

**Jigme Ugen  
Narrator**

**Tsewang Sangmo Lama and Charles Lenz  
Minnesota Historical Society  
Interviewers**

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

**August 31, 2005  
Jigme Ugen Residence  
Richfield, Minnesota**

**Tsewang Sangmo Lama - TL  
Jigme Ugen - JU  
Charles Lenz - CL**

**TL:** I'm Tsewang Sangmo Lama and I'm interviewing Jigme Ugen. We are in Richfield, Minnesota. Today is August 31, 2005. I'm with Jigme Ugen and Charles Lenz.

Can you say your name please?

**JU:** Jigme Ugen.

**TL:** How do you spell it?

**JU:** J-i-g-m-e U-g-e-n.

**TL:** Does it have a Tibetan meaning to it?

**JU:** Yes. Jigme actually is a pretty interesting name. Jig means fear. Me means none. So basically I'm the fearless.

**TL:** Fearless.

**JU:** Yes.

**TL:** Where did you live before moving to Minnesota?

**JU:** You mean like where I came from? My roots?

**TL:** Yes.

**JU:** I was born in Kalimpong. That's in Darjeeling. I was born in Darjeeling in Kalimpong and later on I moved to Australia for a bit and then again I went back to Kalimpong. I have family there. Then I came to Minnesota straight out from there.

**TL:** So Kalimpong, where is it?

**JU:** It's in Darjeeling. It's right across . . .

**TL:** Which country?

**JU:** India. It's in India. Right across the Himalayas.

**TL:** So what did you do in India?

**JU:** Besides going to school, later when I went back to India I was doing a lot of volunteer work. I worked for the Friends of the Western Buddhist Order. It's a trust based out of England, so I was doing a lot of volunteer work going to non-profit schools as a teacher. In fact, I had the privilege of being a teacher in one of the first Tibetan schools established in India. Anywhere in the world, actually. The first Tibetan school out of Tibet. It was called ITBCI, Indo-Tibet Buddhist Cultural Institute. It's ITBCI. In Kalimpong. So I was a teacher there for about two years teaching English and history.

**TL:** So you said you also lived in Australia?

**JU:** Yes. For a bit.

**TL:** What did you do there?

**JU:** All sorts of odd jobs. I thought I could make it in Australia because I have part of my family. My brother lives in Australia. My sister lives in Australia. Australian citizens. So I thought I'd make it in Australia. I went to Australia with my grandmother but she had different plans. She kind of missed home. She missed India and that's when she wanted to go back to India and I had to just go back with her.

**TL:** So what was your favorite part, like things that you do in India?

**JU:** In India. You mean favorite as in being a Tibetan or as an Indian?

**TL:** Favorite activities, things that you like in India.

**JU:** The thing about India is—the most interesting thing about India was we were refugees in India trying to establish ourselves and trying to be recognized as Indians; which was a struggle by itself again. The most interesting—I mean when I think about India, what comes back in mind is trying to be accepted by Indians as someone who was born in India. I was born in India. I was an Indian citizen. I had a right to vote. But still, we were constantly tested as to how Indian were you. Like I can speak Hindi like

any other Indian in India and I can speak a couple of different languages in India but again we were judged from where we came in. So my favorite activity was probably trying to prove to be an Indian. [Laughs]

**TL:** So when did you move to Minnesota?

**JU:** I came here about four years—a bit less than four years ago.

**TL:** Do you remember the year?

**JU:** Yes. I think it was around the end of 2000. Yes.

**TL:** So why did you choose to move to Minnesota?

**JU:** My wife came in here and, like I told you, going to Australia, it was something that—I mean a lot of Tibetans, if you look in India, want to move out of India for their own personal reasons. But one of my reasons for moving out of India was, I'd say, a lot to do with identity crisis like I talked to you about. I thought maybe going out in the West you'd be more accepted. And I heard tons of stories about people who came back from the West and how easy things were for them as in terms of acceptance. So I tried Australia, which really didn't work out. So here I am in Minnesota, since my wife and family moved here and I had a good opportunity. I had a choice to come to Minnesota and I said, "Yes. I'll be there."

**TL:** So what were your families, like your parents and the relatives' reaction when you told them that you were moving to Minnesota?

**JU:** Oh, they were really excited. I think everyone, including my neighbors and the mothers and the grandmothers, were all excited. In India, I think if you go to every second house, someone in that family is in the West and it's a sense of pride when you go back. It's like, "Oh, he's coming back from America or Australia," or anywhere in the West. Even if someone goes back from, let's say, Mexico. It would be like, "Oh, he's coming from a foreign country." So it's a sense of pride.

**TL:** So do you think Minnesota was the right choice for you?

**JU:** I debated on that a lot when I got here because I'd never seen so much snow in my life. I was here, I think, when it was the worst and I walked in—when we drove out of the airport I was like—I'd never seen so much snow. But then again, living here, I think, I actually call Minnesota home now. The Minnesotans, the people in Minnesota, they have been very, very kind. They have—in my case they have like really spread out their arms and accepted me and I feel like I am a part of Minnesota. When I'm out of Minnesota, I'm actually out there trying to be a good son of Minnesota. When people make fun of Minnesota, I'm fighting it. So I feel like I'm loyal to Minnesota now.

**TL:** So how would you describe Minnesota to other Tibetans in different states or other Tibetans who are in different countries?

**JU:** Different countries. I'll go with states, actually, which is interesting because a lot of my friends live in Los Angeles or all those fancy little places which—who term Minnesota as like a little town. All right. And when I ask them to come and visit me, they're like, "Why should I ever come to Minnesota?" That's like the first thing that comes out. I think . . . what I tell them about Minnesota is Minnesota is pure. The people here have a—there is such a range in Minnesota in terms of the immigrant population coming in here and the Minnesotans readily accepting them. As a Tibetan, when I go out I actually tell people I'm a Tibetan, provided that they know where Tibet is. A lot. And then I—and they actually ask me what is a Tibetan if they don't. Right. And I think I feel good about it and the size of the Tibetan population here. I think Minnesota has been kind to the Tibetan people.

**TL:** So you would basically describe Minnesota as kind to people?

**JU:** Kind, accepting and open to different cultures and diversity. Yes. I'd say that. Yes, I'd probably want to live in Minnesota for a while.

**TL:** So what was your first job in Minnesota?

**JU:** The first job. I came to—it's really weird because when I came to Minnesota I had a lot of problems. I mean it's always a problem coming from India to Minnesota or any other country in the world. Given that I was coming for a family reunion, kind of like a husband and wife here. Both the American embassy and the India government weren't interested in my case. That's when my wife actually went up to the late Senator Paul Wellstone and asked him if he could help the case. Which he did. He wrote a couple of letters to the Indian embassy and there was a lot of problems there, right? When he wrote his third letter, that's when my case was actually on the table, and I actually could buy a ticket to come to Minnesota.

So when I came to Minnesota I felt like, "Hey, I've got to meet this guy who got me here." Then I heard he was running for re-election and I was—being a Tibetan I'm loyal as we are, that's it. I'm going to go and work for him. I didn't care about which side of the—even if it was a Republican or Democrat. He is the man who helped me. Right. I went and worked for him and then that was my first job. I actually volunteered for him and my first job—actually I wasn't paid for was when we had the sixth July<sup>1</sup>, the celebration for Dalai Lama's gathering. I took a stack of voter reg cards and got every Tibetan in there to sign it. And I actually didn't know what they were signing for, but I said, "Hey, you guys have to sign this because this a great guy here." So that was my first like community-based push from my side coming to Minnesota. So you could call it a job as such.

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<sup>1</sup> The Dalai Lama's birthday.

**TL:** So going back to the problems you mentioned about coming to Minnesota. What were the problems that you faced? To my knowledge, if you are married to someone who is a U.S. citizen you could easily come here.

**JU:** You shouldn't have a problem, right?

**TL:** Why did you face—what kind of problems did you face?

**JU:** One of the problems, one of the biggest problems that I had was this was right after 9/11 and they were being very, very picky about who comes to America. My delay was more based out of confusion in the Indian Government and in the American embassy based out of Delhi. The people were pretty scattered. They said I had to go to Bombay and Bombay said I had to go Delhi. So they just made me walk around a lot with that. The other complication that came along with that was—I think it was more based out of what had happened in the past with a lot of Tibetans going in. There were a lot of rumors then that a lot of Tibetans went to America and never wanted to come back. And a lot of them had to do with political situations happening in Tibet. But it was a huge thing for the Indian Government that they were—that this was going on. So I think me and a bunch of people who were in that process then were kind of victimized by the Indian Government, as to have really staunch and hard rules in terms of immigration policies with America, the government of America. So we were kind of like victimized. You could say that. We were just like . . . we were like . . . as a kind of proof that we don't let this happen in India. Kind of a situation. So that was one of those unfortunate situations for me.

