

**Tsewang Sangmo Lama
Narrator**

**Charles Lenz
Minnesota Historical Society
Interviewer**

**Interviewed for the
Minnesota Tibetan Oral History Project**

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CL: Today is Monday, September 19, 2005. My name is Charles Lenz. I'm here with Tsewang Lama. I am the primary interviewer. We are at the Minnesota History Center Oral History Office Conference Room.

Can you say your name for the tape?

TL: Tsewang Sangmo Lama.

CL: Can you spell that?

TL: T-s-e-w-a-n-g S-a-n-g-m-o L-a-m-a.

CL: And where are you from originally?

TL: I'm a Tibetan but my parents lived in Nepal.

CL: Where were you born?

TL: I was born in Nepal.

CL: Do you know where in Nepal?

TL: In Boudha, Kathmandu. Which is the capitol city of Nepal.

CL: And how long did you live in Nepal?

TL: I lived there for like twenty years. And then I moved here.

CL: Did you go to school in Nepal as well?

TL: I went to school in English primary school as a kid and then my parents sent me to a Tibetan school in India which is called Tibetan Children's Village. And this school is funded, I mean founded by Dalai Lama's youngest sister, Jetsun Pema. And it's one of the most prestigious Tibetan schools in exile.

CL: And the Tibetan Children's Village or TCV, where is that in India?

TL: It has a lot of branches. The one that I studied was Lower TCV. Lower TCV is also considered—like a lot of other TCV they are sponsored by sponsors from Western countries like United States or Europe. But the one that I went to until class ten was called Lower TCV. And then His Holiness the Dalai Lama and Jetsun Pema always took pride in mentioning my school, Lower TCV, because it was funded primarily by the Tibetan parents themselves. It shows that Tibetans are self-independent. We don't need to depend on sponsors. So basically my [unclear] school I went to where like students were people whose parents were mainly from Nepal who do carpet business, who have a sweater business, because they pay their own tuitions, like the parents and don't have any sponsors.

CL: What town is this in?

TL: It's in Dharamsala, where the Dalai Lama currently resides.

CL: So there's Lower TCV where you went and then Upper TCV.

TL: Yes. Lower TCV. And then after graduation from class ten I had option. My parents asked me if I wanted to go to like English school or Indian school or Tibetan school and then I choose to go to TCV again. Because then I went to Upper TCV which is in the Upper Town of Dharamsala. They have from nursery, like kindergarten, to class twelve and they also have an orphanage, too, like the street kids without parents.

CL: So when did you—I'm guessing you lived in like dorms then in Lower TCV when you were there?

TL: Yes. I did.

CL: How old were you when you first went to—?

TL: I think I was ten years old. It was really hard. I cried almost every evening in my dorm. And then my foster parents would like scold me for crying and things like that. So it was really hard. And I didn't like the school food.

CL: What was wrong with the school food?

TL: Like, basically during lunch we have rice and then lentils all the time and then in the evening we had tingmo. It's like a bread, Tibetan bread. And then some vegetables. Cabbage all the time. Then in the morning we had like sour bread. I don't know. I

didn't like the food at all and I was missing my home, my parents, like the food I had in home so bad.

CL: Yes. How often were you able to go back and visit your parents in Nepal?

TL: Our school basically is for ten months, I think, and then two months we have a vacation. Our vacation starts in December. So December to February. February we have Tibetan Losar¹ so up to that we have two or three months vacation, so I get to be with my parents. Then we also have a summer vacation for ten days. My parents basically take—I go back to Nepal or my parents visit me in school. Then we go to a different location in India for summer vacation.

CL: What was it like having your parents live in one country and you essentially live in another country for so many years of your life?

TL: It was really hard. But then my parents' reasoning was like, "We love you very much but then we want you to be able to have a Tibetan culture values." I mean my parents are carpet business so if they want to they can send me in any school they want. But then among all the siblings I have, I was sent to the farthest one, like beside my brother. And then I console myself with—I was console myself saying that, "Well, even though I am far, I am learning Tibetan cultures, Tibetan values and most important of all Tibetan literature, language. And then I get to be with a lot of Tibetan kids like me."

CL: Where did your—how many brothers and sisters do you have?

TL: I have five brothers and sisters. Two elder brothers. One is a monk. One is a layperson. I have two younger sister.

CL: Did they go to Tibetan schools as well or did they—?

TL: My brother, he went to Tibetan school up to class ten and then later he went to British—English primary school in Mussoorie. Then my sister went to English school.

CL: And where are they now?

TL: Two of my younger sisters, my parents send them to United States to study and then now they move to Canada. So they were here for like two years and then they moved to Canada.

CL: Both your sisters?

TL: Yes.

CL: How about your brothers?

¹ Tibetan New Year.

TL: My brother, monk, he pretty much travels a lot. He travels to Singapore because he's a monk and then he's in his monastery right now. He basically teaches younger monks about Tibetan Buddhism.

CL: Where is his monastery?

TL: It's in Nepal, and then the location is Pokhara. Which is a little high altitude in Pokhara. And then myself, I'm in United States.

CL: How about your other brother? Is he—?

