

Institution: University of Oxford		
Unit of Assessment: 22A - Anthropology		
Title of case study: Activating Art for Tibetan (Self-)Representation and Collaboration in UK Museums		
Period when the underpinning research was undertaken: 2000 – Dec 2020		
Details of staff conducting the underpinning research from the submitting unit:		
Name(s): Professor Clare Harris FBA	Role(s) (e.g. job title): Professor of Visual Anthropology and Curator for Asian Collections: Pitt Rivers Museum	Period(s) employed by submitting HEI: 1998 - present
Period when the claimed impact occurred: 2018 – 31 Dec 2020		
Is this case study continued from a case study submitted in 2014? N		
<p>1. Summary of the impact (indicative maximum 100 words)</p> <p>For more than 20 years, academic and curator Clare Harris has pioneered new ways of representing Tibetan culture in her publications, exhibitions, online platforms and collaborations with Tibetan researchers and artists from China, India and the global Tibetan diaspora. Her work has fostered new modes of understanding, increased well-being among a group of refugees, and given unprecedented opportunities to Tibetans to reflect on their identity outside traditional community settings. Harris' most recent project has specifically engaged with Tibetans in the UK to co-curate exhibitions, workshops and public events that challenge long-established and resilient stereotypes about Tibet. This project has shaped understanding amongst museum audiences about Tibetan identity and enabled Tibetans themselves to change the narrative about Tibet at a critical juncture in its history. Her work has also directly influenced curatorial practice concerning Tibet at major museums (British Museum and World Museum, Liverpool).</p>		
<p>2. Underpinning research (indicative maximum 500 words)</p> <p>March 2019 marked 60 years since the 14th Dalai Lama escaped from Tibet and the Tibetan diaspora was initiated. Today, approximately 250,000 Tibetans are living as refugees around the world. After 1959, the homeland they vacated was absorbed into the People's Republic of China and 6,000,000 Tibetans are now citizens of that nation. The creation of these two 'Tibets' - in exile and in China - has led to widely divergent experiences for Tibetans, as well as distinct differences in how non-Tibetans perceive and represent them.</p> <p>For more than two decades, Clare Harris has been conducting anthropological research into the production of knowledge about Tibet by outsiders and the ways it has been communicated in museums and visual/material culture from the nineteenth century to the present day. Her investigations in museums and archives have shown how powerful representational tropes about Tibet and Tibetans have been established by foreign photographers, collectors of objects, and curators, while her fieldwork in Tibetan communities worldwide has established how the impact of outsiders' representations continues to impinge on the lives of contemporary Tibetans. These themes are explored at length in 'The Museum on the Roof of the World' (2012) (R1) and 'Photography and Tibet' (2016) (R2), two monographs in which Harris critiqued the reductive stereotypes that have fixed and framed Tibet in visual, material and museological contexts. These works show that whether as a traditionalist, spiritual 'Shangri-La' (as in accounts produced in the West since the 19th century) or, as a modernised Maoist utopia (in post-1959 visions of the country in China), the representation of Tibet has been constantly embroiled in politicised debates and remains a highly contested subject among academics, politicians, journalists, and Tibetans themselves.</p> <p>Harris' work also emphasises that Tibetans have largely been absent from the spaces in which such knowledge and representations are produced, particularly in academic circles and in museums whether in the West or China. (R3, R4) Most egregiously, they have lacked access to their archival and material histories embodied in the vast quantities of Tibetan objects stored in institutions around the world and the capacity to determine how that heritage might be interpreted and represented according to their own criteria. Harris has therefore focused on asserting the agency of Tibetans wherever and whenever it can be unearthed in the historical record, as well</p>		

as in contemporary cultural formats. As a curator, she has pursued an ethically-engaged methodology that seeks to counteract the limitations of the past and facilitate new modes of expression: first, by sharing the results of her own research as widely as possible with Tibetans through exhibitions (e.g. **R5**, a book published for an exhibition co-produced with Tibetan artist Nyema Droma), publications and digital projects and second, by enabling Tibetans to gain access to the collections, staff and spaces of museums in the West. By actively pursuing principles of co-curation and collaborative knowledge-making, she has sought to enable Tibetans to create their own visions of how Tibet should be represented in the future and to redress the power imbalances of the past.

