

Tenzin Yangdon
Narrator

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Interviewer

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Minnesota Tibetan Oral History Project

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CL: Today is 24 September 2005. My name is Charles Lenz and today I'm interviewing Tenzin Yangdon. We are at the Minnesota History Center.

Can you say your name for the tape?

TY: Sure. T-e-n-z-i-n Y-a-n-g-d-o-n.

CL: And can you tell us a little bit about where you were born?

TY: I was born in Rajpur in India. It's a small town in a state called Uttaranchal now.

CL: I should have asked you this first, but how old are you?

TY: I'm twenty-two.

CL: Where did you go to school in India?

TY: I went to a couple different schools in India. At first I did my preschooling in—I schooled right in Rajpur, which is . . . I don't remember the school's name but it was a small, I think, Christian-type school. And then after that I went to . . . after my preschooling I went to North Point School, which is also in Rajpur. Like it's almost kind of like a block away. After that I went to St. Thomas in Dehra Dun. Like it's Dehra Dun—it's like city. So I went there for my third grade and then I went to Hill-Grange Prep School, which is a boarding school and I was there until I moved to America.

CL: So how was life like in India when you were a little kid growing up?

TY: For me it was mostly school and just after school playing games and things like that. I don't quite remember very much. I was just like a kid going to school and then after school we'd play games and do our homework and things like that and in boarding

school it was a little different because you were actually living at school. And it was more disciplined. But everything else . . .

CL: How old were you when you went to boarding school?

TY: I started boarding school when I was in fourth grade and I was there until I finished sixth grade.

CL: Was that like a Christian school as well or was that like an English medium school or—?

TY: It's an English medium school. All the schools that I went to were English medium schools. I don't think it's a Christian school though.

CL: So do you remember like your first time going off to boarding school what your impressions were of being—how far away from your house was the school?

TY: The school was maybe like a half an hour away from where we lived. So it wasn't very far. But because my mom was—like my dad was moving to America and my mom decided to move to Nepal for a brief time so for me to go to resettle in Nepal and attend school there would be sort of problematic so they just decided to send me to boarding school. I think when I went into school there was a lot of shopping. You have to buy all your uniforms. New uniforms now since it's a different school. Not only uniforms. You need games clothes and you need like school pajamas sort of. There's a lot of like different clothings that you have to wear at certain times of the day. Kind of like that. Books and everything the school provided. Because it was all included in our fees, school fees. Other than that it was basically—and we ate in a huge dining hall and stuff like that.

CL: How long were you in that boarding school?

TY: I was there for three years.

CL: So your dad moved to America right at the same time you were going into boarding school?

TY: I don't exactly remember, but I like know the reason like why I was being sent to it was . . . well, I think my dad was actually, he was actually in America at that time.

CL: He was already.

TY: Yes. He had already left for America and after he had already left my mom had decided to move to Nepal. So that's why I was—and it was maybe like a couple months or a month or two after he had gone I was admitted into that school.

CL: Do you remember when your dad was leaving? Did your family talk about that at all or did you understand what was happening?

TY: You know, I don't remember anything. I do remember that there was once like we were all in our grandparents' home and they were talking about it. But I wasn't included in the conversation. I was just a little kid hanging around. So I don't like—other than that I don't remember anything. I don't even remember when he actually left or anything like that.

CL: Do you have any sisters or brothers at all?

TY: I have a younger brother. He's here, too.

CL: Do you remember him at all? Did he have more of a reaction, being so small and not really understanding what was going on at all?

TY: Actually he like started—he was in boarding school then. Like I was in a day school and he was in boarding school, so I guess I would have seen more of what was going on and he was mostly at school.

CL: So did he go in like right at first grade then to boarding school?

TY: Yes. He went to the same preschool that I went to and after that he went to Colonel Brown School and that's where my dad taught like before he came here. So he had been going there ever since like I think first grade. After preschool.

CL: How many years later then was it before you got to join your father in the U.S.?

TY: I think he left in 1992 and we came here in 1996. So that's two, three, four, five, six. That's like almost five years.

CL: Four or five years.

TY: Four or five years. Maybe he left in 1993. I don't remember, actually. But we came here in 1996.

CL: And were you able, your whole family, to go at one time?

TY: Can you repeat the question?

CL: Were you able, like you and your mom and your brother, were you all able to go at one time to visit your dad?

TY: Yes. Yes. Like we all came here together. Like dad was already here. So we joined him in 1996. Me and my mom and my brother.

CL: Do you remember when you found out that you were going to be going to the U.S.? Did you have any reaction to that at all?

