sup> There is, however, a recent body of literature on archival praxis that advocates a shift away from the maintenance of original order, in favour of promoting access and

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<sup>26</sup> Canadian Council of Archives, Statement of Principles, July 2008, pt. 3: xxiii.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid, xxiii.

<sup>28</sup> Michael Duchein, "Theoretical Principles and Practical Problems of Respect des Fonds in Archival Science," *Archivaria* 16 (Summer 1983): 67.

understanding of the material.<sup>29</sup> In this view, rearrangement of the material is acceptable if a collection exhibits no original order, or if it assists in promoting user access.

One possible way to physically arrange the TPS negatives is by image content. In fact, the Tibet Museum already applies this method of arrangement to the photographic material in its collection. Inside the archives, photographs have been rehoused into archival sleeves and placed into folders inside filing cabinets. This photographic material has been rearranged from their original donor's order into a category system that was developed in the summer of 1999 by museum staff, loosely based on the Dewey Decimal system.<sup>30</sup> The categories are varied and include people, places, and intellectual concepts. These categories include "Religion," "Dalai Lama," "Politics," "Environment," and "Costumes."

The Tibet Museum's physical reordering of material in their photographic archive into categories counters the Western archival tradition of *respect des fonds*. As photographs from a single donor are physically separated into intellectual categories, contextual information regarding their original order and related materials is lost. With this system of arrangement, the category into which a photograph is placed is determined by the reading of its image content by the archivist, who is assumed to be a neutral actor.

The categorization system of arrangement employed by the Tibet Museum poses a problem for archives staff. A single photograph, which has the potential to be placed into several designated categories, requires that its cataloguers select only one of the appropriate categories

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<sup>29</sup> Terry Eastwood, "Putting the Part of the Whole Together: Systematic Arrangement of Archives," *Archivaria* 50 (October 2000): 93–116; Jennifer Meehan, "Making Leaps from Parts to Whole: Evidence and Inference in Archival Arrangement," *The American Archivist* 72 (Spring/Summer 2009): 72–90; and Mary Lynn Ritzenthaler, and Diane Vogt-O'Connor, *Photographs: Archival Care and Management* (Chicago: Society of American Archivists, 2006), 145–50.

<sup>30</sup> The Tibet Museum, "Proposal for the Renovation of the Archives of the Tibetan National Commemoration and Documentation Center," Summer 1999.

into which to physically place the object. This means that it is necessarily physically absent from other categories that may be related to its image content.

Another way to arrange this material is by attempting the more tedious task of piecing together the roll of film. The TPS medium format negatives are individually cut frames. By piecing together the roll of film, the chronology of the frames is maintained. The roll of film can provide context that is missing in the single frame of the negative. Provided within the context of a roll of film, the viewer is able to place a particular frame within the framework of images made before and after. This may reveal more contextual information not contained within the frame of a single negative.

Attempting to recreate the roll of film can be time-consuming and laborious. However, this task can be simplified by paying close attention to the material qualities of the negatives. By examining the splicing patterns of individually cut frames, for example, it is possible to learn several things. Firstly, on some of the frames, the cuts are located to the left and right of the image, when the image is properly oriented. Noticeably, on other frames, these cuts are located above and below the properly oriented image. These differing splicing patterns suggest that these negatives were likely made using two different types of cameras (fig. 5).

Depending on the type of camera used, roll film will either be pulled through the film chamber horizontally or vertically. For example, a Mamiya RB67 camera with a 6x6 back will pull film through the camera horizontally as it advances. By contrast, a Rolleiflex twin-lens reflex camera will pull the film vertically through the film chamber as it advances. Of course, if the negatives were rectangular, formatted as 6x7 or 6x4.5, this difference in splices could be attributed to the photographer rotating the camera in order to make decisions on the images' composition or orientation. Because the negative frames are, in this case, 6x6 cm, it would be

unconventional for the photographer to feel the need to rotate the camera's apparatus. Since the frame of the image is completely square, there would be no compositional or orientational difference in rotating the camera. Indeed, the Rolleiflex that TPS photographers often used had a waist-level viewfinder,<sup>31</sup> which necessitated that the photographer use the camera in a specific way – that is, held at waist-level looking down with the camera oriented upright.



**Figure 5.** An example of splice differences. The object on the left is cut vertically (splices located to the left and right of the image), and the object on the right is cut horizontally (splices located above and below the image).

Since a roll of film would only be placed into a single camera, splices for an entire roll would either be consistently horizontally- or vertically-spliced. Therefore, it was determined that

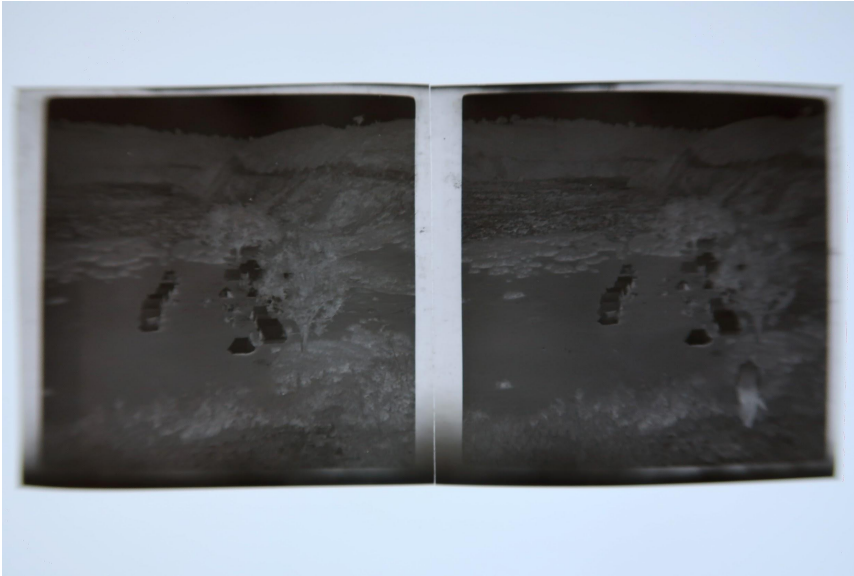
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<sup>31</sup> Bhutook, interview by author, Dharamsala, May 10, 2019.

the task of arranging this material into rolls could be split up into smaller parts. The first step of arrangement was to separate the horizontally-spliced frames from the vertically-spliced frames. These were placed into separate containers, effectively dividing in half a frame's possible matches, streamlining the task of arrangement.

Arrangement was additionally facilitated by paying attention to the film brands and stocks of the frames. Several different brands of film were present in the Tibet Museum's collection of TPS medium format negatives. While this stock information was only present on some frames of a single roll, numbers would appear on each individually cut frame of a branded film. These frame markers were formatted for 6x4.5 film rather than 6x6, so they did not directly correspond to the film frame of the TPS negatives. Nonetheless, it was possible to separate the film based on these numbers into four sections for each of the vertically- and horizontally-spliced film frames: 1–4, 5–8, 9–12, 13–16. Dividing the film into these numbered sections, and paying close attention to matching film brands and stocks, made it easier to match like sections together.