**TL:** Do a lot of Tibetans like you face problems regarding immigration?

**JU:** Oh, absolutely. Absolutely. Every day. Every day. What surprised me was when I walked up to the American embassy in Delhi; I thought I'd make it pretty good. About seven a.m. in the morning, be in the front of the line. But I was probably the seventy-fifth guy standing in line. There were people lined up. I hear that people sleep in front of the embassy the whole night so that they can be the first pick. Those kind of problems happen to a lot of Tibetans.

A lot of Tibetans come to America not because they—I mean to a point, America is great, glamorous. To the other side, this is again a place where you can come and establish yourself and create a niche for yourself, because you're looking at the land of opportunities. When I look at myself about five years from now I would never have thought I would be doing this as in America. I could have never done it in India. So this is what America creates. Opportunities. If you work hard for it. And us Tibetans being very hard workers and we believe that we can create support for ourselves in a place like America, where you are appreciated for what you do.

**TL:** Going back to your Paul Wellstone campaign, what else did you do beside distributing the pamphlets and—?

**JU:** That was the first—right. That was the first start on my long voyage down Minnesota’s history and politics. Signing this voter reg—I think I got about sixty people to sign the voter reg, which was like a huge thing. For me, when I walked in that office, they gave me a box. The box had about five hundred voter reg cards and out of that I think I signed about sixty, a bit more than sixty. And I felt kind of embarrassed going back because I was like really shooting for signing five hundred people. I thought it was like, “Hey, it’s a good thing. You’re registering to vote.” When I walked in with sixty cards at the Wellstone office, everyone dropped their pens and just like, “Wow!” Then that was it. I had my first job. I started working out doing outreach for Senator Wellstone’s election. Outreach just not with Tibetans. We’re going much beyond.

One of the interesting things that I felt like I could achieve, which didn’t happen initially, was we—actually the DFL<sup>2</sup> actually created a database for Tibetans in Minnesota. It had never happened before. It was with the Hmongs, Somalians and the Tibetans had a database, which is amazing. So I was working on that. But besides that, I wanted to go out and actually talk to Minnesotans as to what they feel about Paul Wellstone. Oh! Even being naive to the American politics. I wanted to know how people felt. So I used to do a lot of canvassing. Door to door canvassing, too. So that was something that I did during the campaign.

**TL:** So being involved politically in Minnesota, do you know about other Tibetan political orientation? Do you know if other Tibetan immigrants are active in Minnesota politics?

**JU:** But they are. I think Tibetans are very, very political. But they are very shy about talking about their politics. They are very, very—I mean I think Tibetans come here, I think we have a—Tibetans have a kind of stand whereas we always stand neutral grounds. I felt that was one of the weaknesses that we had and we didn’t want to create a kind of a controversy coming to a country like America. In Minnesota I felt that a lot. People were not ready to take stands. A lot of Tibetans believed in Paul Wellstone. The man had sponsored a lot of bills in terms for Tibet and human rights in Tibet—abuse in China. And the man had come and attended every other rally or gathering that the Tibetans had. So he was like—every Tibetan loved him. But then, I’m sure like Tibetans voted for him but they were not like vocal about it.

There were just a handful of people then who could actually go around driving in the car with bumper stickers, which was like a huge step for Tibetans again. Besides having a Free Tibet bumper sticker you have a Wellstone bumper sticker. There were about two or three other Tibetans who came in and volunteered. The Tibetan Youth Congress actually took an interest in the political situation then with getting involved with Paul Wellstone. They came in and I do remember them coming in one of the blitz that we had. That was kind of nice having Tibetans in there. Not a whole lot, but then there were a few.

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<sup>2</sup> Democratic Farm Labor Party.

**TL:** So do you know if Tibetans voted more for like DFL or Independent party, Green party or the Republicans?

**JU:** It's kind of mixed because Tibetans are very influenced in their votes. I can take—I mean, I'm being very straight with my political views here. The 2004 presidential election, a lot of controversy. A lot of mixed reaction. If President George Bush invited the Dalai Lama to his farm or to the White House, it was a huge thing for the Tibetans and it directly affected how they voted. Not based on politics or not based on issues. A message is that the politicians were giving out—it was based on how they reacted to the Dalai Lama. When Paul Wellstone was out there supporting the Dalai Lama when he came to Minnesota, that was good enough for the Tibetans. Right? And when Norm Coleman came in and spoke to the Tibetans, that was good enough for them, too. It wasn't about issues. It's about who cared more about Tibet. When it comes tomorrow, if a Chinese government delegate comes into American, who's out there asking him questions? That's being noticed by Tibetans. Again, I told you, like I told you earlier, they won't get really involved with the—like creating a controversy as in like here you go. Here's a group of Tibetans who are creating political stir in American. But being a handful, they are being very, very smart and coordinated as to how politicians react to their own issues. You may call it selfish, but again, it was more based out of like what every Tibetan believes. We have a problem. Who's going to handle it?

**TL:** You said earlier the DFL created this database of Tibetan voter registration and entry. Do you know of other things that the Republican Party, Independent or Green party did for Tibetans to increase their Tibetan wards?

**JU:** Sadly none. I think—I mean, especially Minnesota, given that we have one of the largest Tibetan populations in the country. None of those efforts were made initially. Maybe you could blame that—the Tibetans weren't really involved in the political scene like a lot of other immigrant communities. Me going into the political scene actually created a kind of awareness that there are Tibetans. The more I started talking about the community, the more interested they were. The DFL actually started lit pieces in Tibetan. They had lit pieces in Tibetan. They talked about Senator Wellstone's stand on Tibet. There were flyers and lit pieces especially messaged or focused on Tibetans. So that was something that was completely new. The 2000 election.

**CL:** 2002, right? 2002?

**JU:** Yes.

**TL:** So on a scale of one to ten, ten being the highest, how would you rate the activeness of Tibetan immigrants in Minnesota in state of Minnesota politics?

**JU:** Oh! It's going to be a low three, I'd say. Yes. Sad. But, yes.

**CL:** You talked about how President Bush inviting the Dalai Lama or Wellstone showing up or Coleman showing up and that that was enough for Tibetans. Just the

politicians taking an interest in Tibet. But what about the issues? Do you think Tibetans pay attention to the issues or are they more focused on Tibetan issues and not the American issues, being American citizens?

**JU:** Right. I mean one of the things that—I saw a lot of Tibetans. Besides writing to politicians about taking a more keen interest on abuse of human rights in Tibet. That was a huge stand, right? I think the last election, as far as I know, I've seen letters being sent out to both John Kerry and George Bush talking about where they stood on Tibet. I think they even wrote one to Howard Dean. Given that he like, you know. So besides that, when it comes down to Minnesota, now that I work for—I work in a union. And given that we have a lot of Tibetans working in different hospitals and hotels, one of the biggest things that the Tibetans understood is the health care in America, which is so different from where we come from. They want to know where politicians stand on, I mean, issues solely related on health care. They are people who are interested in that. But in a majority-wide, I think—because we are looking at all the Tibetans here. Who wouldn't really care about health care? Because we come from background where nobody cared about our health. We had to pay for our own health care no matter what. Right? But for them the sentiment of a politician standing on the issue, on what they believed in on Tibet was very, very important and how the Dalai Lama was represented or kind of like—what kind of welcome he had and who were involved in it. It was very, very important for the Tibetans. So George Bush meeting with Dalai Lama could have swayed a lot of votes.

**CL:** So this question will be totally based on your own opinion. And I understand that the war in Iraq happened after the Wellstone election that you worked on.

**JU:** Right.

**CL:** But in your own opinion, being a politically minded politically active Tibetan. I've read many articles or several articles have been written by Tibetan scholars and a lot of them written by Tibetans. Some have been very pro-war in Iraq and pro-Bush as a liberator of a country. And I think it's pretty easy to make the connections between that and Tibetan issues. And also at the same time, very anti-war just simply because it's violence in war and whatnot. So what do you think the—if there is a Tibetan opinion or is the population diverse enough that the opinions are all over the place on the war in Iraq?

**JU:** Yes. Can I talk about the general before I go with my own personal?

**CL:** Yes.

**JU:** Because right around then, right after the presidential election, I actually went back to India. And working and helping on the other side of the party, our views are totally different. Somehow you're right. When we talk about Tibetans we talk about non-violence and compassion. When I was in India, when I talked with a lot of Tibetan elders, the views are totally different. It was more based on, here is the president who can actually take a stand. So it was very confusing. And I had to actually sit and talk to

them and actually to some point debate with them why they felt this way. And it wasn't based more on religion, in like places like India. It was more based out of America because again, in India, America is looked at like the world leader, the big brother. It's like, what America does is right. America can never go wrong. And America can be wrong is something I learned living in America. And if you are in India, anything that America does, anything, anything, no matter what, they go and bomb a country. It's right because America is doing it. On a personal view, it was totally wrong. Taking a country to war. Again, when we talk about what it was based on, that's a different story. Which is kind of baseless. But again, the whole—what kicks in me more than the Tibetan is living in America and understanding the political situation in America and when my views are more Americanized at this point on the war than as a Tibetan.