TY: The most apparent time was when we were actually in Delhi and we were taken to the American embassy. We had to go through an interviewing process or something like that and doing health checkups and all that. And we were with a whole bunch of other Tibetan families who were also going to America to, I guess, reunite with their families. So yes, there were a whole bunch of other Tibetan families that were going with us and that were there for the interviewing process. So I guess that's what made it more apparent to us. That we were actually going somewhere. But it was a fun time then because a whole bunch of kids getting together.

CL: Did they interview you as a family or did you have to be interviewed separately?

TY: I don't remember. Actually, I don't remember. But I remember being at the embassy office. I remember getting health checkups. But I don't remember if we had actual like individual interviews or not.

CL: Do you remember getting on the big plane and the trip over here at all?

TY: I do. Yes. Actually. It was kind of . . . it wasn't like my first time getting on a plane or anything so it didn't really make that much of a big difference. But it was just that we were . . . because we had so many people together, so many Tibetan people together, going there. That's what made it more fun, I guess. Because we were all like at the airport. We were just sort of running around and doing things that we shouldn't be doing. Not like anything bad, but . . .

CL: Creating more chaos than usual at Delhi International?

TY: Yes.

CL: How about when you finally got here? When you finally got to the U.S. Did you come right to Minnesota?

TY: Yes. We came—our flight was from Delhi to France and from France to Chicago and Chicago, I think, is where we actually went through the immigration process and then we came here in Minnesota.

CL: Did you have any first impressions about America when you first got here?

TY: I did. I saw downtown when we were driving from airport to like our apartment, which is in Minneapolis. I saw downtown like really far away with all the lights and I thought it was really pretty and it was like the first time I had seen . . . I guess I would say like the city sort of.

CL: So you got to see it at night for the first time?

TY: Yes. At night. With all the lights and everything. So that was my first, I guess, viewing of American downtown city.

CL: You liked that. You thought that was really—?

TY: I thought it was really pretty. I was really, like I just . . . the first moment I saw it I was just like, “Oh, my God, what is that?” Then they explained to me that’s downtown. We’ll get there tomorrow or maybe day after.

CL: How about was there anything that really surprised you about—I mean besides seeing the big city? When you were first here in the U.S. getting used to things? First of all, do you remember what time of the year you came?

TY: It was in August. End of August. So we came here and it was really nice to see my dad again at the airport.

CL: Had you not seen him since he left?

TY: No. I saw him. Like he did come and visit once but I was in school then and like they don’t allow too many outing days no matter what unless your parents are sick or something like that. So I guess . . . yes. He did, like he visited me for like half an hour and that was about it. Like when he came to visit. And after that I hadn’t seen him, so it was like my first time meeting with him again after so many years. That was very exciting. And then like when we got here we were in our apartment so it was kind of I guess new for me to be living in an apartment. That’s something I haven’t done before and after that it was—so after a couple days we were admitted into school. So we just began school and got to see the mall and downtown. Getting like health checkups at the Hennepin County Medical Center. So we went through all that process.

CL: You said you got to see the mall. Did you go out to like the Mall of America or someplace?

TY: Yes. We went to the Mall of America. Our uncle took us there, actually. It’s not our real uncle. It’s just my dad’s friend. We call him our uncle.

CL: What was your first impression of a place that’s—I mean it’s huge. It’s so much bigger than anything in India.

TY: It is. Yes. I guess it was just . . . we were enjoying, I guess I should say. Yes. Just the new . . . all the new things that we were seeing and experiences. Those things. Yes. But I guess even in India we are very—like we have gone to like fairs. We call them maila. That kind of thing. So it wasn’t—we didn’t think it was very much different than that except for that it was indoors.

CL: Was there anything that really surprised you about the U.S. at all? Something that you weren’t expecting?

TY: It's very clean. Like going from the mall. Going from our apartment to the mall on the freeway and just seeing the city and everything. Just shocked by how clean the city was. I guess we weren't used to that cleanliness in a city or something.

CL: What about the people? Was there anything about the people that was surprising?

TY: People. I guess the only difference was that we were in America so there were a lot of like white people, black people and other Asian people. We saw like . . . I mean like before in India like we know Chinese people look like . . . all Asians kind of look similar but didn't know anything about Vietnamese or Cambodians. I knew there were Thai people but I haven't seen them or anything. So just, too, like see all these people from different backgrounds, like different origins in one place together. That was kind of, I guess, a surprise, I should say. But it was also a good experience.

CL: Since you came to the U.S. and pretty much went to school right away did you have any first impressions of school or anything that really surprised you about the change in schools?

