

Tibet Oral History Project

Interview #45M – Sonam Tsomo
April 13, 2010

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INTERVIEW SUMMARY SHEET

1. Interview Number: #45M
2. Interviewee: Sonam Tsomo
3. Age: 65
4. Date of Birth: 1945
5. Sex: Female
6. Birthplace: Banja
7. Province: Utsang
8. Year of leaving Tibet: 1959
9. Date of Interview: April 13, 2010
10. Place of Interview: Kalachakra Hall, Camp Number 3, Doeguling Settlement, Mundgod, Karwar District, Karnataka, India
11. Length of Interview: 0 hr 54min
12. Interviewer: Rebecca Novick
13. Interpreter: Namgyal Tsering
14. Videographer: Ronny Novick
15. Translator: Tenzin Yangchen

Biographical Information:

Sonam Tsomo's parents were farmers and paid taxes to the government in the form of butter, grains and flour as well as medicinal plants that they acquired from tribesmen living on the border between Tibet and India. She explains that taxation was often an overwhelming burden passed down from one generation to the next. Many people struggled to meet the taxes and could face punishment by the tax collector if they could not make full payments.

Sonam Tsomo describes the first appearance of the Chinese in her region, who originally came with wives and children, but were gradually replaced by soldiers. As a child she witnessed the *thamzing* 'struggle session' of her aunt, who hailed from a rich family. She speaks about how her aunt and other wealthy villagers were subjected to beatings by their own servants, who received strict instructions to do so by the Chinese. Her aunt was forced to wear her maids' clothing and move into the servants' quarters, while the former servants occupied her home.

Sonam Tsomo's family decided to escape and she recounts their strategy in leaving their belongings in the house as if they were still living there to escape the prying eyes of the watchful Chinese soldiers. Their escape journey was wrought with difficulties, which included crossing a bamboo bridge that swung dangerously and a short airplane ride.

Topics Discussed:

Childhood memories, taxes, first appearance of Chinese, life under Chinese rule, *thamzing*, oppression under Chinese, escape experiences, life as a refugee in India.

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Interview #45M

Interviewee: Sonam Tsomo

Age: 65, Sex: Female

Interviewer: Rebecca Novick

Interview Date: April 13, 2010

Question: Could you tell us your name?

00:00:16

Interviewee #45M: My name is Sonam Tsomo.

Q: His Holiness the Dalai Lama asked us to record the experiences of older Tibetans to share with the younger generation of Tibetans, with the Chinese people and people in the outside world, and your memories of your life will help us to properly record the true experience of the Tibetan people.

#45M: That's very good. Thank you.

Q: Do you give permission for the Tibet Oral History Project to use your interview?

00:01:08

#45M: Yes.

Q: If during the interview you want to take a break anytime, let us know.

#45M: Okay.

Q: If there's questions you'd rather not answer, just say you'd rather not answer that.

00:01:32

#45M: Okay.

Q: If this interview were shown in Tibet or China, would it make a problem for you?

#45M: There will be no problem. I do not have many relatives left in Tibet. Everyone's expired.

Q: So is it okay to use your real name?

00:02:00

#45M: Yes, you can use it.

Q: We very much appreciate your coming to share your story with us.

#45M: [Smiles and nods] Thank you.

Q: Perhaps we can start with your village in Banja and what kind of livelihood were your father and mother engaged in?

00:02:31

#45M: My parents did farming, paid taxes to the Tibetan government and raised animals.

Q: You had to pay a huge tax to the government?

#45M: After the harvest was done, one must pay a huge tax.

Q: How much tax did you have to pay?

00:03:09

#45M: It depended on the scale of taxes one was obliged to pay. Our family was required to meet the level four taxes. I do not know the number of *khel* 'load,' as I was a child then but we paid taxes in the form of butter, grains, ground flour and also plants from the tribal areas for the Tibetan government to make medicines and a host of different types of items to the government. We purchased wooden items and medicinal plants from the tribesmen.

Q: Where were the tribesmen?

#45M: During our escape journey, we came across a place called Manikhang. The tribesmen lived in this region, down to A-long where there were many Indian security forces. The tribesmen lived in these regions.

Q: Was it in Indian territory?

00:03:55

#45M: If one crossed over the mountain pass, you reached the tribal area. If one journeyed down the valley for three days, you met the Indian border sentries. We purchased them [herbs] from the tribesmen who came to our village to sell. The road was very poor. They brought green chili, tiger and leopard skins, butter and different items for sale. We bought from them and paid them as taxes to the Tibetan government.