While this process was useful for film with brand information on the rebate, the majority of the TPS medium format negatives were shot on unbranded film. The lack of information on the rebate made these negatives more difficult to match. For these frames, the process of arrangement was adapted to more closely examine other key material qualities of the objects. For example, light leaks often occurred in patterns that spanned several frames. For frames without any rebate information, these light leaks often provided clues to piece together continuous frames of a roll (fig. 6).



**Figure 6.** An example of a light leak that spanned two negatives.

Film tone was also useful in matching together frames from a roll of film. The negatives' colour tone was often distinct roll to roll. While this distinction was often subtle, close observation of this material quality of the negatives was useful in arranging the objects.

Along with these methods, for both branded and unbranded film, attention was paid to the splices of each individual frame. Since the majority of these cuts were done by hand, each was unique. This helped in matching together parts of a whole.

Observing these material qualities of the objects, in combination with their images, facilitated the arrangement of many of the negatives. However, the complete arrangement of the TPS medium format negatives was not possible (fig. 7). While these methods led to the successful completion of several rolls of film, some of the individually-cut negatives appeared to have no matches that could place them within the context of a roll.



**Figure 7.** An example of the partial arrangement of a roll of film.

There could be several reasons for this. A progress report dated November 1998 states that the photographs collected for the Tibet Museum were already in “varying conditions, in so far as preservation [was] concerned.”<sup>32</sup> The report outlines that the photographs had been stored in “inappropriate conditions” which had “damaged many of them, and in some cases led to their destruction.”<sup>33</sup> It further notes that “a lenient, and in many cases un-systematic, lending policy [had] led to the disappearance of many pictures and items.”<sup>34</sup> Perhaps the missing negatives were

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<sup>32</sup> The Tibet Museum, “TNCDC – State of Affairs and Progress Report,” November 1998, pt. 5: 2.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid, 2.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid, 2.



too damaged to keep. Perhaps these negatives were lent and lost. Or, perhaps, the TPS negatives were donated as an incomplete archive. Either way, it became clear that not all the material could be placed within the context of a roll.

A separate binder was used to house the negatives that could not be matched to a roll of a film. These individual frames were placed into sleeves in no particular order. It is possible that further research by visiting scholars with specialized knowledge of Tibetan exile history could place these individual frames into a chronological order. It is also possible that, in the future, more TPS medium format negatives could be discovered, allowing the unmatched frames to regain the contextual framework of a roll of film.

### 2.3 Rehousing and Storage

The TPS medium format negatives had been housed in cardboard boxes since their donation in 1987. These boxes, made of acidic material, contributed to the deterioration of the acetate negatives inside. Additionally, the boxes provided no way to systematically arrange the material. The negatives had to be rehoused into enclosures that would better preserve the material qualities and contextual particularities of the collections items.

As discussed in the literature survey, Wilhelm and Brower have selected high-density polyethylene as the best low-cost enclosure material for long-term storage, as it is both inexpensive and relatively inert.<sup>35</sup> However, high-density polyethylene enclosures were not selected for the rehousing of the TPS negatives, as the available formats of the enclosures were insufficient in addressing the particularities of the collections material.

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<sup>35</sup> Henry Wilhelm and Carol Brower, *The Permanence and Care of Color Photographs: Traditional and Digital Color Prints, Color Negatives, Slides, and Motion Pictures* (Grinnell, Iowa: Preservation Publishing Company, 1993): 496.

Arranging the material within the context of the roll of film required a housing solution that would in some way resemble the roll. High-density polyethylene enclosures could only be found either as individual sleeves or as rolls of material that could be cut for custom enclosures. The individual sleeves could only hold a single negative; they were not able to keep the material in the context of a roll of film. Consequently, they were inappropriate for housing the TPS negatives. The rolls of high-density polyethylene were also inappropriate, as they would require the creation of custom housing. Custom housing for the volume of material in the TPS medium format negative collection would be excessively time-consuming and labour intensive, and there was not sufficient space or resources in the Tibet Museum's office or archives to do this kind of custom work.

Low-density polyethylene sleeves were instead selected to rehouse this material. PrintFile's 225-12HB Slide Page notebook pages, made of low-density polyethylene, hold twelve 6x6 cm frames of 120mm negatives – an entire roll (fig. 8). While they were not recommended by Wilhelm and Brower, these notebook pages passed the Image Permanence Institute's Photographic Activity Test, meaning they met the ISO 18916 standard for the long-term storage of photographic material. The notebook pages were also relatively inexpensive, which for an institution with limited resources, made them a desirable choice. Since one notebook page could hold an entire roll of individually cut negative frames, they were useful for the particularities of rehousing this material. The clear plastic sleeves also allow the image to be visible without removing the negative from its enclosure, significantly reducing the risk of damage that could occur from frequent handling, and avoiding fingerprints and scratches. For these reasons, the notebook pages were selected as the most appropriate and realistic housing for the TPS medium format negatives.



**Figure 8.** Rehousing of the negatives into PrintFile 225-12HB Slide Pages. These were placed into archival binders that the Tibet Museum's photographic archives already owned.

But, of course, addressing the housing material was just one factor in ensuring that the acetate negatives would be properly preserved by the institution. The overall environmental conditions of the storage space of the photographic archive also had to be examined.

The Tibet Museum's photographic archives space is a single room which measures approximately 4 by 6 meters. Within the photographic archives, there is a Bry-Air FFB-300 dehumidifier, which is set to keep the archives at a relative humidity around 30% rH. These levels were observed to be relatively stable over the course of a six-month period,<sup>36</sup> and did not need to be adjusted.

The temperature of the photographic archives was the greatest environmental concern of the storage area. The wall-mounted air conditioning unit in the space was not regularly turned on, and the temperature of the archives fluctuated greatly depending on the weather outside. In the winter, the temperature in the archives hovered around 15°C, and in the summer, the space would often reach temperatures over 30°C.

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<sup>36</sup> From January–July 2019.

The museum's archives staff had not had the opportunity for extensive training in photographic preservation, and so they were not necessarily aware of the severity of these environmental issues. The IPI's *Media Storage Quick Reference* recommends storage of acetate negatives between 0°C and 4°C at a relative humidity between 30% and 50% rH.<sup>37</sup> However, these guidelines had to be adapted to the practical realities of this particular institution. Since the temperatures were observed to fluctuate somewhere between 15°C and 35°C, it was recommended to staff to keep the temperatures in the archives at 15°C year-round. This temperature was determined to be more realistic for this particular institution. The temperature would be attainable and maintainable over time for the Tibet Museum, and would greatly prolong the lifespan of the photographic material in their archives.

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<sup>37</sup> Ibid, 5.

