

Tibet Oral History Project

Interview #3U – Tsewang Chodon
April 6, 2017

The Tibet Oral History Project serves as a repository for the memories, testimonies and opinions of elderly Tibetan refugees. The oral history process records the words spoken by interviewees in response to questions from an interviewer. The interviewees' statements should not be considered verified or complete accounts of events and the Tibet Oral History Project expressly disclaims any liability for the inaccuracy of any information provided by the interviewees. The interviewees' statements do not necessarily represent the views of the Tibet Oral History Project or any of its officers, contractors or volunteers.

This translation and transcript is provided for individual research purposes only. For all other uses, including publication, reproduction and quotation beyond fair use, permission must be obtained in writing from: Tibet Oral History Project, P.O. Box 6464, Moraga, CA 94570-6464, United States.

Copyright © 2018 Tibet Oral History Project.



TIBET ORAL HISTORY PROJECT

www.TibetOralHistory.org

INTERVIEW SUMMARY SHEET

1. Interview Number: #3U
2. Interviewee: Tsewang Chodon
3. Age: 75
4. Date of Birth: 1942
5. Sex: Female
6. Birthplace: Gakorma
7. Province: Dhotoe (Kham)
8. Year of leaving Tibet: 1959
9. Date of Interview: April 6, 2017
10. Place of Interview: Lingsang Tibetan Settlement, Manduwala, Uttarakhand, India
11. Length of Interview: 0 hr 53 min
12. Interviewer: Marcella Adamski
13. Interpreter: Tenzin Yangchen
14. Videographer: Tenzin Choenyi
15. Translator: Tenzin Yangchen

Biographical Information:

Tsewang Chodon was born in Gakorma, Lingsang in Kham Province in 1942. Her father died of an illness when she was at the age of 4 and her maternal uncle helped care for her and her mother. Tsewang Chodon's family were nomads from the middle class, owning hundreds of yaks, *dri* 'female yaks,' sheep and horses. The family had four servants who cared for the animals. They did not grow any crops so the family traded milk and cheese with farmers for wheat and barley.

Tsewang Chodon rode horses as a young child strapped to the saddle until age 8 when she was able to ride alone. She describes the various kinds of saddles and how the children were given foals from their parents' horses to raise. She lived in a *ba* 'tent made from yak hair' and moved twice each year. She describes the tent's shape, size, religious alter and the flooring used to keep warm during the winter. She recalls the surrounding scenery, which was filled with beautiful flowers, rivers and mountains.

Tsewang Chodon names some of the flowers that abounded in the region, some of which were used as medicines by the lamas. The women protected their skin from the cold weather with homemade remedies made from butter, honey and sugar. Families in her region practiced the tradition of sky-burial, feeding the dead bodies to vultures.

Topics Discussed:

Kham, childhood memories, nomadic life, customs/traditions.

TIBET ORAL HISTORY PROJECT

www.TibetOralHistory.org

Interview #3U

Interviewee: Tsewang Chodon

Age: 75, Sex: Female

Interviewer: Marcella Adamski

Interview Date: April 6, 2017

Question: Please tell us your name.

00:00:11

Interviewee #3U: Tsecho [short for Tsewang Chodon].

Q: His Holiness the Dalai Lama asked us to record your experiences, so that we can share your memories with many generations of Tibetans, the Chinese and the rest of the world. Your memories will help us to document the true history, culture and beliefs of the Tibetan people. Do you give your permission for the Tibet Oral History Project to use this interview?

#3U: Yes, you can.

Q: Thank you for offering to share your story with us.

#3U: [Smiles]

Q: During this interview if you wish to take a break or stop at any time, please let me know.

#3U: [Nods]

Q: If you do not wish to answer a question or talk about something, please let me know.

#3U: [Nods]

Q: If this interview was shown in Tibet or China, would this be a problem for you?

#3U: There will be no problem.

Q: We're honored to record your story and appreciate your participation in this project.

#3U: Thank you.

Q: *Ama-la* 'respectful term for mother,' can you please tell me how old you are?

00:02:09

#3U: 75

Q: Where were you born?

#3U: Gakorma, Lingsang.

Q: In Lingsang in Kham?

#3U: Gakorma, Lingsang, Kham.

Q: How many people were in your family when you were born?

#3U: There were five including me.

Q: What kind of work did your family do to earn a livelihood?

#3U: We were nomads.

Q: How many animals did you have and what kind?

#3U: There were *dri* ‘female yaks’ and yaks—*dri*, yaks, sheep and horses. There were three kinds. Yak and *dri* are the same because yak is the male and *dri* the female. Then there were horses and sheep.