TY: I guess the only change was we were . . . like in India we sit in one classroom the whole day and the teachers go to different classes to teach, not the students. So over here we were moving one class after another. We had to go to our different class and teachers are already in the class. So that was a change. And then I guess coming from a boarding school, being in a day school again was a change. Having to like—I guess more time to spend with parents and things. That was a change, too.

CL: Is that a good thing or a bad thing do you think?

TY: I think it was a good thing. Like, I love my boarding school and I liked being there. I liked everything that we did there but it was just nice to be back in a home again with parents and sort of experience that part of life again where it's like—I have gone to day school before attending boarding school but at that time I was really young so I don't remember anything about that.

CL: How about your brother? Did your brother have any—because he'd pretty much only been in boarding school.

TY: Yes. I think he really enjoyed being in a day school again. It's like more freedom, less discipline. Other than . . . we didn't have like many problems adjusting or anything. We spoke English before we came here so that wasn't a problem. But just being in day school again and the different classroom settings and the openness in the classroom were—everything is more engaged. Those were like changes.

CL: So did you have any trouble adjusting to the—the teaching style between here and India is pretty different even in an English medium school. Was that a challenge at all for you?

TY: I didn't think it was very much different, actually. We were—the only thing is like we . . . the students were very like open. All the students like were very, I guess I should say, sort of free. They like, very . . . they participated in everything in classrooms and I think back in India like in school, the teachers' style of teaching I guess wasn't much of a change or anything but just the students. Like reaction to the teachers was different here.

CL: Yes. How was that? How was it different?

TY: It is what I said before. They were more open. It was just like the whole classroom setting was really free. It wasn't like, "Oh, there's the teacher." Not be scared like in India, sometimes teacher it seems like are really powerful person in classroom so everything has to be very respectful, order and everything. But here it was like—I'm not saying it was disrespectful or anything, but it was just . . . I liked the freedom that we had even in a classroom.

CL: Yes. I think in a lot of other countries teachers just kind of . . . that position just kind of comes along with it. With an air of respect from other people.

TY: Yes. Yes.

CL: Not that, like you said, not that we don't respect teachers here, but it isn't the same. It doesn't have the status level as it does in other countries, you know.

TY: I don't know if I would . . . I mean I think they have the same status level. It's just that there's more understanding between like—not that there isn't there, but it's just a different level of understanding here between the student and a teacher. Like the relationship here is I think more different, more relaxed, I should say.

CL: How about uniforms? Did you have to wear uniforms at your new school?

TY: Yes. And it was a change here to be out of uniform going to school. So now I have to think about oh, what I'm going to wear the next day and things like that. So shopping for my own clothes and everything was a change. I didn't do that in India. Everything came with whatever my parents got me.

CL: How about being the—how were the other students? Being in your new school for the first time and coming from another country, do you remember? What did you—did you talk about this in class with the other students at all or try and help them understand where you're from and things like that?

TY: That's interesting. I think even in middle school we did like . . . because I came . . . like my background was so much in like . . . most of my time was spent in English medium schools. Even like I as a Tibetan didn't know very much about my Tibetan background, I should say, except that I was a Tibetan. But beyond that I didn't know very much. So coming here it sort of made me think more about that because I guess it's

just a place where people get to like really question where we're from and get to know our background better and things like that.

So here, like and—also I got to engage with Tibetan people more here because there were some other Tibetan students in our school and . . . yes. Also like I also got to like—I guess in classes or not only like Americans, we had like Americans—they are Americans but they were like people from different backgrounds like Mexico and Philippines and all these people from various backgrounds just like for me was really new. But also like having grown up in India where it's like we have . . . and also growing up with all Indians and not Tibetans very much, it wasn't for a change of like . . . that change wasn't very much, I guess I should say.

CL: Did you make friends pretty easily?

TY: In the beginning it was kind of . . . I guess I should say wasn't like—it was strange a little bit. Like it was a little strange. But after like a while, yes, I did have friends. We didn't do very much after school or anything but I didn't have any problems in the classroom or anything. Adjusting.

CL: So you went to high school here and you graduated. What year did you graduate from high school?

TY: I graduated in 2002. June.

CL: And then you went off to college right away?

TY: I took half a year off and I began college in like . . . was it February? Yes. February of 2003. So I went back and met with my grandparents and also actually went to different pilgrimage places and things like that.

CL: Back in India?

TY: Back in India. Yes. I went back to India. That year.

CL: So how was your—can you talk a little bit about your decision to go to college or selecting colleges?

