

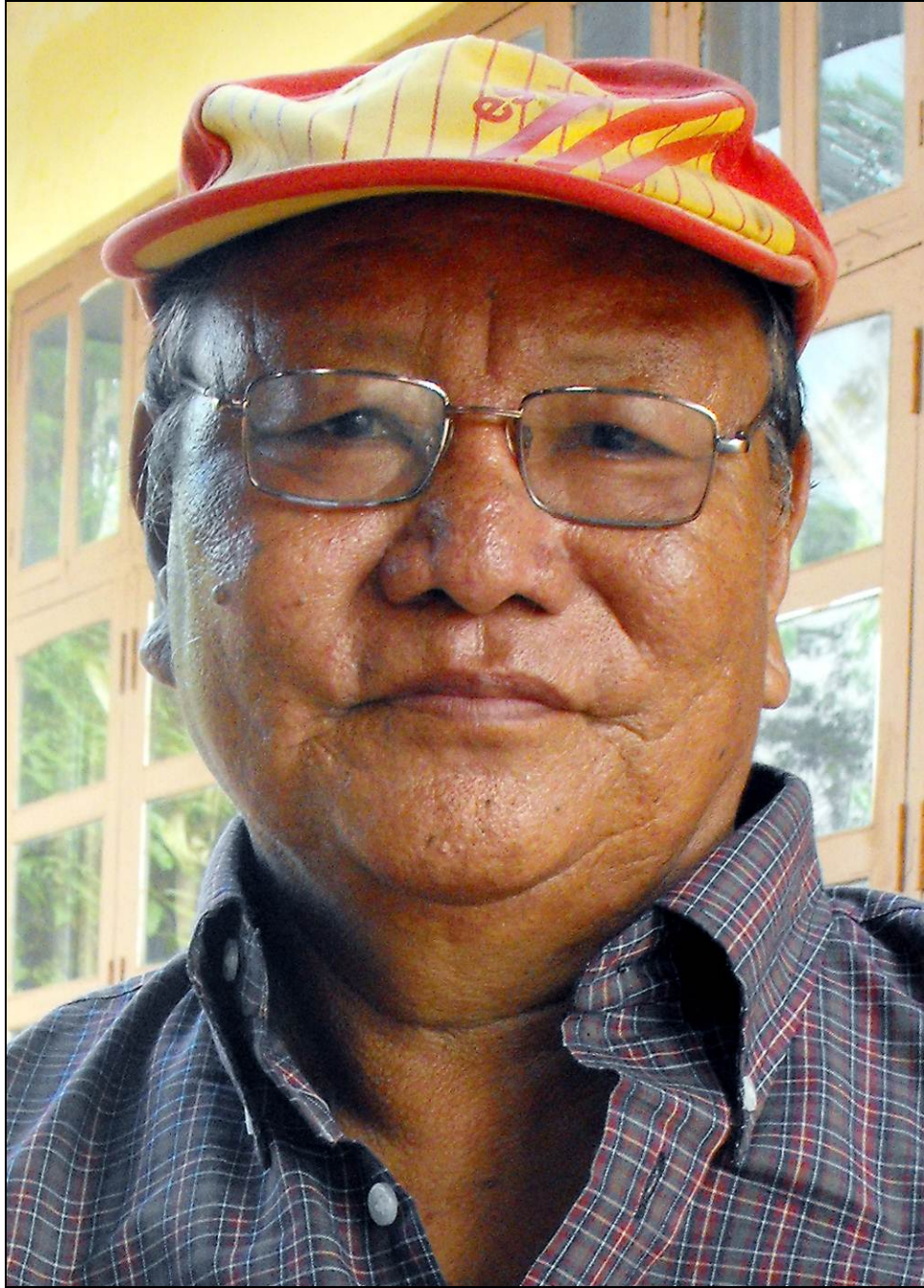
Tibet Oral History Project

Interview #50M – Tsewang Norbu
April 6, 2010

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INTERVIEW SUMMARY SHEET

1. Interview Number: #50M
2. Interviewee: Tsewang Norbu
3. Age: 66
4. Date of Birth: 1944
5. Sex: Male
6. Birthplace: Phuma Changthang
7. Province: Utsang
8. Year of leaving Tibet: 1959
9. Date of Interview: April 6, 2010
10. Place of Interview: Kalachakra Hall, Camp No. 3, Doeguling Settlement, Mundgod, Karwar District, Karnataka, India
11. Length of Interview: 1 hr 47 min
12. Interviewer: Rebecca Novick
13. Interpreter: Namgyal Tsering
14. Videographer: Ronny Novick
15. Translator: Tenzin Yangchen

Biographical Information:

Tsewang Norbu's family owned around 100 yaks and about 1,000 goats and sheep. They were among the richer nomad families. He gives information about the nomadic way of life, explaining that in winter they stayed in a proper house and lived in a tent during grazing time. They practiced the barter system, exchanging butter, cheese and meat for grains and peas with the farmers from a nearby region.

The *chirim* 'community prayer' was held annually where people from different nomadic villages assembled to pray, sing and dance. Another enjoyable occasion was when all the animals of Phuma Changthang gathered at the *gangpu* 'community land.' Tsewang Norbu describes the five levels of tax payers who had to remit taxes to the government for use of the grazing land. Every three years the government conducted an animal census of each family's herds.

Tsewang Norbu remembers seeing the Chinese first come to his village in 1957 to survey and photograph the area. Later in 1959 many people fled through their village and related the battles between Tibetans and Chinese. As the Chinese oppression increased, his uncle was beaten and then committed suicide and his father was imprisoned. Tsewang Norbu and siblings escaped from the grazing area leaving behind everything that they owned.

Topics Discussed:

Childhood memories, nomadic life, trade, religious festivals, customs/traditions, taxes, first appearance of Chinese, life under Chinese rule, *thamzing*, escape experiences.

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Interview #50M

Interviewee: Tsewang Norbu

Age: 66, Sex: Male

Interviewer: Rebecca Novick

Interview Date: April 6, 2010

Question: First of all, please tell us your name.

00:00:19

Interviewee #50M: My name is Tsewang Norbu.

Q: His Holiness the Dalai Lama asked us to record the experience of older Tibetans to share with younger generations of Tibetans and also with the Chinese so that people understand the true history and culture and experience of the Tibetan people.

#50M: Okay. Thank you.

