In the midst of these significant social changes that started in the mid-1980s and continued into the 2000s, Tibetan youth in McLeod Ganj were attending school as well as participating in and consuming the influx of Indian and global media from television to the Internet to international texting. Significant changes, like these, can provide youth with experiences that differentiate them from their older cohorts. Sociologist and demographer Norman Ryder suggested that an “aggregate of individuals . . . who experienced the same event within the same time interval” ([1965] 1997, 98) develop a sense of being a distinct group or in his terms a cohort. In McLeod Ganj, such a sense of being a cohort does seem to have emerged among youth in their late teens and twenties. Not only do many more youth in this age group use English for writing than among those just five or so years older, but they are also, in my experience, more likely to be found at an Internet café or texting a friend.

While these events in the exile education system and access to different forms of media have, along with other factors, given rise to this cohort, this notion seems too homogenizing to capture the diversity of youth experiences in McLeod Ganj. Although as youth and young adults, they receive many of the same messages through education and media, some youth lived much of their childhood in Chinese Tibet, others grew up in the exile communities surrounded by family, and still others spent their adolescence mostly among other children at one of the Tibetan exile boarding schools. These differing experiences of exile as well as migration undermine the unity that has emerged, creating fissures among these youth resulting in three distinct but not entirely discrete youth communities in exile: Born Refugees,1 Semi-Orphans, and New Arrivals.

In this chapter, I will introduce these three youth communities in McLeod Ganj as well as describe how I went about studying them and their literacy practices. In each section on these communities, I describe the community as a whole and then present vignettes that highlight a portion of the everyday lives of a few members of each community. I then

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1 I am borrowing this term from Hess (2009) and will use it throughout the book.
conclude with a discussion of the methods I used to understand these intersections of youth, migration, and literacy.

SEVEN TIBETAN YOUTH

In the vignettes below, we meet seven Tibetan youth: Tsomo, Tashi, Chödön, Dechen, Dolkar, Palden, and Nyima. These short excerpts from their lives highlight that exile across these youth varies greatly. Tsomo and Tashi are both Born Refugees and college educated, but differ in their orientations to Tibetan preservation. Chödön and Dechen, both Semi-Orphans, move easily across the margins of the exile community and Indian society. However, Dechen is closely linked to the CTA and Chödön to those who test the bounds of social acceptability in a conservative exile community. Among New Arrivals, Dolkar and Palden are quite typical in some ways but different in others. Dolkar doesn’t speak the Lhasa variety of Tibetan common in exile nor does she make an attempt to learn it. Palden, on the other hand, is fluent in several Tibetan varieties. Dolkar spends long hours studying English, while Palden, who speaks English relatively well, all but refuses to use it. The last youth you will meet is Nyima. I have included Nyima in order to underscore the fuzziness and permeability of these youth communities. Nyima is a New Arrival; however, because he is related to a prominent McLeod Ganj family, he is able to move between the New Arrival and Born Refugee communities with varying successes. Overall, these youth highlight much of the variation present in among youth in McLeod Ganj.

Born Refugees

Among Tibetan exile youth in McLeod Ganj, Born Refugees make up the largest number of young people. Because these young people have well-established social networks, it isn’t uncommon for Born Refugees to make few, if any, foreign friends among the tourists, foreign volunteers, and expatriots in town. Unlike New Arrivals, who come into exile most likely knowing no other exile Tibetans, these young people have benefited from having lived all of their lives in India as well as having their parents’ contacts and ties to rely upon for employment, marriage partners, and the like.

Many Born Refugees are children of the founding generation of the Tibetan exile community. They can often tell you stories of their or their parents’ experiences as new refugees in India. Dikyi, who was born in McLeod and whose cigarette list I discussed in chapter 1, told me about the experiences of her older siblings and parents when they first arrived in India. They came to McLeod Ganj in the early 1960s soon after the Dalai