Q: How many animals?

00:04:19

#3U: There were around 200 yaks and *dri*.

Q: Sheep?

#3U: There were around 300 sheep.

Q: Horses?

#3U: There were around 20 horses.

Q: Three hundred sheep?

[Interpreter to interviewer]: Yes.

Q: And horses?

[Interpreter to interviewer]: Twenty.

Q: With these amounts of animals, did that make you in a more wealthy class of nomads?

#3U: [We] were not in the wealthiest class but was among the number two.

Q: More middle class?

#3U: Yes, middle class.

Q: *Ama-la*, can you tell me a little bit about what kind of activities did you do as a young girl, as a nomad girl?

00:05:57

#3U: As a little child of 6 or 7 years of age, I played around with the little lambs and hugged them. While riding, [I] would be placed on the horse and tied. Other than that [I] do not know much as a little child, but at age 6 or 7, it was like that.

Q: Were you all by yourself on the horse or was there somebody with you?

#3U: This [indicates back of index finger] is [the back of] a horse and upon this a device like this [crosses fingers] made from wood that prevented a child from falling off is placed. I would be put on that and tied up. [Laughs] One did not sit bareback on the horse but a seat like a saddle was made.

Q: Was it on the side of the horse or on top of the horse?

#3U: On top of the horse, on top of the horse. There was a sort of bar in the front and at the back, at the front and back with [the child] in the center.

Q: Up to about what age did a child ride a horse?

00:08:11

#3U: Until about the age of 8 years. Then you could ride by yourself.

Q: Do you remember before 7? Do you remember riding in that child saddle? Can you remember that?

#3U: [I] do remember; remember a little. The little children of the neighbors and others used to do the same, just like I did it. So [I] remember a little. That is how it was with us nomads.

Q: Do you keep that saddle as a keepsake or does it get passed on to the next person?

#3U: When the child grew up some gave it away and some saved it for children that they may have later. [I] think some gave them away, but I do not know for sure what is done. It depends upon the individual. Some gave them away and some saved them.

Q: Were there other children in the family and where were you in the lineup of children?

00:10:11

#3U: There was a maid's daughter.

Q: Did your parents have other children?

#3U: There is a younger sibling.

Q: Boy or girl?

#3U: Girl. She lives in the United States of America.

Q: Do you remember going from being in that little baby saddle to being 7...you could then...age 7 you could ride a horse. Do you remember riding a horse when you were 7?

#3U: [I] do remember.

Q: What was it like?

#3U: You rode by yourself. Somebody would help put you on the horse. Then you held on to the bridle of the horse and trotted slowly on a gentle horse. Later you became accustomed and rode everywhere. By then you were not scared. [Laughs] I was a very good rider. At around age 12-13 I used to race horses everywhere.

Q: Horse racing?

#3U: I did not race in front of people but when alone I used to ride everywhere. [Laughs]

Q: Did you get a faster horse as you got older?

00:12:30

#3U: Yes, one did. There were many horses everywhere. There were many horses.

Q: What kind of saddles? Did the children have saddles when they were 12 or 13 or ride bareback?

#3U: There were saddles. There were saddles and covers. There were saddles with valuable ornaments that might cost 100,000 rupees these days. These were placed over the horse. While playing one rode without saddles; one rode bareback and raced about. [Laughs]

Q: Are you remembering doing that?

#3U: Yes, I remember.

Q: Was there a competition between the boys and the girls, between the children?

#3U: I have not done that, have not raced with others much.

Q: What were those...you said very valuable covers on the horses. What were they made of?

00:14:36

#3U: Below the horse's saddle, first *chingpa* 'felt' that is made from wool is spread on the back of the horse.

Q: Is it *chingpa*?

#3U: Yes, *chingpa*. It is also called *then*.

Q: *Then*?

#3U: Yes, called *then*. The *then* is placed over the horse and on top of it a carpet. You know a carpet; they are available here. This was used. Then the saddle is placed over it. Saddles have many kinds of ornaments but I cannot say all the names.

Q: Was the saddle made of leather?

#3U: The actual saddle is made of wood—wood. The wood is covered in leather and fixed with many ornaments. There is a metal stirrup called *yochen* just like it is shown on television. *Yochen* is where a rider puts his foot to get on the horse. Such was there. The main part is made of wood. The stirrup is metal.

Q: So everybody who rode horses in the nomad family had to have their own saddle?

00:16:52

#3U: Some do have. There were others that did not. It was different for everyone. Also there were saddles of good quality and poor quality. There were many kinds. It was not same for everyone.

