

YOUNG TIBETANS IN SWITZERLAND  
Patterns of Enculturation and Persistence<sup>+</sup>

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RECENT HISTORY

From 1950 on, units of the People's Liberation Army started to penetrate systematically into Tibet, which was claimed as Chinese territory. The task was to transform the feudal system into a socialist society, although the actions were at first officially directed against "imperialist powers" in Tibet. By more or less "soft" pressure, the Chinese succeeded in arranging for moderate forms of cooperation. With the notorious "17 Points Agreement" of 1951, Tibetans had accepted the status of inner autonomy at the price of Chinese suzerainty in foreign affairs. With the Kham-pa resistance movement on the one hand and the intensified efforts of the Chinese to gain ascendancy in local politics and education on the other, the latent tensions grew steadily until they finally erupted in the Lhasa uprising in 1959. The fourteenth Dalai Lama, a young man of 25 in those days, fled with some close confidants to India<sup>1</sup>. Many thousands of his countrymen followed their spiritual and political leader over the passes and found refuge in Nepal, Bhutan, Sikkim and India<sup>2</sup>.

The "drama on the roof of the world", as the incidents were presented to the public in the Western hemisphere by the mass media, found, surprisingly, vast interest in Switzerland. Not only was the country alerted by this further example of communist expansion, as predicted by "cold war" propaganda in the late fifties, but the ideological reaction was surely reinforced by some affinity between two brave mountain peoples, both living in peace and justice, equally menaced in their independence and freedom by an atheist aggressor. Following closely upon this motivation, a vague enthusiasm for a "Shangri-La" culture of eternal peace and extraordinary spirituality may have had its impact on the mobilization for Tibet. In fact, knowledge about the "Land of the Lamas" was apparently in general limited. Last but not least, the ideal of humanity, regarded in Switzerland as a genuine national virtue, had an impact in the case of the Tibetans<sup>3</sup>.

Whatever the key motivation for the involvement of the Swiss with the Tibetan refugees, it was comparatively extensive<sup>4</sup>. Privately organized groups collected

remarkable amounts of money and influenced public opinion towards a generous support of the Tibetans, culminating in the demand to resettle Tibetan refugees in Switzerland<sup>5</sup>. Finally, non-professional and professional helpers (such as the Swiss Red Cross) transferred more than 1 200 Tibetans from miserable camps in South Asian countries to the "Land of Milk and Honey" (as the Tibetans had reason enough to believe)<sup>6</sup>. After arriving in Switzerland, the Tibetans were placed in diverse social environments, geographically situated mainly in the eastern parts of the German-speaking region. Families were settled in so-called "Heimstätten" (planned housing areas), unaccompanied children found homes either in the "Kinderdorf Pestalozzi" (Children's Village) or in Swiss foster families.

### THE RESEARCH PROJECT

As the impact of the three different environments on the Tibetans' identity had not yet been evaluated, we initiated a research project in 1978, nearly twenty years after the first Tibetan had begun his Swiss exile<sup>7</sup>. It is well known how difficult the approach to an alien ethnic is in general without the cooperation of informants, particularly if refugees are concerned (see TINKER 1977, p. 170/Fn. 1; WONG 1967, p. 196; PALAKSHAPPA 1978, p. 12). However, carrying out the research jointly with representatives of the Tibetan community also involved an ethical aspect of fieldwork, in the attempt to change the status of passive objects into active subjects with the same rights and votes as the social scientists.