Q: Are the tribesmen Tibetans?

#45M: No, they are not Tibetans.

Q: Where are they from?

00:05:00

#45M: They live between India and Tibet. We considered them as inferior but they are Buddhists. We call those people from Mon Tawang [Arunachal Pradesh, India] and the related areas as tribesmen.

Q: What kind of special herbs were they?

#45M: The medicinal plants were used for preparing Tibetan medicines for ailments like hypertension. They consisted of barks of trees, which were tied into bundles [gestures a size of half a foot], the ink [sap] of *dolma* wood, feathers of birds etc. The preparation was done in Lhasa where the materials were taken to from our village. The materials from the different woods were used in the preparation of medicines and the other items were used for different things. These materials were supplied by the tax payers. The non-tax payers were free [from such duties].

Q: You said your family was farmers and nomads, so if your family was both farmers and nomads, would you have to pay a lot of extra tax?

00:07:24

#45M: The payment of taxes was passed down from generation to generation. If the mother was a tax payer, her daughter paid tax according to what her mother paid. If the daughter died and if she had a daughter—it did not apply to a son, though—she too paid taxes like her mother. This was in continuance since the beginning. However, those people that originated from a distant place and settled in our region were not liable to pay taxes. It was those people that were born and brought up in this region, that were obliged to pay taxes.

Q: Did your parents complain about the rate of the taxes?

#45M: Taxes were being paid since long ago and later we could not complain that we were not in a position to remit that year. My parents struggled a lot. I heard that if they complained that they could not pay, the nobles did not listen but said, “You have paid last year, so you have to pay this year too.”

[Interviewer to interpreter]: Actually what I meant is, did she hear them complaining in the house, around dinner or something; that’s really what I was asking.

[Interpreter to interviewer]: They used to share always due to the high tax, we have to work hard. They used to share within the family.

Q: Were the taxes so high that it created hardship or was it slightly difficult? Did it actually create hardship in your family?

00:09:45

#45M: The tax payers paid until the situation became hopeless. Unlike here, in Tibet we did not have anyone coming to a poor person’s help—not the nobles. One paid until he became desperate. He cultivated his lands and remitted whatever grains he harvested.

Then it became hopeless when he could no longer cultivate his lands nor raise animals and then he fled to some other region.

Q: Would the government authorities try to find them?

#45M: They would be caught. However, some fled directly to Bhutan; that was another country and they would not be caught. If they remained anywhere within [Tibet], they would be apprehended some day. Once the parents died, the children became liable for the taxes and they were forced to work as servants to another family. They would not be in a position to pay the taxes, as they did not have parents. So the children, whether they were boys or girls, served in the family of [another] tax payer.

Q: Would people do that? How often would they escape to Bhutan to avoid paying taxes?

00:11:32

#45M: Two or three families from our village fled to Bhutan. They became free in that country. Wherever they went within our region, they would be gradually located and reported to the district administrator. Then they would be forced to work for a tax-payer family since they had not been able to remit their taxes.

Q: The penalty was they would just make the person work. They wouldn't physically harm them, right?

#45M: Unlike here, we did not have a watch to check the time. We worked according to the sun. Starting from dawn, work continued until the evening when one could hardly differentiate between grass and pebbles [due to the fading light]. One was provided with food and clothing but no wages.

Q: Did that ever happen in your family?

00:13:05

#45M: I remember that the taxes were difficult to pay and our animals died. However, our land was very fertile. I can recall that my late father did not face that extreme of a difficulty. When the tax collector arrived, fearing the lashings for non-payment, we somehow managed to pay by borrowing from here and there.

Q: What were you growing in your field? Was it wheat?

#45M: We grew three types of barley to make *tsampa* 'flour made from roasted barley' and two types of wheat for making flour. There were five or six types of crops to make wheat flour and *tsampa*. We also grew peas.

Q: Who collected the taxes? Whose job was it to collect the taxes?

00:14:32

#45M: The tax collectors were the nobles of the Tibetan government. His Holiness the Dalai Lama lived in the palace and the nobles did many different things. It was the nobles

who collected the taxes. They collected [taxes] claiming that it was to feed the monks of the three great monasteries [Sera, Drepung and Gaden]. But I do not know if it [the collected taxes] really went there.

Q: You said that there was an earthquake in your village. When did that happen?

#45M: I heard that the earthquake took place when I was 4 years old. There used to be a run-down house provided by the government in which the tax grains used to be stored. That house crumpled and a new one was built at a distance of about a mile away. During the earthquake, many families' houses and that house were destroyed and then it was moved to the new location. I can recall that the house was built with wood; I must have been 5 years old then.