## Chapter 3: The Tibet Museum

In order to understand the TPS medium format negatives' exclusion from care and display, this chapter examines the institutional history and motivations of the Tibet Museum and its photographic archives. It is divided into two sections. The first section provides an analysis of the Tibet Museum's permanent exhibition *A Long Look Homeward*, in order to understand the types of photographs that have been selected for display. The second section considers the collecting history and archival methods employed at the Tibet Museum's photographic archives, to understand the archivist's role in determining which material is privileged within the institution and which material is not.

### 3.1 *A Long Look Homeward*

Modelled on the Holocaust Museum in Jerusalem, the Tibet Museum's mission "is to inform about the Chinese occupation of Tibet, to provide personal accounts of lives lost in Tibet since the occupation and to inform on the continuous and ongoing abuses carried out by the Chinese government against the Tibetan people."<sup>38</sup> The museum also "aims to educate the exile Tibetan community on the values of democracy, human rights, environment protection, freedom struggle, as well as to strengthen the Tibetan spirit and collective pride through presentations on Tibet's rich history and culture."<sup>39</sup>

The Tibet Museum's permanent exhibition, *A Long Look Homeward*, features reproductions of a selection of photographs from the Tibet Museum's photographic archives

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<sup>38</sup> "About Us," The Tibet Museum, 2019, <http://tibetmuseum.org/about-us/>.

<sup>39</sup> "About Us," The Tibet Museum, 2019, <http://tibetmuseum.org/about-us/>.

(fig. 9). Curated by eleven members of the community in exile, the exhibition consists of ten text-and-image-based sections. These sections illustrate Tibet in the pre-1950 period (20%), its recent past and its present political occupation (60%), and its future, which includes Tibetan life in exile and its “future imaginings” (20%).<sup>40</sup>



**Figure 9.** The entrance to *A Long Look Homeward* permanent exhibition at the Tibet Museum.

The Tibet Museum’s permanent exhibition was designed to depict the “terrors of occupation [which] forced many to flee their homeland.”<sup>41</sup> Clare Harris wrote in *The Museum on the Roof of the World* that the Tibet Museum in Dharamsala has “ultimately been designed to elicit empathy for Tibetan refugees and call for a change in Tibet’s political status without overly demanding its independence.”<sup>42</sup> In the museum, photographs and text are employed to tell the historical narrative that Tibetans were a self-governed people who are now suppressed under China’s political occupation. The images selected for exhibition illustrate the invasion of Tibet

<sup>40</sup> The Tibet Museum, ““Capturing Memories” - Concept Outline for 1999,” October 23, 1998.

<sup>41</sup> The Tibet Museum, Introduction, 2000, *A Long Look Homeward*, The Tibet Museum: Dharamsala.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid, 169.

by Chinese soldiers, the violence and destruction inflicted on the Tibetan body, culture and land, and the escape of Tibetans into exile.

In the “Invasion” section of the museum, ten photographic reproductions are displayed across three panels hung from the ceiling. Each of the images, which illustrate the invasion of Tibet by Chinese soldiers in the 1950s, are accompanied by text captions in Tibetan, English and Hindi. A panel of text beside the images narrates the event.



**Figure 10.** [*Chinese army marching into Lhasa*], Namgyal Dundul Tsarong, 1951, digital reproduction from gelatin silver print. From the Jigme Tsarong, Khedroob Thondup Collection at the Tibet Museum.

One of the images in this section depicts the People’s Liberation Army entering into the capital city of Lhasa in 1951 (fig. 10). In the black-and-white image, six Chinese soldiers sit high on horseback, facing Westward. The soldiers have a menacing presence in the image, their guns all identically pointed forward. The repetitive nature of the figure of the soldier tempts the viewer to imagine the cavalry of uniformly positioned soldiers that exist beyond the frame of the photograph. A small crowd of Tibetans stand below the soldiers. The mountains beyond Lhasa are visible in the background. On the same panel, several similar images depict Chinese soldiers



marching inside Tibet in the 1950s. At the bottom of these panels, illustrations of marching soldiers add to the imagery of militiamen (fig. 11).



**Figure 11.** Exhibition view of the “Invasion” section of *A Long Look Homeward* at the Tibet Museum.

Directly across the “Invasion” section of the museum is a large reproduction of a black-and-white photograph that stretches from floor to ceiling. The image shows the ruins of Yumbulhakang, Tibet’s first fort, which was destroyed during the Cultural Revolution. This image is surrounded by a grid of twelve photographs on six panels that comprise the “Destruction” section of the museum (fig. 12).





**Figure 12.** Partial exhibition view of the “Destruction” section of *A Long Look Homeward* at the Tibet Museum.

Images in this section depict the ruins of monasteries and religious objects that were destroyed during the Chinese occupation of Tibet. In one photograph, a man dressed in a blue “Mao suit” stands with a hat in his hand, looking up toward the photographer (fig. 13). Behind the man, pieces of brass are piled into a large heap. Captions in Tibetan, English and Hindi inform that these are parts of the sculptures and temple fittings from the Norbulingkha Palace – the Dalai Lama’s former summer residence in Lhasa.



**Figure 13.** *[Parts of sculptures and temple brass fittings piled up in a courtyard in the Norbulingka Palace (summer residence of the Dalai Lama), Lhasa], Lobsang Dhargay, 1979, digital reproduction from colour print. From the Tibet Museum's photographic archives.*

Around the corner, in a section of the museum titled “Human Rights Violations,” pictures of political protests, political prisoners, and public shaming sessions are grouped together across three image panels. These are accompanied by a long panel of text describing the human rights violations of the Chinese governmental forces throughout Tibet (fig. 14). Placed centrally, reproduced in colour, and substantially larger than the surrounding photographs, one image shows a group of young monks and laymen surrounding the body of an older man who is laid down (fig. 15). The man’s head is bloodied, and a white cloth is placed on top of his head, presumably to stop or slow his bleeding. His eyes are puffed and bulging out from his face. The text under the image tells us that the photograph depicts Gonpo Paljor, a Tibetan shot dead by Chinese security forces during a protest in Lhasa in 1988.



**Figure 14.** Exhibition view of the “Human Rights Violations” section of *A Long Look Homeward* at the Tibet Museum.



**Figure 15.** [Paljor, shot dead by the Chinese Security forces in Lhasa during peaceful demonstration], Unknown photographer, March 1988, digital reproduction from colour print. From the Tibet Museum’s photographic archives.

These photographs depict explicitly political events. The images selected for permanent display in the Tibet Museum have an immediate impact as political images. In their permanent exhibition, photographs help to illustrate an accompanying text – a description of historical events, told by the exile community. The Tibet Museum’s “long look homeward” reminds its visitors through photographs why Tibetans are in exile in the first place, by recounting and illustrating the “darkness of invasion, destruction and oppression” inside Tibet.<sup>43</sup>

<sup>43</sup> The Tibet Museum, Introduction, 2000, *A Long Look Homeward*, The Tibet Museum: Dharamsala.