3. References to the research (indicative maximum of six references)

R1. Clare Harris, *The Museum on the Roof of the World: Art, Politics and the Representation of Tibet*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2012 (paperback edition 2014) Winner of the E. Gene Smith Book Prize for outstanding research awarded by the International Association of Asian Studies. [Available upon request] [output type: A]

R2. Clare Harris, *Photography and Tibet*, London: Reaktion Books, 2016. Endorsed by the 14th Dalai Lama as “invaluable”. [Available upon request] [output type: A]

R3. Clare Harris, ‘Setting the Stage for Performing Tibetan Identities: A Curatorial Commentary’ in *TransAsia Photography Review*, Spring Issue, Vol. 9, Issue 2, 2019 Perma link: <http://hdl.handle.net/2027/spo.7977573.0009.202> [output type: D]

R4. Clare Harris and Michael O’Hanlon, ‘The Future of the Ethnographic Museum’ in *Anthropology Today*, Vol. 29. No.1 pp. 8 – 12, 2013 <http://doi.org/2027/spo.7977573.0009.202> [output type: D]

R5 Clare Harris and Nyema Droma, *Performing Tibetan Identities: Photographic Portraits by Nyema Droma*, Oxford: Pitt Rivers Museum, 2019 [Available upon request] [output type: A]

Funded by: (PI on all grants: Harris) British Academy Small Research Grant (*Photography and Tibet*, GBP6260, 2015); Leverhulme Research Fellowship (*At home in the Himalayas: rethinking photography in the hill stations of British India*, GBP38,651, 2015-16); BA/Leverhulme Senior Research Fellowship (*The Museum on the Roof of the World: Art, Politics and the Representation of Tibet*, GBP33,372, 2006-7).

4. Details of the impact (indicative maximum 750 words)

Tibetans are a highly marginalized group in the UK; the Office of Tibet estimates that the current population has been at no more than 1,000. The presence of this ‘minority among minorities’ in Britain is rarely acknowledged in public discourse and has never been explicitly celebrated in a British museum before. Nor have the two Tibets (of China and the global Tibetan diaspora) previously been brought together in an exhibition format. Harris’ research has led to a series of collaborative projects with Tibetan individuals and groups designed to coincide with the 60th anniversary of the creation of the two ‘Tibets’ in 2019, culminating in the *Performing Tibetan Identities (PTI)* exhibition at the Pitt Rivers Museum, Oxford, where Harris is Curator for Asian Collections. With its strong track record of collaboration with ‘source communities’ and its decolonizing agenda, the Pitt Rivers has been, and continues to be a prime site for asserting indigenous agency. This project attempted to overturn the conventional balance of curatorial/academic power and assign it to Tibetans by opening up the galleries, collections and practices of the Pitt Rivers Museum: according to a Tibetan visitor to the exhibition it was “a precedent of its own, in sync with the current needs of the Tibetan community” [E1]. This has resulted in changes in **understanding and participation** amongst members of the Tibetan community, national-level Tibetan organisations, and museum visitors, as well as changes in the **creative and cultural practices** of influential Tibetan individuals, and curators in national and international museums.