TL: Oh, my other brother, he's in Minnesota right now. He lives in St. Paul and he graduated from Minnesota State University. And right now he's a computer engineer.

CL: When did you move to the U.S.?

TL: I came here in 2000, August, when I was twenty years old.

CL: What was your reasoning for moving to the U.S.?

TL: My parents send me to college for St. Cloud State University in the United States so I came here as a student on F-1 visa.

CL: Did your parents pick the school or did you pick the school?

TL: My parents were uneducated. My mom went to class until seven. And my dad never had opportunity to go to school in Tibet because he was—I mean he basically didn't have any opportunity. He just had an opportunity to learn about Tibetan medicine. That was it. I mean they didn't pick the school for me. It was my brother who was here earlier. So he picked the school for me.

CL: Your brother did.

TL: Yes. And then basically my parents had at that time a carpet buyer like a business person who was in Connecticut. So she was also one like helped me in bringing here. Basically my parents wanted me to—I had an option to go to Connecticut and then Minnesota. And then my parents told me to go to Minnesota because my brother is already here. So I don't have to depend on their carpet buyers.

CL: You said your brother went to Minnesota State, too. Did he go to St. Cloud as well?

TL: No. He went to Minnesota State University.

CL: Minnesota State University.

TL: Yes. Mankato.

CL: In Mankato. Okay.

TL: Yes.

CL: And you said your brother is a computer engineer?

TL: Yes. Software engineer.

CL: So you came here in August of 2000. And did you go right up to St. Cloud then as soon as you moved here?

TL: I came here like a week earlier. So I got to live with my family friends and then my brother. So I had a little time socializing with Tibetan people here before going to school.

CL: What was it like your first—was that your first time you'd been to America?

TL: Yes.

CL: What was it like arriving here?

TL: The first time. Yes. It was funny. Like the moment my plane arrived in Northwest Airlines . . . what is that? Airport. Then my aunt picked me up because my brother had just started his job and he didn't want to take a leave to pick me up. Then like she was driving and I didn't see any people except the cars. Then she took me to a home. She lives on Lincoln Avenue in St. Paul. And then I see nobody. Just like quiet neighborhood. I was like, "Man. This is like a dead town or something." I kept complaining. I don't see any people. Not even a dog. That was during lunchtime, I guess, and then once it was five or six then I started seeing people outside neighbor.

CL: Did you do any traveling around or explore the city at all that first week when you were here?

TL: My aunt, she basically took me to lakes: Lake Como, Lake Josephine. And then my brother basically took—he kind of guided me the nightlife. So we went to—we hang out in the Twin Cities area in the evening. I don't remember much.

CL: Do you remember anything about the nightlife at all? Because I've been—I know I've been out in the nightlife in Kathmandu and in Dharamsala. So what was your—do you remember anything about your first impressions and the differences there?

TL: Yes. I see like all these towers, all these buildings lighted up. And then I felt like, "Oh, my God, they are wasting a lot of electricity." Because I'm from a country where like government says we won't have electricity from this time to this time. So I was like, "Maybe they could have done something instead of wasting so much electricity like

lighting up with the building empty and then the electric light on.” I was thinking that’s not good.

CL: So tell me about your first time going up to St. Cloud to go to college.

TL: I was very excited. Plus I knew a guy who was already there. He was kind of related to my family friend. So I was kind of excited. Tibetan people there. And then there was another Tibetan girl who is half Tibetan, half Nepali. Then I met a lot of people from diverse backgrounds. So I always like to be with different kind of people. Not just Tibetan people. So I really liked it.

CL: Did you get to pick your roommate first year? Because I’m guessing—did you live in the dorms up there?

TL: No. I didn’t get to pick my roommate. Plus I—because I . . . I came from a background—we don’t have to worry about deadlines. We don’t care about dates and stuff. I was like late on filling my application for the room. So when I went there they didn’t have a room for me so they put me on sort of—like students above twenty-four years old. Then my roommate was Tracy Valstad. She was—I like her very much. Because when I was in Nepal my parents always told me, “Well, American girls are this and you shouldn’t be like American girls.” And there I see a roommate who is very conservative, who believes in Catholic and she’s very, I would say she’s very nice. Like her hobby is to play flute. She doesn’t go out late night and she’s very disciplined. I really like her. She’s above twenty-four years old. So I didn’t get to pick my roommate but I really enjoyed my first roommate.

CL: You stayed with her then for that first year?

TL: First year. Yes.

CL: How was your first year in college? I mean, just going from high school to college even in America is a big deal. But coming from a school in India or Nepal and coming to an American university here, was that challenging for you? Or the things that you liked about it or—?

TL: Yes. It was really challenging. Plus I stress a lot about studying so I did very well in my first semester. I studied a lot. Like I really did good in first semester. But then another problem was the food problem. Like in the beginning I had diarrhea because, I don’t know, someone—I had a problem with the digestion because of the food and I kept like—I had lost a lot of weight. Like ten pounds or something. Then I wanted to work. And then for freshmen, like, they don’t take you seriously. So I didn’t have a job or something. Yes. It was really challenging. But then my American friends told me, like I’m an ambassador for Tibet, and so you should behave nice and stuff. But I had a lot of friends there so it was fine. Not that bad.

