

Tibet Oral History Project

Interview #66D – Tenzin Wangmo
May 20, 2012

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TIBET ORAL HISTORY PROJECT

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INTERVIEW SUMMARY SHEET

1. Interview Number: #66D
2. Interviewee: Tenzin Wangmo
3. Age: 75
4. Date of Birth: 1937
5. Sex: Female
6. Birthplace: Khangzikha
7. Province: Dhotoe (Kham)
8. Year of leaving Tibet: 1959
9. Date of Interview: May 20, 2012
10. Place of Interview: Hotel Tibet, Mcleod Ganj, Dharamsala, Himachal Pradesh, India
11. Length of Interview: 0 hr 57 min
12. Interviewer: Martin Newman
13. Interpreter: Tenzin Yangchen
14. Videographer: Pema Tashi
15. Translator: Tenzin Yangchen

Biographical Information:

Tenzin Wangmo was born in Khangzikha village in Kham which consisted of 35 families. Her family was poor so even from young age she had to work in the fields and look after the animals. She remembers searching for mushrooms in the mountains. She didn't spend any time playing with other children, but does recall having picnics with other girls during festival times.

Tenzin Wangmo narrates her feeling about the Chinese when they first arrived in her village driving yaks and mules. She recalls the Chinese deceived them by helping with fieldwork and behaving in a friendly manner. At age 21 Tenzin Wangmo and a few friends ran away from their village to Lhasa out of curiosity. In Lhasa she found employment first with a Tibetan family and then later mixing coal with soil for the Chinese because they paid well. At that time she stayed with her brother, a monk living in Drepung Monastery.

Tenzin Wangmo describes how suddenly the Chinese attacked Lhasa and how she fled with some of the monks of Drepung Monastery. The escape was a difficult journey and many were killed by the Chinese along the way. When they reached Mon Tawang in India they had to beg for food. Tenzin Wangmo feels blessed to be able to often see His Holiness the Dalai Lama since she now resides in Dharamsala.

Topics Discussed:

Kham, childhood memories, first appearance of Chinese, life under Chinese rule, escape experiences, life as a refugee in India.

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Interview #66D

Interviewee: Tenzin Wangmo

Age: 75, Sex: Female

Interviewer: Martin Newman

Interview Date: May 20, 2012

Question: Please tell us your name.

00:00:11

Interviewee #66D: Tenzin Wangmo.

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

#66D: Please permit [publish] it everywhere if it will help the Tibetan Government.

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

#66D: Okay.

Q: During this interview if you wish to take a break or stop at any time, please let me know. If you do not wish to answer a question or talk about something, let me know.

#66D: There is no need to stop.

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

00:02:14

#66D: There will be no problem. Please show it anywhere you like. I will have no problem. Please show it anywhere if it will help the Tibetan Government. [Joins palms]

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

#66D: Thank you.

Q: Can you tell us where you were born?

#66D: Khangzikha.

Q: Yes?

#66D: My birthplace is Khangzikha. Khangzikha.

Q: Khangzikha?

#66D: Yes, Khangzikha.

Q: Is that the name of the village?

#66D: It was a village and not a city. Khangzikha.

Q: Was this a large village or a small village?

00:03:13

#66D: It was small. There were only around 35 families when I lived there. [It] was small.

Q: At the time you were living there, how many people were in your house?

#66D: [I] am told there were 12 members in the family including the children and a daughter-in-law.

Q: When you were living in Tibet?

#66D: Yes, when [I] lived in the village.

Q: Twelve members. That was in a house or did you live in tents or how did you live there?

#66D: It was a house with only the ground floor and small. [We] were very poor. It was a small house and not a tent.

Q: It didn't have upper floors?

#66D: [It] did not.

Q: What did your father do for work?

00:04:49

#66D: Poor thing, he worked in the fields at that time and then went to gather salt at the salt pans. And sold the salt, [I] think. [We] were a poor family. When [I] lived there we were a poor family.

Q: Was your father away from the house a lot of the time?