Q: What happened when the Chinese came to your area? How did your life change?

00:16:43

#45M: They first arrived with their wives and children and started cultivating vegetables around our area. They gave candies to our children and were very loving. That continued for about two years.

Q: And then what happened?

#45M: Later when many Chinese soldiers started arriving, the women and children were relocated and we did not see them. The soldiers' number increased and they arrested and took away the government officials. They [the government officials] were to attend a meeting. Later they were not released on the pretext that they had to attend a meeting at a big office. Then the fathers of the richer families were also taken away and their wives were protested against. The maid-servants were told, "Until now they have made you slave for them. Now you must make your masters do likewise." Whether it was beatings, poor food or tattered clothes that they had received [at the hands of their masters] they [the servants] were to do the same to them [the masters].

Q: Was it done to anybody in your family?

00:19:31

#45M: My mother's older sister had to undergo *thamzing* 'struggle session' at the hands of her maids. My aunt's family was rich. She was beaten a lot. Her husband was taken away to prison and the maid-servants collectively beat her. The maids said, "We do not wish to beat her as she is the provider for us. She made us work, but she also gave us food and clothes." They were instructed not to mention such things, "Until now you have slaved for them. Now you must do the same to them." She underwent a lot of beatings.

Q: Did you also attend these meetings?

#45M: I witnessed. We were many children who went to watch and saw it happen.

Q: When you were told about the meetings, who would come to your house to tell you to come to the meetings?

00:21:31

#45M: All the poor, those who did not have anything to eat, the characterless and the worst people of our village were appointed as prefects called *u-yon* by them [the Chinese]. The *u-yon* brought the message that everybody must attend [the meeting] that day and that this person must receive beatings and that person must do the beatings.

Q: Did anyone refuse to go to the meeting?

#45M: There were some people who said that they did not want to attend the meetings. They were punished by the *u-yon*.

Q: What was the punishment?

00:22:27

#45M: [The punishments were] like running in the hot sun carrying a boulder on the back, being forced to lift an immensely heavy log and not given food.

Q: How long would they have to carry the stone?

#45M: He would not be provided food and made to do that for a whole day. By evening, the man was sort of withered.

Q: When you went to the meeting where your aunty was being *thamzinged*, did you know ahead of time that she was going to be one of the people who was being *thamzinged*?

00:23:59

#45M: I did not know that she was to be subjected to *thamzing*. It was done suddenly in front of us and many people watched it. When a member of a wealthy family was to be subjected to *thamzing*, people were called to watch it. Many poor people and children were made to watch it [too].

Q: I am just wondering if you are able to describe exactly what happened from the moment you left your house to go to the meeting where your aunty was being *thamzinged*; if you could describe exactly what you saw, what people did, what happened as if you were replaying it like a movie in your mind, like moment by moment. Let us know what it was like, what happened, if it is possible for you to be able to remember.

#45M: There was nothing we could do [during a *thamzing*]. It was said that that day she would be subjected to *thamzing* by her servants. The servants' dresses were put on the mistress and the mistress's clothes were worn by the maids. The maids lived in the house of the master and the masters were moved into the maids' quarters. Food was doled to them by the maids, which normally was done by the master. Now the maids fed the masters and told them that they had to wear their [the servants'] clothes.

I was a child and did not pay too much attention but just watched the proceedings. I saw the mistress being dressed in the maid's clothes and being told, "From today you must live where the maids lived and do the work that they did. The maids have received freedom and should live upstairs where your masters lived." Their living areas were reversed.

Q: How old were you at that time?

00:27:33

#45M: I might have been 12 at that time. I was 13 when I came to India. I must be completing my 12th year and almost 13. The *thamzing* were carried out in '58. It was 1958 when all the fathers of the families were taken away to prison and the mothers subjected to *thamzing*.

Q: Do you remember what your aunty was doing at the time?

#45M: The maids accused my aunty of doing things to them that she had not done, "You beat us, gave us such [poor] food and provided us such [poor] clothes." Picking up clothes from the garbage, a maid said, "She [the mistress] gave me this dress. She gave me food that was fit for the animals." Making these allegations, her [aunt's] hair was pulled; she was beaten with sticks and slapped on the cheeks.

Q: Did she eat the food from the dustbin?

00:29:17

#45M: She had to eat it though she was not used to it. If you were forced to do so, you must pretend to eat it. I do not know if she really swallowed it or not.