CL: How was the food? You talked about the food in India being different from what you're used to. I have to imagine the food here was even more different than—?

TL: Before starting my college I was in home for three months vacation. So I had like really, really good food. Spicy food. Whatever food I want and I used to go to eat out a lot. Here I didn't have any option. It was just breakfast. Milk. I don't know. The food was just like—they just buy and they just put it there to eat. It was not like—I don't feel like it was homemade or something. I didn't feel like eating at all. Even when I eat I just like—it just goes—I mean I had a bad diarrhea that time. Diarrhea or stomach indigestion. I was not healthy that time.

CL: I know that a lot of people in India and Nepal grow up drinking powdered milk. Did your family buy powdered milk or did they always have fresh milk?

TL: They always have fresh milk.

CL: They did. So that wasn't—you didn't have an adjustment problem there with the milk at all, the difference in taste or anything like that?

TL: In the United States?

CL: Yes.

TL: I don't know. In the beginning I had food problem. Like my stomach was nothing. I don't know. It was more like an anorexia or something. Whatever I ate, it just comes out. So I was not really healthy. And then like after a semester then I got used to the food and then I started like getting freshman fifteen pounds and stuff.

CL: A lot of the freshman fifteen here is attributed to a lot of drinking and partying and things like that. Did you experience any of that at St. Cloud?

TL: No. It's funny. Like a lot of people label St. Cloud as a partying school or something. But I never drank there. Neither have I seen a lot of people drinking. It just like—I basically like to think whoever you want to associate or have company with. I mean I had—my companies were all nice. So I didn't have any problems. I didn't drink. I do go out but I didn't drink.

CL: How was it like adjusting to classes?

TL: It was really hard because when I first came there the professors spoke really fast and a lot of time I didn't understand what they were talking about. And then it so happened that one time—of course my professor asked me for like a paper that was due today. And I was like, "When did you tell us that?" "Oh, yes. It's due today." Then I didn't have any information because—then I came to know that because I was not adjusted to the fast level that the professor speak. So in that way I miss a lot of information. And then when the professor first—like it was a different class from—I

think it was . . . I don't remember which class. Anthropology or something. The professor asked—that was the first time I was writing paper. Then I wrote paper. I gave a hand written paper and she refused to take it and asked me to write in computer. Like save in a floppy disk and turn it in. I just like—I wrote in the best handwriting of my own. So it was different.

CL: What about teaching styles? Did you have any problems with just the way teachers teach differently here than they do in Asia?

TL: Yes. Here, like in India, a lot of teaching in spoon-feeding. It's the teacher who like gives you lot of—tons of information. Here it's up to you. You have to read it. You have to think about it and then write a paper. So it was really different. One is more of a spoon-feeding. Another is one of like letting you do it, letting us do our own stuff.

CL: Did you have any favorite subjects at all?

TL: I like political science. So I took a lot of political science courses in St. Cloud State.

CL: And you have graduated now, right?

TL: Yes.

CL: What was your degree in?

TL: A bachelors in international relations and then minor in political science.

CL: You were just talking about a lot of the problems you had or things that you struggled with. Was there a point that you remember where suddenly things just seemed to like all work and you were adjusted to it and comfortable in the school and just like any other regular student? Did that ever happen or did you always feel a little bit different than everybody else?

TL: I always feel a little bit different from everybody else but then I was kind of—I'm kind of outspoken. I mingle with a lot of people. And then during my sophomore year I feel like—St. Cloud is a big university but then at the same time compared to U of M it's a very small university. Like dormitory people. Professors. It's small compared to a big university like U of M. They hired me as a residence advisor and then—so I get to know a lot of people. Then I also work in St. Cloud as a news reporter for the *University Chronicle*. And then I always write about Tibet. Like I remember writing about—I remember the title I wrote, "Free Tibet-It belongs to Tibetans." And then about my Washington experience that I did internship. So a lot of professor they started like reading my articles and then they like—when I started, when I take classes they already know me and it was fun.

CL: You mentioned there were a couple of Tibetans that were already at St. Cloud. Did you associate with them at all?

TL: Yes. As a Tibetan we know each other. We always say hi. We had an evening out and stuff like that. But then we—like during my freshman year we never really got to work. We never had a Tibetan organization, nothing like that. Then once I was passing through Student Activity, which is at Atwood Hall, and I saw there's a Tibetan Dalai Lama's pictures in the exhibition and then Tibetan people and I wondered, "Who do that? All three of Tibetans, we didn't do that." And I realized it was Amnesty International who was doing all this human rights activities, and during my first semester I enrolled in the—I became a member of Amnesty. Then the next year I started the Students for Free Tibet (SFT) organization at St. Cloud State. And got more people involved and then aware of Tibetan issues.

CL: Sure. Can you talk a little bit about starting the SFT chapter at St. Cloud?