**CL:** The reason I asked that question is that I was in India and Nepal and Tibet about ten months after the war started and we—the election was—we were watching, getting on the internet and looking at the news. And the campaign was raging with full steam. Both Republican and Democrat in the U.S. So us, as Americans were very interested in that. Plus the war was happening and that was—it was very odd for us to be halfway around the world and be getting all this news filtered to us. And when we talked to Tibetans, I think most of us that were on the trip were very Democratic and we expected—we kind of anticipated that Tibetans would be that same way. And they were very, very pro-Bush and pro-war and I got the same response that you just expressed. That whatever America does is right. But also there was this grand, like, liberation. If they do that for Iraq, they might—it means that they're politically minded. They might do it for Tibet, too. How do you think opinions of Tibetans in America then that have had that experience of you, like you said came to America and you didn't find out how wrong—you couldn't understand how wrong America can be sometimes until you've lived here. So thinking about other Tibetans that you've interacted with here in America, do you think their views have changed or are they on that same view as Tibetans in India?

**JU:** Yes. I think a lot of Tibetans views have changed once they have come to America. I think especially with the younger generation. A lot of younger generation being more active with what's going on. With the news. I mean, I have met a lot of Tibetans who believe in the media now than the older generation listening to CNN or FOX. I've met Tibetans who believe in reading magazines based out of independent journalism than reading the Washington Post.

[Tape interruption]

**CL:** This is the beginning of Side B of Tape 1. We were just talking about political views of Tibetans in Minnesota on the war in Iraq.

**JU:** So war in Iraq and Minnesota was more looked at as . . . rather than liberation for the Iraqis, I think it was more closely related when I really look at it, it was what happened during 9/11 and the way the media has really focused on 9/11 has—because Tibetans again—I mean even me to that point. I was—9/11 was wrong and I know a lot of Tibetans actually from Minnesota who have prayer sessions the whole time. Some of

them actually went to New York, had covers, scarfs put on the site and they came back and for them this war was kind of like . . . not more like a vendetta. It was like, “Oh, these people were wrong. These people were bad people.” This war was somehow, I think, not politically but I think morally they supported it because there were—like the media had portrayed the Middle East to be evil people, I think. There was a bit of acceptance in the older generation and given that America needed to take a stand because Tibetans are very loyal to America right now. Living in America they are more loyal to America than most of the people I’ve seen around. It’s like any Tibetan event today wouldn’t start without the National Anthem. So they are very loyal, patriotic towards America now, and I think that was one of the reasons that old generation . . . having that, talking about that acceptance in America. I think they thought it was the stand that America needed to take. But that didn’t reflect with the younger people again.

**TL:** So you really did—going back to the answer that you gave before. You rated Tibetans number at three out of ten. So that means like they have a low political participation, a low awareness. So what kind of problems do Tibetans face when they are trying to be politically active in Minnesota?

**JU:** In terms from the politicians?

**TL:** No. I mean like if they want to be like politically—?

**JU:** Oh, how do you get them involved?

**TL:** Yes. I mean what kind of problems do they face?

**JU:** The problems that they face. I think one of the biggest problems that they face is—in terms of American politics, right? This is again—I speak more from Minnesota and again I hold my views more personal, because in the West Coast I’ve known and I have friends who are involved politically. In Minnesota I think it was more to do with how Tibetans in Minnesota are so involved with the daily chores and work. Tibetans work really, really hard. And for them, the end of the day, it’s like, “How much did I work?” It was more based out of that which gives them little room. And then given that we have so many Tibetan gatherings and there’s the commitment to the Tibetan community itself, that being really active in the American political scene, which is a full time job by itself and I totally did volunteer, a bit of volunteering work—but then I think that it was just that initially they were just ignored as just a small group of immigrants coming in trying to make a living and live the American way of life. So I think there wasn’t a lot of acceptance. So that could be one of the bigger problems. Any Tibetan, if a Tibetan worked in the political scene, it would have been more focused on like, “Oh, he’s doing it or she’s doing it because they’re doing it for Tibet.” You know what I mean? So people would have taken—I mean when I came in on the political scene, people were more interested about finding about Tibet from me than what my views were on the politician that I was working on. So it was kind of like really—it would be self-centered when people asked us questions.

**TL:** So considering that a lot of Tibetans older generation here they don't speak English, they don't write English, do you think it's also problem for them to be politically active? And then do you know of initiative taking by the State of Minnesota to have immigrants more active in Minnesota politics?

**JU:** Absolutely. I think it's really, really important. Because given—especially in the Twin Cities, given that we have such a huge range of immigration here. I think it is really important to get them active. And I have seen it in different communities. Like the Indian community has, like Satveer Chaudhary<sup>3</sup>. The Hmong community has Mee Moua<sup>4</sup> and Cy Thao<sup>5</sup>. People like that who are really involved politically.

With the Tibetans I think we are so much concentrated and focused on Tibet and how we can move people on issued based on Tibet, right? The older generation, like if you look at this room you see this picture of the Dalai Lama shaking hands with Bill Clinton. That is as political as an older person could get. In a different house you could probably see the Dalai Lama sitting with George Bush, right? That is as political as you can get. Right? And for them, I think it's more than getting involved in the process. Like I told you. For the older generation it's not about issues. It's about pictures. It's about messaging. It's about how Tibet is worked out with these people. So the state should actually, I mean (A) make it more—whenever there's an election I mean I think more than the state. I think the parties should reach out to every immigrant population. Not just Tibetans. And there are a lot of immigrants here who are less in population but their voice needs to be heard and there's not a general interest from either party. Parties to reach out to them.

**TL:** Do you know, can they reach [out] to the Tibetan community? Like, in what ways they can do or reach out to Tibetans?

**JU:** I mean this year when—every time there's a huge Tibetan gathering, Tibetans actually invite politicians, which is kind of very, very, very weird and different from every community gathering I've been to. Like this year we had Peter McLaughlin<sup>6</sup> come in. Maybe we invite R. T. Rybak<sup>7</sup> too but then Peter McLoughlin said yes and he came in and probably he's going to get Tibetan vote there, right? But my point here is Tibetans being—it's more than politicians. I think it's an initiative that the Tibetans should have. To reach out to politicians more often, make it more vocal. Start writing letters to politicians and being involved in the process. Tibetan Youth Congress does that a lot but since it's so much based out of India, I think most of the political decisions are made—that's the biggest political party for the Tibetans. The Tibetan Youth Congress. The Tibetan community here. The community has TAFM. Being a non-profit [it] cannot take a political stand on anything. Tibetan Youth Congress.

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<sup>3</sup> Minnesota State Senator Satveer Chaudhary.

<sup>4</sup> Minnesota State Representative Mee Moua.

<sup>5</sup> Minnesota State Representative Cy Thao.

<sup>6</sup> Hennepin County Commissioner.

<sup>7</sup> Mayor of Minneapolis.

**TL:** What does TAFM stand for?

**JU:** TAFM is Tibetan American Foundation of Minnesota. The first ever started in Minnesota by Tibetans. It's been in existence for about eleven years now but has never taken any political stand because of its status. But the Tibetan Youth Congress could definitely—they did write to the presidential candidates this year. But I think—I mean I'm in—I have had lots of conversation with the RTYC, Regional Tibetan Youth Congress to attend in sessions of meetings or anything. Have conversation open with politicians in Minnesota so that we are in the forefront and we have to show that we are active before the politicians react to us. I'd say it that way.

**TL:** So going back to your job after living—after the late Senator Paul Wellstone campaign, what did you do?

**JU:** Well, I worked for Vice President Walter Mondale straight off, which is like an amazing feat by itself. But after we lost the election I went and worked for SEIU, which I'm still working for. It's the Service Employees International Union, which is the largest labor union in the country. 1.8 million members. The reason I came in there was, us staffers from Wellstone, we are trying to keep the legacy alive and I believed in Paul Wellstone a lot. I believed in him and working with the man made me stronger and I think I am what I am of what his beliefs were. He really believed in—one thing he used to say is like if you ever believe that everyone should get employee, fully employee paid health care, which is not too much to ask, actually, go and work for SEIU. They are a good union. So the three of us actually came in and worked for SEIU and I'm the only one remaining out of the three. Two of them went back to doing political stuff again. So I'm still with SEIU. It's been about—more than three years working for this union.

**TL:** So what do you do at SEIU?

**JU:** SEIU. I am actually a lead organizer. So initially what I used to do as an organizer is I used to go out to different hospitals around Minnesota, nursing homes and basically when people called us and said, "Hey, there's a lot of unfair—there's a lot of mistreatment here and things need to improve." That's when we go in and organize them to form a union.