#66D: It did not take more than two weeks [for the salt mission] and then he returned.

Q: Did your grandmother live in the house or your grandfather?

#66D: I have never seen them.

Q: What do you remember as a child before you went to school? What kinds of things did you do there?

00:06:14

#66D: There were no schools then. One herded the cows or worked in the fields. There were never any schools then.

Q: Were there other children you played with there?

#66D: [I] have never played but worked in the fields. Coming from a poor family, [I] worked in the fields or looked after the animals. [I] have never played as such. [I] used to look for mushrooms in the mountains.

Q: Do you remember what kinds of mushrooms you were looking for?

#66D: Where there was *beli*, there would be round mushrooms that [I] went to look for. It was found in the forests. There was this thing called mushroom in my region that [I] went in search of. It was not for sale but for our own consumption.

Q: What was the color of the mushroom?

#66D: The color was brownish. [Looks around and points to something off camera] The color was like this. [It] was found among the *beli*.

Q: What's a *beli*?

00:07:51

#66D: *Beli* is a wood. It is a hard wood. There are many *beli* trees around here.

Q: What did you do with the mushrooms that you brought back?

#66D: That was for cooking for yourself.

Q: What else did you eat then?

#66D: Everything grew in our fields. [We] owned lands then. Radish, turnips and lettuce grew in the fields. One need not purchase anything, as they grew in our fields.

Q: Did you ever eat any meat there or did you eat strictly vegetables?

#66D: [We] did eat meat.

Q: What kind of meat did you like?

#66D: I was small then and when my parents gave me meat saying it was yak meat, [I] liked it. Yak meat and mutton were considered superior.

Q: Do you have any particular memory of that time that you find stays with you even today?

00:10:19

#66D: [I] remember working in the fields, going to herd the animals and looking for mushrooms.

Q: Do you have memories of being happy or sad?

#66D: [I] belonged to a poor family and only engaged in working in the fields, searching for mushrooms and herding animals. [I] worked in the fields.

Q: Did you have any friends that you played with?

#66D: No, [I] have never played. Oh, we used to do this [joins palms and utters a prayer], during the Losar ‘Tibetan New Year’ and other festivals, 5, 10 or 15 girls of my age would collect provisions and—what would you call it here? A picnic? We gathered together and cooked food.

Q: Was there a monastery near where you lived?

#66D: There was a small monastery called Choetsong Gon that [I] told you about.

Q: Choetsong Gon?

#66D: Yes.

Q: Did you or you and your family...did you go there on special occasions?

00:12:34

#66D: [We] went there. [We] went on auspicious days.

Q: Were any people in your family; did they belong to the monastery? Do you have brothers that were monks?

#66D: The monk I told you about who now lives in Drepung Monastery [in India], was sent to Lhasa as a small child and lived at the Drepung Monastery in Lhasa.

Q: Was he a monk of Choetsang Gon earlier?

#66D: No. My monk brother went to Lhasa and lived at the Drepung Monastery. I told you about this earlier. That is it.

Q: At what age did he go there [to Drepung Monastery in Lhasa]?

#66D: [I] do not know at what age [he became a monk] because he is older than me. I cannot give an exact figure. [He] is much older than me; there is an age gap of 7 years.

Q: When did you first hear about the Chinese?

#66D: Yes?

Q: When did you first hear about the Chinese?

00:14:21

#66D: The Chinese appeared when I lived in my village. That was the time [they] started arriving. When the Chinese first appeared, they were driving yaks and mules—you know mules? They are not donkeys but mules—they were driving such [animals]. That was time the Chinese arrived in my region. They pretended to help us by pulling out the big stones in our fields, harvesting the crops and thrashing the grains. They were being clever and were deceiving us then.

Q: So you thought that they were...they meant you no harm.

#66D: They were so clever that they pretended to be helping us. They had not mistreated us then. They were so clever that they pretended to help us by harvesting the crops, pulling out stones from the fields and pretending to be helping us greatly. [They] did like that.