Although at that time scientific knowledge about the Tibetans in Switzerland generally was not satisfactory, we directed our attention to those between the ages of 15 and 34 at the time of our inquiry (summer of 1979). We assumed that, for the younger generation of an ethnic minority, having to cope with cultural discrepancies resulting from simultaneous exposure to different social orientations would present a different situation from that of the older generation who entered upon their exile after a homogenous Tibetan socialization. In the literature the chances for adaptation of young expatriates are discussed controversial<sup>8</sup>. On the one hand, very young immigrants are assessed as being more easily adaptable to an alien environment than adults, in whom the concepts and customs of their cultural heritage are deeply rooted. Yet, on the other hand, it seems likely that adolescents are burdened with even more problems if they do not wish to disassociate themselves from their cultural heritage, or if they are unable to, as is the case due to the conspicuous physical appearance of Tibetans in Switzerland. The young people can neither re-tread completely into memories of home as their parents may, nor can they become absorbed by the host society<sup>9</sup>, since they continue to look Tibetan.

As Tibetan children grew and are growing up in three different milieus,

we were facing a laboratory-like situation, representing three different approaches to cross-cultural socialization:

- More than 160 Tibetan orphans, or children whose parents were not able to care for them properly due to difficult conditions in the refugee camps, found homes in Swiss foster families. These had been selected by a wealthy Swiss entrepreneur (and his voluntary helpers), who had initiated the *Pflegekinder-Aktion* (foster-child campaign), from many applying for a Tibetan child. In a formal contract with the Dalai Lama the foster families, mainly from the upper middle class, committed themselves - amongst other duties - to provide education in the Tibetan language, religion and general aspects of culture<sup>10</sup>.
- 72 Tibetan children, true orphans as well as "social orphans", were accommodated in the *Kinderdorf Pestalozzi* (an idyllic settlement on the meadows of a mountain ridge). Living in two "Tibetan houses", the children are looked after and educated by Tibetan "house parents" and teachers of different nationalities. Besides training in Western skills during the classes in primary and secondary school, the children are systematically instructed in the topics relevant to their cultural heritage, i.e. religion, history and, above all, language.
- 497 Tibetan children, 312 of them born in Switzerland, are living (or have been until recently) with their own parents or close relatives in the *Tibeter Heimstätten* or in outlying settlements<sup>11</sup>. The Swiss donors, organized as the *Verein Tibeter Heimstätten* which, in cooperation with the professionals of the Swiss Red Cross, arranged for resettlement of refugee families, are also committed to protect the culture, language and religion of Tibet.

As the exile was regarded as temporary, the declared intention of the three institutions preparing the Tibetan refugees' admission to Swiss Society was to preserve the essentials of Tibetan culture in exile. Although we did not define it explicitly as our primary task to evaluate the success of the intended preservation of the Tibetan cultural heritage, we were strongly interested in investigating patterns of adaptation of an ethnic minority in a completely different environment, where a complete persistence in forms of orientation and behaviour indigenous to Tibet would be perceived as disturbing or even deviant.

Based on the experience of 15 months of participant observation (with anecdotal sheets) in the Tibetan community, a questionnaire was designed. As our budget was not sufficient to hire bilingual interviewers, we had to confine ourselves to a pencil-and-paper survey, although being well aware of the particular problems of this instrument.

According to various sources, we estimated that there were about 400 young Tibetans between the ages of 15 and 34 living in Switzerland at the time of inquiry. 228 of them (57 %) returned the questionnaires; of these, 20 questionnaires had to be eliminated because of various serious deficiencies. From the remaining questionnaires, 191 could definitely be classified according to the subpopulations we wanted to compare (see Table 1)<sup>12</sup>:

Table 1: Distribution of respondents according to educational environment, sex and age (n = 191)

	Swiss foster families	Pestalozzi Kinderdorf	Heimstätte (Tibetan families)	Total
Total male respondents:	63	18	32	113
15-20 years old	14	2	7	23
21-26 years old	44	6	18	68
27-34 years old	5	10	7	22
Total female respondents:	38	10	30	78
15-20 years old	5	2	18	25
21-26 years old	30	4	8	42
27-34 years old	3	4	4	11
Total	101	28	62	191

Although we do not have absolutely precise numbers at hand, it seems that, in our sample, Tibetans from the Heimstätten (those brought up in Tibetan families) are underrepresented. With 68 respondents we reached about a third of this group (out of nearly 200 in the above age categories), while the 102 respondents coming from Swiss foster families represent more than 63 % of the approximately 160 foster children. 29 respondents from the Kinderdorf represent about half of those in the relevant age group. The imbalanced quota are most likely due to differing acquisition of cultural skills, primarily language, determined by the environment of the Tibetan children's socialization in Switzerland<sup>13</sup>.