**CL:** So you're going to people that aren't in unions.

**JU:** In the union. Yes. Which is kind of really weird. I just got back from Vegas from APALA, which is the American Pacific Alliance Labor<sup>8</sup>—the only Asian American labor movement in America, the first and the only. I mean it's been three years but it seems like I'm the only Tibetan in America working in the labor movement. Which is kind of like pretty amazing. And APALA actually promised to write an article on that which should be interesting. Which is like a first. Because coming back from India, labor movement we looked at—the unions were looked at as something very difficult and nasty. So, yes. That's something that I thought you guys should know. [Chuckles]

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<sup>8</sup> Asian Pacific American Labor Alliance.

**TL:** So are there any Tibetans who are a member of unions in Minnesota?

**JU:** A lot. A lot. Our union is more focused on health care workers. Now if you look at hospitals, like Abbot Northwestern, Fairview, Methodist, some of the leading hospitals in the Twin Cities, there are a lot of Tibetans working in these hospitals. Then when you look at the hotel industry there are a lot of Tibetans working there. So Tibetans are very active dues paying members in Minnesota.

**TL:** So going back to India and Nepal where a lot of Tibetans don't even know about labor unions because a lot of them are self-employed, what do you think made them to be active in labor, a member in Minnesota? Were they facing like discriminations or—?

**JU:** Yes. That's a great question because when I first joined labor movement and Tibetans have been here for more than—some more than fifteen years and have been union members for over twelve years. These people joined the union movement. There have been more unions because it was one—if you are in a unit that's more union you automatically are a dues paying member, right? They never questioned it. Tibetans love to assimilate and they want to be one of the people in the country. So when they were asked for dues they paid the dues. But for them the understanding of dues was more like paying it to a lawyer or in the old times like paying it to the Mafia because you have protection, job protection and you're getting health insurance, right? But the whole concept of being a union, right, that these folks were the union and you're paying dues just because you have representation from the union, a different local, was foreign to them.

When I came in I wasn't hired more to handle—because though we have a lot of Tibetans in our union I wasn't hired to work with the Tibetans. I was actually working with a full Caucasian hospital. The only two immigrants were Somalians in that hospital. So I wasn't even working with the Tibetans. But I went out of my way besides working in the hospital to talk to the Tibetans about what unions meant and why they are paying union dues. And like you said, it's really, really foreign to them. And once I talked to them about what their rights were in this country, what they had privileges to and what as a worker they are entitled to, these people were—I had the word empowered. I had it but these people, a lot of the Tibetans were like, “Yes, we are part of the system. We're not assimilating just because we need to do it. We're doing it and now we know why we're doing it.” So it was a good education on their part.

**TL:** So you said that you studied in India.

**JU:** Yes.

**TL:** And considering that you have a bachelor's degree from India, was it easy transition working in like American's work environment? Is that easy transition or did you face problems having like background study in India more than in the U.S. for education?

**JU:** The only problem I have in America is probably my accent. Given that I have lived in so many countries, my accent is more twisted than I am. But I grew up in India with a lot of American culture. Like every other kid in America. I think I grew up listening to Bob Dylan and I grew up like playing music from Lynyrd Skynyrd not knowing where they came in from. We embraced anything that was American. I was wearing Levis jeans. I was like—I was doing everything that was American. I was reading American books. I was watching American movies. I think I knew more about American culture before I came to America. And here it was like . . . I mean no culture shock at all. It was an easy transition. It was like I was meant to be here. That was how I grew up and that's how a lot of American—a lot of kids in India. Like if I look at younger kids now, they know more about 50 Cent or Snoop Doggie Dog than any American kid. They are dressed up like other basketball or rap singer like the American kids. So when they come to America it's an easy transition. It wasn't a problem at all.

**TL:** It's amazing that you didn't face any sort of problem. Like nothing.

**JU:** Yes. Except for my accent.

**TL:** Work culture, especially getting on time, I mean getting things done.

**JU:** Oh, yes. I mean in terms of accountability, in America it's so—I mean one thing I learned in America is like the trust factor. I could go to an interview and say I'm a doctor in India and nobody would actually ask me for certificates. That amazed me because when I went to an interview in India I had to take a little bag of all the certificates that I had in my lifetime just to prove who I am. When I come to America I could fill up anything in the papers and all they believed, all they looked at is how you present yourself the first five minutes. That's something very different, right? And going through these interviews and right now with my job . . . now I mean, today, I feel like I have achieved a bit coming from my standard education from India. Being a lead organizer in a union, that's that big. I think it's an achievement. But again, it was more—rather more than educational background. It was how you performed. How we got along with people and that was something that helped me more than my education in India. How I handled or talked to people in America.

**TL:** So beside the union work, what else were you involved in?

**JU:** Presently?

**TL:** Yes.

**JU:** A lot. A lot. I mean the job, as an organizer, is something that I do full time. But besides that I've been involved in a lot. I mean which is interesting because when I came to America and came here speaking English, then I find out that more people speaking Spanish than English. And in India everyone wanted to learn French because they thought French was the second language in the world after English. Everyone that I knew. And I come to America and more people speaking Spanish. Actually, I went to

classes to learn it and through that process I got involved with the problems in South America and I'm actually very active with the Resource Center for Americas pushing their agenda in South America. I'm very involved with Progressive Minnesota. I'm very involved with the education system in Minnesota. So I go to a lot of these meetings and I go there not representing SEIU but as a Tibetan. A lot of people confuse me for Native American. A lot. I used to have longer hair so I could easily actually pass out as a Latin American or a Native American. But I used to always be like, "I'm a Tibetan," and I think it gave me an opportunity to talk to them about Tibet. And since there were so many activists gathered in the room it was something that I could even talk about, "Hey, I could be a Tibetan who wants free Tibet plus I could support you folks on this." So I go around mix a lot with the community. I mean even with the local politics in Richfield. I go to all the city meetings just so I can be in there, be involved. At times I'm the only Asian but you know, it's nice just being in there.

**CL:** The subject you were just talking about, like the political actions that you do with South America and Central America were not—did you get interested in that because you worked with—was it because of the people you work with? Were you influenced by them or was it just a general interest in politics and political action?

**JU:** I think it has more to do with the struggle. I think it was more to do with the struggle. Given that I grew up listening to my parents about their struggle and when I come here and when I—I mean for me, personally, for a certain age my life revolved around the struggle that I had or my people had as Tibetans. And that was the focus in my life. I was in every rally and every time there's a procession, every time there was a meeting amongst Tibetans, I was there. That was my focus. And I wanted everyone that—all my friends to come to meetings with me and if you want to be my friend you've got to be part of my struggle. And when you come to America and when you see this wide variety and range of things that are going on. And then somehow now I feel we can relate to each other. Now with Latin America it was more with—I mean I grew up thinking that Mexico is Cancun and fun. I mean my history tells me that the resolution passed in the UN about China's invasion of Tibet was started by El Salvador, not by America or England or any other super power, right? It was El Salvador. It's like we are looking at here—it's like these people in 1959 or earlier could relate to our struggle in Tibet and when you really look at it, it's nothing different. There is a group of people fighting for what's right.

**CL:** So the struggle in El Salvador is very similar to what you feel is the struggle for Tibet?

**JU:** I think it's struggle everywhere. I think it's struggle everywhere not just in one particular place. I think as long as—like Tibet has become more like a global issue because I feel like Tibet was more recent to a lot of people's memories. More recent when the UN was formed and it did not intervene in it. More recent when you have super powers in the world but did not do nothing and it just happened in front of people's eyes. And a lot of older generation in America especially, I have seen relate easier to Tibet. And for me, being a second generation of Tibetans here, when I look at struggles in South

America, when I look at struggles happening anywhere, actually even back in Asia, what's happening in Philippines, Cambodia . . . I mean I know more about Asian struggles coming to America than I knew living in Asia. So now I can relate. I go to all these places and I see similarities. It's families being displaced. It's about death. It's about more than vengeance, I think. Well, some of the struggles do have vengeance, but what similarity I see is it's about destruction of cultures and identities. And that's what I relate to. Identity. Which has been a problem for me from day one.

**TL:** So what kind of—so did being Tibetan help you to be politically active?

**JU:** It was interesting because every time I went and—people always called me foreign and exotic and I just joked about—like a plant or a dancer. But being a Tibetan I think [laughter] honestly you know, it was like—I actually had one guy actually ask me, “Do you dream in Tibetan or English?” And I said, “I dream in Tibetan with English subtitles.” But, yes. It makes you want to think, right? That's like how people look at you. Being active in politics and even in the labor movement now, it is a struggle because you are the—rather than—when you say, “My name is Jigme,” they're like, “Jigme? I've never heard that name.” It starts from the name onwards to like where you come from. I mean people are like really nice. I play around a lot with people. They are like, “Where you from?” I say, “Minnesota.” “Where were you before that?” “New York.” “And before that?” “Chicago.” So people don't even have like the guts or—to a certain point they don't even kind of go like, “Where are your roots?” Right? And they just want to like, “Where were you from?” And I've even played this game where like, “I'm from around here. I'm a native.” So I do that because it gets kind of irritating after a while. People won't like—if you want to ask me, “You're a Tibetan. What's a Tibetan?” I can answer you that. But rather than playing around and stuff and political and anything. Just being a Tibetan it's like—but every Tibetan, any time we speak to someone else I think we are educating them about who we are. That's the most important thing. That if we go around saying we are Tibetan rather than saying, “Oh, are you Philippine?” “Yes.” If we say that, we kill the topic with them. I say, “I'm Tibetan.” I'm starting the conversation there. So, yes. I have to do that.