TY: Like in high school and even like ever since middle school I was really interested in biology and becoming a doctor, I should say. So I was like—we worked on like—I took several biology classes in high school that were like college level classes and then when I like I wanted to go to the University of Minnesota College of Biological Sciences, I didn't get admitted there so I decided I will take a year, like half a year off and then after that I went to—and when I came back I started applying for colleges again and I got into like a few different schools. I decided to go to Hamline because I remembered that like one time when I was at the career center in my high school and I was looking for the

biology program, schools with good biology background, and Hamline's name was in there. So I figured that would be a good school for me.

CL: Yes. Yes. Was there anything else about Hamline that really attracted you?

TY: It's a small school so, yes. After I guess, like coming to Hamline I feel for me a small school was better. I don't want to get lost in a big school or anything. Not that I will but . . . yes. That was, I guess, a good thing for me.

CL: How has your time at Hamline been?

TY: It's been great, actually. After coming to Hamline I took a few English classes and those classes seem to be really interesting so I decided to take more and more and now I decided to major in English as well. Along with biology.

CL: Where do you think this is going to take you career-wise? Do you think you're leaning more toward the bio side now or more towards the English side?

TY: I do want to go to med school so that decision is like . . . is there. But other than that, like taking more English classes and getting to study literature more, I guess we are like . . . I'm like more interested in writing as well. It's like I thought about what a career, what a writing career would be like and things like that. Also not only that, I want to like really improve like in my writing style and everything. That's why.

CL: Do you think there's something about young Tibetans and becoming doctors that's—I mean because we've had four young college age people working on this project and three of the four of you are med school bound. So do you think—is there something? That's a pretty high percentage. I mean, I don't think if I had four non-Tibetan Americans students working on a project, I don't think we'd have a ratio like that of everyone wanting to go to med school. So is there something about Tibetan youth at all and medicine?

TY: I don't know. I know a lot of Tibetan kids who are studying political science, psychology and they are going to law school. Not a lot. Like a few are going to law school. I guess we happened to get the kids who were interested in medical school here or something.

CL: I got the bio bunch is what you're saying. [Chuckles]

TY: Yes.

CL: At least I got one English major. That was good. I know that you are part of Tibetan Youth Congress or TYC. Can you talk a little bit about your role and how you got interested in TYC?

TY: Sure. Tibetan Youth Congress was founded in 1970s. In 1970 actually, and this year is the thirty-sixth year that it's been functioning. It's a non-government organization and it's been very much at the forefront of the Tibetan Independence Movement. In America I got to learn a lot more about what's going on in Tibet. Also, my dad has been very much active. So he was a big influence in my decision as well. He has been like . . . he has been TYC member since his college and high school days and he also—here he was very much active. He was working for that organization, for our TYC here. He worked as general secretary and then public relations.

So after that, like when he was working I got interested in the things that he was doing. For me like here, like learning about all these incidents and things happening in Tibet . . . I guess I should say like, just as he was working he sort of like engaged me into like working as well. I paid attention to what he was doing and things like that. Also I got to talk to several people and talking to older Tibetan people and getting to know what they think of this organization. Why are they participating? What's the importance of this organization and things? After learning all those things I got interested in TYC.

CL: And what is your position now with TYC?

TY: Right now like our term is just coming to an end, but I am the TYC Vice President for our TYC.

CL: For the regional Tibetan Youth Congress.

TY: Yes.

CL: Why do you think an organization like TYC is important to the Tibetan community?

TY: I guess for Tibetans, Tibetan Youth Congress, the members, are only Tibetans and it's important for Tibetans to have sort of have like an organization that leads the Tibetan Independence Movement because like there's . . . I mean not only Tibetan Youth Congress. There's Tibetan Women's Association and other organizations. So it's sort of like . . . the movement to keep alive our movement for independence for Tibet. I guess that's the like the main goal of Tibetan Youth Congress.

CL: And do think it's . . . the Tibetan Youth Congress, TYC, is based in Dharamsala and we have a regional office here, a regional Youth Congress. What do you think the importance of that is? To have such a large body so far away from the main organization.

TY: I guess before it was mostly concentrated, the Tibetan Youth Congress was mostly concentrated in India and in Europe because at that time there were more Tibetans in India and some in Europe. Now that Tibetans have come to America as well after the resettlement project,¹ more Tibetans are in America, it's important for Tibetans

¹ U.S. Tibetan Resettlement Project, a program that became effective under the 1990 Immigration Act passed by Congress. 1,000 Tibetans were granted Visas to come to the United States.

themselves to keep their movement alive. So wherever they are they should be. Even if they don't start a regional Tibetan Youth Congress they should be engaging in those things and for us here to have, I guess. people who had previously participated and were active in TYC now like who are here and like they have—for us to have them start this organization and have the younger generation take over and sort of continue this movement, that's like . . . I guess I should say the goal sort of. To keep that movement alive from passing it from one generation to another whether they move to America or to the farthest corner of the world. There are still people there and those people who are foreigners to us, they should learn about . . . I mean I guess it's our responsibility to teach them what's happening in Tibet. Where is it? And how we can help them.