### SOME SELECTED RESULTS

Out of all the information gathered by our 23-page questionnaire, I want to focus on the relation of young Tibetans to their cultural heritage and its contemporary form<sup>14</sup>.

#### Cultural abilities:

Since ethnic identity is established by interaction in a specific social context rather than by acquisition at birth, the level of cultural knowledge sets the limits for the success of personal efforts in gaining admission to a particular social group. The other side of the coin shows the differing chances for ac-

quiring specific competencies, depending on the educational environment (see Table 2):

Table 2: Average achievements in cultural abilities

(in school-marks: 6 = very good, 5 = good, 4 = satisfactory, 3 = sufficient, 2 = weak, 1 = insufficient)

Respondents from	Swiss foster families	Tibetan families	Kinderdorf
speak Tibetan	2.1	5.2	5.9
write Tibetan	1.4	3.9	3.8
read Tibetan	1.5	4.0	3.9
Tibetan culture and history	3.3	3.8	3.9
Tibetan songs and dances	2.7	3.8	4.1
German language	5.3	4.4	4.7

We recognize a pattern which consistently shows up in the results of this study: The ability to act Tibetan is remarkably foreign to respondents who grow up in Swiss foster families. In their own judgment, their knowledge of the Tibetan language is weak, whereas they give the best marks on the average for their German. In contrast, the respondents from the Kinderdorf and the Tibetan families rate their own knowledge of Tibetan higher, but only give themselves "satisfactory" to "good" marks for their German<sup>15</sup>. In fact, German has the character of a foreign language for Tibetans in the Heimstätten and in the Kinderdorf as they speak mainly Tibetan in private. On the other hand, Tibetan became a foreign language for the foster children<sup>16</sup>.

For interaction in the Tibetan community this situation means that communication is conducted in foreign languages, and is not an exchange in a common "mother tongue". Aside from the complications of mutual communication, the differing skills in German influence the chances of success in Swiss society. This fact is clearly proven by the differing levels of education and employment, where the foster children, as well as Tibetans from the Kinderdorf, are better off, while Tibetans from the Heimstätten tend to terminate formal education earlier and have jobs of less prestige and income.

Another expression of differences in affiliation with Tibetan traditions with regard to the social environment in Switzerland is indicated by patterns of participation in social events and celebrations (see Table 3).

Religious confession, knowledge and belief:

The traditional Tibeto-Buddhist religion plays a most important role in the cultural heritage of Tibet, not only from the Western perspective, but also

Table 3: Participation in social celebrations and events

Celebrations and events	Respondents from	Participation in %		
		always	some-times	never
Tibetan New Year	foster families (N=100)	27 %	51 %	22 %
	Tibetan families (N= 66)	97 %	1 %	2 %
	Kinderdorf (N= 29)	83 %	17 %	-
European New Year	foster families (N=100)	74 %	24 %	2 %
	Tibetan families (N= 67)	52 %	44 %	4 %
	Kinderdorf (N= 29)	83 %	17 %	-
Own birthday	foster families (N=100)	55 %	35 %	10 %
	Tibetan families (N= 66)	24 %	44 %	32 %
	Kinderdorf (N= 29)	17 %	59 %	24 %
Christmas	foster families (N=100)	76 %	30 %	4 %
	Tibetan families (N= 67)	42 %	32 %	26 %
	Kinderdorf (N= 29)	46 %	47 %	7 %
Constitution Day	foster families (N=100)	14 %	29 %	57 %
	Tibetan families (N= 66)	36 %	24 %	40 %
	Kinderdorf (N= 27)	41 %	22 %	37 %
March 10 (Memorial Day)	foster families (N=100)	30 %	37 %	33 %
	Tibetan families (N= 66)	82 %	9 %	9 %
	Kinderdorf (N= 28)	66 %	27 %	7 %
Dalai Lama's birthday	foster families (N=100)	38 %	46 %	16 %
	Tibetan families (N= 67)	93 %	7 %	-
	Kinderdorf (N= 29)	72 %	25 %	3 %
Tibetan religious feastdays	foster families (N=100)	7 %	50 %	43 %
	Tibetan families (N= 67)	49 %	46 %	5 %
	Kinderdorf (N= 28)	11 %	85 %	4 %
Ceremonies with high lamas	foster families (N=100)	5 %	42 %	53 %
	Tibetan families (N= 67)	45 %	50 %	5 %
	Kinderdorf (N= 28)	4 %	85 %	11 %