Q: When did you discover that they weren't, as they seemed to be?

#66D: [We] believed initially [that they had come to help us]. Oh, [they] deceived [us]. That is what [the Chinese] did in my village and then I left for Lhasa. Later when [the Chinese] started the oppression, I was already in Lhasa.

Q: How did that happen? How did you get from Markham to Lhasa?

00:17:07

#66D: Believing that it would be great to go to Lhasa, I wished to go and so, 2-3 of us girls sort of fled to Lhasa. [We] had heard Lhasa was a very happy place.

Q: How old were you then?

#66D: I was 21 years old when I left my village.

Q: Twenty-one years old and you thought the village was a little boring and Lhasa seemed a more exciting place to go to.

#66D: Right, [I] believed that. [Points to head reproachfully] After arriving in Lhasa, [I] missed my parents so much that [I] used to cry around 2 or 3 o'clock in the evening.

Q: Your trip to Lhasa, was it a pilgrimage or did you just go?

00:18:35

#66D: It was just a childish whim and then [we] also saw the pilgrim sites. Thinking Lhasa was a great place, [we] just went away.

Q: So how did you go?

#66D: [We] went walking and just before we reached the place called Kongpo—no, not Kongpo as we walked through Kongpo—just before we reached Lhasa, we managed to get a vehicle. [I] suppose it was a Chinese vehicle. We walked through Kongpo. We came on foot and drove two or three donkeys. [We] sold the donkeys and the *chupa* ‘traditional dresses’ and travelled in the vehicle.

Q: You said you got a Chinese vehicle. I mean, how did you do that? [Laughs] Yes, how did you do that?

#66D: [I] do not know how they arranged it. There were two, three or four colleagues.

Q: So what happened then when you... You had a dream of Lhasa when you came from the village. What was the first thing that you did when you got there?

00:20:44

#66D: Initially I lived as a servant to a Tibetan [family] taking care of a child but not for long. [I] heard that the Chinese were paying a wage of one *dhayen* ‘Chinese silver coin’ per day and resigned from the job at the Tibetan [family] and went to work for the Chinese doing this [gestures off camera] with coal. [Interviewee grimaces and presses right side of stomach].

Q: Are you feeling okay?

#66D: At times I have pain in my gastric but it is not bad.

Q: What kind of work did you do for the Chinese?

#66D: I told you just now.

Q: Please describe it.

#66D: [I] did coal work. In the night the soldiers... Then the Chinese attacked the Tibetans.

Q: *Ama-la*, can you please explain the coal work you did for the Chinese.

#66D: I see. We could not perform any other work but this. Coal and red earth were mixed together in a basin. Then using a ladle [the mixture] was laid out in small lumps.

Q: Where?

#63D: At the place where the Chinese lived. It was some sort of a field. It was coal and a type of red soil, which was brought in horse carts. We mixed them with water and using a ladle, laid them out in lumps. [I] performed that job.

Q: It sounds like hard work.

00:23:14

#66D: It was not very hard.

Q: How did the Chinese treat you?

#66D: As I look back now, I think the attack was to start soon. [The Chinese] told us, “When you hear the sound of explosion, hide beneath the ground.” There were bunkers created. However, when the explosions took place, I was not living there but used to return to my brother at Drepung [Monastery]. When the attack occurred, I was back with my brother at Drepung. [I] fled along with many monks of Drepung through Chushul.

Q: What year was this?

#66D: When I worked for the Chinese?

Q: Yes.

#66D: I was only two or three months working for the Chinese when the attack took place.

Q: Did you learn any Chinese while you were working for them?

#66D: [I] did not learn, maybe a few words...No, [I] did not learn but just carried out the tasks.

Q: So you were doing your work for several months and they led on that there would be an attack coming. What did you think when they said that?

00:25:30

#66D: [I] thought a great attack was going to happen. At that time we were not happy. Fortunately my brother who lived at Drepung told me, “Do not stay there overnight. Come back after work is done.” So I used to return to Drepung for the night. I worked at the Chinese place and went back to Drepung during the night.