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

00:01:15

#50M: Yes.

Q: Thank you very much.

#50M: [Nods]

Q: If you don't want to answer a question then just say, "I don't really want to answer that."

#50M: Okay.

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

00:01:41

#50M: There will be no problem.

Q: Okay, we are very honored and we very much appreciate your sharing your story with us and participating in this project.

#50M: I wish to thank you.

Q: And I know it's sometimes distracting because there's sometimes people walking around here, but if you could please just try to look at Namgyal the whole time because the reason is

when somebody sees the video and if someone is doing this, then they are thinking “Who is he looking at” because they can’t see. It looks strange, so that is the reason.

So first of all, when you think about Tibet, when you remember Tibet, what comes to your mind?

#50M: Tibet was where I was born and grew up long ago and when [I] hear the word Tibet, the image of the place where I was born and earned a livelihood automatically comes before my eyes and I wish I could see my country again.

Q: Can you tell us something, a little bit about your early childhood?

00:03:51

#50M: The name of my village in Tibet is called Phuma Changthang. It came under the district of Rimuk in Tsang [Province].

[Videographer requests that the question be asked again due to the noise from a passing truck]

Q: Could you please tell us something about your early childhood?

#50M: When I was small in Tibet, we were nomads. We herded the animals in the nomadic region. When one reached the age of 11-12, one grazed the animals and in order to earn a livelihood...[not discernible] went to the regions of Lhoka and Tsang. When I grew to be about 14 years old, I concentrated wholly on looking after the animals.

Q: How many animals did your family own?

00:05:36

#50M: My family owned around 100 *dri* ‘female yaks’ and yaks and about 1,000 goats and sheep.

Q: So how did that number compare to other nomads in your area? Was that a lot or was that not so much or was it kind of average?

#50M: In our region, [we] were among the richer ones.

Q: Can you describe a little bit about the environment in which you lived? What did it look like?

00:06:51

#50M: Our village of Phuma Changthang is located between Lhoka and Tsang. There is a big lake below our village; a big lake called Phuma Yumtso. Though in general the region was flat, it was surrounded by grass-covered hills. All those people that lived there were nomads. Three small hills are located in the middle of the lake.

Q: Did you ever go to get salt in the Changthang?

#50M: There was no one in our village who went on such [expeditions].

Q: In your village, were there any special stories associated with your village or any special history?

#50M: There was nothing special as the region was nomadic. For survival [we] obtained grains from Lhoka and Tsang in exchange for butter, cheese, meat and animals. In return [we] received grains and peas or whatever the requirement was, like salt to last for the entire year from the neighboring areas. That was how we lived and there was nothing else [that happened].

Q: Actually my question had to do with, when I said stories, I meant sort of like legends. Do you understand? Like you know history and legends and stories about the area and about, like the guy was saying about the very rich guy who founded the village or King Gesar or were there any stories associated with his area?

00:09:44

#50M: Our region was a nomadic region and other than that there were nothing special about it.

Q: And the nomads, did you have like certain songs that were particular to the nomads, to the *dokpa* ‘nomad’?

#50M: There would be songs of one’s region. Annually a Changthang *chirim* was held near our monastery.

Q: Changthang *chirim*?

00:10:39

#50M: *Chirim* means community prayer. During this time nomads from every area in Phumo Changthang ... We had five *ling*; five *ling* meaning that there were five larger villages. Each formed their own group and the five groups assembled there and performed prayers and played sports like horse racing, a running race; likewise there was jumping, throwing...[not discernible] and arrow shooting. Such a competition was held once in a year.

Q: You remember this?

#50M: Yes.

Q: Have you taken part in it?

00:12:19

#50M: I was small at that time and not old enough to participate.

Q: Did the *dokpa*, when you were herding, were there songs that the *dokpa* used to sing with the animals out in the grasslands?

#50M: During wintertime in our region, from the end of the 8th month to the 10th month, there was a community land called Gangpu where all the animals of Phumo Changthang arrived. There were individual places and people stayed in *ba* ‘tent made from yak hair.’ Since everyone was close to each other, people gathered at night and sang songs challenging the other [group] and danced.

Q: Really? So was anybody in your family particularly good at singing?

00:13:58

#50M: Most of the nomads were accomplished singers and even if they sang the whole night, [their songs] did not come to an end. At the same time, they did their wool work.

Q: Do you remember any of the songs?

#50M: The songs were in verses to challenge each other. I know a little bit.

Q: Would you mind singing a few words that you know?

00:14:45

#50M: I can sing. [Recites the following verse]

*Gampa lamoe tse nay
Thapoe chitay lok chung
Thapo thukak mindhu
Chag kyi zandoe ley sha*

*[From the top of Gampa’s mountain pass
A horse turned to look longingly back
His actions were not a surprise though
For he left behind his unfinished food.]*

That is one verse.

Q: What does that mean?

#50M: *Gampa lamoe tse nay* [means] a person is riding a horse, which turned to look back from the top [of the mountain pass]. It cannot be blamed for looking back because it had not been able to complete eating its feed. That is meant to indicate that a part of work is left undone.

Q: Can you sing this?

#50M: [Speaks before question is interpreted] One is riding on a horse and [speaks in English] the horse looks back.

Q: Yes, yes.

#50M: Why? Because he left his food.

Q: He left his food. So he is wishing that...

00:15:45

#50M: ...so that he is looking like that.

Q: Can you sing this rather than just talking?

#50M: [Sings the verse]

*Gampa lamoe tse nay
Thapoe chitay lok chung
Thapo thukak mindhu
Chag kyi zandoe ley sha*

The meaning is the same as the earlier one.

Q: Thank you. Was there some alcohol consumed during this singing competition?

00:16:28

#50M: Not much of *chang* ‘home-brewed beer’ was consumed. [People] drank tea and as it became colder gradually, hot *thukpa* ‘noodle soup’ was drunk.

Q: I want to get back to the animals. Was there a limit on the number of animals that each family could own or could you own as many animals as you were able to?

#50M: There were different ranges of tax [payers] like the five *tokpon* and below that the five *dhiwa*.

Q: What’s the first one?

00:17:19

#50M: [I] told you that there were five *tokpon* when the community prayer was held. The five *tokpon* were the highest tax payers in our region. Below them were the five *dhiwa*. There were different ranges of tax. I do not know much as I was small then. Depending upon the number of animals, one was entitled to land by the government.