strongly in the self-perception of the Tibetans<sup>17</sup>. The enduring worship of the Dalai Lama might be mentioned as the strongest evidence of this. It is surprising to find that about one-third of the Tibetans brought up in Swiss families profess Buddhism. Only 30 % of them are Christians, although more than 80 % of all foster children have been educated as Christians, according to their foster parents<sup>18</sup>. Predictably, the Tibetans from the Heimstätten, as well

as the respondents from the *Kinderdorf*, professed Buddhism as nearly without exception. Apart from this, we wanted to test knowledge about the Tibetan religion. To the question who *Tsong-kha-pa* was, only 42 % of the respondents coming from Swiss foster families could identify him as the founder of the *dGe-lugs-pa* sect. The *Kinderdorf* seems to provide the profoundest instruction in the cultural history of Tibet; 100 % of their respondents gave the correct answer, yet only two-thirds of the young Tibetans from the *Heimstätten* did so. Finally, we asked for comment on the statement, "Some Tibetan monks are able to look into the future". Only 6 persons called it "pure fiction".

If religious confession, knowledge and belief are indicators of ethnic orientation, the Swiss foster families apparently could not condition their Tibetan children to Western culture. The upbringing in the *Kinderdorf* and the *Heimstätten*, on the other hand, shows the intended results.

Leading public figures:

We set three types of Tibetan public figures (*Rinpoche*, a Tibetan nobleman, a representative of the Tibetan government in exile) with three Swiss (a member of the Federal Council, a multimillionaire, a professor). Respondents were requested to rank these figures according to the esteem in which they held them (see Table 4).

Table 4: Ranks of leading public figures

Public figures	Rank	Total resp. (N=192)	From foster families (N=100)	From <i>Kinderdorf</i> (N=63)	From <i>Heimstätten</i> (N=24)
<i>Rinpoche</i>	(1)	49 %	37 %	62 %	67 %
Representative of Tibetan government in exile	(2)	22 %	18 %	28 %	21 %
Member of Swiss Federal Council	(3)	14 %	22 %	7 %	4 %
University Professor	(4)	10 %	18 %	1 %	4 %
Tibetan nobleman	(5)	2 %	3 %	-	1 %
Multimillionaire	(6)	2 %	2 %	4 %	-

It may be surprising to find the *rinpoche*<sup>19</sup> at the top of the ladder, placed there by all respondents, irrespective of their educational background. Almost the same homogenous vote put the contemporary type of Tibetan political leader in second position.

Although the analysis so far suggests a remarkable degree of assimilation into the Swiss culture, table 4, as well as their religious affiliations, show that

Tibetans from foster families have not developed a clear-cut pattern of cultural orientation. For the two other sub-populations, the results remain consistent. It should be emphasized that, even after long years in exile and substantially independently of their educational environment, young Tibetans still give preference to public figures representing the traditional spiritually and the political establishment of Tibet in exile.