Performing Tibetan Identities

PTI was a practice-based, co-curated effort to address some of the issues of identity and representation regarding Tibet in a museum context (as identified in **R1, R2, R3, R4**). It also sought to provide a space for the Tibetan community to convene and reflect on their own identity and representation. The main *PTI* exhibition featured ‘double portraits’ by Tibetan artist and

photographer Nyema Droma (who Harris had met in the process of researching **R2**), showing Tibetans in both traditional and contemporary dress reflecting different facets of their lives. Over 30 Tibetan individuals in China or living in exile in Europe, were photographed for the exhibition and helped to conceive its messages. The show was supplemented by a series of public engagement with research activities (4 workshops for Tibetans and 4 public events between October 2018 and May 2019). These events were supported by a number of Tibetan individuals and organisations in the UK including: the Office of Tibet (London), as well as community organisations such as the 'Tibetan Community of the UK' (whose elected members represent 1,000+ Tibetans in Britain), and Y-TEC, a charity that supports culture-specific learning for young Tibetans (**E2**). The active participation of the individuals and organisations above ensured that the exhibition and workshops reached the Tibetan community in the UK effectively, resulting in **the project directly reaching one fifth of Tibetans in the UK**, with 200 Tibetans attending events in the museum in-person.

Increasing exploration and (self-)representation of Tibetan identities

The exhibition project was intended primarily to benefit the UK Tibetan community by nurturing a greater sense of wellbeing and social inclusion through making connections to historic photographs and objects, creating their own narratives about them, and changing attitudes to museums. As mentioned above, the exhibition was supported by 4 facilitated workshops for more than 60 Tibetans (3 for adults, 1 for young people) held at the museum. The workshop events provided a reflective space for Tibetans to explore the questions raised by the exhibition and to discuss issues of Tibetan identity further. Feedback from the events specifically for the Tibetan community is captured as part of a wider exhibition report from the Pitt Rivers Museum Evaluation team [**E1**]; and workshop feedback provided by Tibetan teenagers is captured in a report by the Pitt Rivers Museum Education Officer [**E3**].

The displays at the Pitt Rivers substantially enhanced the profile of Tibet and Tibetans, with many commenting that they were 'proud to see my culture in this exhibition' [**E1**]. Others felt that their sense of 'Tibetaness' had been enhanced [**E1**]. **E1** elaborates on ways in which Tibetan visitors reported personally benefitting from the exhibition: 'This exhibition made me think of all the layers of identity that I have, being Tibetan, human, student etc' [**E1**]; 'I used to slightly struggle with being mixed [ethnicity] but as I became more assured I've become more confident' [**E1**].

The opportunity to explore their own identity further was particularly powerful for young audiences. One visitor reported after the exhibition: 'I want to learn Tibetan from my dad and wear my chuba [Tibetan coat] more often and get in touch with my Tibetan family' [**E1**]. One teenage workshop participant said that as a result of the exhibition and events: '**I am now more aware** of the fact that there are many Tibetans out there that have struggles with identifying as Tibetan. [The workshop] provided me with comfort...I feel less alone and more comfortable with my identity' [**E3**]. When asked if the workshop had made these 17 young people reflect on their identity, the 15 who gave feedback all agreed it had, with some saying 'yes, because **I had never asked the question to myself**' and 'Before a week ago, **I never even knew that there was a museum that had Tibetan artefacts**' [**E3**]. The Museum's Education Officer reported that the workshop for young people 'made me think about the role I hold, and how I can use my position to further develop my equitable community engaged research practice and how I can continue to support people in connecting with their identities and heritages' [**E3**]. A young Tibetan man in one of the workshops for adults said: '...what I felt really special about all the exhibition is like, this exhibition shows profound Tibetan perspective, or Tibetan narrative on issues. It's in the forefront... it **challenges the stereotyping** of being Tibetan' [**E4**].

The adult workshop participants underscored the unusual nature of the opportunity afforded by the project. The audio transcriptions show several of the interviewees reflecting that there are generally no opportunities to think about their 'Tibetaness' beyond events directly organised by their own community ('...I think it's only like when there are Tibetan events. That's all there is. Cause that's when the Tibetans gather up and there's only Tibetans....we don't really get to meet up apart from the events and occasions and stuff like that', **E4**, p15). They also emphasise the

sense of pride they felt at the representation of their culture in a major museum and the importance of interacting with young Tibetan artists and curators as role models.