Q: But is that difficult to figure out though if you are moving from place to place? Is it little bit difficult sometimes to ascertain how much land you are using at any one time?

[Question is interpreted as: Did you face any problems when your animals strayed into other areas?]

#50M: There were no such [problems] as pathways were available to reach your individual area. As I told you earlier, Gangpu is the community land. Animals from anywhere could graze there until the grass got over. However, once you were in your home, each individual

had his particular piece of land. One had to graze [his animals] on his land and could not let them lose anywhere else. In order to reach one's area, there were pathways through which [the animals] were driven.

Q: How much land...he had almost 1,000 sheep and a few hundred *dri* and yak. So how much land did your family have?

00:19:44

#50M: We owned a large area at the place we lived. One could go up the large grassy hill as well as a large valley below our home.

Q: Was it one tract of land or many...

#50M: At the place where we lived was a large tract of land. Likewise there was another piece of land where we let the lambs graze. The lambs grazed there for two to three months. There were different pieces of lands the tax payers were entitled to. For example, five or six smaller [poorer] families lived along with a bigger [richer] family because they did not own land. So what they did was; they helped the rich family in the summertime with milking and clearing the enclosures of dung.

There were certain small families that did not pay tax and owned just 100-200 or 50-60 goats and sheep. They let [their animals] graze with the rich families' [animals] because when they were not obliged to pay tax, they did not have right to any land. So there were some [families] that lived in that way.

Q: So if you had to walk from one side of the division of your land to the border where it became somebody else's land, how long would it take?

00:22:07

#50M: One would have to walk a day.

Q: Would you and your family move around within that land? Would you move your tent around within that area?

#50M: There was a house at the base area. It was built out of sod with a roof, where one could stay. When we moved away from there, we carried a tent.

Q: Did you used to go into the tent or were you too small?

00:23:07

#50M: During winter, [we] lived in the proper house but once [we were] at the nomadic site, it was only the tents.

Q: Did you enjoy staying in the tent?

#50M: It was very happy [comfortable] in the tent. During summer at the time of the milking season, the *ba* was as large as half of this room. The *ba* was extremely large.

Q: And how many family members would go in the tent—would be in the tent?

00:23:58

#50M: About 15-20 people could fit in.

Q: Was it mostly the men who stayed or did the women also stay?

#50M: Those that were engaged in herding the animals went out with the animals and those that did the household work, stayed in the tent.

Q: Whether they were men or women?

#50M: Yes, everyone.

00:24:36

[Interviewer to interpreter]: So you said that they could own as many animals as they wanted. There was no limit on the amount of animals.

Interpreter to interviewer]: No limits.

Q: The animals that your family looked after, did they all belong to your family or did some of the animals belong to the monastery?

00:25:05

#50M: They belonged to the family. However, we had to pay tax to the Tibetan government for the land but other than that, the animals were ours.

Q: So the tax that you paid, was that in money? How was that paid?

#50M: The tax was paid in the form of money, butter, meat and the spun *rapu* of goats.

Q: What's *rapu*?

00:25:43

#50M: It is the hair of the goat called *lena*.

Q: Was there a limit?

#50M: There was a range in the tax, but I do not know the limit as I was young then.

Q: But this was an annual tax?

00:26:13

#50M: It was annual.

Q: Who collected it? Do you know?

#50M: We remitted much of the tax to the Rambatsang [family] while the tax in the form of money and butter had to be taken to the Tibetan government in Lhasa. We were the tenants of Ramba and paid [tax] to Ramba.

Q: Ramba?

00:26:36

#50M: The [noble] family called Ramba.

Q: So you paid the money tax to Ramba...

#50M: If we remitted money, *rapu* and meat to Ramba, Ramba took it to Lhasa. The butter tax had to be transported to Lhasa.

Q: Was Ramba the leader of the village?

00:26:51

#50M: [He] was our village's...

Q: District administrator?

#50M: The district was Rimuk. However, there were various chieftains in Tibet and ours was the one called Ramba. [We were] the tenants of Ramba in Tibet.

Q: What happened if there were families who were unable to pay?

00:27:42

#50M: [I] believe one had to make every effort to remit the tax.

Q: In case one does not?

#50M: I wonder what happened if one did not pay as I was small then. It was not possible that one did not pay tax. Our leader was gentle and the tenants lived happily.

Q: Do you always remember having enough to eat? Did you always feel like there was plenty to eat?

00:28:30

#50M: The majority of the people lived happily. However, there were a few cases where families had many children and not a large number of animals and faced difficulties.

Q: How about you?

#50M: I have never faced such problems. To [assess] tax, the government did a *chuktsi* of our animals once every three years.

Q: What's *chuktsi*?

00:28:58

#50M: *Chuktsi* was checking the number of animals. If the figure had increased the land tax...For example, if I was in Category 2, [I] would be included in Category 1. If the tax [quantity] was the same, one remained in the same [area of] land.

Q: Did the nomads, the *dokpa* use coins between one and other to exchange goods and to exchange resources?

#50M: Most of the time, animal wool, animals, butter and such were given. At times if one fell short of these, one could purchase grains by paying money.

Q: But between one and other, like from family to family, not to the government but from family to family? Like if I didn't have any butter, for example, would I give you money to get butter or would I give you something else and say, "I'll give you this if you give me butter"?

00:31:07

#50M: If one conducted the barter system, one gave wool and received grains in exchange. Likewise I told you earlier that animals were given. The richer people drove 100 or 80 goats and sheep and dispersed them to the farmers. Then they went during autumn, when they [the farmers] harvested their crop and received grains. The grinding too was done in that village and a year's supply of *tsampa* 'flour made from roasted barley' stock was brought home on one's yaks. The farmers grew radishes or different types of crops.

Q: What vegetables were found at that time?

#50M: There was nothing in my village. There were no crops that grew.

Q: What did the farmers have?

00:32:23

#50M: The farmers living in the inner Lhopra area had radishes; radishes which had been dried. Then there were potatoes. That was it because the region was cold and not many vegetables grew.

Q: What was considered like a really, really special food, like if you got this kind of food everyone's really excited, like oh, these guys got this food, you know?

#50M: In Tibet *dey* 'rice' was scarce. Since *dey* was scarce, *dey-sil* 'rice cooked with butter and dried fruits,' *sham-dey* 'rice and meat' and likewise, similar to the feasts we have here, *momo* and such were the [special] ones. Most of the nomads loved meat. So there was dry meat or boiled meat and such.