TL: All the schools have different policies. So in our school we need to have ten to twenty members, like student members. And then we need to write a constitution. And then we need to—so there are a lot of policies or rules that we have to do. So I basically followed everything and then I gave a hundred dollar fees or dues to the SFT main headquarters in New York, and then it was easy. I had to find an advisor. My advisor was International Relations professor who also happened to be my own academic advisor. So she was willing and I had everything. So we started the Students for Free Tibet chapter and then we had our first ten members and then we distribute pamphlets, things like that.

CL: Did you have a hard time finding people that wanted to participate?

TL: Not really. A lot of the members were my own friends so it was not hard. Then we had a very—when I was there the Amnesty International Chapter was headed by Melanie Lahr. She's also very active. So she was my friend and a lot of Amnesty students, Amnesty members, they were like the SFT members. So we had a program together bringing Tibetan speaker to the St. Cloud, talking about human rights issues. During that time we had a Panchen Lama issue, like missing Panchen Lama. So we had a Tibetan speaker who talked about Panchen Lama. Then I was so amazed to see more than eighty students, including professors, turn out for the—to hear what the speakers have to say. It went really well.

CL: What other stuff did you do? Did you do more political things at all?

TL: Yes. We do more political—I mean we distribute pamphlets, things like that. Then we also had a cultural event where—and then later like my sister joined me in the school and then my sister, one of my sisters, like they both are really good in dancing. Like one of them went to a really prestigious national dancing school in Nepal and then one of them also went to France to perform culture for her school. So they kind of taught other people Tibetan dancing. So they performed. They kind of performed in different culture shows. I think they started the first Tibetan dancing program in St. Cloud, too. Not a program. It [was] just like a show.

CL: Right. Did you do anything else Tibetan oriented when you were in college?

TL: During winter break I volunteered at the TAFM, Tibetan American Foundation.² During that time the director was American lady called Ann Aryualt and then the office was located at Nicollet in Minneapolis. So I used to volunteer there.

CL: What kind of stuff did you do when you volunteered?

TL: I basically updated with the list of Tibetan—list and then basically, mostly administrative. Then when the office moved from third floor to second floor I helped cleaning. So all this administrative stuff.

CL: You were used to—on your breaks in India either going back home to Nepal or having your parents come out. What kind of stuff did you end up doing on your breaks in school in Minnesota?

TL: During break, like summer break or something? I read a lot of books. I like volunteered, also worked. Then I participated in the community events.

CL: Did you ever go back to Nepal to visit your family?

TL: Yes. I did. In 2002-3-4. Three weeks only. It was great. But then, right now, Nepal is in really bad condition. Political chaos. So when I went there they had bandh. Bandh means like the—

CL: Strike.

TL: Strike. So it was really bad. Then when I went back I had again food indigestion. Stomach problem. It seemed like when I first came to United States.

CL: And I know that you went to Washington. You had an internship in Washington. Can you talk a little bit about your experience with that?

TL: That was one of my most favorite part or like memorable ones. I got involved with International Campaign for Tibet (ICT). Which is an international non-governmental human rights organization working for Tibet. Prior to my internship, I was selected, based on writing that I have done to participate in the Tibetan Youth Leadership Program. I was among fifteen that were selected from the whole Tibetan group, the youth—I mean a lot of people applied. So just fifteen were chosen out of that. It was a week long intensive. So we were like given exposure to American political system. We were taken to Capitol Hill. We witnessed testimony and stuff. Then we talked to different scholars, Chinese, Taiwanese, Tibetan, American scholars and then also with the White House spokesman. I forgot his name. And then we also met with different authors. Then when I applied for internship at ICT it was really easy. They accepted me readily because I had experiences. During my internship I worked for political prisoners.

² Tibetan American Foundation of Minnesota.

I worked for the release of . . . I kept forgetting their names. I worked for the release of a couple of prisoners and I updated prisoner's health condition.

CL: This is prisoners in China, right?

TL: Prisoners in Tibet. Tibetan prisoners who are in Tibet or in China. Then we went to different testimonies and then we also were responsible for holding conferences. Like we hold conferences on post-Dalai Lama issue. We had a conference about Chinese [unclear] Tibetans. So like we are responsible all about logistics. Me and other interns.

CL: And how long were you in Washington, D.C. then?

TL: For three months.

CL: How was it like now living in a totally different city, totally different region in the U.S.?

TL: I mean I love—I like New York and D.C. because they have a lot of stuff going on there. And then I like the people there because the people over there seem . . . Tibetan people who are there are more like educated. You know a lot of them work for RFA³ and Voice of America. And people in Minnesota, Tibetan people, they are more inclined to work. A lot of them work sixteen hours, and we didn't have like media conferences like we do have in D.C. So I kind of missed that academic environment in D.C. I remember having—like when I worked at the ICT there was this woman, Tashi Rapgay, who had a Ph. D. and then her sister, Lobsang Rapgay, who also had a Ph. D. Tibetan. Two Tibetan women. So these women, they were like bringing Tibetan people in their home and they discuss all these Tibetan issues and it was—I don't know. I really love D.C.

CL: So now that you've graduated do you have any plans to continue your education at all or what do you want to do now that you're done?

