

Sonam Tso's Account of Her Life in Tibet
As recorded by
TIBET ORAL HISTORY PROJECT
on April 7, 2010 in Mundgod, India

I was born in the village of Rong Shinglaykha in Amdo Province in 1929. When I was little, I lived with my parents, my five siblings, a paternal aunt and uncle, and my father's mother. My father had many relatives, but they lived separately.

In my region, there were forests, rivers, grasslands, cattle, farmers, and nomads. When I was small, we were farmers. All the people in our village were farmers. Even younger people worked in the fields. Our people were not traders. We were spiritual and worked with great happiness. It was such a pleasant region.

Tibetan Food

Every family had space to plant pear trees and grow vegetables. There were no markets where you could buy food. In my region, there were many things to eat that we did not have to buy. In summer, there were fruits and other things to eat that we could collect in the forests; there were none in winter because it snowed. There were perhaps 20 to 30 different types of fruit. The only fruit we had in winter was this yellowish fruit, called pear. We stored them in baskets for the winter, so that they could be eaten during the Tibetan New Year and until the 2nd or 3rd lunar months. The baskets were covered with a mud paste and stored on top of the house. When we opened the mud, the pears were cold and some were black in color, but they were very juicy and sweet.

The foods that we ate in our region were noodle soup, dumplings, and bread. We added green leafy vegetables and potatoes to the soup. When we made dumplings, the dough was made of wheat flour and we stuffed them with vegetables like chives and pumpkins mixed with meat. We also ate boiled radishes. The noodles were prepared by hand because there were no machines to make them. Everything was hand-made in our region. We farmers rarely ate meat, but when we did, we ate the meat of sheep and yak; we did not eat the meat of oxen.

We also ate a little *tsampa* [flour made from roasted barley], but not much because wheat flour was plentiful in Amdo and we had time to make bread. So we farmers mostly ate bread. There were water mills in our region for farmers to grind the grain, which was done only twice a year. The children packed the flour very tightly into wooden boxes so it did not spoil.

Working on the Farm

When I was a little child, I was responsible for finding firewood and cow dung, and grazing the animals. When I was about 15, I worked in the fields, hoeing. All the young boys and girls worked together. Our parents also worked in the fields. They collected and spread the manure, which contained human waste and the dung of animals. The men and boys plowed the fields with oxen and another animal, which was a male hybrid of a yak and a cow. The women leveled the fields. The women hoed the crops three times, as the plants grew. We did any other work that needed to be done because there were no laborers you could hire. We grew wheat, barley, and peas. We also grew mustard, which we grew for the oil we could extract.

Construction of Village Houses

Our house was a single story—there were no upper floors. In Amdo, there were very few houses with upper floors. Partitions and cupboards were made of wood, and the cupboards were painted. There were beautiful carvings on the house, as well as on the altar. The roof was made of soil. Cement was not necessary since no rainwater seeped inside. The floor was the ground, but there were wooden boards on the floors of the rooms where the family lived.

The family built the house with help from the people in the village—two people from each family came to help. The helpers had to be provided with food, but there was no payment because we were helping each other. The foundation and the walls took quite a long time to build, maybe a month or two. When wood was required, people helped cut it. Nothing needed to be purchased as everything was available in our region. The house would last for one or two generations. If a house leaked, it would be dismantled and the walls built once again.

Prayers for the Sick or Dying

There was a prayer room in the house that was large enough to hold 50 to 60 monks from the monastery. The ceilings were painted. There were also sacred texts and holy images of Buddha and other deities in the prayer room. Normally, only 15 to 20 monks were invited to read prayers, but if someone in the family passed away, the whole monastery was invited. For about five days, breakfast, lunch, and dinner were provided to all the people in the village in order to earn merit. The monks of the monastery were also offered food for five days.

In those days, people lived to be very old, 80, 90 or 100, and our people did not suffer from many diseases. There were no doctors or hospitals in our village. Instead, if someone became sick, prayers were offered and the men gathered in the evenings to read a special prayer. When a person was dying, a divination was consulted and, if it revealed that prayers should be read, monks were invited to come and pray with the family.

When the person died, the body was not immediately removed. Instead, it was kept in the house for a day or two and, in some cases, even for a week. Astrological calculations were used to decide on how long the body should stay in the house. The body was kept in a separate place in the house. Because of the cold climate, the body did not smell.

Then there would be a sky burial. Male family members, neighbors, and friends accompanied the body far away to a pasture; women did not go. The men fed the body to the vultures and ground up the leftover parts. People used to say that the vultures did not eat the bodies of sinners. It was said that giving the body to the birds satiates their hunger, which is an admirable act.

Marriage

In Tibet in those days, parents arranged the marriage by matching astrological charts. Love marriages were not considered a good idea because there were different castes in our region and the boy's family might not accept the girl. So marriages arranged by parents were considered the best and the boy and girl listened to whatever their parents said and obeyed them.

I was married at the age of 18. My husband was from a village that was about half a day's journey away. We had seen each other before our marriage because we went to the same monastery. We did not meet alone because it was not considered good for boys and girls to do

that. My husband came from a good family. In this family, there were three sons and there were three brides for the three sons. I was the youngest. At that time, the Chinese had already arrived and there were restrictions. They did not approve of grand celebrations, so we had a small affair—we did not dare to hold a big celebration or make incense offerings.