Q: And did you do that [as advised by brother]?

#66D: Yes, [I] did. [I] did not spend nights there [at the Chinese camp]. My [brother] monk would not let [me] stay there and said, “Do not stay there. Come back. Come back.” It was important to go to work.

Q: Did the Chinese wonder why you were going there or where were you staying before that?

#66D: Yes?

Q: You mentioned that you used to return to Drepung every evening. Were you returning to Drepung right from the start or...

#66D: I used to return to Drepung right from the beginning. My brother did not let me stay there saying, "Do not stay overnight. Come back to Drepung in the evening. Do not stay there."

Q: What did the Chinese think of that?

00:27:12

#66D: I do not know what the Chinese thought of that.

Q: And then what happened? So you would go stay at Drepung after your work and then what happened? What happened?

#66D: [I] worked for the Chinese only for a few months, returning to Drepung every night and then the attack began. [I] did not get to work long for the Chinese, as by then the attack started. And then [I] fled the whole night together with the monks of Drepung.

Q: Where did you flee to?

#66D: Drepung was located here [joins palms to form a hill shape and points to mid-section of hillock as location of Drepung] and we came over like this [indicates climbing up and going over the hillock] and passed through Chushul. The name of the village was Chushul. We journeyed the whole night through Chushul following a river that flowed in the region. After crossing Chushul, we arrived in Senge Zong, as I told you earlier.

Q: Was that a village or another monastery or...?

#66D: Senge Zong was a fort, an actual old fort of the army. It was not a house like this [interview location] but a real fort. The Chinese appeared while we were there. The monks of Drepung were armed with knives and volunteered to go and kill the Chinese. The Chinese fired mortars at the monks and felled them to the ground. Except for a few, the Chinese killed most of the men.

Q: Well, backing up just a bit, did you hear fighting when you were fleeing? When was the first time you actually heard canon fire or guns?

00:30:35

#66D: [I] heard the [sound of canon fire] in the night; it was just before dawn. It was night when the canons were fired. So [we] fled the entire night. It was not during the day; [the canons] were fired at night.

Q: So you were still in Lhasa then. And then you heard the shelling and you went to the fort?

#66D: I was at Drepung. And then [we] went through Chushul and reached Senge Zong.

Q: What was the mood of everyone who was going with you? Were people scared, were they anxious to fight the Chinese, what were people feeling?

#66D: [People] thought of fighting but there were no weapons. The Chinese possessed canons and guns while the Tibetans had no guns.

Q: Were you worried for your family that was still in the village?

#66D: Yes? People left in the village?

Q: *Ama-la*, your whole family...

00:32:38

#66D: The panic was more for one's own escape. [I] did not think of the village. [I] was terrified that [I] would not succeed in escaping and that I would get caught by the Chinese. [We] walked the whole night and slept through the day in the mountains. From Senge Zong, we arrived in the place called Ney. [Wipes eyes, sighs and says a prayer]

Q: So this memory is making you sad now. Is that true?

#66D: Yes, [I] feel sad. I shed tears even now. We walked the entire night and slept on the mountains during daytime. How many Tibetans would have been killed? And when we arrived in Mon Tawang [in Arunachal Pradesh, India], everybody had nothing to eat and went to beg. There were no clothes. [Wipes tears]

Q: Yes, it sounds very hard. And when you got to the fort, then what happened?

#66D: [We] went into the fort. [I] do not know how they managed to receive help but [we] entered the fort. It was a real fort and not a regular house.

Q: And then what happened?

00:34:48

#66D: The Chinese arrived and fired canons towards the open ground. I told you earlier about the monks.

Q: *Ama-la*, please talk about it now.

#66D: Okay. The Chinese arrived and the monks, armed with knives exclaimed, "[We] shall go to kill the Chinese." I was a girl and could not take part. Then the Chinese fired canons and numerous Drepung monks were killed at Senge Zong.