The degree to which this opportunity was appreciated was confirmed by Tibetan community leaders from the Office of Tibet. The former representative of HH Dalai Lama said in May 2019 that the exhibition had been ‘encouraging Tibetans...and giving them the platform to show their work’ and also allowing ‘the general public to appreciate what we Tibetans are capable of doing and giving Tibetans the opportunity to tell their stories in their own words’ [E5]. Another community leader, the Secretary of the Office of Tibet (Dalai Lama’s representative in the UK), said that the ‘The fluidity with which diaspora Tibetans moved on from cultural/traditional to contemporary as conveyed through Nyema’s amazing photographs, was a surprise revelation for me. We haven’t given much thought to this transition’. He went on to reflect that ‘for him, it did change his attitude to museums and collections’ and gave him ‘a fresh perspective to look at culture and cultural objects’ which has helped with his work at Tibet House (a UK charity established with the aim of preserving Tibetan language and culture) [E6].

As a project located at the Pitt Rivers Museum, this exhibition also **benefitted non-Tibetan audiences**, enabling a wide range of museum visitors to encounter a place they knew little about (Tibet) and to **rethink their own identities** through images critiquing stereotypes about Tibetans. The exhibition was available to all visitors to the Pitt Rivers (485,030 in 2019) and to Tibetans and others virtually and globally via the museum’s website (6,838 views between Oct 2018 to Sept 2020 for exhibition-related content). The Pitt Rivers Education team also used it as part of their secondary school art programme, which reached 10,500 pupils in 2019. Harris and team were able to evaluate the impact of the *PTI* exhibition through the collection of over 400 pieces of feedback in different forms – a survey, post-it feedback wall and ‘vox-pop’ interviews with visitors in the museum. Of those surveyed, 66% of visitors agreed that it had **changed their perception of Tibetans**. In empathising with Tibetan refugees, similar numbers were inspired to reflect on their own sense of identity and highlighted their mixed heritage or migration stories. The exhibition was described by visitors as having “broken all boundaries” and made people “think deeply about prejudice and stereotypes in general” [E1]. For 62% of visitors, the exhibition also changed their experience of the Pitt Rivers by inserting contemporary perspectives from new and different voices, making “the whole museum feel less like a house full of colonial plunder” [E1]. Another visitor noted that “for the first time, the social role of the museum is being fulfilled” [E1].

Developing artistic and curatorial practice for Tibetan (self-)representation

For Nyema Droma, the creator of original artworks and co-curator of the *PTI* exhibition, the experience of being ‘artist in residence’ at the Pitt Rivers was transformative. Usually based in China, it was her first exhibition in a major museum anywhere in the world. She writes: “As a photographer or an artist, it has helped me with building stronger connections with different artists and curators....., I have learned so many methods of how to put together an exhibition ... All of these skills and experiences will definitely play a big role in future projects. Now I’ve stopped my commercial photography work, as I have found more value in curating my own work as well as creating a platform for other artists’ [E7]. Since the project was completed in 2019, Nyema has curated three further exhibitions in the US and China. She been offered a residency at a museum in New York, and invited to curate a show at another venue there [E7].

Having grown up with a passion to learn about his Tibetan heritage as a refugee in India, **Thupten Kelsang** came to Oxford to work with Prof Harris ‘due to the specific expertise on Tibetan museum representations encapsulated by Prof. Harris’ seminal work’ [E8]. His interest in Harris’ work means that he is now set to become the first Tibetan trained in museology (with a PhD) anywhere in the world. As a key collaborator on the *PTI* project, he helped to organise and deliver multiple workshops for members of the Tibetan community in the UK at the Pitt Rivers, as well as at the British Museum (BM) and Victoria and Albert Museum in London. For most, this was their first opportunity to view Tibetan collections in British museums. Most importantly, Kelsang curated a case display in the heart of the Pitt Rivers using objects loaned by his fellow refugees, becoming the first indigenous person to do so and **the first Tibetan to devise a display in a Western museum**. For Kelsang, this project brought “displaced people and displaced objects together”

enabling Tibetans to “reconnect with their heritage” and for museums to “become sites of healing after trauma” [E8].