Q: As a child what was your reaction seeing this?

#45M: The children did not think much, just sort of watched it unfold. In Tibet, except for the children of wealthy families, the others did not have time to go to school. Because of the stringent tax, we had to tend the animals. That day it [*thamzing*] took place and then it was announced, "Gradually everyone will face the same fate. From tomorrow, the beatings will be carried out one by one. *Thamzing* will take place and food that is unfit for consumption will be given." Then I went off to graze the sheep and I do not know what happened to the elders.

Q: And then what happened in your village?

00:30:51

#45M: *Thamzing* was perpetrated even later in the village and the poor were acting as the *u-yon*. The richer families were subjected to *thamzing* and we would hear news like, "someone was being subjected to *thamzing* terribly in that village, such that he/she was unable to get up and might die or that someone's kneecap has been broken in another village."

I heard such news but did not witness them. Then pretty soon we made our escape fearing that our turn [to undergo *thamzing*] was nearing. They [the Chinese] separated the people into categories and when we heard that the tax payers were to be subjected to *thamzing* in three days, my late father said that we must make our escape and that was what we did.

Q: Do you remember the escape?

#45M: When we made our escape, we left our belongings in the house as if we were still living there, for the Chinese were watching us, perceiving that those who were to be subjected to *thamzing* might make their getaway. We left our home as it was. We carried how much ever provisions we could manage. Those who could not walk like old people and young children rode on horses and carrying the provisions, we stealthily escaped.

Earlier to that, we could not cook elaborate food or prepare tea as they [the Chinese] would accuse us of wasting wealth. They claimed that we were wasting our wealth and trying to leave behind an empty house. So if we wished to eat good food, it was prepared silently and the tea was churned softly.

There were about 40 people on the night we escaped. Some people had their sick relatives with them and could manage to bring very little food. The rest was left behind as it were. On the border between Tibet and the tribesmen, we found Indian sentries who gave us some food. We begged our way through as we did not have enough with us.

Q: Were there any incidence on the way during your escape?

00:35:35

#45M: During the journey, we did not have food unless we received some from people on the way. Carrying stuff like mats and blankets--there were no roads then in the tribesmen's region—we walked for around 21 days. The old people faced a lot of problems. They became exhausted on the way and developed sores on their feet. We faced difficulties trying to cross a bridge over fearful swirling waters.

At the place called A-long, there was a large Indian army camp and an office of the Indian government. They provided us with enough food rations to last until we reached Assam. Then they took us by flight for 15-20 minutes, together with the food rations. After landing in Guwahati, we took a boat. The boat ride was about three hours and then we were left at Missamari. We received food rations at Missamari.

Q: What was it like going on the plane?

#45M: Everyone was afraid. We were tied at the waist and cotton was stuffed in our ears. Some people hid their eyes with their palms. [Laughs covering face with hands]

Q: Did you look down at all to see?

00:38:21

#45M: We, the younger ones, looked down and saw animals that looked small in size. However, all the older people covered their eyes with their palms in fear and said, “We have come to such terrible times as to travel in this thing.”

Q: You said you had some particular problems crossing the bridge. Tell us more about that?

#45M: The bamboo bridge was tied with thin ropes and laid with narrow wooden boards [as floor]. The water underneath had waves like hills. When two people walked across, the bridge swung here and there [gestures extreme swinging movements]. Some people waited while others managed to cross to the other side. We had to wait for an hour or so for the bridge to stop swinging. When two people walked across together, at one point the bridge swung so much, you were afraid to continue. The old people started to cry, “The Chinese have treated us so badly and caused us to flee like this.” We had never seen such a bridge.

Q: Did everybody make it okay in your group?

00:40:43

#45M: The 40 people in our group made it. The others [from the village] who came later were accommodated elsewhere and Missamari being a large city, we could not locate them. Those in our group were together.

Q: That’s good. So did anybody ever try to destroy the bridge after they crossed it?

#45M: A bridge that was a simple structure across a river was dismantled, which was on the first night of the day we left home. Had we not done that, the *u-yon* would have brought along the Chinese in pursuit of us. The women and children were sent along ahead and the men remained behind to swiftly dismantle the bridge. We journeyed that whole night until we crossed over a pass. The next day we reached the Indian sentry post.

Then we heard that the *u-yon* reached the bridge and learned that we had fled and the bridge was being re-built. At that time, we dismantled the bridge.

Q: Was it a bridge across a river?

00:42:55

#45M: The bridge was built at a cliff where water flowed swiftly.