### 3.2 The Photographic Collection

While the Tibet Museum's exhibition space largely employs a specific type of politically-charged image, the mandate of their photographic archives allows for the collection of a wider scope of photographic material. In a 1998 project outline for the Tibet Museum and photographic archives, T.C. Tethong, the CTA's Department of Information and International Relations *Kalon* (Minister), wrote of the "urgent need to create a central institution that [would] provide information, documents, photos and other items to researchers, for display in or outside India."<sup>44</sup> He stated that the future archives would serve to "preserve[,] catalog and archive photographs, documents, audio-visual material and other items of historical significance," and would "make the archival material readily accessible to interested institutions and individuals."<sup>45</sup> With this in mind, photographic material for the museum and archives were gathered from various departments of the Central Tibetan Administration, and from private collections in the diaspora.

The material collected for the archives included over 80,000 photographic prints, slides, and negatives. The subject matter of the images varies. There are photographs of Tibet before the Chinese occupation. These consist primarily of photographs of photographs, or images reproduced from books. There are also photographs of contemporary Tibet. These images depict the landscape and wildlife of Tibet, industry and farming, protests and political events, as well as Tibetan landmarks and people. The collection also includes photographs from the Tibetan community in exile and the diaspora. These depict various administrative, political and religious gatherings, and portraits of notable members of the community. While some photographs

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<sup>44</sup> Kalon T.C. Tethong, The Tibet Museum, "Archiving and Documentation Centre for Modern Tibetan History - Project Outline," 1998: 1.

<sup>45</sup> Ibid, 1.

gathered from the Private Office of the Dalai Lama were made by well-known photographers,<sup>46</sup> most of the material in the Tibet Museum's collection are from unknown makers.

In the first few months of the museum and archive project, the state of the photographic material collected was assessed in an internal report. The report states that "In as far as quality, historical value and appropriateness for exhibition is concerned, the pictures vary immensely. Some of the pictures are simply snapshots of sites, people, events, etc. Others document extremely important events and places, but are of poor quality. The collection also contains excellent pictures from various periods, but generally speaking, about 70% of the pictures do not have photographic value of their own (that is, they might document an important event/place but are not suitable for public display)."<sup>47</sup> It is not made explicit within the document what might make these images unsuitable for public viewing, or how this determination was made. What is clear is that, within the first few months of the archives project, decisions were being made internally by the Tibet Museum's staff about the value of the material that had been collected for the photographic archives. The collection was intellectually divided into two categories: "simply snapshots of sites, people, [and] events" and photographs that "document[ed] important events and places."

This value judgment led to an unequal standard of care and display of the material. A three-page manual developed by museum staff to outline the institution's policies and procedures for processing photographic material into the collection made this explicit. Material that was considered more valuable to the institution was prioritized for preservation and exhibition.

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<sup>46</sup> There are, for example, three signed and stamped Henri Cartier-Bresson prints, and a signed and stamped Richard Avedon print in the collection. These are photographs of the Dalai Lama that were gifted to the Private Office by the photographers.

<sup>47</sup> The Tibet Museum, "TNCDC – State of Affairs and Progress Report," November 1998, pt. 5: 2.

Step-by-step instructions outlined how accessioned photographic material should be filed into categories and rehoused into archival enclosures for preservation. The policy manual also stated that “miscellaneous pictures which are not considered useful or historically important should [...] be kept in a box. Numbering these is not important.”<sup>48</sup>

The manual directed the archivist to make judgements on the historical value of collections material and to base the standard of care on their selection. This demonstrates the selective power given to the archivist to determine which collections material were worthy of being preserved and which were not. The archivists at the Tibet Museum’s photographic archives were not simply passive collectors, applying equally the standards of care to the material that was donated, but were instead involved in the active process of producing history. The material selected by the archives staff was preserved and exhibited as the community’s history. By contrast, the material deemed unimportant by the archivist was left in a box in the back of the archive – retained but unrepresented within the collection and its exhibitions.

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<sup>48</sup> The Tibet Museum, “Developmental Time-line for the Photo Archive of the TNCDC,” 1999, pt. 10: 2.

## Chapter 4: Historical Analysis

The TPS negatives were kept unnumbered in a box by the Tibet Museum, deemed not “useful or historically important”<sup>49</sup> by its archives staff. These photographs were dismissed by archivists as “simply snapshots of sites, people, and events.”<sup>50</sup> Indeed, at first glance, the images contained on the TPS medium format negatives may appear to their viewer to be completely banal. They are mostly images of the people and spaces of a Northern Indian hill station. The photographs appear to be the mundane scenes of everyday life.

In *Image Matters*, Tina Campt has attempted to interpret “less eventful” photographs that “do not depict a particular event, significant or recognizable figures, or even noteworthy or highly identifiable sites or contexts.”<sup>51</sup> She has suggested that instead of using photographs to illustrate or supplement the known past, we engage with photographs as enactments of the past. She asks that “we engage these images as sites of articulation and aspiration; as personal and social statements that express how ordinary individuals envisioned their sense of self, their subjectivity, and their social status; and as objects that capture and preserve those articulations in the present as well as the future.”<sup>52</sup> Photographs are “a politicized element of everyday life,”<sup>53</sup> intertwined with the individual’s contested social, political and personal interactions.

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<sup>49</sup> The Tibet Museum, “Developmental Time-line for the Photo Archive of the TNCDC,” 1999, pt. 10: 2.

<sup>50</sup> The Tibet Museum, “TNCDC – State of Affairs and Progress Report,” November 1998, pt. 5: 2.

<sup>51</sup> Ibid, 6.

<sup>52</sup> Ibid, 6.

<sup>53</sup> Brian Wallis and Deborah Willis, *African American Vernacular Photography: Selections from the Daniel Cowin Collection* (New York: International Center of Photography, 2005): 13, quoted in Tina Campt, *Image Matters: Archive, Photography, and the African Diaspora in Europe* (Durham; London: Duke University, 2012), 8.



This chapter provides an analysis of some of the images of “sites, people and events” contained in the TPS medium format negative collection, engaging with the social and political contexts of their creation. It looks at the subjective ways that the Tibet Photo Service photographers made pictures of life in exile – something that has not been extensively done in the literature on Tibetan photography.

#### 4.1 Sites

In the TPS medium format negative collection, there are a number of images that depict what one might define as “sites.” The Tibet Photo Service’s photographers often travelled around India, making pictures of the various Tibetan exile settlements and the built environments of those places. They also made images of the sites closer to the studio, in their homebase of Dharamsala.