Q: Where did the rice come from? Did it come from India or...

00:33:56

#50M: The rice came from Bhutan and Nepal.

Q: How did the rice come to your region?

#50M: Our region was located on the Himalaya mountain range. So the Bhutanese carried rice on their backs and came to sell it.

Q: There's a note here about an animal census every three years. Can you tell us about the animal census?

[Interpreter to interviewer]: Means?

[Interviewer to interpreter]: Animal census is when people come and count how many animals there are.

[Interpreter to interviewer]: That I've said earlier. Every three years, the government authority comes and sees what the family has.

[Interviewer to interpreter]: Oh, I see.

[Interpreter to interviewer]: According to that, they give the land—to be given more or less. So every three years the renewing inspection comes.

[Interviewer to interpreter]: And they renew inspection and determine how much land based on that. Okay.

Q: So when did you first see Chinese come to your area?

00:35:22

#50M: The Chinese first came to our village around 1957. A group of Chinese with mules and horses arrived in our village and looked around using binoculars and took photographs. [I] suppose they were surveying the area. That was the first time they came.

Q: How many Chinese were there?

#50M: Perhaps there were 10-15 Chinese then.

Q: So it was like surveillance. These were military?

00:36:09

#50M: They were not dressed in the military uniform.

Q: And all they did was take photos?

#50M: Yes, they took photographs, but we had never seen this before.

Q: Did anybody talk to them?

00:36:30

#50M: [Speaks in English] Communication...radio...Chinese speaking but we are not understanding.

Q: Did the Chinese talk to the Tibetans?

#50M: The Chinese spoke to each other on the phone and took photographs.

Q: So this was 1957. So already there was a lot of fighting going on in the east. Did you know about the fighting that was happening in Kham and these other places in your village? Had the news reached your village about the fighting between Tibetans and Chinese in the eastern area?

00:37:16

#50M: We did not know about it then.

Q: By 1957, no knowledge?

#50M: There was no fighting in our region. The Chinese had arrived in Gyangtse. We heard that schools had been established. There might have been fighting going on, but I never heard of it.

Q: Did you have a radio in your village?

00:38:02

#50M: No, there were no radios or anything.

Q: No communication with the rest of the...?

#50M: No, there was not.

Q: When these Chinese came and they were taking photos, what was the general feeling among the people in your village in your area? Were you suspicious, or what was your kind of feeling about what they were doing?

00:38:36

#50M: Since it was the first time that the Chinese arrived, we had fear in our heart but did not know the language. There was unhappiness when the Chinese came and the elders said that [we] would no longer be happy.

Q: So it felt like a bad sign?

[Interpreter to interviewer]: Bad sign.

Q: And how many people did you say came?

[Interpreter to interviewer]: Fifteen.

Q: And what was your next experience with the Chinese?

#50M: Then later in 1959 after the attack took place in Lhasa, soldiers arrived. After Lhasa was conquered, the escaping Lhasa soldiers were pursued by the Chinese. A division of Chinese soldiers sort of permanently stayed in the monastery called Sanzam Gonpa of our region.

Q: Okay. So first of all the way that you heard about what was happening in Lhasa was through the people coming from Lhasa, escaping Lhasa.

#50M: [Nods]

Q: Did your family look after any of these people? Did any of them come to your house?

00:40:53

#50M: Many such [people] arrived. They'd spent a night and then when they heard that the Chinese were coming, fled. Once around 20-30 Khampa [people from Kham] soldiers were staying in our house. There was a village next to our village called Sang Karpo and the Chinese arrived there early one morning. A few Khampas from our place went there and three Khampas were killed, killed by gun fire. They [the Chinese] had reached there earlier and set up an ambush from within a house. They [the Khampa soldiers] went in directly and were unable to escape. Three men and their horses were killed right there.

Q: Can you tell us more about what happened on that day and if you could tell us the events as much detail as possible from when these people first arrived to when you saw them being killed, please?

#50M: To relate in detail, the Khampas were staying in our house. Sang Karpo was the place where the leader of our village lived and he owned horses. Since they [the Khampas] had ridden for many days, their horses had become weak. They wished to change their horses and left in the morning to get their horses changed. The Chinese arrived from the other side. Since it was a plain region, our people could see the Chinese arrive [and remarked], "Whether they are Chinese or not, many riders on horses have arrived there. Some things shaped like animals and Chinese have arrived there. It's better not to go." However, since they needed to change horses, they left. Majority of the Khampas left from the other side of our house while the three horsemen went there to get their horses changed. They [the Chinese] set up an ambush and they were killed.

Q: How many did they kill?

00:44:03

#50M: Three Khampas. The majority of them escaped. The sound of gunfire could be heard. They [the Chinese] had set up an ambush and hid inside the house and fired automatic guns. They let them come close to the house and killed all the men and horses.

Q: Did you see this yourself?

#50M: Yes, I saw it. At that time I was grazing the *dri* a little further away from my house.

Q: Did the Chinese soldiers, did they shoot them execution style or did they shoot them from a distance?

00:45:01

#50M: [Speaks before question is interpreted] The Chinese are waiting inside a house. They ambushed.

Q: It was an ambush.

#50M: They [the Khampas] were riding on horses and reached close to Sang Karpo. The Chinese had arrived there earlier. After killing the three Khampas, those Chinese rode in pursuit of the other fleeing Khampas. There was a big mountain near our village and they chased them beyond the mountain. However, none could be killed because those that were fleeing fled away and they [the Chinese] could not catch them.

Q: So it seems that the Chinese knew they were coming?

00:46:24

#50M: That's right. They [the Khampas] could see them coming after them on horses while they fled.

[Interviewer to interpreter]: Oh, they saw them from a distance.

[Interpreter to interviewer]: They are running away, so the Chinese chased them.

[Interviewer to interpreter]: No, I am talking about the ambush. He said it was an ambush. So the Chinese knew that they were coming. They had previous information.

[Interpreter to interviewer]: Previous information so they were hiding [and waiting for the] Khampas to come over there. So when the Khampas reached nearby, the Chinese troops shot those three Khampas. After shooting these three Khampas, then all the Chinese ran after rest of the Khampas.

[Interviewer to interpreter]: I understand.