Q: Did you ever have a horse that you would consider your horse; the one you rode all the time?

#3U: Yes, there was.

Q: Can you tell us about this horse? What was the horse's name? What color? What did it look like?

#3U: My horse...what was it...I forget. The horse was red in color, dark red. The horse's name was Changtuk.

Q: Yes?

#3U: Changtuk.

Q: How did you get this horse?

#3U: Yes?

Q: How did you get this horse?

00:18:23

#3U: There were a few horses in the family when I was born. When a mother horse gave birth to two or three foals, you claimed it, “this is my horse” and kept it. Then gradually the horse grew up and I looked after it. You claimed your own horse saying, “This is my horse.” [Laughs]

Q: Did you do that?

#3U: Yes.

Q: Why did you choose that horse?

#3U: What does it mean by “why choose it”?

Q: Many horses may have foaled. Why did you choose this particular foal?

#3U: When I was little my father had specifically said of the mother of this foal, “This horse is yours.” When the horse gave birth, [the foal] became mine.

Q: What did your father do for a living, *ama-la*?

#3U: He went on business trips, served and assisted the lamas and the monastery, and went on business trips. [Father] assisted the monastery and lamas, and went on business trips.

Q: Was he in your life until you grew up?

00:20:58

#3U: [Father] was not there. My father passed away when I was little.

Q: I’m sorry to hear that. What caused...can you tell me what caused him to pass away?

#3U: [He] passed away from illness.

Q: Was there any epidemic or illness going on or was it just an illness that he died?

#3U: It was not like that [epidemic]. Father suffered from something like appendicitis or gallstone, as we would say these days. It was a sudden pain. Maybe it was appendicitis but there were no hospitals in Tibet those days. I do not know whether it was appendicitis or gallstone but it was one of those. [Father] had been to the monastery and became sick on the way back. [He] reached home and passed away suddenly before being taken to hospital. It was sudden and there was no epidemic in the region.

Q: Oh, that’s such a shame. How old were you when he died, *ama-la*?

00:22:47

#3U: I was 4 years old.

Q: Oh, only 4, but you can remember him telling you about the horse?

#3U: [Speaks before question is translated] I can remember a little and not much of Father.

Q: How many children was your mother left with after he died?

#3U: I was the only child. Then when I was 9 years old Mother had a daughter from a different father. Mother never had any other children but the two of us. There were no children that passed away. We were the only two [Mother] gave birth to.

Q: How did your mother survive if her husband was gone and she had one little girl? How did she make a living?

#3U: There was maternal uncle who is my grandmother's brother at home. Though a monk, [he] stayed home and helped mother. Maternal uncle was very good. Then there were around four hired help.

Q: So he stayed home from the monastery to help mother?

[Interpreter to interviewer]: Yes.

[Interviewer to interpreter]: And he hired...

[Interpreter to interviewer]: ...hired four helpers. They had in the house four hired help.

Q: How did he have the resources to do that? He was a monk.

00:25:04

#3U: I mentioned earlier that [we] owned sheep, horses and cattle. My mother did not have time except to do household chores. The four hired help grazed the sheep, horses and cattle on the mountains, brought the animals down, tethered and did the milking. They did all the work.

Q: I see, because before that, did your father do the grazing?

#3U: There were the servants and maids to help herd the animals even then. Father did not graze animals. I explained earlier that [Father] engaged in business and served and assisted the monastery. [He] engaged in such but did not look after animals. [Father] did well and was a good trader.

Q: When you were living in your home as a nomad, were there other people sharing your nomad tent? Were you with other families or just your mother and you?

#3U: All of us lived together.

Q: The hired help and everyone else?

#3U: There was a separate tent, which is a *ba* ‘tent made from yak hair’ for the hired help and another for us. It is like a present day house. If the family members lived in this house, the helpers lived in another nearby. It was like that.

00:27:26

The servants and maids lived in a small *ba*.

Q: So it was just your mother and you in one *ba*?

#3U: There was my mother, maternal uncle [and me]. After nine years came my sister. Then we were four. [Laughs]

Q: Did you live in the *ba*, the yak hair *ba*, in the winter and then did you have one made of lighter material for the summer?

#3U: There was not. It was the same. Some pitched tents like the cotton ones of today. Some made such for the summer, but for us there was not any difference.

Q: How often did your family...you weren't doing any farming, is that right, no planting of vegetables?

#3U: There was no farming.

Q: Growing vegetables?

#3U: There was not.

Q: You were a complete nomad.