TL: I have plans to go to—pursue a master's degree. But then like I'm doing a lot of thinking right now, because there has been a lot of changes in my life. So my interest is always in like education or academic but I also have interest in business, too. So I don't know. I'm thinking right now as we speak.

CL: Do you have any inclination—I know that you're thinking things over but if you had to decide today, do you think you would pick to go and do international relation things or maybe teaching or business things for your graduate degree?

TL: Right now I'm more towards international relations.

CL: What would you like to do with that in the end?

³ Radio Free Asia.

TL: I would love to help people who are less fortunate. People who need help. My parents, especially my dad, raised me—like raised all of my siblings—he always told us that we are very fortunate. We have a good—you know, my parents are really great. Like he always made believe like we are in a better position to help other people. So that kind of values or ideas made me like—I don't know. I just wanted to help other people. I don't know if I could. But that's my plan.

CL: Do you think you'd focus more on Tibetans or on other groups that need help?

TL: When I was young I used to focus more on Tibetans. I used to feel very sad learning about Tibetan condition. Then after taking international relations I came to know that there are a lot of problems out there in the world. So basically, if Tibetans that would be great, but yes, I would be interested in helping other communities that have a lot of problems. A lot of like African countries where they have—where they don't even have food, and AIDs problem. All those things. So I think there are a lot of issues.

[Tape interruption]

CL: When you were at St. Cloud did you associate with any of the other international students up there?

TL: Yes. We had a lot of Indian students, Nepali students. Then I had a Mongolian friend. I had a Taiwanese friend. Then I was responsible—like I also started (helped start) the Chinese academic club in St. Cloud. Yes. I was also involved in International Relations Club. Like when I got involved with the Chinese club we had a discussion about Chinese politics. Then when we were like brought about Tibetan issues, a lot of people were kind of reluctant to talk. A lot of the Chinese kids there, they were kind of reluctant to talk about like Chinese politics at all. They don't want to deal with the politics. It was really funny.

CL: Why do you think they didn't want to talk about it?

TL: Because they feel like Americans, other people hate Chinese or something. Politics. So they don't even want to go there. So we had a lot of discussion about Chinese culture. Old Chinese . . . Hong Kong and stuff. But then when we come to politics, they don't even want to talk about it. I don't know the reason, but I think maybe they have this idea that everybody hates Chinese or something. Chinese leaders.

CL: You were just talking a little bit about what you'd like to do with international relationships and whatnot. Helping disadvantaged people and things like that. Did you identify yourself being an international student with any of the other international students that may have gone through similar events historically with their countries or the people or whatnot? Did you find any kind of bond there being an international student?

TL: You mean bond with any other international students? Yes. Of course. I mean we—like they came from other country to study in United States. Same as me. I don't know. I'm not sure. I don't have an answer for this.

CL: So now that you've lived in Minnesota for quite a few years now, are there things that you really like about the state?

TL: First of all I like a lot of lakes. I like lakes. I like walking by the lakes. And I also love my alma mater, St. Cloud State. I had a lot of fun, good times there. Good professors, good mentor. Then I also like . . . I think that's pretty much it.

CL: Are there any things about Minnesota that you just will never get used to?

TL: I don't like snow. I hate winter. I hate winter. I don't like snow. I can never get used to the snow.

CL: You were in Dharamsala though. Dharamsala gets snow. Not so much in the lower part of Dharamsala. But McLeod Ganj does.⁴

TL: My twelve years there, it just snowed once and that was like really thin compared here. Like inches and inches in Minnesota.

CL: What do you do in Minnesota when we get all kinds of snow?

TL: I pretty much hibernate in my room.

CL: Do you find it hard to travel in the snow or get around in it? Is there anything particularly about the snow that you dislike?

TL: I depend on public transportation, bus. So it's really hard like waiting for the bus outside all the time.

CL: Do you think it's the cold then or do you think it's the snow? Because me, personally, like I grew up in Minnesota and moved away, and lived a large part of my life in other places. And I don't mind the snow but I can't stand the cold. So do you think it is the cold then or do you think it's the snow?

TL: It's the cold and snow combination. I don't like both of them. I like fall or autumn or spring. But not winter. I don't want winter.

CL: Maybe one just kind of comes with the other in Minnesota.

TL: What is that?

⁴ Dharamsala is often divided into Upper and Lower Dharamsala. Upper Dharamsala is called McLeod Ganj.

CL: One just comes with the other. Once it gets cold you're going to get snow, maybe.

TL: And then the thing is, like the winter is longer in Minnesota compared to other states. It just seems like six months winter.

CL: So do you participate with the Tibetan community at all here in the Twin Cities?

TL: I used to when I was younger. Like nowadays my participation is limited to like going to Tibetan community events. Like dance or Tibetan gathering. And then supporting Tibetan Women's organization. I don't go there. Like I don't work for them or I don't—I'm not actively involved. But whenever there is a function or they need a raising funds, I'm always there.

CL: Do you have specific activities that you like more than others or that you think the community is doing well?

TL: I think a lot of Tibetans here, they work sixteen or more hours. So financially wise, they are really doing good. And then they can help other Tibetans (their relatives) who are back in India and Nepal or in Bhutan.