Q: Did you have this feeling that there were spies in your village, Tibetan spies?

#50M: There were none like that because all were villagers. That morning we warned [the Khampas], "Many people have arrived there. Wonder what they are? Do not go." However, they did not heed it as they needed horses. They [the people of Sang Karpo] could not come to give the message because the Chinese were there. The people of Sang Karpo were ordered by the Chinese to remain inside their houses. Then they [the Chinese] aimed their guns and waited until the trio reached close. After killing them they rode after the

majority of the Khampas who were fleeing. They [the Khampas] had a head start and when they were over the mountain pass, the Chinese were pursuing them in the plains. Actually if they really wanted to shoot them dead, they could have shot them one by one, but they did not fire. They [the Khampas] fled away.

Q: Were there no Chinese who were spies?

00:48:51

#50M: There were no such [spies] because at that time there were not many Chinese in the area.

[Interviewer to interpreter]: Actually I was asking about Tibetans who were working under the...

[Interpreter to interviewer]: ...working under the Chinese because the Chinese—it was the first time the army came.

Q: When saw this and you were with the animals, were you sort of a little bit high, like what sort of an advantage point? Were you looking down on this or were you looking, you know same level?

#50M: I would not be able to see them being shot in Sang Karpo. In general the region was flat ground. If I was grazing the animals at a place like Gaden [points to the left], Sang Karpo was like Camp Number 6 [in Mundgod] [points to right] [Interpreter describes distance as 2-3 kilometers]. One could hear the sound of gunfire. One could as the region was flat ground and surrounded by hills.

I saw them [three Khampas] go as I was grazing the animals. They passed me on their horses while the rest of them went toward the hills. When they [the three Khampas] reached there and the firing started, they [the fleeing Khampas] turned back and—there was a high mountain called Birzey among the mountain ranges where we worshipped the deity—they crossed the pass there and escaped. Then they [the Chinese] pursued them on horses after killing the trio.

[Interviewer to interpreter]: But he saw also; he didn't just hear, right?

[Interpreter to interviewer]: Just hear. Saw means it was quite distant, far away. But he saw that people are going just nearby him, running away. Khampa and the Chinese were chasing.

Q: Did you see them being killed right in front of you?

00:51:12

#50M: I could not see it right in front as I was with the animals. They [the Chinese] hid in the house and fired. However, I witnessed them [the rest of the Khampas] running away and being pursued.

[Interviewer to interpreter]: But it didn't occur inside the house, did it?

[Interpreter to interviewer]: The Chinese were staying in a house.

[Interviewer to interpreter]: I know the Chinese were staying in a house but...The Khampa came on their horses, so when they were killed, were the Khampa on their horses riding towards the house?

[Interpreter to interviewer]: Yes, riding on their horses and they killed them.

[Interviewer to interpreter]: So the incident occurred by the house.

[Interpreter to interviewer]: By the house.

[Interviewer to interpreter]: Okay, and so then they fell off their horses.]

Q: And you saw this?

#50M: I did not see them fall off the horses, but it looked like they fled a short distant from the house but did not succeed.

Q: What did you do? What was your reaction?

00:52:29

#50M: That was the first time [I] heard the sound of gunfire. My animals, the *dri* started running. Of course, people would be in a panic.

Q: How old were you at that time?

#50M: I was 14 years old then.

Q: Did you run to tell somebody?

00:53:06

#50M: Everybody in and around our village would know of it.

Q: When the people came to your house from Lhasa, what kind of stories were you hearing from them?

[Interpreter to interviewer]: Tibetan people?

Q: When Tibetan people were taking refuge in your house, what kind of stories were they telling you?

#50M: They asked for things to eat like *tsampa* and meat. They ate in our house and took what they wanted. Other than that they did not tell us anything.

Q: Did they not share stories like “the country’s been invaded,” the problems they faced, or like, “I’ve left my wife and children behind”?

00:54:00

#50M: No, they did not tell such stories. [I] think most of them were monks from the monasteries, single men. [They] ate what they needed and took what they could and left.

[Interviewer to interpreter]: No, I'm saying like what experiences were they sharing with them?

[Interpreter to interviewer]: Nothing except that they want some food. Nothing they have shared, like my family is left [behind]. Nothing expression was given to them.

[Interviewer to interpreter]: Maybe he just didn't hear because I'm sure they did because there was big fighting in Lhasa.

Q: Did they not say that there was fighting and that the Chinese had come?

00:54:51

#50M: They would say that there was a fight and that Lhasa was conquered. Some said that they were going to Dhuwazong to join the army while some wished to escape. Since the time Lhasa fell, everyday there were 50-60 horsemen or at times 25 fleeing continuously.

Q: So they would come only for a very short time to your house and then they would move on. Is that right?

#50M: If they arrived in the evening, they spent the night and left early in the morning. They just rested the night and moved on as they could not stay.

Q: Were you told to be very careful? I mean to keep their presence secret because there was a risk that your family was taking from sheltering these people. So was there this feeling of, you know, of secrecy and hiding them and being very careful?

00:56:40

#50M: Everybody was fearful at that time. When horsemen appeared, the women of my family fled into the hills. We left the door of our house open. There was no time to sit relaxed at home.

Q: Was this generosity that you shared to these people who were fleeing from Lhasa, was this a common response by other families in your village or was your father maybe especially open to receiving these people?

#50M: Not everyone [in the village] faced the problem [of people barging in] except those that lay along the route [of escape]. They faced more problems.

Q: It was right on the way, so people always knocking on your door, "Open the door."

[Interpreter to interviewer]: Door is always open.

00:58:32

#50M: Door is always open. If not, it will be broken.

Q: Did the Chinese ever come to your house?

#50M: That was the story during the attack. After the fighting had come to an end [in Lhasa] and the escapees had gone, then the Chinese officials came to our monastery called the Sanzam Gonpa. [They] ordered the fathers of all the families to attend meetings. Then only did they begin the ill-treatment and the beatings.

Q: Which year was it?

00:59:09

#50M: It was in '59 and the latter part of '58. We fled in '59. We escaped in the 10th month of '59. That was earlier to that.

Q: What did they do by calling the meetings?

#50M: They called the meetings and accused [people] of being rebels and charged [them] with crimes that did not exist. Then they were beaten and ill-treated. These things started then.

Q: The Chinese would call the meetings in your house?