00:29:23

#3U: Nearby where we had pitched the *ba* were many farms where people plowed and harvested but we did not own any land.

Q: You didn't engage in that?

#3U: [We] did not. We bought wheat and rice from those that owned farmlands and us nomads gave butter and cheese in return. Such exchanges were carried out but we did not work in the fields.

Q: Butter and cheese for wheat and...

[Interpreter to interviewer]: ...rice.

[Interviewer to interpreter]: Wheat and rice.

Q: Rice, right? Wheat and rice?

#3U: No, not rice. Rice did not grow there. It was wheat and barley.

Q: I didn't think it did. Wheat and barley. Did you move from one location to another during the year?

#3U: Yes, [we] moved.

Q: How often? How often in a year?

#3U: Around twice a year.

Q: Was the move by yourself or with other families?

#3U: Everybody moved together.

Q: Like about 10 families or five...

#3U: [Interrupts] There was a summer site and a separate winter site. There were separate sites for the cold and hot seasons. Everybody migrated together.

Q: How many families migrated together, like 10 or how many?

00:31:42

#3U: Actually Gakorma is a settlement in which were around 50 families when I was little. Presently it has become much larger after the Chinese moved people here and there. There used to be 52-53 families.

[Laughs]

Q: What's funny?

#3U: Yes?

Q: Why do you laugh?

#3U: Nothing.

Q: Questions are funny? I don't know. *Ama-la*, for people who have never lived in your part of the world if you came out of your *ba* in the morning, what did you see? What was the scenery like?

#3U: If it was summer there were flowers and grass. Various kinds of flowers grew and it was a happy place. Winter was cold and the water froze. There were no flowers in winter. During summer our region was an incredibly happy place. When emerging from the door

there were flowers of this height [moves right hand knee high]. There were flowers everywhere. It was enjoyable with grass and flowers.

Q: Can you remember the names of any of the flowers?

00:34:10

#3U: [Laughs] There was a flower called *gawu jangchup*.

Q: Yes?

#3U: *Gawu jangchup*.

Q: *Gawu jangchup*?

#3U: Yes.

Q: And others?

#3U: Then there was a red one called *adhar gidhar*.

Q: *Adhar bidhar*?

#3U: *Adhar gidhar*, and then *serchen* ‘marigold.’ There used be to many different kinds of flowers each with an individual name. Flowers grew to this height [indicates thigh in sitting position]. A great many grew.

In my region many flowers used as medicine grew in plenty because it was a very pristine place.

Q: Yes, I was going to ask. Can you remember any kind of medicine that they made from the plants?

#3U: I do not know how to make, but there were a few of my relatives who are lamas and good doctors. They used to collect medicinal plants and had people ground them to make medicines. All these plants grew in summer from the earth. I do not know how to make [medicines]. We did not have any other medicines except these that were powdered.

Q: In the *ba*, was there any kind of altar or shrine that you used to pray at?

00:36:34

#3U: Yes, there was.

Q: Can you describe it?

#3U: The altar was in one side of the *ba* and just like the objects [of worship] in a house these days, there were *thangka* ‘traditional Tibetan Buddhist painting,’ golden statues and

offerings of water in seven bowls. Many lamps used to be lit using liquid butter. Everything was there. [We] did everything.

Q: Was the *ba* like one large room where you did everything?

#3U: It was just one, a large one. Yes.

Q: The *ba* that you lived in, could you say how big it was, like was it as big as from here to that wall or bigger?

#3U: I cannot recall exactly. It was big. It did stretch from there to here [points across room].

Q: Okay, that would be 60 feet.

#3U: Could be.

Q: Was the *ba* round?

00:38:40

#3U: It was square.

Q: Yes?

#3U: It was square.

Q: Oh, square. Who had round ones? I've seen them.

#3U: I have seen some round *ba* when we passed through other regions. There were no round ones in our region. However, there were tents that were circular, fabric tents that Indians call *thambu* here. Such were made round but we did not have round *ba*. Well, actually there were a few tiny ones for lamas to stay in, but not many.

Q: What was the ground cover to protect you from the wet and the cold in the *ba*?

#3U: Rugs made from wool that was similar to carpet but much thicker were spread.

Q: Not sheepskin but you would actually weave the carpets?

00:40:48

#3U: Wool is sheared from the sheep, spun into yarn and woven into rugs.

Q: Was it waterproof in some way?

#3U: It did not become wet because the ground was dry; also because thick multiple layers were spread. It did not become wet. There were large pieces [of rugs] made from the hair of yak and many such were used. It did not become wet.

Q: If you moved your *ba* twice a year, did it go back and forth to the same place?

