

Tsetin's Account of Her Life in Tibet
As recorded by
TIBET ORAL HISTORY PROJECT
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I am from Jongmay in Kham Province. Until I was about 15 years old, my father went with mules to trade in China and Lhasa. I don't know what goods he took when he went to China, but when he returned, he brought tea leaves and brown sugar. My mother and the rest of the family engaged in fieldwork as well as raised animals; we were nomads. We grew wheat and barley. Our region was a place where you could grow everything.

First Arrival of the Chinese

I was about 10 years old when my father returned home after one of his business trips to China and told us about the hardships perpetuated by the Chinese. Some people said that Tibet would be okay, since those things were happening so far away, while others remarked that we would face the same situation.

When I was about 12 years old, about 300 soldiers came to our village. I saw them arrive. One Chinese soldier was very loving. He gave candies to the children and he liked them. The soldiers offered help to the villagers with their work. For two to three years the Chinese said that they were going to start schools and they constructed houses. We lived under the Chinese in this way for some time.

When I was about 15 years old, all our leaders were taken away to Ba for a meeting. Then the people of the Badhe Ngari Shingkhams district staged a rebellion. All the influential people were imprisoned by the Chinese. The leader of our village was also imprisoned at Ba. Not all of them were killed but all of the older ones died. Later the Chinese released the leaders and they returned to their respective homes. They returned and then there were more fights.

Defeat of the Resistance Fighters

From the time I was 15 until 19, people were resisting the Chinese in the village. No one was arrested, but many died. Those that could fight engaged in the resistance and the women and children worked on the farms. I was not particularly alarmed because I believed and hoped our people could fend off the Chinese. I thought they were successful when they resisted them.

My father came back from where he was fighting saying that they were defeated. We left everything behind and fled the whole night. We reached my father's hometown Chashay in three days. When we arrived, Chashay was peaceful. My father's relatives had no plans of escaping. But my father was adamant about leaving and he made preparations for about a month, packing things and buying horses. Then my parents and three siblings left while my sister and I were left behind with my father's family. When I look back, it makes me cry.

Until I was separated from my parents, I did not have any thoughts about becoming a nun or anything else. After my parents left, I did not think of anything else except to become a nun. Though the Chinese always said that people were not allowed to become monks or nuns, the leader in our village was a nice man and he did not report me. I didn't join any nunnery—there were no nunneries in our village.

Destruction of Monasteries

The relatives I stayed with were farmers and I worked in the fields. It remained calm for one year. After one year when I was 20 or 21 years old, the Chinese arrived in Chashay during the third Tibetan lunar month. The Chashay people did not want to surrender and did not give up their guns. When they did not give up the guns, the Chinese planned to attack them. A messenger came to report that the Chinese were coming and would arrive in two days. Then we fled to the forest.

The next morning at about 3 o'clock, we heard bombing at Suwo Monastery. Situated on the inner side of the mountain was Suwo Monastery and on the outer side was the Kandha Monastery. Both the monasteries were destroyed within minutes of each other, at the same time. All the monks of Suwo Monastery had escaped while the monks of Kandha Monastery were inside. All of them were killed, including the lama.

Later the Chinese told the people that the smaller monasteries were not to be left standing. So the leaders of the villages [appointed by the Chinese] forced the Tibetan people to destroy the monasteries. They dug at the foundations and made the walls topple. There was an instance when a wall fell over the diggers killing them underneath. If anyone spoke out that the monasteries should not be destroyed, he would be treated like the leaders, who were forced to work or imprisoned.

Innumerable small monasteries were ruined. There was one called Lagonkha, which the Chinese destroyed and scattered the scriptures on the road. I could see the scriptures on the road as far as the eye could see. The Romo Monastery was destroyed. I saw that with my own eyes. Then there was Parathang Monastery. I saw the Para lama being beaten.

Beatings, Imprisonment and Suicides

I was sent to my father's younger sister. At that time everything was peaceful there. I lived with my aunt for a year and I turned 22 years old. I thought I would never meet my parents again. I was terribly sad. After the year was over, the prominent people of that village, including my aunt's husband, were called for a meeting and then they were imprisoned. They were led away to attend a meeting at Gathok, but when they reached Gathok, their waistbands and bootlaces were removed and they were shut up in a dark room. That was because many prisoners hung themselves using the waistbands.

I thought of committing suicide, but I couldn't do it when the actual time came. Every day I thought about dying, but I could never do it. Perhaps that was not my fate. Many people died so easily. The reason I couldn't die was because I thought there might come a good time when I might be able to see my parents again. That gave me strength. Otherwise, there was nothing I had to hold on to by not dying.