**TL:** I've heard that you also worked for America Coming Together?

**JU:** Yes.

**TL:** So what did you do and what is the organization about?

**JU:** America Coming Together is ACT. I was actually offered the position, which is very, very prestigious position of being the director of canvassing. Which is like, “Wow!” But I had a lot of stuff happening at the union, my own campaigns that I had to work on that I couldn't go. But ACT was part of SEIU. It was a nonpartisan organization that reached out to millions and millions of people getting them registered to vote for the election and more voter participation. But I was lucky enough to work for the last two weeks on the campaign bringing my experience from working during the Wellstone campaign to ACT. So that was one of the things I did with ACT.

[Tape interruption]

**TL:** I'm Tsewang Sangmo Lama and I'm interviewing Jigme Ugen. Today is August 31, 2005. I'm with Jigme Ugen and Charles Lenz, second interviewer. And we are beginning the second tape.

Considering that you had education in India and then can you tell us about education system in India?

**JU:** Yes. Sure can. I went to a school that was a Catholic school. I went to a Catholic school for twelve years and [it's] sad but I know more about Christianity. I knew more about Christianity than I knew about Buddhism, being a Buddhist. Tibetans in—there was an organization called SAT, Swiss Association for Tibetans, who actually went house to house, Tibetan, door to door, asking the priest, missionaries, asking for us to send them to school. A lot of Tibetans actually were scared sending their kids to school, to a Christian school; but that changed later on. I went to this Catholic school—it was called St. Augustine School—for twelve years. Then right after that I went to Dr. Graham's Homes, which is another Protestant school, for two years. So again, I grew up learning more about Christianity and what is interesting in the schools were—going to the schools we had a lot of teachers and priests who came in from the West and they talked about the history of the West. And today I know more about American history, European history through my school studies. I know more nursery rhymes, which are more Americanized and English. It was very interesting.

In comparison to a lot—we have a lot of Tibetan schools solely devoted to education for the Tibetan community and today and even through university in Delhi, it was very difficult for us to sit and talk. My Tibetan was and is actually still extremely weak compared to a lot. I used to talk to these people so that I could improve my Tibetan and they talked to me so that they could improve their English. So it was very difficult. And I still face it in Minnesota when I talk, when I sit down with a lot of Tibetan people. Tibetan guys my age or younger. There's very little relationship that I can build. It's easier for me to build relationship with an American-born person than someone else coming from India. I can talk about music and movies and books easily with an American-born than with Tibetan youth of my age and it goes back again to the education system that I was sent to. So, yes. I mean again, that way I think I was fortunate and it was easier for me to like just fuse into the Minnesotan culture.

**TL:** Are there things in Minnesota that you think that you will never be able to adapt to?

**JU:** So far I've been pretty good adapting to the Minnesotan way of life. Interesting. With the Minnesotan way of life . . . see, I mean, I think—I have been to certain places that would probably mark me as the first Tibetan to be in—from the job I do. I've been straight out from working in Long Prairie up there to like, I don't know, like somewhere down south Minnesota. Like at times when I'm driving around I'm like, "I think I'm the first Tibetan here." Like no Tibetan would ever come down to the boondocks here.

And I have knocked doors and talked to people there in big huge farmlands. I've talked to them. Again, one thing that I can't attend is again, when I go up and knock at the door it's I think more to do with the accent that I bring in. My own personal accent. I think it's something that it's very tough to—given that Minnesotans have a very distinct accent. That's the belief. When I go out to any other place out of Minnesota and I tell people I'm from Minnesota they go, "*Minnesota?*" And when I start actually talking they are like, "Oh!" So basically the 'oh!' is basically, you're not a Minnesotan. So I think that's something that I'll never be able to attend or get to. Being accepted as—like I told you, I'm very, very loyal to Minnesota. They call me the fierce loyal Minnesotan foreign son, right? A lot of my friends say that. But again, you know, I can live here for another sixty years but then, hey, I'll just be another person who just came to Minnesota.

**TL:** So what do you hope to achieve in Minnesota? Or where do you see yourself in ten years?

**JU:** [Chuckles] Ten years from now. One thing that I've really vowed on living in Minnesota is being really active with what I do right now. One thing that was really interesting about Minnesota is what Minnesota stood for and how it was a pioneer for a lot of states around Minnesota, on the Minnesotan beliefs, on Minnesota's politics, on even the health care of Minnesota. The most amazing. I've read histories about it. We're nothing close to that. Now considering this home, one thing I'd like to see is Minnesota go back to the Minnesota it was. Not the Minnesota it has become or it's turning out to be. Because when I go and talk to a lot of older Minnesotans they still believe in it. They still believe in it. And it's pretty amazing that they still believe the Minnesota that they lived in is going to come back.

When I talk to my neighbor—my neighbor talks to me like I'm a Minnesotan, right? And he at times goes like, "Oh! Look around. There's a lot of immigrants moving in here." And it's funny because she's telling me, right? But I think she—I kind of give her the doubt because she has—the kind of conversation we have had in the past; she doesn't see me as an immigrant. My neighbor. Because I've been so close with her and she believes that. I talk to them a lot about what Minnesota is. I think the Minnesota value has been lost and it's so much like our values. I feel like our Tibetan values are being lost. I'm fighting really hard. And we are all to sustain it and bring it back. I'd like to see the Minnesotan values stay. I think it's a great place. I think it should be—should remain great.

**TL:** I forgot to ask you this question. I was wondering what kind—there are a lot of Tibetans who work in hospital, hotels and other jobs. What kind of problems do they face in their work environment?

**JU:** Again, number one is language. I think with hospitals, working hotels and restaurants, I think it's very similar because most of the work that—we have Tibetans today who are nurses. We are at a state we have Tibetans who are doctors. Even in Minnesota we have future doctors here. But the majority of Tibetans working here are either doing housekeeping or nursing assistant. There is a strong competition among the

immigrants in these positions. And Tibetans are really hard working people. They can put in sixteen hours for months without even saying, “Aayee,” you know? One of the problems I see they face is like if they are so determined to do it that they don’t get opportunities. I’ve had lots of Tibetans come and complain to me. Like, “I want to do the sixteen-hour. I don’t get a chance.” Right? And that’s a problem. And then when they look at it they talk about, “Hey, I’m a Tibetan. That’s why I’m not getting it.” So that was kind of a thing that people talked about initially. But now it’s more to do with like the system and they have a problem understanding it. So I feel that that’s no longer a concern.

The other thing I’ve seen is Tibetans are very, very well established in Minnesota unlike anywhere in American. The Tibetan community is well settled. I’ve seen Tibetans who are housekeeping driving better cars than the doctors who work in the hospital, because they are well established. And now they have like bought houses, cars, everything. When it comes—the bottom line is acceptance amongst—I mean my question is have they tried it or have they not been accepted. Because the community is getting stronger but it’s getting stronger internally. There’s been nothing going outside of it. So one of the problems that we have is we are too clustered and too much together as a community. That we haven’t given any room for anyone from the outside to come inside or, you know, we haven’t given that opportunity because we are so much with ourselves. That could be one of the bigger problems we face today.

**CL:** Do you mean other Tibetans that are coming over now or—?

**JU:** No. It’s other people. Not Tibetans. I think Tibetans accept it, you know, no matter where they come from. I think it’s just like—I mean personally you have been with the Tibetan community. I think that could be like an exception for you. Not many people—like when I look at the communities like the Hmong community, they have—the Hmong youngsters can hang around with a lot of American people. You know what I mean? But a Tibetan-born American, Tibetan-American, they just hang around with Tibetans. In a way, it’s great. I think they communicate in Tibetan. They’re strengthening that. But there’s no—nothing where people from the outside can come and look at the community. There are very, very few people. And Tibetans have been known around the world to accept—I mean like anywhere. If you go to India and if you go to Dharamsala, Tibetan people open arms to anyone who is coming in. And in Minnesota there is a kind of a—I’ve seen this. Unlike many other places it’s like we are strong as a community. If there’s an incident it stays in the community. It’s handled in the community. There’s a fear of being like detected. That’s my biggest fear. I think it’s a problem. I think we should really look into it. Being involved in other things.