CL: How do you think the community is doing here in the Twin Cities as representing Tibetans or representing Tibetan culture or preserving it, you know things like that?

TL: I think they are doing great job because we already have a Tibetan Culture Center basically run by Tibetan people, then elected, democratically elected—whatever position they have. Then they have a Cultural Center where they teach young Tibetan kids who never had the opportunity like we did to go to Tibetan school. Tibetan language. They have a Sunday class. They have a dance program, Tibetan dance program. So they are doing their level best.

CL: Do you think there's anything they need to do better?

TL: I think—I don't know about the situation at this time. But when I first came here I see a lot of kids my age who are like not in college, who are basically going to community college and then dropping out of college. So I think Tibetans should focus on educating Tibetan youth and then making sure they go to college or they have a degree or something.

CL: How do you think they can—or what do you think they need to do or can do to help improve that?

TL: I think the parents should be working less hours and devoting more time to their kids when they grow up. Like I said, like a thousand times, a lot of people work two jobs, three jobs, sixteen hours, seventeen hours. I don't blame them because it's important to have a basic American dream. So I really don't know. I can't say because I don't have kids.

CL: Do you think that—you just mentioned that people might have more than one job or multiple jobs, you think, because they want that stereotypical American dream.

TL: Yes.

CL: Do you think that maybe that's getting in the way of their own culture or things like that here in the U.S.?

TL: You mean like losing our culture? I don't think losing or having a lot of—having American dream is losing culture. Because they are in Nepal and in Nepal and India there are a lot of Tibetans who own big houses, big cars, a couple cars. It just . . .

CL: But if they're working a lot to get those things—?

TL: Yes.

CL: They have to sacrifice something. They can't be—they're not at home with their kids.

TL: Yes. Exactly. Because you know, whenever we have a protest march we just—we have more than one thousand Tibetans here in Minnesota. Like almost fifteen hundred. During protests or something we have just like a hundred people show up or less than that. So I guess like looking at that you can easily figure out that they are either working or devoting their time to some other cause.

CL: There have always been Tibetans in Nepal, and at one time or another there have been more Tibetans than there have been at other times and whatnot. And being in Nepal, myself in Kathmandu and Pokhara and in south and north and pretty much all over the place, I know that there are some things that are Tibetan that just seem to flow right into the culture. But there are other things that seem to be very Tibetan and that are not against the culture, but that are Tibetan and distinct within themselves. So do you think that there is this aspect of preserving culture, preserving Tibetan culture in Nepal as well as there is here? Or similar to what there is here?

TL: I think in United States it's a lot harder because it's more diverse. I mean the United States—I don't know how I'm going to describe the United States because compared to Nepal . . . like in Nepal you will see just Nepali and Tibetan and then variation between Nepali and variation within Tibetan. But in United States you will see American, you will see African American, black people. You can see people from other countries. Muslim countries. People from—it's more diverse here. But then in Nepal, because in Nepal and India, because it's more nearer to Tibet. Then there are a lot of cultures from there just because Buddhism came from Hinduism. Like that's what happened. I've read. In Nepal because Tibetan peoples settled there early then they settled in the United States. They have a lot of foundations there. Like Tibetan schools, Tibetan Government-in-Exile and then monastery, nunnery. So I think this kind of a thing there enhanced or like helped preserve our culture, whereas in the United States it's

hard. I haven't seen a decent Tibetan temple in the United States. It's just more like a home that they consider as a temple or monastery.

CL: Why do you think there isn't something larger like that?

TL: First of all, we are like—a lot of Tibetans belong—the maximum they have been here in the United States [is] twelve years. And what can you do in just twelve years? I think they need more time to establish themselves. I mean a lot of them have established very well and assimilated into American culture and American life. But then I think in order to build all these temples or Tibetan schools you still need a lot of population. But we are just like fifteen hundred people.

CL: Have you had a chance to travel around the U.S. at all?

TL: I traveled to D.C. and New York, Connecticut, Maine. I was in California, L.A., but that was just in the airport.

CL: There aren't near as many large monasteries or even monasteries in general in the U.S. as there are in India or Nepal or other places. But there are a few. Do you have any want to go to the larger monasteries say in—or retreat centers like in Woodstock, New York or in Boulder, Colorado, and there's a few in California?

TL: I don't know. I'm not like a religious person like my parents are. I really don't utter much prayer like I should. My school in India, I used to pray every morning since waking up. We have to pray. In the evening and during the lunchtime. So every time we have a prayer. But coming to United States the first time, like first semester, I prayed because my roommate was praying. And that's a challenging with her. Like, you know, if your roommate is doing something you also need to do something, I guess. During my first semester I was like this typical Tibetan girl from India who is doing her religious prayer and stuff. But after that I don't do prayers. I'm really not interested in going to all these temples or religious centers. But I would love to meet some of my gurus. My parents' gurus. We have—all the Tibetan people they have their own gurus depending on what sect they belong to. My parents belong to Nyingma⁵ sect so we have this Rinpoche⁶ in Nepal who visits here all the time, especially in Connecticut. So I always had plans to visit him whenever he's in United States, but I never got a chance.