#### Return to Tibet:

The intention of returning to the homeland is to a certain extent a unifying myth of emigrants in general<sup>20</sup>, but also may indicate the strength of identification with the cultural heritage. 23 % of the respondents (three-fourths of them coming from Swiss foster families) would probably not return to Tibet. 14 of the 19 women and 11 of the 19 men who want to remain in Switzerland are bound to Swiss partners by marriage or close friendship. Another 51 Tibetans would return to Tibet if a Swiss-type democracy could be established there, 18 if the constitution of the government in exile, and 7 if a Tibetan type of Communism were to be established. 62 young Tibetans (about a third of the respondents) intend to return as soon as Tibet becomes independent, regardless of the type of political system.

To summarize, for one-fourth of our Tibetans settlement in Switzerland has lost its provisional character while, for the majority, Switzerland remains a station on the way back to Tibet. 82 % from the *Kinderdorf* and 70 % from the *Heimstätten* accordingly regard Switzerland only as a place of exile in that they perceive themselves to be "refugees" or "foreign guests", whereas only 22 % of the foster "children" do so.

#### Self-perception:

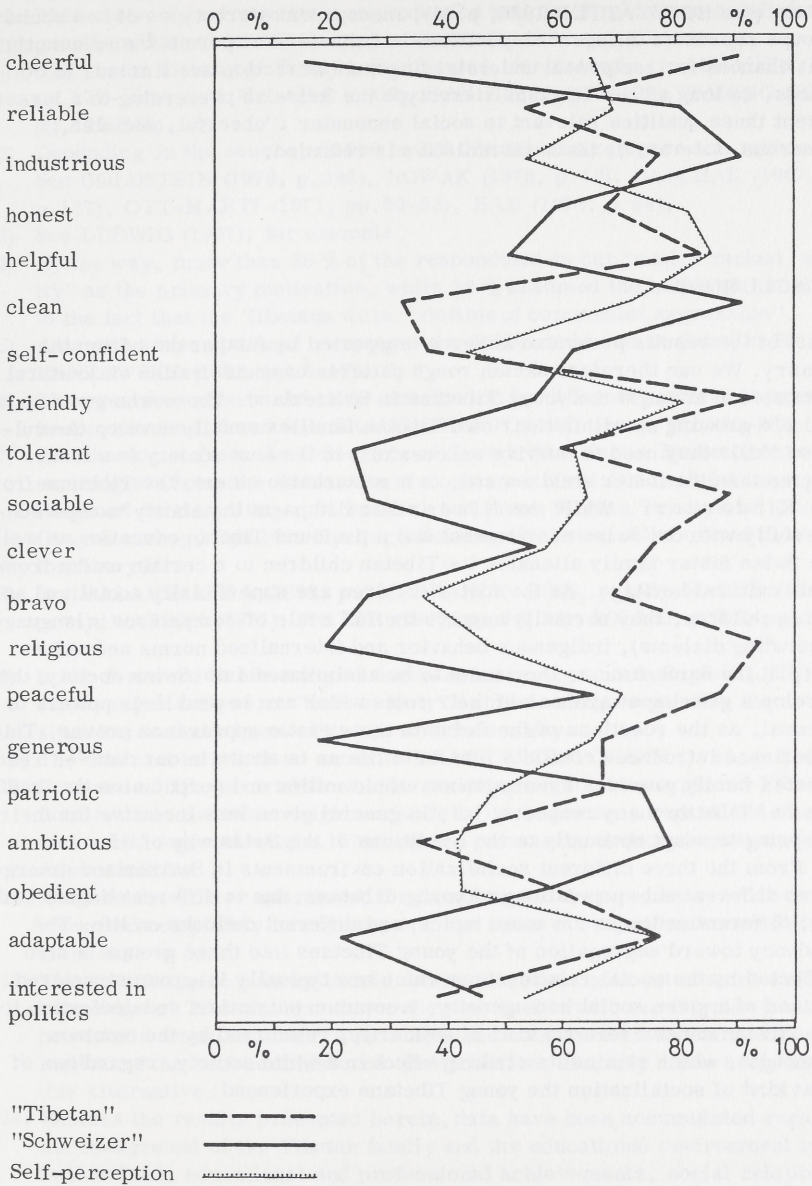
In assessing the degree of identification with either the host or Tibetan society, the relative position of the respondents to the stereotype "Swiss" or, respectively, "Tibetan" is another indicator of enculturation or ethnic persistence (see Fig. 1).