CL: So you were just talking about TYC and about informing foreigners. So what do you think—you mentioned before that TYC was a very Tibetan organization, you know. It's only Tibetans. Run by Tibetans. Started by Tibetans. Do you think that it is more of a Tibetan organization or that they do have this outward goal of educating foreigners or non-Tibetans?

TY: It is . . . the goal of Tibetan Youth Congress, I should say, is to keep the movement alive. And the way to keep the Tibetan Independence Movement alive would be to educate people. One of the ways is to educate people and that's like educating not only Tibetans but also non-Tibetans. So that all is a part of the movement.

CL: TYC has often been seen, and you mentioned it, too, that it's been on the forefront of the independence movement. And oftentimes it's considered or referred to as much more radical than His Holiness the Dalai Lama's Middle-Way approach. Do you feel that? I mean is that your personal view too that it does tend to take a pretty strong stance on wanting independence and not autonomy? Can you talk a little bit about its role in that or the views, the general views of TYC?

TY: I mean I guess most Tibetans are very like . . . the majority of the Tibetans, like mostly they follow what His Holiness says. But for Tibetan Youth Congress to have this goal for complete independence, I should say, it's not sort of a radical idea. It's . . . Tibetans have their birthright. It's their birthright for self-determination. I guess it's not that Tibetan Youth Congress is going against His Holiness or anything like that. It has never been like that. Tibetan Youth Congress is, I guess I should say, very respectful of what His Holiness has proposed.

But it's also important for the Tibetan people to take up that responsibility and determine their own fate as well. His Holiness, I guess . . . like I don't—like His Holiness' Middle-Way approach is widely accepted by non-Tibetans, I should say. But for Tibetans you can see that majority of the people want complete independence and that's the, I guess, the question that's there. I don't know how to say this.

CL: Well, maybe that's just a Western view then that TYC is much more vocal about announcing their desire for complete independence instead of autonomy. Do you think that's true that they're just more vocal about it than other people?

TY: I don't . . .

CL: And that because of that, that makes them seem more radical even though they may be more in the mainstream because not as many people are standing in the street shouting it that TYC is seen as a more radical group then.

TY: I don't know. Like I guess some people do think TYC is more radical. I think TYC is more open about what the demands and what the wishes of the Tibetan people are and it's an organization that's run by the Tibetan people. The people who are running this organization are elected. So they have the peoples' mandate and what Tibetan Youth Congress puts forward, I guess, is sort of what is like . . . what the people are asking for sort of. So I don't—I mean even SFT, Students for Free Tibet, is also like, you know, they are also Tibet support group who are supporting Tibet for complete independence. So there are other organizations out there that are fighting for complete independence. It's not just TYC. But because TYC is like all Tibetans . . . I'll just leave it at that.

CL: You just mentioned SFT, Students for Free Tibet, and I know that you've been a part of that as well. Can you talk a little bit about your experience with SFT?

TY: Like I haven't been involved with SFT very long but because I'm in Hamline and I attended an SFT conference last year and that was through Hamline and it was like how they . . . I liked how they engaged students, how they like sort of prepared students for grassroots organization and for, I guess I should say, just building these like chapters in their school system and going about that way to educate people. So that's why I felt it might be good for me to get involved with SFT so we can bring SFT to Hamline and educate even a few Hamline students about what's going on in Tibet and things like that.

CL: I think that's an important point, because not only are you involved in SFT but you were kind of instrumental, very instrumental, in bringing SFT to Hamline. So did you—was that really—you think your main goal was that . . . let me ask it this way. You mentioned that an important part is . . . you mentioned SFT is kind of a support group for Tibetans and you also mentioned SFT as being more of an outreach group educating Westerners. Which area do you think you would like the SFT branch at Hamline to be?

TY: I think right now that we are just starting at Hamline. This is our first year at Hamline. I think it's more important for us to educate what SFT is doing. Why is SFT there? There's a reason behind having an organization. So it's like to make, I guess, to make SFT more apparent on campus and to like get more Hamline students involved and to I guess not only Hamline students but staff and faculty and everybody to sort of build awareness sort of for Tibetans, for the Tibetan cause I mean.