01:00:20

#50M: Not in my house. It was at the Sanzam Gonpa where the Chinese stayed.

Q: So they called everyone to Sanzam Gonpa?

[Interpreter to interviewer]: Yeah.

Q: So these kinds of meetings...do you remember what would happen at these meetings?

#50M: My father, being among the well-off families, was always called for the meetings and besides hearing what occurred there from him, I had not personally attended the meetings because I was small.

Q: What position did your father hold exactly?

01:01:31

#50M: We were one among the five *tokpon*.

Q: So your father would tell you what happened?

#50M: Yes, father attended the meetings and when he returned, he told us what had occurred that day; that someone's father was captured and beaten that day. There was a relative of ours who was beaten excessively during the day and locked up in the night.

[He'd been told that] he would be beaten more excessively the next day, so he hung himself in the night and died.

Q: What was the name of your relative?

01:02:26

#50M: [He was] called *Ashang* 'maternal uncle' Kunchok Tsephel.

Q: Your uncle hung himself?

#50M: Yes, he had been beaten excessively that day and locked up at night and told, "Tomorrow you will receive more [beatings] than that." Though one had not committed any wrong, one was accused of some wrong-doing. That was the first instance.

Q: So your uncle committed suicide in jail?

01:03:32

#50M: Yes, in the jail at night. In the morning he was found dead.

Q: You went to the jail?

#50M: I did not see him in jail as I was a child and engaged in tending to the animals. However, that was how he passed away.

Q: What kind of punishment was your uncle receiving?

01:04:05

#50M: Though there was no wrong doing, [he] was accused. There were poor families who were told, "These are rebels."

Q: Was that *thamzing* 'struggle session'?

#50M: Yes, it was *thamzing*. [He] was subjected to *thamzing*. The poor families were told, "These are the ones who have made you suffer. They are the rebels." I cannot remember exactly what he was charged with. The fathers of the families attended the meetings once, twice and then were captured during the third time and were taken away to a place called Thalung. You know Thalung Monastery? [I] think Thalung was a bigger town. Father was taken there and did not get the chance to come back home. He was jailed there for the time being.

Q: This *thamzing* session of your uncle, where did this occur?

01:06:04

#50M: It was conducted at the Sanzam Gonpa. That was the first session.

Q: Did you go to witness this?

#50M: I did not go to witness it.

Q: Had you ever heard of anybody committing suicide in your village before this?

01:06:40

#50M: That was one instance and when they were taken to Thalung, the fathers were made to suffer a lot. I escaped earlier, but I heard later that after they were released from Thalung, some of them died before they could reach home. They'd been imprisoned there for a year.

Q: That's when you started your escape. And before the Chinese came, had you ever heard of any Tibetans taking their own lives?

#50M: There were no such [suicides] on account of difficulties.

Q: During this time were you asking your father a lot of questions and was he very willing to share with you? It sounds like he was very willing to share information with you to educate you about what was going on?

01:08:16

#50M: [Father] shared the sufferings like, "Today so and so was captured and done this." Poor thing, one must share the bad things at home. Other than that, being nomads one was not very aware of the politics. One was backward.

Q: Do you remember any particular thing that your father said to you during this time—any word of advice or just anything that stands out in your memory, something that you remember he told you?

#50M: There were no such [advice] as I was engaged in herding the animals. During that time I was at Gangpu while my father was living at home. It was a day's journey and we did not meet. Then he was captured by the Chinese and put in prison. Except for some family members going to see him at times, I was staying at Gangpu with the animals.

[Interviewer to interpreter]: You said he was staying in the house under Chinese control?

Q: Was your father captured by the Chinese?

01:10:04

#50M: Yes, he was in the Chinese prison.

Q: Did he advise you earlier to that?

#50M: No, he did not.

Q: He told you that your uncle was beaten and during that time, did the Chinese trouble your father?

01:10:18

#50M: At that time he was called frequently to attend meetings. He had not been captured then. But it was certain that he would be gradually captured considering that he was from a richer family.

[Interviewer to interpreter]: When you said he had to face, are you talking about *thamzing*?

[Interpreter to interviewer]: Yeah, *thamzing*.

Q: So your father was also *thamzinged*?

#50M: Yes.

Q: Did your father undergo *thamzing*?

01:10:58

#50M: Later when he was sent to Thalung, he would have faced *thamzing*. Irrespective of severity, everyone was subjected to it.

Q: It [Thalung Monastery] was made into a prison?

[Interpreter to interviewer]: Yeah, prison.

Q: Was your father imprisoned?

#50M: He was imprisoned after he was taken to Thalung.

Q: So your father was actually taken to prison by the Chinese?

01:11:51

#50M: Yes. All the fathers were taken away. When I made my escape, father was in prison. [We] did not meet.

Q: Both your parents?

#50M: Mother passed away when [I] was small.

Q: When your father was taken to prison, do you recall his arrest? Were you there when he was arrested?

01:12:27

#50M: When father was taken away, I was with the animals. [We] never met [again].

Q: Did you ever see your father again?

#50M: [We] never met as [I] escaped.

Q: Never saw him again?

01:12:54

#50M: Never. [People] who escaped from Tibet later said that father had passed away, but nobody knows how he died.

Q: When were you informed that your father had died?

#50M: Those people that came later through Bhutan [told us].

Q: Where did they tell you?

01:13:25

#50M: Some of them came here from Bhutan. There was turmoil in Bhutan and they arrived in Camp Number 9 of this settlement.

Q: I'm sorry. Who informed? Are we talking about Bhutanese people?

[Interpreter to interviewer]: Not Bhutanese. Tibetans who came escaped from...

#50M: Tibetans, some of my relatives.

Q: Oh, who came later?

#50M: They came from Bhutan later.

Q: When did you learn this news?

01:14:05

#50M: They stayed a few years in Bhutan.

Question is repeated.

#50M: When was it when they came down here? Those that came from Bhutan...

Q: Perhaps '81, '82?

01:14:18

#50M: Yes, I think something like that.

Q: Your mother had also died. By the time your father was arrested your mother had...

#50M: [Interrupts] When I was small, about this size [gestures off camera], mother...

Q: Had the Chinese arrived then?

01:14:43

#50M: No.

Q: How did she die?

#50M: She fell sick and died. I cannot recall what mother looked like.

Q: How many people lived in your household then? Who was in the household at this time when your father was arrested? There was you and how many others?