#3U: It was loaded on a yak while moving because we did not have vehicles at that time. [A *ba*] is large and can be separated into parts; separated into about four parts and then the parts loaded onto four or five yaks and driven along. And then [we] rode horses.

Q: *Ama-la*, how did you get water supply, like for washing clothes and cups or your body? How did you get that water?

00:43:11

#3U: Oh, we had plenty of rivers flowing everywhere. One can wash any number of times. There were rivers but no lakes. The rivers were very large and if one crossed, the water came up to here [indicates waist level]. Water was plentiful. It was there on this side of the *ba* and on that side of the *ba*.

Q: But in the winter it was too cold. So in summertime did you wash more often?

#3U: One washed more often in the summertime.

Q: It was so cold in winter. Did the women put anything to protect their skin from the freezing winds and things like that?

#3U: Yes, [women] did apply.

Q: What?

#3U: There was something that you made. We have this brown sugar cube...

Q: Yes?

#3U: ...which the Indians call *gur*. This and honey was mixed together. Honey could be obtained—these were mixed together making an application for the face. The elderly did not apply anything but the younger ones did. Then those that went outside with the animals developed cracks on the face [touches cheeks] due to the intense cold and applied such things. Such were available. You made it yourself.

Q: Was this left on overnight or for a few days?

00:45:27

#3U: Some left it on for 2-3 days and others overnight and then washed it off.

Q: What about like the hands did so much work in the cold? Was there any treatment for cracked skin and hands?

#3U: For the hands...[we] made butter from the milk of animals. Some butter was purified and then left to gel to be used for the hands. Application of this prevented cracks from

appearing. Everything came from the animals—the cattle and sheep. Food, clothing, the application and everything came from them. There was not any need to go in search or to buy them from outside.

[To interpreter] It seems she [interviewer] is very surprised.

Q: It sounds very economical.

#3U: Did I look like an animal then?

Q: Yes?

#3U: Do you think I was an animal? [Laughs]

Q: No, I think you are very smart. I think natural products are much healthier for people than all the chemical products. I was admiring you.

00:47:38

#3U: Yes, it is healthier. Products bought from outside are not good.

Q: No, butter is better.

#3U: Yes, and the butter is pure and not just any butter.

Q: And the animals were eating beautiful grass and flowers, and pure water.

#3U: Right. These days [people] are afflicted with cold and such, but during summertime when the flowers bloomed one did not suffer any cough or cold—maybe you had some other illness—but never cold because of the medicinal plants that bloomed.

Q: See, that's much healthier. I know... Like in your experience how long did most people live? Was there an average age that most people passed away?

#3U: Length of life depends on each individual. It is not the same for everybody. Some live to be 90 or over 100 and some pass away at 70-80 or 60-70. Then someone afflicted with a sudden illness may pass away at 20-30. It is not the same.

Q: When people did die in your region, what kind of burial ceremony? What did they do for funeral and then to dispose of the body? What did they do?

00:49:52

#3U: When a person passed away... We had three large monasteries with many lamas. The lamas were invited home and rituals performed. An astrological calculation was consulted and based on that the body was taken away to be fed to the birds. Many birds called vultures—they are not found here—look like eagles—appear. Most are fed to birds. We did not cremate. The birds fed [on the bodies].

Q: Did people prefer that kind of a sky burial? Did they feel happy that that's how they were going to be disposed of?

#3U: That was our tradition. Other than that burying in the earth was not good and we never practiced it. [The body] was fed to the birds and the bones taken to pilgrim sites and left there or made into *tsatsa* 'miniature conical figures molded of clay and used as offerings.' We practiced the dharma a great deal in our region. There were many monasteries and many lamas, and the dharma was practiced a great deal.

Q: Did the...

#3U: [Interviewee moves to get up]

Q: I think we're going to have to wrap up. *Ama-la*, I know you want to go to the *mani* 'mantra of Avalokiteshvara' prayers. I can see. You want to get on your horse and go.

00:52:19

#3U: Yes. [Laughs]

Q: I want to ask you so many more questions about nomad life but...

#3U: [Joins palms]

Q: ...but I respect your prayers and I hope that you will pray for us and I would like to ask what prayers are you saying for Tibet these days?

#3U: It is not just Tibet, but my prayers are for all sentient beings believing that they have been my parents [in earlier lives] because there is no one who has not been your parents. I pray and dedicate it for the parents of this life who are considered the most important, and all sentient beings who have been my parents. Even if it is just one *mani*, I dedicate it for all.

Q: That's a very special ending.

END OF INTERVIEW