CL: The structure of SFT, how it's run and governed and whatnot, is very different than TYC in the fact that there's many Westerners involved in SFT. Do you think that that's a big deal? Does that change the structure of the organization at all that it's not a completely hundred percent Tibetan run organization?

TY: I don't know about the structure but I think just having Westerners participate and be involved in SFT is a great factor to our independence movement. It just shows that it's not just the demand of the Tibetan people. It's also Tibetan supporters who want that and for us to have a great number of supporters in the Western world I guess it helps our movement a lot.

CL: How do you think—I mean Hamline isn't an anomaly in the fact that the SFT branch was started by Tibetans and it's largely run by Tibetans. But there are lots of SFT branches all over the country and a lot of them are in areas where there aren't a large number of Tibetans or any Tibetans at all. So, you know, in a lot of cases it is a completely Western run group. And now that you've been to a big regional conference in San Francisco last year, do you see or do you feel that there would be a big difference between groups like yours at Hamline or the one at the U that had a large Tibetan involvement and other groups, say, in other parts of the country that are mostly or hundred percent Western involvement?

TY: I think it's the same whether Westerners start it, non-Tibetans start it or Tibetans. Basically it's . . . even there are Tibetans who are not interested at all in the Tibetan cause and very few I would say but there are. So it depends on how people react. It's the peoples' reaction I would say to certain injustices happening in other parts of the world and I mean even I—like I'm not only . . . like I guess caring about the Tibetan cause. It's just being aware of what's going on around the world. It's not a Tibetan problem, it's the world's problem and so it's not just, I guess I should say, like . . . I can't recall what I'm thinking.

CL: Do you hope to bring a different perspective to SFT or to project a different perspective because you're Tibetan and the Tibetan involvement at Hamline? Do you think that there's going to be something like very unique being in the leadership and being Tibetan? It isn't just a personal view. It's a personal experience for yourself. Do you think that that adds a lot or makes issues more important?

TY: I think . . . I mean for me as a—like I'm a Tibetan so for me to be involved in these is more personal. And to have Westerners, to see Westerners get involved in SFT, and there are. There's a group called International Supporters for Tibetan Youth Congress where Westerners are involved, I think. I mean it's just like, I don't know if I'm like bringing anything new or anything like that, but I just know that whatever that we do maybe some other people will catch on and they will continue with that.

CL: I think that, as a personal statement here, I think that you being involved in SFT or any Tibetans being involved in SFTs is a really good thing. Because having spent a lot of time with Tibetans all across the U.S., all over Asia, many Westerners grasp the issues with Tibet but as any person who has ever spent any amount of time with Tibetans or especially with Tibetans in dealing with Buddhism there's . . . as with any culture there's little things, there's lots of things that you can read. There's so much more that you can only experience. And the issues of Tibet and freedom and Tibet and autonomy or independence are so much more intricate than what you can get in a pamphlet or a book

or whatnot. So your personal involvement in it and personal passion in it I hope will be able to communicate on a much more intricate and personal experience to other people as well. So I think, personally, I think it's a really good thing.

TY: Thank you. I hope so, too.

CL: And I'm glad, I'm really glad that some of us, being a former Hamline student myself, some of us have talked about SFT for a long time. But that someone finally has given up time in their busy schedule and started it. And it being started by Tibetans is a very important thing, too. And there are more Tibetans at Hamline now. I remember there was one when I started Hamline and now there are . . .

TY: Four.

CL: I think four with a new Tibetan student starting this year. And a lot of the Tibetan youth that I've talked to in America tend to like to go to schools, and are much more comfortable in college settings, where there already are Tibetans. So do you—first of all, one, do you agree with that? And second of all, do you see a place like Hamline as being kind of a new comfortable place for Tibetans and hope that it can enrich maybe the college experience for Tibetans somehow?

TY: Oh, I don't know. It's just like, when I decided to go to Hamline I wasn't thinking of—I wasn't thinking at all in lines of whether there are Tibetans there or not. I was more concentrating on where I would be able to get a good education. Like education in what I'm interested in. And even like from like middle school I moved . . . I was first attending Anthony Middle School and I moved to Burton for eighth grade and there were no Tibetans there. I was the only Tibetan there. And after that I went to high school and there were Tibetans there, but that wasn't my decision. I didn't decide to go there because there were Tibetans there but because they had a good program there. So like in terms of deciding where, what school I went to, I looked more at the programs that they had rather than whether there were Tibetans there. And I can't say about other students. Some people might, some Tibetans might prefer to be in a school where there more Tibetans. Some might not. I don't know.