**TL:** So what do you think Tibetans in Minnesota should learn from Americans in Minnesota or Americans anywhere?

**JU:** Americans. I think Tibetans have learned a lot from the Americans. They have learned a lot. They have learned that hard work pays off. Like they’ve always done. I think—oh, I feel Tibetans are very quick learners. Very, very quick learners. I have met

people, who went to no school, had no educational background in Minnesota, speaking English. I think that's a process of learning. They had to learn to live the American life. They are living the American dream. They're doing every—I mean they are not backing down from doing anything that's American. I've seen Tibetans being involved in watching sports, movies, to a certain limit music, and the way they wear their clothes. I think that's all coming here and learning it. And I'm glad. There's a lot of good things that we learned from America. Positive things.

**TL:** So what should Americans learn from Tibetan polity or characters?

**JU:** It's interesting. I was having this conversation with one of my coworkers the other day. She said she went to this—she went to meet her parents and [unclear]. That's really nice. She said she spent an afternoon. I'm like, "What do you mean you spent an afternoon?" She goes, "They are in a nursing home." I'm like, "Really? Why are they in a nursing home?" So the conversation starts from that. Us believing like most Asians believing in joint families. I mean we stick with our families. Like to the core, right? This lady actually told me that's something we're learning from all you Asians. Something that's really important. Economy. With the world. You're saving so much living together. (B) There's so much of a moral values that live when you're living together. And (C) you're working as a team every time. And I think there if you look at this last election they say the president won on values. I think the biggest value I think Tibetans can actually give out to the West is about living together as family. About forgiveness. About compassion. I think Tibetans here can sit and talk to a Chinese person and like anywhere in this world and talk to them as human beings. And Americans sit down with an Iraqi easily and talk to the person. That's pushing, right? So I think that's something they can learn from Tibetans. It's about accepting people as human beings and not judging them.

**TL:** What do you think are the most dominant clashing views or values between Tibetans and Americans? Like Caucasian Americans?

**JU:** About American Americans, right.

**TL:** Caucasian.

**JU:** Caucasian Americans. Okay. Clashing. I can give my own personal here. I'm a vegetarian, right? And not a lot of Tibetans are vegetarians. When I go out to the boonies and when I see like deers being lynched that's really tough for me. When I sit and talk to Minnesotans about hunting and fishing, that's like oh, rough for me too, right? And on a general basis, I think Tibetans—one thing I think Tibetans have tough, it's a problem for them in Minnesota is more based out of, I think it's a competition. You're talking about problems, right? With Caucasian Americans.

**TL:** Clash values or anything. Kind of dominant clashing values.

**JU:** Okay. I was going on a different way there. Clashing values. Ahhh! I don't think so there are any. When you look around Minnesota, Tibetans do the sixteen-hour or whatever they need to do and they do their jobs. They come out and they are a bunch of very friendly people. Get along with everyone. When you talk about values, Minnesotan values is very, very similar to Tibetan values in terms of our being friendly, in terms of being open and accepting to a lot of things and open to new ideas. I think I've seen—I mean having traveled around America I would have no problem saying hello to a stranger in Minnesota than saying hello to a stranger in New York. And a Minnesotan stranger would actually say hello to me. So that's Tibetan value, right? When I see another Tibetan I go, "Hey!" I've never seen him but I say, "Hey," anyway. And that person will say, "Hey!" So those kinds of like human greet human—

**CL:** Relations?

**JU:** Relations. Thank you. Those are there in Minnesota. I lived in Sydney. A bunch of very happy people. Everyone is just wishing everyone—then when I went to New York, New York is so cold. So cold, right? I even lived in Connecticut for a while. People there are so cold. When they see a person walking by they like—that person is walking. But in Minnesota it's so much different. People are very friendly, smiling. You don't hear a lot of, 'good days' but then there's like, 'how you doin'?' So those are the values, I think. And in terms of—Minnesotans love meat as much as the Tibetans do so Tibetans have no problem being in Minnesota, I think.

**TL:** In the recent times we have heard of precipitating news of Northwest Airlines going bankrupt. Do you know if there are a number of Tibetans working there and how are they going to be affected if Northwest Airlines closed down? Or goes bankrupt?

**JU:** That is such a—I wish there was—I bought my tickets—when I went to Vegas, I had my tickets with Northwest. And when they went out on strike, I cancelled it and flew Sun Country. Cost me about a hundred dollars extra but then, I mean in my house, right, my brother came to pick me up from the airport. Here's this guy who listens to all, everything that's hip-hop and everything. He wears hundred and fifty dollars worth of shoes and is so oblivious to everything that's going on. But when we were driving back from the airport and were passing through I actually heard him honk. And for me it was huge. Like here's this kid, right, who doesn't care about anything that's going around, but here's him supporting this group of workers. Honking his way right through the freeway. And in terms of affecting—I don't know if there are any Tibetans working in Northwest. I think I will—I can't be factual on it but I can be ninety percent, in fact, ninety percent sure that the Tibetans would still fly Northwest because they think that it's nothing that they could relate to. And that's part of what I'm doing is trying to bring that relationship in. I don't think they're really going to be affected by Northwest.

**TL:** I've heard like a number of Tibetan people working there.

**JU:** Really?

**TL:** I've heard that.

**JU:** Okay. I haven't met any Tibetans working in Northwest. And if they are and if they get affected by this, I really hope, I really hope they know what's going on in there and they support the strike.

**TL:** So are there any things in India that you really miss about, that you don't find in Minnesota?

**JU:** I don't find in Minnesota. What I miss in India? I miss the cars honking . . . no, I'm kidding. [Chuckles] What I miss about India is, I miss the pace in India. The lifestyle in India. I miss sitting eating lunch and my family going like, "What should we eat for dinner?" Right then. I miss that. I miss how unplanned we were. Un-strategy about days. We never took care of time. Time was not our business. We could judge the day by the sun. Because we didn't have nothing to do as much. Even at work. [Chuckles] You could be working but then you could still be working without a watch because, hey, you know, people are so laid back.

I miss the times when in India you could sit with a total stranger and share a drink and talk about stuff and totally relate to each other and walk out being good friends and doing that forever. I miss that trust in India. That trust varies in India. I miss the different occasions when a lot of people kept meeting and meeting. Not like here. We do have like a lot of gatherings but the gatherings are boom, get done. Gather, done. But in India every time there's a gathering there's a relationship built. I used to love that. I used to love going to—being a Tibetan I used to love going to Hindu ceremonies, Muslim ceremonies. We celebrated Christmas. New Years. We celebrated Easters. Anything. And when we had Losar, our New Years, we have people from different communities come and celebrate with us. I miss that. The cultural exchange. There's so much I miss about India and of a certain level. And things that we took so much for granted living in India.

I miss like the peaceful walk. Not in a park but just like you could be walking down a busy street. Very busy street with cars honking but you could still walk around with like . . . openly like . . . there was like . . . kind of like . . . it's really tough to describe. In America I would—when I'm walking, I think there are people watching me. I feel I'm being judged, right? You don't have that there. Because there's so much of different cultures in India by itself at large and people. That's one thing I miss in India. Whenever I land in India, when I walk out, you breathe that air. It's not the best air you can breathe but then there is a sense of pride being back. I miss that. And all my life I've been fighting for an identity in India. I have acceptance here but I have pride there. That's what I miss about India.

**TL:** Can you tell me about some of the stereotypes that Americans in Minnesota have of Tibetans or did you face any?

**JU:** I'd say more stereotyping, more in terms of, more than Tibetans. I'd say more with Asians, right? Stereotyping is like, I am supposed to be really good in math, which I suck in. I'm asking the guy sitting next to me, "How do you do this?" We're stereotyped as like the guy driving a fancy car with a twenty-two inch rim. I drive a Saturn. You are stereotyped, as you're an Asian. Not because you're a Tibetan. As an Asian. Collectively a stereotype. I think when—the common stereotyping of Asian I've seen is like you gotta be great cooks; basically work in a restaurant, right? That is something. Or you're working in a grocery store. I mean the, 'fry lice'. The fried rice concept of Asia is I think so much taped on our head. When I talk to Americans it takes me about fifteen minutes to gain the trust that, "Hey, this guy I think he knows what he's talking about." But for the first fifteen minutes, I'm trying to create an impression. That's stereotyping. Right?

Another stereotyping I've seen is like, "He's an Asian." Doing this. Personally for me, "Why does he even give," you know, "why does he even care about what's happening for us? Look around you. This is a hospital full of white people. Why do you even care about what's happening?" I think that's stereotyping, right? When we—I mean we—it's more than Tibetan.