The servants were taken away, given property and kept separately from us. We were made to live in the cow shed. The Chinese brought back my aunt's husband to the village and he was beaten, and my aunt fell ill. I saw him being beaten. They kicked him and pulled his hair and ears. They dragged him here and there. It was the Chinese who did the beatings and not Tibetans. The whole village had to be there to witness the beatings. The session lasted for three days and then they were led back to prison again.

Hiding in the Forest

My aunt was scared that she would be subjected to the beatings. She wanted her relatives to take her into the forest, so that she could die there. She didn't want to die from the beatings. We all went together. Among my relatives, my uncle and his three sons, an aunt and her monk son were living in the forest. All the men from other families were moving about in the forest. They did not all live together. They hid in different places.

The villagers had to provide us with food because we had nothing to eat in the forest. If the Chinese saw the villagers taking food to us, they were beaten and taken away to prison. They faced a lot of problems because of us so when the villagers asked us to leave, we left. There were more than 300 to 400 people and around 300 to 400 mules and horses.

All our belongings were gone and we were empty-handed. Another nun and I went to look for food at the Choten village. We were captured by the Chinese because we did not belong to the village where they found us. We were led to Tsawa Zogang and locked up for 15 days. I saw many people imprisoned there. There were about 500 to 600 people, both male and female, whom the Chinese had captured. The people were imprisoned in the Dayab Monastery. We were also locked up there. During the time of our capture, they killed three people.

Returning Home and Isolation

I was sent home to Jongmay, but there was no one at home. I went to the place where my three nieces and sister were living. All five of us came back. We were made to live in a house which was in a dilapidated condition. That was not the house my parents lived in. Long ago we used to keep our goats there. Half of the house had fallen while the other half was standing. The Chinese gave us the worst piece of land. We did not even have a morsel to eat. We were provided with just about enough food to prevent starvation. We were not allowed to speak to anybody.

There was a period of relaxation at one time, during which there was freedom of religion. We enjoyed happiness for a year or two. We could talk to each other. Later that was changed and then we underwent very strict rules. The Tibetan leaders in our village were beaten. They were beaten very badly. Then for about three years, we had another happy period.

Then I think it was in 1970 when the leaders were beaten again—from the children to the elders. One of my nieces and I were beaten. She was beaten for visiting people's homes and I was beaten because I was the oldest in my family. The Chinese insisted that I had discussed important issues with the village leaders. They were persistent. They beat and beat and beat me for that and imprisoned me for one month. They tied my hands behind my back and suspended me. I was suspended in the air and even these days, I have pain in my shoulders.

My niece and I were put in one cell together. The others were locked up in their houses. We were kept separate from them. They kept us locked up and we couldn't go anywhere and then they forced us to work every day. The beatings happened once in a month. However, I was taken to witness others being beaten. The influential people used to be beaten every day, while I think I was too insignificant for such attention. The elders were beaten several times a year. Everyone had to witness the beatings kneeling down on the ground. I think I was about 33 years old when I was subjected to the beatings by the Chinese.

We were released after a month. I returned to my home. The strict rules of not venturing further from the fields and not speaking to anyone else still existed. However, no one beat us. We could live in our own homes. I lived for 13 years fending for myself.

New Taxes and Commune System

Then the Chinese levied the taxes. People suffered terribly then because those villagers who knew nothing were appointed as leaders. They claimed that the harvest from one acre of land was 25 sacks of grains! After the Chinese received that information, they made some calculations and levied the taxes. Each person was entitled to 30 kilograms of grain a month and the rest of the harvest was to be given to the Chinese. The majority of the harvest was taken away. We couldn't survive on what was left and people almost died of starvation.

I think it was 1973 or 1974 that the landowners were grouped among the common people. We were required to give up all the animals for the commune. Everyone worked together and as a result we only got a share of what was divided from the harvest. We worked, but did not have enough to eat. Our leaders were those who had no work experience except for depending on others on a daily basis—they were now the big leaders and their plans went awry. We never again saw a good harvest and there was hardly anything left to be divided. We faced a lot of suffering because the food was never sufficient.

There was no development at all. Until the imposition of the policy of relaxation, people underwent a lot of hardships. The leniency period came around 1978. After the death of Mao Zedong, the commune went on for another two years and ours was the first to be dissolved. The lands and the animals were divided. Since then we were free to work or stay at home. We were allowed to move from place to place then so people could find food to eat. Until then we were not allowed to go anywhere. Then our livelihood improved.

The sole reason for my escape was because I heard my parents were in India. In 1980 a monk from India came to our village and he knew my family. He said that my father was dead, but that my mother and siblings were alive. Since then I never had any plans to live in Tibet—I was determined to escape. I met my mother in India and lived with her for 16 years. I thought this reunion could not be true. I wondered if it was real or if it was just a dream.