CL: Has the college experience shaped or changed you in any ways that you didn't expect?

TY: I think so. Just for me, like picking up the English major and just getting a chance to learn a lot about American history and British history through English literature. That, it's changed my ways of thinking. Sometimes for the better. And just how, I guess, I think it's made sort of a good impact on me. I'm more able to . . . I should say, I guess, analyze things better. Situations.

CL: Let's talk a little bit about the Tibetan community here now. You came in 1996 and that was a time when a lot of families were coming over here. We had a lot of Tibetans here since 1992 and 1993. The first that were arriving. And then with family

reunification in the community it almost tripled in a couple years there. So now you've seen the community for almost ten years. How do you think the community has changed in those ten years?

TY: Our community has gotten a lot bigger. At the same time, people are gaining more independence financially, I should say. Not only that, now that people have families here they are more concentrating on how to—for families who have children, for them I guess it's a concern of preserving Tibetan culture. Having their kids, I guess I should say, get a taste of what the Tibetan culture is and what their background is. So the community is very strong about that and we have a lot of good programs. Even like for me. I didn't know how to write Tibetan at all when I came here and I went to Tibetan Saturday schools and I actually learned a lot there and I thought that was really important. Although I didn't quite finish completely there. But it sort of . . . and then for—they have dance programs. Now they're even teaching Tibetan instruments. A lot of parents are very involved in that. They send their childrens there and that kind of thing. So I think our community is doing a great job to create sort of a well-knit family.

CL: Why do you think that's important? Both the knitting together, like you said, a well-knit family or teaching kids about writing or Tibetan language, instruments, things like that. Why do you think those things are important?

TY: I think for one our language is like . . . preserving language is important, I think. I mean the most . . . like it's a distinct culture. Like our culture. The reasons. . . we say our culture is different from the Chinese. In what ways is it different? Like we're all people. But we have like different ethnicity. We have different languages and we have different cultures and what are the things that makes us different? It's important to preserve those things. Our community, to be together . . . it not only helps the Tibetan people . . . like it's a good way to keep our sort of like, the Tibetan movement alive as well. People can get more information. They have more access to the Tibetan community and things like that.

CL: What do you think—first of all, what do you think culture is? How do you think you define that?

TY: I don't think like culture is—I can't really define culture because it's so broad. It's not just the way that people dress or the way that people talk. There's a lot of historical background to it, I guess I should say. I can't really define it in a sentence or a word.

CL: Do you think it's important to preserve it?

TY: I think so. It is important to preserve but it's also important to root out the negative things in your culture as well. It's culture . . . just when we say we want to preserve our culture we don't mean we want to preserve everything that is good and bad. It also—culture changes over time. It's an evolving process, I should say.

CL: But culture, as culture changes, you gain new things, new good things but you also gain new bad things. So do you think—but eliminating those bad things, do you think that that changes who you are?

TY: I guess that depends on the person. I don't know how to answer that question.

CL: Since you brought up change, Tibetans have changed a lot since they've been in India.

TY: Yes.

CL: Tibetans have changed here in America, too, and there's this real hybridity now of the cultures that many Tibetans would—I mean when they first got here coming from India, you talked about seeing the city lights for the first time and going to the Mall of America and everything being new. But now, you know, you walk down the street and wouldn't have a second thought about anything you see and likewise anybody else seeing you wouldn't have a second thought about who this person is or what not. So you've had this melding like many other Tibetans, most Tibetans, I'd probably say. This melding of the two cultures. You've created this kind of like hybridity. So do you think it's important to now preserve this new culture that's been birthed between something that was . . . something that is very Western and something that is very Tibetan? Do you think it's as important to preserve that as well as what may have been in Tibet at one time?

TY: I guess the way . . . like the way we live our life right now, where like when we first came here we weren't used to the tall sky tower buildings or anything like that but now that, like you said, when we come here we see those things and we don't give a second thought to it. That kind of change, like I don't really . . . I don't know like how . . .

CL: Let me rephrase it then. Do you think it's as important to preserve who you are today as it is—is it as important to preserve who you are today as it is who you were? Because, let's face it, there are Tibetans in Tibet doing a lot of the things that the community spends a lot of time trying to preserve but a very few of the Tibetans that live in Minnesota now are that. They're something else. Still Tibetans. But they're this product of Tibetan culture and Indian culture and American culture and European culture and everything kind of mixing together. So do you think it's as important to preserve who you are today as it is to preserve what the people were at one time?