One image shows a group of people passing a wooden scaffold between two floors of a semi-erected structure (fig. 16). The photographer stands at a distance from the workers. The foothills of the Dhauladhar range are visible in the background, the mountains beyond obscured by low-hanging clouds. On the second floor of the building, two men on their knees extend their right arms, reaching toward the wooden frame. A young Indian boy with a bandana tied over his hair kneels next to the men, holding onto the top edge of the scaffold. On the ground floor, three men and a woman push the wooden frame up toward the group on the second level. The woman wears a *chuba*, a traditional Tibetan dress, and the man in front of her wears traditional Tibetan wool boots. The identities of all of the labourers on the ground level are obstructed, their faces turned away from the camera, or concealed by the large wooden frame. Two Indian men, closer to the foreground, stand with one leg raised onto a concrete slab. One of the men, balding, limply

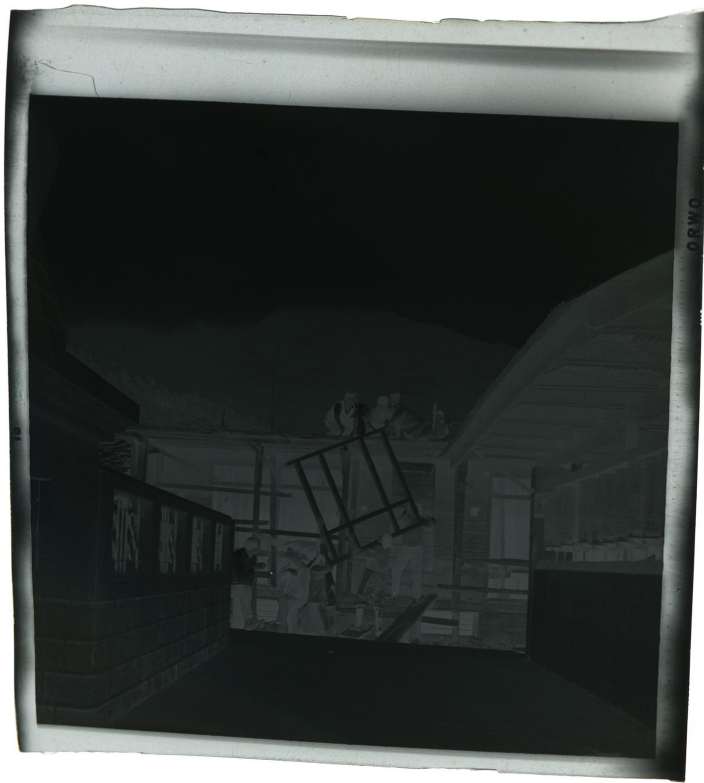


holds a cigarette in his right hand, watching the action taking place, while the other is turned away from the construction crew. His hand reaches into his pocket, perhaps to join the balding man in a smoke.



**Figure 16.** Digital inversion of *[Untitled]*, Tibet Photo Service, ca. 1970, gelatin silver negative. From the Tibet Museum's photographic archives.

A recently erected *chorten*, a religious monument symbolizing the Buddha's presence, is half-visible in the left-hand side of the frame of the negative, and Tibetan prayer wheels are visible on the right. The *chorten* and prayer wheels were used by many Tibetans to do their daily *kora*, a ritual Buddhist circumambulation and devotional practice. The religious monument was placed at the center of town, next to the main square of McLeod Ganj, across from the Tibet Photo Service's studio at the time. The building that was being constructed was called the Bhoshoong Rabgay Khangsar on Jogiwara Road. It would be completed in 1971, and the Tibet Photo Service would later move into the ground floor of the building (fig. 17).



**Figure 18.** *[Untitled]*, Tibet Photo Service, ca. 1970, gelatin silver negative. From the Tibet Museum's photographic archives.

On the rebate of the negative is the number "16," indicating the last frame on the roll

(fig. 18). Did the photographer think this was a picture worth making? Or, did he perhaps cross the street from the studio to take one more frame to finish up the roll of film? The frames before this one remain a mystery. Because so many of the negatives in the collection are missing, it is not possible to connect this image to the context of a roll.

An image from another roll, however, shows the same site a bit later (fig. 19). The image, taken from a different angle, depicts many of the same elements as the first. The *chorten* and prayer wheels are figured on the left, the building under construction on the right. A large pile of bricks in the foreground mimics the shape of the hills in the background.



**Figure 19.** Digital inversion of *[Untitled]*, Tibet Photo Service, ca. 1970, gelatin silver negative. From the Tibet Museum's photographic archives.

The images captured on these negatives depict the building of the Tibetan community in exile. These images are of non-events. Instead, they show a process. The piles of bricks in the images are not from the ruins of a monastery inside Tibet. They are for rebuilding in exile.



**Figure 17.** The Tibet Photo Service storefront in Bhoshooong Rabgay Khangsar on Jogiwara Road, Dharamsala. TPS co-founder Kelsang Wangchuk pictured on left. Digital inversion of *[Untitled]*, Tibet Photo Service, ca. 1976, gelatin silver negative. From the Tibet Museum's photographic archives.

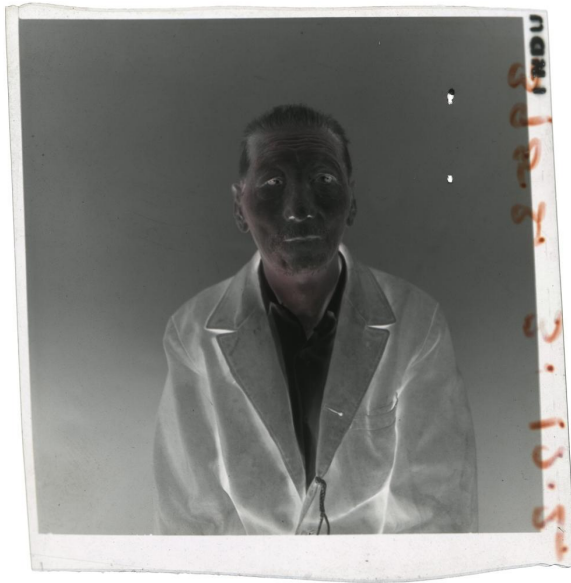
These images captured the aspirations of the community to recreate the familiar built environments of Tibet, many miles away in India. These sites uniquely fused together the local building styles with structures that were reminders of home. The *chorten* and its prayer wheels stand proudly alongside the brick-style buildings typical to the area. The negatives also demonstrate the TPS photographers' desire to document the ways the exile community changed the open landscape of the hills. The negatives bear witness to the choice of the photographer to render the site significant through the act of recording it onto film. Finally, they reveal some of the characters of the motley construction crew that was assembled for the task of shaping these spaces; a crew that included both newcomer Tibetans and the help of the local Indian community.

#### 4.2 People

Many of the Tibet Photo Service negatives contained images of people, posed inside and outside of the TPS studio. The TPS photographers had created a portrait studio on site, where they made photographs of community members who came by their shop.