Q: Please continue just to tell what happened. *Ama-la*, you witnessed the monks going to fight and the Chinese shooting them dead...

#66D: With canons.

Q: Killing them with canons. Did you witness it yourself?

#66D: I could not see it clearly. Someone shouted, “Many monks are killed!” and then we fled from Senge Zong the entire night to Ney Sapmaytsang. [We] fled through Ney the whole night. And then [we] were led through a forest. [We] could not take the road because the Chinese would be using it. So people who knew the region of Ney took us through the forest.

Q: And how many people do you think this was with you?

00:37:04

#66D: There were only 5-6 people. People became scattered and with us were only 5-6 people. Each one fled wherever he could. There were not many that moved in a group. Each one fled where he could. With me were my monk brother and 4-5 other monks. The rest had fled.

Q: So then what happened?

#66D: The people of the village [of Ney] took us up through the forest saying, “If you use the road, the Chinese will come. Do not go there; you will be killed.” [They] were familiar [with the terrain] and took us through the forest.

Q: And then what happened after you went into the forest?

#66D: [We] fled through the forest. There were people in Ney that were familiar [with the terrain] and helped us. We went up the forest the whole night. [We] slept during the day and trekked through the night. [I] have no idea which regions [we] passed but finally arrived in Mon Tawang, as I told you earlier.

Q: So you walked and walked and walked and walked a long distance.

00:39:07

#66D: Yes, we did. There were no vehicles. [We] had to walk through forests and terrible pathways. Thank God, I was young then and it was okay. Then we went to beg in Mon Tawang and the people gave good alms.

Q: Had you heard then that the Dalai Lama had escaped?

#66D: We knew that he had escaped. His Holiness the Dalai Lama was escorted out immediately. The *Chushi Gangdrug* [Defend Tibet Volunteer Force] knew about it. We knew that His Holiness was escorted out already.

Q: At that point did you know anything about the fate of your family in Markham?

#66D: [I] did not know what was happening. How would [I] know?

Q: At what point did you learn of what happened to your family even though you didn't know then? When did you find out?

00:41:13

#66D: Much, much later. It was much, much later when [I] heard the news. Much later [I] heard that they were mistreated by the Chinese and about their miseries. I heard this much, much later and nothing at the beginning.

Q: Did they escape? Did any of them escape?

#66D: No one from my family managed to escape.

Q: So it was very fortunate for you that you wanted to go to Lhasa when you did.

#66D: Yes, it was the grace of God. [Here I] can see His Holiness the Dalai Lama almost everyday. [I] do not mind not having anything else. Every day I go to the Tsuglakhang [main Temple in Dharamsala]. If only His Holiness lives on, everything is fine. That is my only prayer. [Cries] That is my prayer that there be no obstacles in His Holiness' life. [I] pray that His Holiness lives on.

Q: Back at the time when you were living in Lhasa before the attack on the fort, did you see yourself any...the Chinese mistreating any of the people in Lhasa?

00:43:29

#66D: I did not witness. Earlier I was a servant in the Tibetan family and later engaged in coal work with the Chinese. I did not see anything like that.

Q: When you were doing the coal work for the Chinese, were they not mistreating anyone?

#66D: There were only the rumors about the *Chushi Gangdrug* [resistance].

Q: So until the attack itself, you did not really see anything.

#66D: Right. And then we escaped. When the Chinese fired canons, we fled and reached Mon Tawang. From Mon Tawang we came to Missamari [in Assam, India]. At Missamari, [we] were asked, "Where do you want to go?" Then we were sent to work as coolies to Sikkim.

Q: Had you any...How do you feel your understanding of Buddhism has helped you?

#66D: How am I in a position to help it [the dharma]?

Q: No. You are practicing Buddhism, how has it helped you?