First Arrival of the Chinese

The Chinese arrived in my region first because we were on the border with China. The first Chinese were not soldiers. They wore ordinary clothes and they treated the people well. Two or three Chinese would visit a family, eat with them, and pay them. They visited all the families in the village like this, in turn. They also made the young men and women wear their best clothes and dance. They gave money to the poor and learned from them what each family owned. They stayed for many months, but did not tell us why they were all of a sudden in our village. When I think about it today, they were assessing how rich the Tibetan families were. Later, when the “liberation” was implemented, they knew what we owned. They deceived the Tibetan people.

Arrival of the Chinese Soldiers

Some months later, Chinese soldiers arrived wearing green military uniforms. One day when we got up in the morning, we saw that the Chinese soldiers had surrounded our entire village. Some of the rich families fled into the forests. Those who could not flee were captured. The soldiers fired their guns because they were trying to seize the fathers of the families. So the mothers and the rest of the family members pounced on the soldiers with axes and vegetable knives, the only things they had to defend themselves. When the fathers resisted being taken away or if children obstructed the arrest, every one of them was killed. The people who fled into the forests were killed from above by airplanes.

Some of the young men were imprisoned. All the surrounding villages were called to witness the prisoners, who had wooden boards hanging around their necks. There was writing on the boards that indicated whether the prisoner was to be killed that day or not. Some of the prisoners kept their heads bowed like they were dead and the soldiers pulled up their heads by their hair. People were forced to witness their relatives being shot in the head and killed. There was so much suffering.

My brother was captured along with two others and they were taken to China and faced interrogations for about 15 days. We thought that he would never return, but he was released. He was able to stay home for three years after his release. During those three years, he was interrogated alone and was not allowed to go to meetings or near other people. He was forced to dig the fields and in the winter he was made to gather waste matter for fertilizer for the crops.

I lived ten years under the Chinese before escaping to Lhasa. The Chinese confiscated our farmland and our animals. They did not distribute the farmland. Instead, they took it for the community and people worked in the commune. After the harvest was over, if my husband and I worked, we were entitled to a share. However, old people and small children were not entitled to a share. The Chinese caused such immense suffering that everyone ate grass and weeds and many died of starvation.

Sterilization of Tibetans

My husband and I did not have children because the Chinese sterilized women of my age. We could not have children. The Chinese sterilized all the women in my village and nearby villages who were between 20 and 40 years old. It was also done to all the men. The Chinese did not tell us what they were doing. They said that we had to come to show our private parts. Since we could not show our private parts, the girls in the village refused to go. Then our leader said that if we refused to go, he would face problems. So we went, out of fear. The men were taken separately. I heard that there was a vein near the thigh that was cut.

The women were injected and stretched out with our hands and legs tied. They touched our stomachs. Then we were led to a corner where there were Chinese women wearing gloves, who put their hands into the opening at the end of women. There was a basin with scissors and other things. Some of the women cried out of shyness. Also, it was painful and we cried out in pain. We could not do anything because we were so scared. We were not in a position to say anything to the Chinese. At that time, we did know what they were doing. It was much later that everyone pondered over it and understood what had happened. Everyone was saddened.

Escaping from the Chinese

The Chinese killed all my father's siblings and their children were put in prison. My two older brothers-in-law were imprisoned and died in prison. Since my husband's family was rich, we felt it was not safe and were afraid that the Chinese would capture us. Since my brother was already in Lhasa, my husband and I fled to Lhasa, too. We did not have any money to go to Lhasa, so I sold my earrings, other jewelry, and brocade dresses to friends and family members. We did not have anything with us, not even a cup.

We travelled on a cart pulled by horses and mules. It took us one day to reach Amdo Silang, His Holiness the Dalai Lama's region. Refugees from the Chinese invasion had arrived in Silang and it was teeming with people. From Silang we journeyed to Lhasa for 15 days in a Chinese army truck. Traders and soldiers traveled back and forth between Lhasa and Amdo and the traders hired Chinese trucks. At that time, passes were not necessary.

In Lhasa, we got work as paid laborers, splitting stones. But we could not continue because we would hit our hands and our hands ached. We stayed in Lhasa for just a month or two. We went to Shigatse for about a year and then we went to Dromo. In this region, we gathered wood to sell to beer makers. In this way, we earned our living and were able to save some money. Then we went on a pilgrimage to India. We were stupid and thought that after the pilgrimage we would be able to go back to our village. But when we returned to Shigatse, we learned that Lhasa was being attacked by the Chinese army.

All the men went to Lhasa to join the Defend Tibet Volunteer Force, leaving the women behind in Shigatse. We escaped by ourselves to India. The reason we came to India was because I had already gone to India on a pilgrimage and I believed that there was no other place to escape to. My husband was fighting the Chinese in Lhasa. He was also one of the people who escorted His Holiness the Dalai Lama when he went into exile in India. It was my husband's destiny that he was not killed. In many villages like Amdo Tsongo, Amdo Shongkha, and Karawindhu, people of two generations have been completely wiped out by the Chinese. When I visited my region recently, there were no men of my age or older as they had all been killed.