Identification photographs made up a significant portion of these portraits. Each of these negatives follows a familiar formula, to adhere to the standards of the identification photograph. One of these negatives contains the image of an older man (fig. 20, 21). The man's expression is neutral. He sits in front of a colourless backdrop, gazing toward the camera. He is wearing a white collared shirt and a suit jacket that appears to be a few sizes too large for his thin frame. A *Srungdue* – a cord tied into knots and blessed by a Buddhist Lama to symbolize protection for its wearer – is attached to one of the buttonholes of the suit jacket, and falls halfway out of the

bottom of the frame. The man's eyebrows are slightly raised, deepening the wrinkles in his forehead just below his short white hair.



**Figure 20.** *[Untitled]*, Tibet Photo Service, n.d., gelatin silver negative. From the Tibet Museum's photographic archives.



**Figure 21.** Digital inversion of *[Untitled]*, Tibet Photo Service, n.d., gelatin silver negative. From the Tibet Museum's photographic archives.

On the negative, the translucent markings from a red marker have been applied to the face of the man – a technique used by photographers to reduce the contrast of shadows, or to lighten the tone of the skin in the final print. The horizontal cuts above and below the frame of the negative are irregular and appear to have been done by hand. On the rebate of the film in capital letters reads the brand of the film: “INDU.”<sup>54</sup> Below this, a series of numbers have been handwritten in the same red marker used to colour in the face of the man. They cross the straight border of the rebate, bleeding onto the solid background behind the man. The markings on the

<sup>54</sup> Indu photographic film was manufactured beginning in 1960 by the Udhagamandalam-based Hindustan Photo Films Manufacturing Company Limited, an Indian public sector enterprise with a mission to make India self-reliant in photosensitive materials.

border of the image likely made no practical difference to the photographer or the sitter, as the final print of the identification photograph would be cropped tightly around the head and shoulders of the man. The handwritten numbers would not be visible in the final print.



**Figure 22.** *[Untitled]*, Tibet Photo Service, n.d., gelatin silver negative. From the Tibet Museum's photographic archives.



**Figure 23.** Digital inversion of *[Untitled]*, Tibet Photo Service, n.d., gelatin silver negative. From the Tibet Museum's photographic archives.

Another negative contains the image of a young boy (fig. 22, 23). The boy, wearing a jacket made of water-resistant material, stares toward the camera, with a familiar neutral expression. On his right, the arm of a woman is visible in the frame. The final print of this negative was likely cropped tightly around the face of the young boy, to adhere to the standards of the identification photograph. The identification photograph required that its sitter be suspended in a neutral space – a white backdrop helped to standardize the image. The negative, however, is uncropped, and the contextual creeps in. While the young boy is wearing a raincoat, suited to the Dharamsala hill station's monsoon season, the woman is wearing the traditional



*chuba* dress of central Tibet. Who is this woman? Perhaps she is the guardian of the young boy. She is leaned over slightly, as though she has just fixed the hair of the young boy for the photograph, or to make sure he is sat straight. A light leak on the top right of the negative obscures the space that might contain the identifying facial features of the woman, and she remains illusively indistinguishable. There are notches on the left side of the horizontal cuts above and below the film frame, indicating that it was cut with a splicer, and not by hand.

The negatives with images of people posed inside the TPS studio for identification photographs could be dismissed as boring bureaucratic documents. In the identification photograph, anonymous subjects sitting for their portrait are static; their bodies are stiff, their expressions are neutral. This repetitive standardized stasis – a convention of the identification photograph – could easily be dismissed by its viewer as completely uninteresting, especially when the subject of the image is an unknown figure. While the characteristics of the identification photographs may make them uninteresting as pictures, Camppt has pointed out that these were some of the most important images in the lives of their subjects.<sup>55</sup> Used for official documents, government paperwork, and identification cards, identification photographs were, for their sitters, “gateways of passage, entry and connection; images that authorized or initiated transit and resettlement.”<sup>56</sup>

Indeed, the Indian government began issuing Indian Registration Certificates to Tibetans resettling in India en masse in 1959. Simply referred to by Tibetans in exile as an RC, the

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<sup>55</sup> Tina Camppt, “Thingyness,” *Image Matters: Archive, Photography, and the African Diaspora in Europe* (Durham; London: Duke University, 2012), 122. See also: Tina Camppt, “Quiet Surroundings,” *Listening to Images* (Durham; London: Duke University, 2017), 13–45.

<sup>56</sup> Tina Camppt, *Image Matters: Archive, Photography, and the African Diaspora in Europe* (Durham; London: Duke University, 2012): 122.



mandatory temporary residence permits allowed stateless Tibetans to live in India. However, these bureaucratic certificates only documented and identified Tibetan refugees. Tibetans remained still stateless people, not citizens of India, and were not afforded the political rights of citizens.

The Tibetan exile government adopted its own bureaucratic document, the *Lagteb Janggu* – the Green Book – in the summer of 1972. Tibetans in exile who paid an annual *Chatrel* – or, “voluntary tax” – to the Tibetan government in exile received a pseudo-passport document. Though formatted to look like a passport, since the CTA remained an unrecognized governmental body, the Green Book was not an international travel document. However, within the exile community, the Green Book qualified Tibetans in exile for certain benefits, such as the ability to enrol in Tibetan schools, to vote in the exile administration’s parliamentary elections, to be employed by the Tibetan exile government, and to receive a pension in old age. According to the CTA, holding a Green Book signified “the recognition of [the] Central Tibetan Administration as the legitimate representative of all Tibetans.”<sup>57</sup>

Green Books were aspirational documents. Apart from their practical allowances, the Green Book represented “a base to claim Tibetan citizenship”<sup>58</sup> if ever Tibet were to become free. Opting into the Green Book provided access to the rights afforded to Tibetans governed by the exile administration. Equally importantly, the Green Book signified belonging; the holder of the Green Book officially became part of the Tibetan exile citizenry, implicated in the resistance of Chinese occupation, and united in the aspirational goal of returning to a free Tibet.

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<sup>57</sup> “Green Book (Chatrel),” Central Tibetan Administration, 2019, <https://tibet.net/support-tibet/pay-green-book/>.

<sup>58</sup> “Green Book (Chatrel),” Central Tibetan Administration, 2019, <https://tibet.net/support-tibet/pay-green-book/>.

All of these bureaucratic documents required, of course, identification photographs. In their research on the Tibetan community in India, Jessica Falcone and Tsering Wangchuk have noted that, for Tibetans in exile, the issue of citizenship is complex, “irrevocably tied up with the cultural and the political, the symbolic and the legal, the patriotic and the practical.”<sup>59</sup> So, too, were these photographs.

It is not clear whether the old man or the young boy in the negatives were having their photo taken for an RC, a Green Book, or perhaps another type of document of the state. Perhaps they were applying for an Indian Identity Certificate or a foreign passport – aspirational documents that would allow international travel, and initiate the spread of a Tibetan diaspora outside of the continent. What is sure is that Tibetans sitting for identification photographs in the Tibet Photo Service during this period were navigating the beginnings of the increasingly slippery arenas of statelessness and national affiliation in exile.