01:15:09

#50M: There was a relative of my father.

Q: Was it an uncle?

#50M: Paternal uncle was there.

Q: Did the paternal uncle take care of you?

01:15:17

#50M: Yes, at that time.

Q: Who else were there?

#50M: There was an older sister and a brother with me during the escape. They passed away after reaching here.

Q: Did the paternal uncle live with you?

01:15:42

#50M: We lived together. Uncle was also left behind in Tibet.

Q: Did only the three of you manage to escape?

#50M: It was only the three of us from the family that succeeded in escaping along with our relatives.

Q: [Uncle] has expired?

01:16:16

#50M: Yes, he's expired.

Q: How did he die? Was it due to suffering on account of the Chinese?

#50M: After father expired, paternal uncle was imprisoned. Uncle did come back home later, but passed away around '65.

Q: So the uncle who committed suicide, was he your father's brother?

01:16:54

#50M: [Speaks before interpretation is complete] The maternal uncle who died was from a separate household.

[Interviewer to interpreter]: The question was: Was that his father's brother or his mother's brother, his maternal uncle or his paternal uncle?

[Question is repeated.]

#50M: Mother's relative.

Q: After your father was arrested ... I want to back up a little bit. There's so much information and so much has happened to you and I know it's all really in your head and it's all kind of put together. But after your father was arrested, what was it like in your household at that time? I mean was there like a big discussion and about what to do?

01:17:52

#50M: There was nothing to discuss then as that was happening in general to the entire village. [Father] was arrested, subjected to suffering and put in prison and since that was close by whenever there was a chance, food was taken to him while the rest of the family tended the cattle.

Q: You mean to Thalong Monastery?

[Interpreter to interviewer]: Thalong Monastery, yeah.

Q: So you would take food to your father?

#50M: I did not get to go there. [I] made my escape from the grazing area. After father was imprisoned, I fled in the winter along with relatives. Since then I did not meet my family members.

Q: What I'm trying to understand is—there must have been some discussion in your family about what to do? Should we escape? How should we escape? You must have talked about it, right?

01:19:36

#50M: There were relatives of my mother, maternal uncles who said, "We are going to escape. It would be good for you to escape with us. By remaining here, sooner or later the Chinese are bound to do such things. Come and flee with us." We were children then and fled with them leaving behind all household belongings, including our animals.

Q: And how many in your party were there?

#50M: We were about 14 people when we left from there.

Q: Did you drive your animals?

01:20:54

#50M: We did not drive any animal. Our belongings were left at home, whether they were clothes or ornaments. We had nothing with us as we left from the nomadic site. [We] did not get to bring even one item. [We] left the animals as they were. However, our relatives drove about 24 yaks, which could not pass through the snowy mountain. [We] did not even have a change of clothes. [The yaks] could not cross the snowy mountain and they were turned back and left there.

Q: When you left, did you go on horses?

#50M: [We] walked and drove the yaks along.

Q: You left at night?

01:22:23

#50M: Yes, at night. We walked for two nights; hiding in the hills during the day and walking at night. On the second day we arrived at a mountain pass called Dumpala. There was someone who knew the pass.

Q: What was the name of the pass?

#50M: Dumpala. Dumpa is in the Tsang area on the route to Bhutan. That day when we started crossing the pass, everyone was exhausted and could not proceed. So we spent the night in a crevice of the mountain pass. The next morning crows were cawing and when we went to look, found that the pass had been blocked by the Chinese. Chinese had set up tents along the pass. There were snow-covered mountains all around, so [we] retraced our steps and fled right over the snowy mountain [avoiding the pass]. The yaks could not cross it. [We] trudged right over the snowy mountain.

Q: Did you ever encounter any Chinese on the way?

01:24:07

#50M: The Chinese did not see us, so they could not capture us. However, we left the belongings on the snowy mountain, drove the yaks away and fled down towards Bhutan. A few things were carried by the men to the base of the snowy mountain. [We] met Bhutanese soldiers who did not let us stay, so we moved on to Bhutan. Whatever the yaks had been carrying, except for our blankets, everything else was left behind on the snowy mountain.

Q: The night that you left your village, do you remember what went through your mind?

#50M: [I] was young in age at that time and there was nothing much that I felt or thought. I felt that if I succeeded, it was the grace of God and in case [I] did not, [I] would jump from the snowy mountain and die. [Gets emotional]

Q: Did you think you were going to come back soon?

01:26:22

#50M: For one thing, [I] was a child and did not know much and for another, everybody thought that [we'd] stay a few months in Bhutan and then when things became peaceful, [we'd] gradually return. That was the only thought and nothing else.

Q: So how did you feel when you got into Bhutan and you knew that you were safe?

#50M: When we reached Bhutan, as I told you now, we hoped that we'd stay temporarily in Bhutan. However, the Bhutanese did not allow us to stay and said that we'd have to move on to India. [We] were not permitted to stay and were sent to India escorted by soldiers.

Q: How long did you stay in Bhutan?

01:27:26

#50M: It might have taken a month on the journey in Bhutan. That was so because we had to carry our stuff and walk. There were no vehicles in Bhutan then.

Q: Did you leave for India immediately after a month?

#50M: It took almost a month on the journey walking to Buxa [West Bengal, India], until [we] reached the Indian border.

Q: How long did you stay in Bhutan?

01:27:49

#50M: Perhaps [we] stayed a week to rest. We did not stay long as we were escorted out.

Q: How did the Bhutanese soldiers and police treat you?

#50M: The Bhutanese police did not ill-treat us. The teams escorted us from post to post and did not ill-treat us.

Q: You went to Buxa?

01:28:41

#50M: [We] reached Buxa. [We] sold the few blankets that we owned and slept in the *chupa* 'traditional coat.' We were literally beggars and begged rice as we journeyed along. That's how we moved on.

Q: Was that after you reached Buxa?

#50M: No, that was on the journey from Bhutan. After we reached Buxa, the Indian government distributed food rations.

Q: So in Buxa, was it mostly monks who were there?

01:29:33

#50M: The monks were already there then.

Q: How long did you stay in Buxa?

#50M: We were in Buxa for about a week and then were dispatched to Missamari [Assam, India].

Q: I'm sorry to ask you this because this is very painful memory I'm sure, you know. But in the '80s when you learned that your father had died, did you learn how he died? Did he die in prison?