#66D: [I] have it [the merit accumulated by practicing the dharma] with [me] when [I] die. In India I get the chance to see His Holiness the Dalai Lama. I feel good that due to the

benevolence of God, I am able to practice the dharma in India. [My people] ask me to return to the village but I feel, “I will not return to the village. Even if I do not possess anything, I get to see His Holiness the Dalai Lama, like the sunrise, get the chance to listen to the teachings, get the chance to practice the dharma. I will not go to the village.” Now [I] am close to death.

Q: So you still have relatives in Tibet that are alive?

00:46:45

#66D: All my siblings are dead. I am the only survivor. My siblings’ children are there while all of the siblings are dead. I am the only survivor.

Q: And are they still in Markham?

#66D: Yes.

Q: Do you have any communication with them?

#66D: At times [we] communicate through telephone but [they] asked not be to called frequently as [they] were fearful. Sometime back during the Kalachakra, I sent a few precious pills through someone from my village but the Chinese confiscated them. [My nephews and nieces] did not receive them.

Q: What is your feeling towards the Chinese today?

00:48:25

#66D: [I] feel that the Chinese are the enemies. Even upon seeing a picture of a Chinese, [I] wish to pierce the eyes with [my] finger and smear excrement over the mouth. [Cries] How many Tibetan people are dying? How many people poured kerosene oil and immolated themselves? We are the same Tibetan people.

How much pain is there when we suffer a cut? Due to the utter suffering caused by the Chinese, they in Tibet are pouring kerosene oil and setting themselves alight. The Chinese are killing all the Tibetans and inflicting such misery.

Q: Do you think that the Chinese are sentient beings?

#66D: Yes, they are but [I] wonder how they think, as they are without any compassion and sympathy. [I] wonder what they are.

Q: What would you like to communicate to the young people? From your experience, what would you like to give to them that they would carry on?

00:50:45

#66D: I do not have much [to say] since I do not have much intelligence. The younger generation of Tibetan boys and girls—I go to the Tsuglakhang everyday—they go to the Tsuglakhang with a rosary, chant the *mani* ‘mantra of Avalokiteshvara’ and

circumambulate. I feel in my heart, “The Tibetan culture will not be lost as they are practicing the dharma well.” Other than that I do not understand much.

Q: What do you think is the most important thing in your culture that needs to be preserved?

#66D: I do not understand much but the Tibetan people must not lose our culture, practice the dharma and stand united. This comes to my mind, but other than that I do not have [much intelligence] to be highly capable. [I] feel and hope that all Tibetans will stand united and that Tibet’s culture is not lost.

The most important is for His Holiness the Dalai Lama to live long. As long as His Holiness is there, we can walk like this [moves hands in marching fashion and holds head high as if with pride] on the road. This is what is important for me.

Q: What do you think will happen after the Dalai Lama passes?

00:53:01

#66D: I always feel that if a time comes when His Holiness is no more, the Indians might hand us over to the Chinese and then we will face trouble. [I] do not know if I will be alive then but [I] feel that we will face trouble then.

Q: Is there anything that you’d like to say that I’ve not asked you that you think is important for the world to hear?

#66D: No, [I] do not know much and I am old. [I] do not have much experience and am not educated. [I] do not know much, really. Whatever it may be, [I] pray His Holiness the Dalai Lama lives long. I do not understand anything else.

Q: I want to thank you very much.

#66D: [Speaks before statement is interpreted] When I see the photograph of Jamphel Yeshe, who immolated himself I start crying uncontrollably. Really. I feel very sad. What can [we] do now?

Q: Well, thank you very much, *ama-la*.

#66D: Okay. Thank you.

Q: I want to ask a few more questions before we stop.

#66D: Okay.

Q: I want to ask again just to make sure. If this interview was shown in Tibet, China or anywhere else, would this cause any problem for you?

00:56:05

#66D: Oh, please show it. If this would help the Tibetan Government, please show it anywhere you like. If it would help the Tibetan Government, you can show it anywhere. [I] have not [told any] lies.

Q: Can we use your real name for this project or would you rather we use an alias?

#66D: Of course, you can use [my real name].

Q: Once again, thank you.

#66D: Okay. [Smiles]

END OF INTERVIEW