CL: Now I know that your brother owns and runs a Tibetan store here in the Twin Cities. Can you talk a little bit about that? Your views on that?

TL: Yes. The store is called Tibet Arts and is located in Grand Avenue, St. Paul. One of the posh in Minnesota, I guess. That's what they call it. That is he lives—it started in 2004. And then basically my brother's plan was to sell more of—my parents are carpet sellers. They produce carpet. They export carpet. So he wanted to sell more of a carpets but then carpet in Minnesota is not that demanding like the ones in Europe. So basically

⁵ A school of Tibetan Buddhism.

⁶ A Tibetan Buddhist teacher.

right now he's focusing more on jewelry. Basically Tibetan art and art stuffs and religious objects and things like that and antiques.

CL: Do you think that—so he's doing this on top of his computer stuff?

TL: No. His wife actually—his wife, she worked in Star Tribune,⁷ and then she quit that job as soon as he started his own shop. So basically she's the one who's responsible handling the day-to-day work at the shop. But then she always had some people working for her. Depending on how busy it gets.

CL: Have you been—there are a couple other Tibetan stores in the Twin Cities. Have you been to any of those other shops at all?

TL: I've been there. Yes. Just one time.

CL: How do you think your brother's shop differs from the other ones? Or maybe it doesn't?

TL: I think it's different in the sense that we have a lot of Tibetan handicraft that my parents—I mean it's like a home production than buying from others. A lot of jewelry are made by my uncle. So I think like we don't buy from others, basically. We just—just like home production. If we need carpet then my brother just asks for my dad. If we need jewelry my brother asks from my uncle who has a jewelry production. I think it's different in that sense.

CL: So you're from Nepal and I know that you mentioned a little bit about the current situation in Nepal right now. So how does that—first of all how does that affect you being here and having your parents so far away and having the government in trouble and in turmoil?

TL: It scares me to death because my parents, like I said, they are carpet sellers or carpet business. And they are kind of vulnerable. Because Maoists always target people who are well off. So I'm kind of very scared about that. And then they always tell me some people got gunned down. So it kind of like—I'm really scared about my parent's safety. All the time.

CL: Do you think—what's going on in your home country. Has that made you change your views on maybe what is home or where home will be in the future?

TL: Yes. That's kind of hard. Like, I don't know. Because I was never—like Tibet is my country so it's my home. But I've never been there. And then Nepal is where I was born. But a lot of Tibetans, they are kind of like confused. I mean like me. I don't know. It's hard to say, but I like Nepal. Nepal has its own strength and weakness like any other country. My parents made their life there, fortune there, everything what they

⁷ Minneapolis Star Tribune, a newspaper.

have they made it there. And now the situation is deteriorating. It's really hard to take it. I don't know.

CL: So what do you think is in store for the future of Tibet, or the future of Nepal?

TL: I wish United States could understand more and help Nepali situation. Because right now what the United States is doing is they are not helping the Nepali at all. They think the King was unconstitutional, undemocratically elected or he was in a position—as listening to people who are there. They said like under the King's regime or King's rule they are more safer. They feel safer than they were under democratically elected party people. So I think U.S. should understand. Instead of limiting their idea of democracy in like people elected—there are like—because all these underdeveloped countries, third world countries, a lot of people are uneducated. A lot of—especially in Nepal these people who are involved in Maoist they don't understand what like democracy means. They don't understand. They just know that Maoists are against rich people and then—things that I heard. A lot of people who are from village are told that I know. If you become Maoist the wealth will be redistributed and things like that. So I think a lot of this Tibetan—the Nepali people who are uneducated. They don't know anything about democracy government. So they have been misinformed by Maoist leaders. So they are against the government. I think the U.S. should extend their help to the Nepal king who is right now ruling.

CL: I know that before the current King kind of sacked the government the U.S. was supporting him and in fact was giving him lots and lots of guns. I know when I was in Nepal we witnessed many new soldiers carrying American weapons and American-made uniforms and things like that. So they were helping in some way. Some people can certainly debate whether or not that was help or not. But what else do you think the government, the U.S. government, can do without stepping in there and running the country? What would you like to see them do?

TK: Like I said, I don't know. As a Tibetan, there are a lot of conflicts of values. I mean I'm against violence. I'm against weapons. But at the same time, when you see deteriorating situation like the Nepal people (especially my parents) are going through, when it involves your own people, I really, really hate Maoists. I just want them to eliminate them when I get angry. But I don't know. There are a lot of ways America could help. Like educating Nepali people. Going to the remote place. Volunteering like a lot of American kids in the college to go to the remote—educate them about democracy. Educate them about how bad the Maoists are. Things like that. I really don't know.

CL: So do you think you'll stay in the United States for the rest of your life or do you think you see yourself going back to India or going back to Nepal?

TL: First of all, I know for sure that I don't want to die in the United States. Because I have witnessed some funeral procession of Tibetans in the United States and I just thought it was really, really sad. Because I know I've been to funeral procession in

Nepal, too, where my other grandparents and all my own grandparents, they had a funeral for her. It was really grand with monks and then it took hours and hours. And then, you know, I feel like they die in peace and whatever ritual observation they have they ought to do it, have it done. In the United States I went to this funeral procession and then the body got burned in five minutes and five minutes it was done. I know for sure I don't want to die in the United States.