Harris’ research and practice has also proved to be a significant source of inspiration for curators from internationally-renowned museums in the UK. The Curator for South Asia at the British Museum outlines how Harris’ work has helped to ensure the consultation of communities represented in major exhibitions: ‘The curatorial practice you [Harris] have developed at the Pitt Rivers in fostering ‘indigenous’ curation and voice in museums had an important impact on the development of a key section of the *Tantra: Enlightenment to Revolution* exhibition at the BM (Sep 2020 – Jan 2021)’. Workshops facilitated in 2020 by Thupten Kelsang, saw ‘members of the Tibetan diaspora ...consulted during a workshop at the museum on the role, history, and care of Tibetan ritual objects made with human remains’ [E9]. They also report the particular influence of R5 on the approach to new developments at the museum: ‘[Harris]’ publications were also very helpful in the development of a section of the new South Asia gallery dedicated to Tibetan history and visual culture (opened November 2017), especially *The Museum on the Roof of the World* [R1] which I found particularly beneficial to my curatorial practice’.

The Lead Curator at the World Museum (part of Liverpool Museums) testifies that Harris’ research has been ‘instrumental in shaping my own practice’ and explains how it ‘guided my acquisition programme and the artworks chosen for the collection. **As a result, National Museums Liverpool is the only UK based museum service to have an active collecting policy in contemporary Tibetan art**’ [E10]. They go on to say that they have shared this curatorial practice further afield, inspired by Harris’ research: ‘[R5] has also been highly influential in my recent role as curator for the Tibet Museum in Dharamshala, India [run by the Central Tibetan Administration]....I developed a collecting project based on Prof. Harris’s concept of ‘Museum of Absence’... This has resulted in an innovative collecting programme that focuses its attention on what is absent. This has involved collecting objects often discarded or not consider Tibetan and reinterpreting them to fill absences in the museum’s retelling of escape and exile. As a team we have also highlight absences in the new displays, by instructing visitors where there are absences, leaving plinths empty, and explaining why important types of objects are absent in exile’ [E10].

Harris’ research – through the Performing Tibetan Identities project – has demonstrated how researchers and curators can better engage with Tibetans, as creators of artworks and co-curators of exhibitions, to reach out to a ‘minority amongst minorities’. An unprecedented project of its kind, on an institutional level PTI has helped other major museums to begin to address the limitations and absences in their thinking and practices around Tibet. It has also highlighted the importance of collaboration with Tibetan community members, in which they are active participants in the process of rethinking the representation of Tibet. The result is a recognition by the Tibetan community in the UK of how this project enabled them to meaningfully reflect on their identity and culture and to shape how others perceive them in their own terms.

5. Sources to corroborate the impact (indicative maximum of 10 references)

E1. *Performing Tibetan Identities: Exhibition Evaluation Report*. Pitt Rivers Museum (2020).

E2. Corroborator 1, Founder/Director, Y-TEC (Tibetan Youth Charity).

E3. *Feedback from workshop with 17 young Tibetans* (2019). Education Officer, Pitt Rivers Museum.

E4. Transcript - Workshop with Tibetans (adult group) at Pitt Rivers Museum. April 2019 (original audio available on request).

E5. E-mail testimonial from former Secretary, Office of Tibet (London).

E6. E-mail testimonial from current Secretary, Office of Tibet (London).

E7. Testimonial statement from Nyema Droma (Artist) [Also Corroborator 2].

E8. Testimonial from statement from Thupten Kelsang (Tibetan curator) [Also Corroborator 3].

E9. Testimonial from Curator, South Asia Collections (British Museum).

E10. Testimonial from Lead Curator, World Museum (Liverpool Museums).