The TPS negatives also include many group portraits. These images, often stiff and posed, do not depict any particularly recognizable figures. Instead, they are negatives containing images of ordinary members of the Tibetan exile citizenry.

One of these negatives contains an image of three young men in matching t-shirts (fig. 24, 25). They appear to be on the roof of a building, the familiar rooftops and trees of Dharamsala visible in the background. The men stand beside one another, their arms by their sides, oriented with an awkward frontality toward the camera. The man on the left gazes off to the right, and the man on the right squints slightly at the camera. The man in the middle stares forward with an air of serious formality.

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<sup>59</sup> Jessica Falcone and Tsering Wangchuk, “Were Not Home,” *India Review* 7, no. 3 (July–September 2008): 164–199.



**Figure 24.** *[Untitled]*, Tibet Photo Service, ca. 1975, gelatin silver negative. From the Tibet Museum's photographic archives.

This rooftop – of the Tibet Photo Service studio – was a common backdrop for their medium format negatives. While the studio provided a space to make pictures of one or two people at a time, the rooftop of the building was often used as a space to make pictures of larger groups of people.

The man on the left is Jamyang Tenpanima Khentrul, a staff member of the Tibet Photo Service and the *Sheja* Journal – a monthly secular journal that published local and international news in the Tibetan language to the exile community. The man on the right was the General Secretary of the Tibetan Youth Congress – a group of young exile Tibetans that advocated for Tibetan independence. The man in the middle is my father, though I hardly recognize him as I flipped through the negatives, having seen very few photographs of him as a young man.

Closer examination of the image reveals that the matching t-shirt the three men are wearing reads “RANGZEN 1959 THRU VIOLENCE.” Inside a semi-circle on the shirt, a

graphic shows a fist raised, with two guns on either side. *Rangzen* is a call for Tibetan independence, and 1959 refers to the year infamous to all Tibetans for the March 10th Tibetan Uprising, and as the year the Dalai Lama left Tibet and sought refuge in India.



**Figure 25.** Digital inversion of *[Untitled]*, Tibet Photo Service, ca. 1975, gelatin silver negative. From the Tibet Museum's photographic archives.

The choice to be photographed together in t-shirts advocating *Rangzen* through violence demonstrates the desire of some in exile for a return to Tibet by uncompromising means. The men standing together on the rooftop to be photographed by the Tibet Photo Service are articulating their identities as radical advocates for Tibetan freedom. Disguised as a simple snapshot of a group of friends, it is an image of three young men in political exile, demonstrating their aspirations for a return to their homeland by any means. In the image, the men self-articulate as revolutionaries within their community, rejecting the official, more moderate policies offered by their political and religious leaders at the time.

The photographers also made pictures of people out in the community. One group portrait in the collection was taken on the basketball ground in Gangchen Kyishong (fig. 26). The foothills of Dhauladhar range are visible in the background. The image depicts a basketball team of eleven young men in front of a net. The men have white *khata* – blessing scarves – hanging around their necks and are holding paper certificates written in Tibetan. A row of small trophies is placed centrally in front of the group. Many of the men are wearing white sleeveless tank tops which identify them as the Dharamsala chapter of the Tibetan Youth Congress.

Most of the men stare toward the camera, grinning. Three of the men on the right side of the image look and smile at something beyond the edge of the negative's frame, as though something or someone beyond the boundary of the photograph has caught their attention. A man in the back row stands in the middle of the group, holding a flag in his right hand. This man is Kelsang Wangchuk, one of the founding members of the Tibet Photo Service. The flag he is holding depicts the outline of the territory of Tibet, and written in Tibetan is the word *Bhoe* – Tibet.



**Figure 26.** Digital inversion of *[Untitled]*, Tibet Photo Service, n.d., gelatin silver negative. From the Tibet Museum's photographic archives.

The basketball team is placed centrally in the frame of the negative. The shadow of either the photographer or someone next to him is visible in the bottom right of the image. If the photographer had held the camera slightly higher, or oriented the lens upwards, the image would have contained the entirety of the basketball net. However, at the top of the image, the rectangle of the wooden backboard of the basketball net is cut across by the edge of the negative's framing. This was likely due to the operational particularities and parallax error of the Rolleiflex camera used to make the image.

The Rolleiflex is a twin-lens reflex (TLR) camera, meaning that it has two lenses. The top lens of the Rolleiflex remains open and operates as a viewfinder for the photographer to compose an image. The second, slightly lower lens, opens only when the shutter is pressed, to

record the scene onto film. Even if the photographer had framed the entire basketball net in the frame of the viewfinder, the bottom lens makes the photograph at a slightly lower angle. This difference between what is seen in the viewfinder at the time of making the image, and what is recorded by the lens onto film is called parallax error. Additionally, the Rolleiflex requires its operator to hold the camera at waist-level to compose the image. For this reason, images shot on TLR cameras often provide a different angle than most other cameras. These operational particularities of the Rolleiflex camera account for the slightly askew angle and framing of the image.

Since the photograph was taken from a low angle, the bottom third of the image depicts the grounds of the court. This allocation of so much of the frame to the ground gives it a certain weight. The basketball grounds are not the standard hardwood or concrete court. Instead, it is composed of compacted dirt. Small rocks are scattered across the dirt court. One can imagine the way a basketball might bounce unpredictably off one of these pebbles, and the dust that would be kicked up with each dribble of the ball. More than any of the other signifiers in the image, the grounds place us in a refugee settlement.

Despite this fact, the men in the photograph are all smiling. The men, who are part of the Tibetan Youth Congress – one of the more secessionist groups advocating for Tibetan independence – proudly display both their membership to this group and their accolades as sports competitors. Basketball is as much a part of their identity as their revolutionary ideas about Tibetan freedom. Despite being wrapped in the political weight of being in exile, life for these men continued. Individual members of the exile public banded together to form communities; whose commonalities formed kinship based on more than the victimhood of being political refugees.

The political context of these images is covert, and not explicitly expressed. For this reason, the group portraits taken by the Tibet Photo Service could be mistaken as simple snapshots. However, by engaging the material as sites of articulation and aspiration, the negatives reveal the social, cultural, and political underpinnings that were fundamental to their creation.

#### 4.3 Events

Images of community gatherings make up a large portion of the TPS medium format negative collection. In these images, Tibetan exiles have gathered together for religious, cultural, political, administrative, and social events. Because of the nature of the community, the lines between these categories are often blurred.



**Figure 27.** *[Untitled]*, Tibet Photo Service, ca. 1970, gelatin silver negative. From the Tibet Museum's photographic archives.