01:30:26

#50M: Some people said that he fell ill and died. He did not die from the suffering in prison. He returned home but was not happy, having been beaten there. He was old and physically weak when he returned and [I] think he died because of that.

Q: Did you ever go back to Tibet?

#50M: No, I did not. There are no members at home because father has expired as also the paternal uncle. [I] heard that the paternal uncle later married and if the wife has had children, there is a bloodline. Otherwise, there is no one at home.

Q: Is there something that you specially miss about your life back in Tibet?

01:32:08

#50M: If one could go to see one's land before death and meet the relatives, though the elders are no longer living, one could meet and learn about their children. If this could take place now during our time, one can explain to our children in the future that such and such relatives are living there. If one cannot do that, the new generation who are living there as well as here would not know it. It's like living in darkness.

Q: You have five children. Have you told your children your story?

#50M: I tell them always.

Q: Is there anything that we haven't covered that you would like to tell us?

01:33:41

#50M: I do not have more than that to relate about Tibet. There are some people who, when asked about their village say, "What can it be? [I have] forgotten. Where can it be?" They cannot recall. But unlike that I can vividly see all the places I have been to and remember their names even today. The relations remark, "How come you can relate so much?" That is because I can recall them.

Q: [Could you talk] how marriages take place, how brides are sought and instances of one wife with two fathers [husbands]?

#50M: There are [cases of] two brothers with one wife, like for example my father and paternal uncle. My father and paternal uncle had one wife who was my mother.

Q: Who is the child of the uncle?

01:35:12

#50M: [Laughs] Whether you call one the father's child or the paternal uncle's child, it is the same.

Q: You call the older [brother] as the father and the younger as the uncle?

#50M: You call the older one 'father' and the younger one 'uncle.'

Q: I thought that only happened in Kham. That also happened in Utsang?

01:35:36

#50M: There were many such cases in the Tsang area.

Q: Did that work out okay? There was no problem of jealousy?

#50M: [Speaks before question is interpreted] There were cases of three brothers sharing one wife.

Q: And that was all very amicable?

01:35:55

#50M: There were no problems. One [brother] went to herd animals, one cultivated the lands and one went on trade. The three brothers performed such jobs while the wife stayed home and worked with the mother. Nomads had a large amount of work. However, much depended upon the wife; she must treat all of them equally and the brothers being brothers lived cordially.

Q: Okay, thank you very much. I have to ask you...

[Discontinuity in video]

Q: There was a couple of more questions that we want to ask. One is—when the Khampas were shot by the Chinese army in 1958, '59 sorry, do you know what happened to the bodies of the Khampas?

#50M: For a day or two no one claimed the bodies. There were undertakers in our village who took them to a rock on a hill near where we lived. I cannot recall clearly if they were fed to the birds. The bodies were taken atop the hill.

Q: The other question was—when the Bhutanese would bring the rice, was this like a special occasion when the rice would arrive from Bhutan and did people fight over the rice?

01:39:07

#50M: There was nothing like that. At Thalung, where the prison was established, an annual fair used to be held there. The Bhutanese came to sell rice at the fair. Our village lay on the route to the fair. So on the way they exchanged their rice for wool. They sold rice and rice flakes. What they could not sell in our village was taken to the fair. That's how they did.

Q: Who arrived at the fair?

#50M: [Traders] came with rice from Bhutan and from Tsona came grapes and Tibetan bowls. [I heard] that a big fair used to be held in Jampaling and all the unsold goods were brought there. Items like caps, hair ribbons and whatever one required would be sold at the Thalung fair.

Q: Where did the hair ribbons come from?

01:40:11

#50M: Some came from India.

Q: Did they come from India to Thalung?

#50M: Yes. The Indians did not come, but Tibetan traders brought [the goods]. Tibetan traders who went to Darjeeling and Kalimpong [West Bengal] brought them to the Thalung fair. From the direction of Mon [Tawang]—you know the Tibetan ladles that are made of wood—such [ladles], wooden bowls, tea cups, bowls for kneading *pa* 'dough made from *tsampa* and tea,' likewise caps, apron for women, hair ribbons and bangles which were worn in Tibet. All the requirements including salt were brought there for sale at the Thalung fair.

Q: Okay. Thank you. I have to ask you one more time. If this interview was shown in Tibet or China, would it be a problem for you?

[Interpreter to interviewer]: No, one minute. He wants to advise the youngsters.

[Interviewer to interpreter]: Oh, he does want to say this?

[Interpreter to interviewer]: He wants to say.

[Interviewer to interpreter]: Okay. Sure.

Q: Do you have any advice or guidance for the younger generation of Tibetans?

01:42:40

#50M: The time has come when my generation ends. It [the older generation] has come to an end. So the new generation must follow the way shown by His Holiness the Dalai Lama and further study hard and not lose enthusiasm in order to restore one's country. Most importantly one should study and not waste time. I consider that as very important and hope they will do so. That is my request.

It is a critical time and our opponent is such that one cannot fight it nor would it listen if one spoke to it. We are up against a very tough [opponent]. However, by the grace of the Buddha, [I] think that gradually all these will diminish. Most importantly, if one does not pay full attention to education...

While in Tibet one lived in one's country and strove hard and earned a livelihood; one made one's own clothes and wore them; one cultivated one's own food and that was the limit of our reach. One never heard of what was happening outside and due to this ignorance, we have fallen on such hard times. Therefore, one must consider these points for the future—what has been done is done. As per the way shown by His Holiness the Dalai Lama, I request them to study hard. That is what I wish to say. There are many others who will advise and I cannot say much more than that.

Q: Thank you very much.

#50M: [Smiles]

Q: I need to ask you one more time. If this interview was shown in Tibet or China, would this be a problem for you?

01:46:34

#50M: I have no problems. I have related whatever I experienced, whatever actually happened that I saw with my eyes, whatever I know and [I have] not added what I do not know nor mentioned what I did not experience. So I feel there will be no problems.

Q: Well, it's a great opportunity for us to listen.

#50M: I wish to thank you from the depth of my heart for your deep concern for the cause of Tibet, though not being one [a Tibetan] you have done much more than one.

Q: Is it okay to use your real name?

01:47:46

#50M: Yes, that's okay.

Q: It's not necessary to change your name?

#50M: It's not necessary to change. That is my real name.

Q: Thank you so much.

#50M: Thank you.

END OF INTERVIEW