CL: Is there anything else about the U.S. or the Twin Cities that you can see yourself really liking and wanting to stay, or that you don't like at all and would want to go back?

TL: In Tibetan community, if you do something they just telltale and stuff, like word of mouth. But in the United States people are, they are kind of like in their own lives. So I like that part before. Respect their privacy. They don't bother about each other. I like that part. I can be my own. I like living independent.

CL: So you like living—being more independent?

TL: Yes.

CL: Do you think that makes you less attached to your community then?

TL: Yes. It does.

CL: Is that a good thing or a bad thing?

TL: I mean, like for personal, you know, some people like to be quiet and stay by themselves, have their own private time. Some people like to socialize. It's both bad or good.

CL: As a youth, being a Tibetan youth in the community, how do you think that the rest of the Tibetan youth in the Twin Cities are doing for their culture, for their community? Things like that.

TL: I like to believe that if you are successful, if you are doing good on yourself, you are helping the Tibetan community. Like if you are being successful in this particular profession. Being a Tibetan yourself you are like a part of Tibetan so it's good. Like if a Tibetan becomes—if one Tibetan becomes successful in his own profession or involved or whatever it adds up to Tibetan causes, too, because—I don't want to show my capitalistic views. I think wealth is very important. So if you become rich or have accumulated wealth then—I think like, in the United States, if you have wealth you can do anything. Like you can buy politicians. You can introduce decision makers and stuff like that. So I think it's very important to be successful in the United States.

CL: Do you think that goes against democracy or free speech or free attitudes, free thinking at all if you can go off and buy a politician?

TL: Yes. It's totally against. But you know, when I was in Washington, D.C., I know how hard it is to get a support from some remote senator from remote state. So you know, a lot of this politics, American politics, are partisan. A lot of senators, or the president himself, their relationship with Dalai Lama is dependent on their relationship with China. If they want to—so I think it's against—buying politicians is against democracy but [sighs] my answer was like if you have wealth you can do anything pretty much in the United States.

CL: Now you've been working on this project with us as one of our interviewers, going out and talking to other Tibetans. How did you get involved in the project?

TL: Actually I got this email from Charlie. It was an email that I received from TAFM, I think and then the History Center. And they wanted youth, Tibetan youth, to be involved. And at first when I read I thought maybe I don't have enough time because I already have like a part time job and then I had a lot of stuff on my plate. Then I just ignored. Then I think I received for the second time and then I just thought maybe they badly needed people to work for them. Then I just sent email to you, I guess, and then asked if I could be a volunteer there. So that's how I got involved.

CL: Why did you think it was important to get involved in it?

TL: Because the project was Tibetan oral history. So it was documenting Tibetan history. And I'm not sure if any project like that has been done in other Tibetan communities in other state or in Minnesota itself. That I'm not sure. But I think it's very important because it documents Tibetan culture. And then other people get to read how Tibetan culture is or values, how they have immigrated and then how they have assimilated here. So it kind of gives them a mirror to understand how the Tibetan community works. I mean, like say if an American or other people don't know anything about Tibet, they read different this and they will, "Oh, this is how they . . ." It's like reading a book and educating themselves about other culture. And also I think it's very important for future kids like ten years or twenty years from now. Kids will say—I mean I read an article recently about like if you are in the second or third generations you basically lose ties to the country that your parents were born and stuff. But I think like if you have something documenting, documentation of Tibetan history, then ten or twenty years from now kids will get to read this and they will think, "Oh, our parents did this and that." So it's kind of like agent to link these kids, third, fourth generation about Tibetan culture and values.

CL: What do you think have been some of your favorite things about the project or favorite moments?

TL: Because I interviewed—I was very selective about who I want to interview. And then the first person I interviewed was Thupten Dadak. It was really interesting because he was among the first Tibetans to move to United States and he had a lot of viewpoints. He had a lot of experience dealing with Tibetan Communities. Like in his early days. So I learned a lot of stuff. And then I also interviewed another guy who's politically active

and another woman who was a Tibetan doctor. So I learned a lot of stuff about Tibetan community sort of by interviewing these people.

CL: So you think you learned a lot of things personally about the community that you didn't know?

TL: Yes. A lot of stuff. Especially from the first interview with Mr. Thupten Dadak.

CL: Is there anything with the project itself that you think you'd like to do personally with it in the years to come?

TL: You mean the project? A lot of—we focus on people who can speak English and people—and I think we should also focus on people who are like disadvantage who didn't speak English. And I think, yes, if you could do project—something about Tibetan Women's or people who work seventeen, twenty hours, people who didn't speak or write English. That would be a great . . .

CL: Is there anything else you'd like to say in the end of this at all? Nothing else to say?

TL: Nothing.

CL: All right. I wanted to thank you very much for participating in the project and helping us out and coming in and doing this interview as well.

TL: Thank you.

Minnesota Tibetan Oral History Project
Minnesota Historical Society