In one image, a large group of people have assembled, and are sitting on the ground (fig. 27, 28). The bottom half of the image is filled with Tibetans – women, men, and children. The photographer is positioned above the crowd, to be able to capture as much of the congregation as possible. The crowd gazes upward toward something placed outside and to the left of the edge of the frame. The first few rows of people visible in the bottom left of the image are filled with monks, but the rest of the image is filled with Tibetan laypeople. In the back left-hand side of the image, people sit perched on the sides of buildings, so that every available space is occupied by people.

With so many Tibetans gathered, a quick glance of the negative could mistake the image for a photograph made inside Tibet. However, the contextual clues embedded within the image place us in Dharamsala. Toward the back of the photograph, several low brick buildings with metal roofs and tall, thin trees sprout out from the crowd. We are in Tsuklhakhang, the Dalai Lama's temple and residence in exile.

The negative contains the images of people who were part of the first wave of Tibetan migration that followed the Dalai Lama into exile. Between the years of 1959 and 1960, some 80,000 Tibetans sought refuge in India. The scale of this mass exodus is partially visible in this image of a crowd that has gathered, spilling out onto every available space at Tsuklhakhang for a religious event. In the left midground, an Indian police officer is the only standing member of the crowd. Unlike the images of menacing law enforcement figures used in the museum's exhibition, this patrolman, here in India, is assigned to guard and protect the community.



**Figure 28.** Digital inversion of *[Untitled]*, Tibet Photo Service, ca. 1970, gelatin silver negative. From the Tibet Museum's photographic archives.

In another image of an outdoor community gathering, twenty-one uniformly-dressed young girls stand in four rows inside a circle of assembled Tibetans (fig. 29). The girls are dressed in plaid skirts and have bows in their similarly cropped hair. Some of the girls, who hold tambourine-like instruments, present confidently in front of the crowd, while others glance over at their fellow performers to mimic their movements. Behind the performance, three men fiddle

to set up some instruments, and a photographer, dressed in a *chuba*, paces around with two cameras around his neck.



**Figure 29.** Digital inversion of *[Untitled]*, Tibet Photo Service, 1970, gelatin silver negative. From the Tibet Museum's photographic archives.

The photographer has again placed himself above the assembly of people, so he is able to provide a view of the entire group of performers, and the surrounding scene. Some members of the crowd watch the display with apathetic ennui; some crane their necks to see over the person in front of them. Three men in the back have even resorted to climbing the tall trees behind the crowd to get a better viewpoint of the show. Behind the group, a banner that had been strung between two trees flaps in the wind, so the message of its text is illegible.

In the next image on the roll, the young girls are joined by a group of young boys (fig. 30). The children stand at attention, their arms by their side. Some of the boys in the middle hold instruments – drums, flutes, and cymbals. One young boy, dressed in *chuba* stands with his back toward the camera, a microphone stand visible at his feet. One of the men who had been fiddling with the instruments in the previous frame has now sat down behind the performers and is playing the *yangchen* – a string board instrument.



**Figure 30.** Digital inversion of *[Untitled]*, Tibet Photo Service, 1970, gelatin silver negative. From the Tibet Museum's photographic archives.

Having pieced the roll of film together, we learn that these children were not the only performers at this gathering. Several other frames in the roll show various cultural performances



by a number of different groups. In one image from the middle of the roll, the banner that had been flapping in the wind is now legible. It reads “*Tashi Dheleg* to the Great Day Commemorating 11th Anniversary of Tibetan National Uprising” (fig. 31).



**Figure 31.** Digital inversion of *[Untitled]*, Tibet Photo Service, 1970, gelatin silver negative. From the Tibet Museum's photographic archives.

Images that may read as straightforward pictures of people assembled to watch a children's concert of song and dance are complicated when put in the context of the roll of film. The images are not of a group of people gathered to watch a school assembly. The sequencing of the negatives reveals that these performances took place in Dharamsala in 1970 as part of a commemoration of the Tibetan National Uprising. Protests during this national uprising, which took place in the Tibetan capital of Lhasa on March 10, 1959, ultimately resulted in a violent clampdown inside Tibet and the flight of the Dalai Lama, along with many ordinary Tibetans, into exile.

The people in these images are gathered to commemorate the reasons why Tibetans fled to India in the first place. The negatives do not show the actions that led these people to become stateless refugees. Here, there are no militiamen beating up protestors, there are no desecrated religious sites, there are no marching soldiers. Instead these negatives depict the acts of remembrance and resistance of the community in exile.

The Tibet Photo Service images are “quieter”<sup>60</sup> than those exhibited in the Tibet Museum. The images contained in the TPS negatives are not spectacular. They are not images that make any grand political statements. The negatives make no mention of the conditions that forced Tibetans to leave Tibet. They do not tell about the occupation and colonization that occurred inside the region. They do not show the violence and destruction that was inflicted upon the Tibetan body and land. What these images suggest instead is the daily resistance politics of the Tibetan exile community. They make visible the survival of Tibetan refugees in India, witnessed by photographers who were themselves members of the community.

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45. <sup>60</sup> Tina Campt, “Quiet Surroundings,” *Listening to Images* (Durham; London: Duke University, 2017), 13–

The TPS negatives have a historical, cultural and archival value. Their labeling of “not important” by archives staff demonstrates the loss inherent when individual archivists can determine the value of material for acquisition. By reintroducing this material into the collection as material worthy of preservation, the TPS medium format negatives fill void in the documented histories contained within in the Tibet Museum’s photographic archives.

## Conclusion

This thesis has approached a collection of individually-cut medium format negative frames made by the Tibet Photo Service that had been housed by the Tibet Museum in no particular order. The negatives were recontextualized as social and political documents, which serve as a subjective record of the foundational years of the Tibetan community in exile.

The practical component of this project involved arranging the negatives to improve their accessibility. The methodology employed attempted to arrange the negatives in chronological order, by placing individual frames within the context of a roll of film. This required the engagement of the materiality of the photographic objects. This section also addressed the preservation concerns for the particularities of the acetate negatives. Their rehousing, and physical and intellectual arrangement helps in preserving these objects and restoring their context, allowing them to be objects for further study.

The theoretical component of this project aimed to establish the reasons behind the exclusion of this material from care and display. In this section, the institutional motivations and practices of the Tibet Museum were considered, and the archivist's role in determining the historical value of photographs was analyzed. The theoretical component of this thesis also provided a contextual framework for the TPS medium format negative collection, in which their images were engaged with as sites of “articulation and aspiration”<sup>61</sup> of the Tibetan community in exile. Employing this methodology fundamentally changes the way images can be valued within the Tibet Museum’s photographic archives, widening the kinds of stories the exile institution can

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<sup>61</sup> Tina Campt, *Image Matters: Archive, Photography, and the African Diaspora in Europe* (Durham; London: Duke University, 2012), 7.



tell when histories are written “through images,”<sup>62</sup> instead of using photographs as illustrations of known histories.

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<sup>62</sup> Tina Campt, *Image Matters: Archive, Photography, and the African Diaspora in Europe* (Durham; London: Duke University, 2012), 7.

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