The respondents in general show deviations from the "Tibetan" type, but show no congruency with the profile of the "Swiss". More simply, one might say the Swiss are considered to be more achievement-oriented but less sociable than the Tibetans. The young Tibetan regards himself as "clean, clever and brave" (as the "Swiss"), and as "cheerful, helpful, friendly, tolerant, sociable, generous and adaptable" as the "Tibetan" is. Yet there are only slight differences between the three sub-populations. Tibetans from the *Kinderdorf*, as well as those from foster families, mostly take positions between the "typical Swiss" and the "typical Tibetan", while the respondents from the *Heimstätten* are more distant from the "Swiss" and closer to the "Tibetan".

The clearly divergent perception of both groups and placing of the self mainly in between and often closer to the stereotype Tibetan leads us to a discussion of TINKER's (1977, p.189) hypothesis that the image of the host



Figure 1: Social profiles of Swiss and Tibetans



society's members is an important factor in acceleration or retardation of the immigrants' cultural erosion. According to a hypothesis of the social psychologists (see HOFSTÄTTER 1956, p.81), incongruent stereotypes of two social groups represent different dispositions to behavior and permit the assumption that chances for reciprocal understanding and interaction are limited. In other words, as long as the Tibetans stereotype the Swiss as possessing to a lesser extent those qualities relevant to social encounter ("cheerful, sociable, generous, tolerant"), their assimilation is retarded.

## CONCLUSIONS

Most of the results presented here are supported by further data from the inquiry. We can therefore sketch rough patterns of enculturation vs. cultural persistence amongst the young Tibetans in Switzerland. Those who grew up and are growing up within their own Tibetan families usually develop the cultural skills they need to survive successfully in the host society to a lesser degree than the foster children and, to a remarkable extent, the Tibetans from the Kinderdorf. While the Kinderdorf imparts the ability to cope successfully with the Swiss environment and a profound Tibetan education as well, the Swiss foster family alienates its Tibetan children to a certain extent from their cultural heritage. As the foster children are superficially socialized as Swiss children, they normally acquire the full scale of competence in language (including dialects), indigenous behavior and internalized norms and values. Yet, at the same time as they seem to be assimilated into Swiss society, they develop a growing awareness of their roots which are beyond their powers to conceal, as the reactions of the Swiss to their exotic appearance proves. This experience introduces conflicts into their life as is shown in our data<sup>21</sup>. The Tibetan family provides a homogenous ethnic milieu and perpetuates the traditions of Tibet in many respects, but, in general gives less incentive for their offspring to adapt optimally to the conditions of the Swiss way of life.

From the three different socialization environments in Switzerland emerged three different sub-populations of young Tibetans, due to different lingual training, different attitudes (on some topics) and different outlooks on life. The tendency toward segregation of the young Tibetans into three groups is also reflected by the social relationships which are typically in-group structured. Instead of a given social homogeneity, a common patriotism and dedication to the Tibetan cause creates a kind of solidarity, reinforced by the common phenotype, which retains its striking effect in a white society, regardless of what kind of socialization the young Tibetans experienced.