Q: So it was a wooden bridge?

#45M: Yes.

Q: So you just smashed it up?

00:43:10

#45M: Yes.

Q: Is there anything else you want to tell us about your story?

#45M: I was 14 years old when I reached Missamari in India from Tibet. I did not know to read and write and so I was sent to school for a little while. At that time people used to be sent in groups to various places. The King of Ladakh spoke to His Holiness the Dalai Lama and asked 1,000 of us to be sent to Ladakh, where we could earn a livelihood by farming and that the weather was cold.

My grandmother, my father's mother, was very old and I had a younger brother. At that time we never knew anything about the disease tuberculosis. Due to the extreme heat in Missamari, 20 out of our group of 40 people died there. Then the 20 of us was included among the 1,000 people sent to Ladakh. On our way to Ladakh, we could not cross a pass and at a place called Pathankot, one could look down on the valley of Dalhousie at a place called Chamba. We camped there for three months. While living at this place, from the initial strength of 1,000 people, only 800 survived; 200 died due to the heat within three months. People would be found dead leaning on rocks even while on their way to answering the call of nature. The heat drove people to madness and they jumped into the waters and died. In that way, 200 people died at that place.

Later the snow-covered pass opened and we once again walked for about 20 days and reached Ladakh. The King of Ladakh allowed us to cultivate, but crops did not grow in the sandy soil. So we constructed roads, while half the people continued to farm. However, there was no benefit from farming. And those engaged in constructing roads had to use dynamite to blast away the rocks. Everyday at least one or two people got killed by the debris during the explosion.

I heard that many petitions were forwarded to India requesting that we be accepted back into India. Then [two Tibetan officials called] Tsipon Shakapa and Gyalrong Norsang came to bring us over to India. We worked on the road gang in the hills of Bir [Himachal Pradesh].

Q: Were your family all okay?

00:47:41

#45M: We were five in my family: my parents, my grandmother and my younger brother. My younger brother and my grandmother died at the place where the 200 people died.

Q: How was your life in Ladakh after that?

#45M: If we cultivated the fields, crops did not grow in the sand. Water was very scarce. So, half the people worked in the fields as an experiment, while half went to work on the road construction. We had to cross a huge river to go there. There were no roads at all and we used dynamites. We worked along with the Indian soldiers on the cliffs. During our long stay there, each day at least one or two people got killed from falling rocks.

Then we realized that we could no longer survive there. We could not reap a harvest like they did in the settlements. The region was extremely poor. We knew we could not survive

in such conditions and sent many petitions to India to accept us back. They accepted us upon receiving the petitions. We were sent to a place called Acho Bir near Dharamsala for about 4 to 5 months.

Q: How long did you stay in Ladakh?

00:49:19

#45M: I wonder how long we stayed in Ladakh. It might be two or three years.

Q: I just want to ask you, you said your family faced some problems paying taxes back in Tibet. So when the Chinese first arrived and they said that they were going to stop people from having to pay taxes, were your family quite looking forward to that, sort of thinking that that was a good idea?

#45M: No, we did not feel happy at all. We used to pay our taxes regularly. They [the Chinese] were deceiving us. Initially they were gentle and invited the wealthy people for many parties. They normally deceive the wealthy first, inviting them to this party here and that party there. Then the wealthy got deceived when they received a lot of *dhayen* ‘Chinese silver coins.’ The wealthy even told us, “Do not flee for there is no way but to live under them [the Chinese]. They are the most powerful among all the countries. They can reach us wherever we go, so do not flee.” They told my late father, “Do not flee for there is no country as powerful as it [China]. They are treating us so well now and in the future too, they will not mistreat us. If you try to flee, they will treat you badly.”

However, we were prepared to escape saying, “They will not treat us well. They are deceiving us as they did from the beginning.” We did not have any plans to stay back.

Q: Thank you so much for talking to us. What was it like to talk about your experiences and sharing your memories?

00:53:17

#45M: I wonder if what I shared today will be of any benefit for the politics [of Tibet] or perhaps you are asking me out of curiosity.

Q: Actually it is experiences of people like you that are going to help to show what really happened in Tibet. So it is very important.

#45M: Thank you.

Q: And I have to ask you one more time, if this interview were shown in Tibet or China, any problem for you?

00:54:11

#45M: There will be no problems. All my relatives have died under *thamzing* perpetrated by the Chinese.

Q: Is it okay to use your real name?

#45M: Yes, you can use it.

Q: Thank you so much.

#45M: Thank you.

END OF INTERVIEW