I don't think they know enough about Tibetans that they can stereotype Tibetans. But people who know Tibetans—like, it's interesting, it's funny. Because I designed a button for one of our campaigns. It was a very simple button with like—it was purple and white and got the message through. A woman comes up to me and says, "I thought you Tibetan people were colorful, vibrant. What's with this button?" And I said, "You just stereotyped me." And she's like, "I guess I did. I'm sorry." And walked away. But then that is what it is. When you talk about the website, vibrant color. That's what they see of us, right? Asian. Just like that's what Asia is. We are stereotyped so much with glamour, with—when I was in Las Vegas we stereotyped as gamblers. I mean it's everywhere. Every walk of life. Every morning we wake up we are stereotyped. I think it's more general than Tibetans. But Tibetans are stereotyped as being friendly, overly trustworthy people. We are stereotyped in a good way. A lot of stereotyping for the Tibetans come from the Dalai Lama and how he is and how he stands for the community, for the population of Tibetans. That's what—I mean Tibetan today are what the Dalai Lama is. Compassionate, non-violent, vegetarian. That's how we are stereotyped, I think, in a general, broad sense.

[Tape interruption]

**TL:** Is it true that the longer you stay in America the more Americanized you become and in what ways?

**JU:** That's an ongoing debate within the community itself in terms of Tibetan going to the West and losing the culture and identity and the traditions. It's been very, very interesting. Initially, when Tibetans were moving out to the West, getting political asylum or even an exchange coming to the West, Samdhong Rinpoche<sup>9</sup>, the now Prime

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<sup>9</sup> The Kalon Tripa, Chairman of the Kashag. The position is similar to that of Prime Minister.

Minister of Tibet<sup>10</sup>, was very vocal about Tibetans moving out to America. And a lot of our people were actually very critical about it. I mean it's more about—for them it's more about losing an opportunity to go to a new country and establish. But for him it was more about losing your tradition and culture. The then generation didn't see it. But now we can actually see some of it happening and there is a little bit of cross-culture and tradition. There is a little bit of Americanized Tibetans. The Tibetan culture is being more Americanized.

I was having this really interesting conversation with my boss who is Scandinavian fourth generation. She is talking about how she has lost her identity and her culture, tradition. Scandinavian being so rich. Then she actually said, "I fear you guys are going to go through the same." But my belief was like, as long as I keep teaching my children how to—and my daughter today speaks only Tibetan. Being born in America, a little English would be yes and no and excuse me and thank you. I feel that's my responsibility. But then again, when she grows up, I don't know how far she can carry on with just yes and no. So any little Tibetan I'm going to teach I'm going to teach and try my best to do that. But the advantage that most of the Tibetans have right now is because we live in a joint family. We do take it for granted that it's going to remain. Grandmothers and grandfathers are going to teach the grandkids about Tibet and if our generation is smart enough we will hand it over to our kids. But them being born in America would they do the same to their kids? Would they talk about the Tibetan folklores or would they talk more about American stories? That's the fear, right? And I think Samdhong saw that. He honestly saw that. And we, living in America, we kind of see that happen here and there. A little bit. We cannot connect the dots, but it's happening. It's happening. So, yes. It's true. There is a cross-culture.

**CL:** How do you feel about the actions the community has taken though, like the Cultural Center having music and dance classes and language classes and things like that?

**JU:** Truly I think it's the best thing that's happened here and which I'm really proud about. The Tibetan classes, music. It was—I think it was really, really, REALLY, important that we do that. Because that's our only sustenance here. When I go—like at times I go to the Cultural Center or the Tibetan Community Center on Sundays and I see so many of these young kids participating. I mean I feel at times like, when I was their age and when I was doing this I was doing it because it was so fun. We're doing it because you're a group of Tibetans. That was in India. There are so many Tibetans there. In a day, you go out, you do your own thing. But here in America there's so many things to do outside besides going to this dance. Is it because the kids realize that we need to keep doing this? To keep the tradition alive. And here you have the adults giving them the tools to do it. It feels nice having that and I hope that is being done in every state or with every group of Tibetans around the country. When we have dancers come in from Chicago or New York we applaud them. We really applaud them. And we applaud more to the kids who were born in America doing Tibetan dances. We applaud more to Tibetan kids born in American speaking Tibetan. So I hope we keep

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<sup>10</sup> Tibetan Central Administration (Tibetan Government in Exile).

encouraging these young people to carry on with this tradition of the Tibetan way of life. So I'm really pleased with that.

**CL:** How do you—you mentioned that events here in America, people come together and then they leave and that the event is over. And that's a difference between here and India. How do you feel then about the Tibetan community, you know, originally was a very small area in Minneapolis and now they've really spread out. So people are getting farther and farther out in the suburbs and whatnot. It's harder to come together or it's harder to see Tibetan friends and family on a more regular basis. Do you think that's hurting the community at all?

**JU:** In a way I think it has made the community more stronger as to sustain itself without—I mean like truly one of the ancient problems I saw with the Tibetans they were so much closer as a community and so close proximity. Up on Nicollet you had like, God knows, like more than thirty Tibetan families living in one building. That's close proximity. They are not assimilating with the rest and today they are strong enough to go out. I mean in strength it's more like in terms of economy. They can afford to go out and buy a house. But when they have a gathering, if you go to a Tibetan gathering, it's not like a one hour, two hour gathering. It's like till close, to a point where they [are] like, "We've got to go home." Because I think they lack that in every day. They've been—in every day work. Wherever they go out, when they come in as a group, as Tibetans, doing the Tibetan things. I think they just don't want to leave. There are dances. People are just like—it's like if there's a wedding. It's like a party. I mean it's become—like gatherings, like you say, they're getting more and more. It's getting more infectious. It's not just like now a wedding or just like a ceremony or like a big eventful day. A child's birthday could be a gathering for older people to stay and talk. They just need an excuse to come together now and that's becoming more and more vicious every day. And every week there is some kind of a gathering for Tibetans. I think that's more to do with like you work hard. You're doing it but end of the day you want to go back to your people. So I think spreading out and coming back. It's helping the community grow.

**TL:** You mentioned earlier about joint families and then you are married and then you live with your in-laws. Are there any advantages and disadvantages to like living in a joint family?

**JU:** I can talk about advantage. I have a daughter and I don't need a babysitter. I'm kidding. [Laughs] But that could be an advantage, right? And today I am in a position where I can move out and buy a house. But given that my wife, being the eldest daughter here, has been so useful to her parents and her parents have been very, very crucial in getting me to America. Me, stepping out of this house going to house on my own, it's kind of—personally I feel like I'm going to deprive them in their old age of the support that they have. And personally I think it would be wrong for me. Yes, living with the in-laws if you look in American way of life, it can be pretty weird. But in our culture, like here in my—with the Tibetan—it's not that Tibetans in India do it.

Here, it's really nice. I have enough freedom of my own. I can go in and out of the house any time I want and I make sure that I contribute enough to get this going. But in terms of just—that could be a little bit of disadvantage. But in terms of like getting advantage, if I go out and I don't have any other family here, right? And I have grown up in a close family. Coming here I have an acceptance of my in-laws and my brother-in-law as well. We're more like friends than in-laws.

But going back to the joint family, it is advantage just for Tibetans. I have seen Tibetan families live so close together. Like when I discussed my plan of moving out of this house we were planning to buy the house next door. [Laughs] So we were planning to move but then move next door. But these people haven't planned to move out. So if I move out I'm going to be right there or like a block away. And again it comes back to more than anything it's like they have been here for more than ten years, my wife's parents. They have worked really hard to buy this house, to get themselves established and bring the family over. Which again strengthens me to a connection where I could come in. And today—and I came in here and struggled my way with shelter. Like very, very advantageous for me. Had a house, a bed, food and I started with next to nothing. And today I'm in a job that pays extremely well. And I could again, like I say, move out any day. I thought, "Hey, would that be fair for them? No." So I'll stay here and I'll make adjustments here and there but—and they were living as a family here.

**CL:** So what do you think the difference is between that and Americans then that maybe want to go off on their own? Because there is that sense of accomplishment, of making it on your own without their help and support.

**JU:** I think which is great. But then it's something that—this sense of yourself from values that you grew up with. It's really weird. I mean it's—we used to see it in movies, we used to hear stories that after eighteen you had to have parents go like, "All right it's about time you moved out." Kind of stories, right, where kids go on to college. I went on to college. I mean I went out of my house. I traveled a lot. But end of the day I would go back home. Here when you move out you really moved out. It's like, "Goodbye. See you." For me it's like—I mean tomorrow if my daughter leaves me when she's eighteen it's going to be tragic for me. It's not just like—I mean when she moves out for me it will be like I have my responsibility. I have a daughter. My responsibility was to make sure that she's grown up and she's all set to step out to the world, face the challenges and go on. Right? How different would that be from, I have a dog and I'm going to make sure that this dog is well trained and the dog goes out and I don't care. I mean for me it's really difficult to accept that you have—you have a kid that grows up. And I'm not looking for support from my kids. I'm not. Absolutely not. I mean what they do I will not judge them. But tomorrow I want them to be with me. And besides, carrying the values that I teach them, I would want them to be with me when I need someone.

And I think that's the whole idea about having kids. With the Tibetans, especially, it's a tradition that's passed on from Tibet, when the father was old the kids went out and did the business. When the fathers trained the kids to handle the business. It was something

that you like take it for granted that it's—what I'm trying to get here is more about, there was a confidence that when I grow old I will have this person sitting next to me.