## Notes:

- + This abstract is drawn from my extended article "Ergebnisse der Befragung", published in: BRAUEN/KANTOWSKY 1982 (pp.91-192).
- 1) The recent history of Tibet is documented, for example, in: BRAUEN (1974, pp.171-196), DALAI LAMA (1962), HAN (1978, pp.73-97), TARING (1970, pp.171-245).
- 2) Depending on the source, 60 000 to 100 000 Tibetan refugees are reckoned. See GOLDSTEIN (1978, p.396), NOWAK (1978, p.12), OLSCHAK (1967, p.187), OTT-MARTI (1971, pp.50-53), HAN (1978, p.84).
- 3) See LUDWIG (1957), for example.
- 4) By the way, more than 50 % of the respondents in our inquiry ranked "charity" as the primary motivation, while 39 % assumed the help was mainly due to the fact that the Tibetans were "victims of communist aggression".
- 5) A detailed description of campaigns for Tibetan aid can be found in BRAUEN/KANTOWSKY (1982, pp.8-16).
- 6) The precise numbers and their distribution by different criteria is presented in appendices 4, 5 and 6 in BRAUEN/KANTOWSKY (1982, pp.235-238).
- 7) An ethnologist from the University of Zurich (Dr.Martin Brauen), three sociologists from the University of Constance (Prof.Dr.Detlef Kantowsky, Reinhard Sander, Jürgen Schmuker) and three Tibetan "amateurs" (Chemey Gangshontsang, Gyaltzen Gyaltag, Kelsang Gyaltzen) collaborated closely for five years.
- 8) See PALAKSHAPPA (1978, p.10); BRANDT (1964, p.145); HAGEN (1962, p.24); WATSON (1977); PINTER (1969, pp.76, 79); JOLLES (1965, pp.27, 305).
- 9) In the foreword to his study of South-Asian immigrants in England, TINKER (1977) rejects the term "host society" as misleading, regarding the actual situation as that of non-whites in a white society.
- 10) The contract in full is an annex to BRAUEN/KANTOWSKY (1982, p.234).
- 11) Unaware of Tibetan traditions, the assisting organizations placed Tibetan families into the same neighborhoods in each location, regardless of social status and regional origin. This caused permanent embarrassment and quite a few conflicts.
- 12) Because the "filter questions" for demographic features have not been answered completely in any respect, the sums of respondents may differ from case to case.
- 13) The questionnaire was written in German, as we could not assume sufficient knowledge of Tibetan. For those who had trouble with the German text, we provided a translation service, which then conducted a structured interview instead of the self-administered questionnaire. But only a few made use of this alternative.
- 14) Besides the results presented herein, data have been accumulated regarding the background of the Tibetan family and the educational environment in Switzerland, educational and professional achievements, social relations

and cross-cultural interaction, attitudes toward the host society and their assistance efforts. A further discussion deals with "stereotypes of alternative identities". See SANDER, 1982, pp.115-151, 171-189.

- 15) Our personal experience leads to the assumption that the respondents of the Kinderdorf would receive a better rating for their German from an independent committee. Probably they have another scale of achievement in mind than the respondents from Tibetan families, whose ability to write, read and speak in German seems to be slightly lower in general than their marks indicate. Yet it should be remembered that this group is under-represented in our sample, most likely due to a lack of sufficient ability in German.
- 16) According to the contract with the Dalai Lama (see p.4), the foster families should have seen to language instruction for their Tibetan children. Indeed, some attempts had been made but, due to a lack of suitable teachers, the far-spread settlement of the families and classes only held on weekends, the results were poor.
- 17) Regarding the relevance of religion in the processes of enculturation and persistence of traditional orientations see PALAKSHAPPA (1978, p.11) and ANWAR (1979, p.168).
- 18) Mr. Aeschmann, the initiator of the "Campaign for Tibetan Foster Children" questioned the foster families personally (see AESCHIMANN, 1968, p. 20).
- 19) For respondents who might not have known what rinpoche meant, we translated it with "eminent Tibetan lama".
- 20) See ANWAR (1979) and PINTER (1969, pp.118-120).
- 21) It seems more than incidental that the only cases of suicide are found amongst the foster children.

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