We—I mean again, we believe in the circle of life. And I grew up with the understanding that if I didn't take care of my parents my kids wouldn't take care of me because the wheel keeps turning, right? It could be like to psyche me out but then—but today being a father myself, I give my kid as much attention as I can possibly give. But tomorrow when she grows up I would want her to give me that attention too.

When I look at America, what amazes me is like how it can—I mean when I went out to college, university, from home, my home was like filled with sorrow. It was like I'm gone like forever. Hey, I'm gone for three years. I'm back. I'm coming back in six months for my vacation. But then we have so much of attachment. And what amazes me about America is like when a kid goes away the parents go out on vacation. It's like, job done. See you later. That's what amazes me. The attachment can be so easily like, unwrapped. So that's something. I mean does that answer your question?

**CL:** Yes. You talked about this identity crisis that you always felt in India. And that you were excited to come to America because you knew—you felt you had grown up with so much American things around you. Do you think you've solved that identity crisis?

**JU:** Coming here to America?

**CL:** Yes.

**JU:** Well, the fun thing about coming to America is like what I couldn't achieve for a lot of years in India, I hope to achieve here. Because it's like coming to America is like being born again. Coming to a different culture here. In India being born there and living through it where you are not as readily accepted in the country. I mean there's been a lot of controversies about it. And again, I can again go back to how Tibetans live so strong as a community. It's with them and I've seen this being reflected everywhere Tibetans go where there are more than ten Tibetans living in one place. They tend to live together. Very closely. You have kind of a—everything. The daily things are like more closely related. In India with that happening, the Indians had a huge, huge problem about understanding the Tibetans. I've seen Tibetan youths just hanging out with Tibetan youths. Not actually going around with other people. That was really tough because—and then with India then you were at once segregated as being a Tibetan or you will never be my friend because I'm not a Tibetan.

**CL:** But didn't you mention that the exact opposite is happening here? That so many Tibetans hang out only with Tibetans?

**JU:** No. It is happening here, too. The exact same, actually. Not the opposite. Here, too. It's happening. Tibetans just hang out with Tibetans. Right? And all the younger generation. But when you look at certain group of people like—all right. I knew a lot of

Tibetan people, too. But I used to hang out with a lot of local people, a lot of local people. Where I grew up in Kalimpong. The Tibetan kids in Kalimpong, this little town, we really mixed around a lot. And that's probably one of the reasons why our spoken language is much weaker than people living in Mussoorie and Dharamsala where they stayed together as a group. And even for that case for Darjeeling, which is like a couple of miles away, where Tibetans just stayed with Tibetans. My interaction was a lot with the local Nepalese boys, Indians. So when we are talking, we're talking—I mean we talk all those languages so my accent would be so much different from a Tibetan coming from Dharamsala. Given that, the identity crisis always happened because of our standards of living.

Tibetans, even though in India, we retained our culture our parents brought back from Tibet. It was raw. It was passed down first hand and folks like me and people older than me taught by their parents about how life was in—that we directly brought in everything Tibet had. We brought in the Tibet culture. Our parents didn't adapt it to India. No, they didn't. They just retained what they had in India. So our culture grew stronger amongst ourselves.

But overall in the whole Indian subcontinent, it stuck out like a sore thumb because it was something so different that the Indian people have not seen. Having a refugee status or a stamp in India, again, it's—I mean the Indian government has done amazing things for the Tibetan community. Amazing and we can probably never ever be able to repay most of the things. In terms of socializing Tibetans. But again, that was the government, but when it came to the population they always identified us as being different. Probably because India is so much different in terms of culture, their features, from the rest of Asia. That us coming in there, hanging so freely around India not as a tourist but—us without looks and features around India, we were clearly targeted as being either—we were called Bhutias. That was a name given to us by Indians.

**CL:** What does that mean?

**JU:** From Bhot. Bhot means Tibet. So people living in Bhot is Bhutias, right?

**TL:** Is it like a derogatory term or just—?

**JU:** No. At start but then it somehow has been taken in as a—I have met so many people who've had the last names as Bhutias. Today.

**CL:** That's a Hindi word?

**JU:** It is more—yes I could say it's more Hindi and more Nepali, yes. Because Bhot was what India called Tibet. And people living Bhutias. So people actually adapted it to their last names. I know a lot of people have Bhutias as a last name. So that's pretty interesting. We're trying to create an identity there. I don't know but then we had it so it was a fight right from the start. Creating the government in India. Today when a Tibetan is doing business in India—everything. I think we are fighting it every day. From where

I come in Kalimpong, we have more politicians running for office. Tibetan people running for office in that little town than anywhere else in India. Office for in government. Is out of Kalimpong. Local offices. We are successful in Kalimpong maybe but are we successful everywhere else? No. But when I come out of Kalimpong if I have to cross the border to go to different state the fight starts all over again. So that was happening right through. We are called Japanese, Chinese, Filipino. Everything.

**CL:** So how is that different to America with the people that may be even more ignorant to your ethnic identity?

**JU:** So in America, actually you're just clustered as Asians or Chinkys. It's funny. When I went to the Asian-American Pacific meet we had like two hundred fifty people either from different parts of Asia or Hawaii. I was there explaining who I was. So that is how weird it is. They were either like, "Are you Filipino?" "No." "Indonesian?" "No." "What are you?" "I'm Tibetan." "Really?" It's happening even with the Asians. So it's a crisis. We're fighting it every day. Every day. Like I told you initially. If someone asks me, "Are you Filipino?" I can say, "Yes." The conversation ends right there. Let's go with we're Tibetans. Then you are basically creating an identity for yourself with that person. It's something that I think every Tibetan faces anywhere in the world. Maybe it's because we haven't been like, more out there.

**CL:** Do you think that might be a Tibetan trait to really hold onto that identity? Not that it's a bad thing at all to do that but people get lumped into groups. Like my background might be German and English but I'm just an American or I'm just a Caucasian and then there's Asians or what not. Because in my own work, my own research, oftentimes you know you bring up, you may bring up and address issues like that and say like, "You're an Indian citizen. Are you an Indian?" "No. I'm a Tibetan." "You live in Asia. Are you an Asian?" "No. I'm not an Asian, I'm a Tibetan." So this like strong Tibetan identity is in the forefront all over. Many, many people I talk to.

**JU:** With the Tibetan identity.

**CL:** Yes.

**JU:** Yes. That's what we have, right? That's what we go out with. And then when someone asks us where we are from, we always say we're from Tibet. We're Tibetans, right? But again, one—that's in the forefront for us. For us. But it's challenging every day. Challenging every day. You can look at—I mean I could look at a Japanese and say, "You are Japanese." I can look at a Chinese or an Indonesian or a Filipino and I say, "Okay. I can identify that." But when it comes to Tibetan, they're like, "Where are you from?" Even amongst the Asians. And if that is happening in such a small division of people who look alike but yet distinct, I really don't blame Americans for not knowing where we are from or what we look like. I mean I wouldn't probably call it ignorance but I would say it's more about tomorrow. When an Asian comes in a great day would be when an Asian comes in with a pretty dark feature like me. Asian features go like, "Are

you Filipino?” “No.” “Are you Tibetan?” That would be my identity. That would be when I’d say that’s a job well done. We should be proud of that.

**CL:** So when the census comes around in 2010, and they ask for your ethnicity, are you going to mark Asian-American or are you going to mark other and write in Tibetan?

**JU:** It should be Asian-American, but then I would like to know what division of Asian-American is. When I talked about the database in Minnesota about Tibetans—see I mean we’ve got a bunch of Tibetans. I don’t know. It’s been growing. The last time I remember was about eight—I don’t know. I can’t even remember.

**CL:** It was about thirteen hundred.

**JU:** Yes. Thirteen hundred. And for community that small that’s pretty good and pretty visible given that we have a Tibetan restaurant today in Minnesota, right. We’ve got Tibetan stores and we see so many Free Tibet bumper stickers around. It’s pretty cool, right? And when that happens, I think the Minnesotan—the state, if they recognize Tibetan nationality, these are visible. Besides the people you have the culture that we offer in the state. If that has been accepted, you say like, “Hey, Tibetans are a group of people from Asia but do they have political reasons behind it.” Or is it just that we are not being seen? When you talk about Asian-American, I’ll gladly be an Asian-American but I want to know what the breakdown of Asian-American is. If I’m not on that I’m the other person. Because I don’t have an identity there with Asian-Americans. So that’s what I talk about when we talk about identity crisis. Being recognized.

**CL:** Any other questions? Well, I wanted to thank you for being a part of our project here.

**TL:** Thank you for your time.

**JU:** Thank you. It was good.

**CL:** This is for you. Here you go.

**JU:** Thank you. Thank you.

**CL:** Yes. Thank you very much.

**JU:** And the tradition goes this way. Thank you.

**CL:** Thank you.