TY: I think so. For me, like personally, to have grown up in India, to have grown up in America and to have like, I guess for me I should say, I grew up in Indian culture. I grew up in American culture. Tibetan culture sort of just came along because I am Tibetan.

So for me, like, my . . . what shapes me is I guess I should say, a lot of those backgrounds that I've been in touch with, that I've lived in. So I can't change that like out of the blue or anything like that. That's what I am sort of. But like just . . . to also preserve that Tibetan culture that was there is also really important because that's a part

of our history. That was there. What makes it more important to preserve that is because it's being destructed right now. It's not just that we should preserve it because it's being destroyed but because it is I should say like, it's important to preserve sort of . . . what makes this world so diverse is that there is so many distinct cultures and it's important to preserve those distinct cultures, I think. Because it's what shapes us as well. Like I'm not—like I've grown up in India. I've grown up in America. But I'm also a Tibetan. And for me, to be a Tibetan and to not know what my culture is like, I think . . . I sort of sometimes I guess it leaves . . . one sort of emptiness within.

CL: So what do you think it is that's different between Tibetans and Americans? Because you just mentioned your culture . . . things were being lost. Even in America every time we build a new building or rezone something, a lot of Americans are much more, seem much more disconnected with their own history in that we are losing it as well. Famous places around the U.S. The way things are. So what do you think it is that's different about Tibetans and Westerners? The Westerners seem to be much more accepting or ignorant on the fact that certain aspects of their own history are being lost as well.

TY: I think like for—like living in America and seeing how much of American history and American culture that has been preserved, I mean as time goes along there are some things that will be lost. You can't help that. But I think so far, what I've like learned just living in America for this many years and seeing so much American literature, documentaries and things like that, I think . . . not only that just like, sights . . . so there has been a lot of effort to preserve that part of American history. So I don't know . . . like some things will be lost. Like you can't help that. But I think . . . just like the Tibetans have done. Tibetans have put in a lot of work into preserving our language which is—there's so many schools in India, Tibetan schools where we teach Tibetan language to Tibetan children because our language is being sort of distorted in China, so I can't like . . . I don't know. There is a changing process but it's also important to preserve what we had before. That's like my opinion.

CL: So you're one of four young college-age people that we've had working on this project, the Tibetan Oral History Project. Going out interviewing people. Can you talk a little bit about how you came to the project?

TY: I received an email from you and I thought it would be interesting. I was interested in the project as well so I decided to apply for it and I was accepted. So that's how I got started.

CL: What was it about the project that attracted you?

TY: I felt that it would be good. The emphasis here to preserve sort of the Tibetan history in Minnesota. Like the lives that Tibetan people have lived in Minnesota is also important because everything . . . this all like sort of becomes a part of like Tibetans who are here and for our future. Like for our future generations to know like how people at

first came here and to have like a direct reference back to that. I thought it was important.

CL: Do you think that reference is going—that direct reference back for people in the future, do you think that that has more of an impact for Tibetans that will be living in Minnesota in the future or Tibetans that are maybe living somewhere else in the future?

TY: I think just, it's . . . I mean it is nice to have everything collected. Like how Tibetans sort of . . . like this whole Tibetan Diaspora, like how it actually happened. Like how this process where Tibetans came to Minnesota, where Tibetans came to America. I mean they're a direct reference back to that. References back to that. But to actually hear peoples' experience, you know, I thought that was kind of . . . I mean that's what interested me.

CL: So how do you think this project then will speak to people in the future? Or how do you hope that it will?

TY: Well, I hope that people who come after me can maybe fifty years from now, people can go back and sort of have this access to their parents or their grandparents' history of how they actually got started, how they started their lives in America and things.

CL: What do you think this project says to someone, to a Tibetan that might be, say, in India if they picked up a copy of this and read it? Or maybe what do you hope it would say?

TY: I guess for one there's been an effort to preserve Tibetan diasporic history and second, is that . . . I mean I guess it would be sort of interesting to have that available to somebody in India like fifty years from now. Oh, how did Tibetans come to Minnesota? Well, we can find out and look that up.

CL: We were talking just a little bit ago about the difference between . . . kind of between cultures and hybridity of cultures, of preserving this maybe idyllic view and preserving what you are here now and you just mentioned about the project preserving Tibetan diasporic history or diasporic culture and not preserving just straight Tibetan culture. So do you think the project is really—do you think the project has better preserved that, preserved this cultural hybridity of things or kind of direct idyllic Tibetan culture?

TY: What I think is that ever since the Chinese occupied Tibet, Tibetans moved out—not moved out, but so many Tibetans went into exile and then from there how Tibetans moved into different parts of the world, it's all sort of this whole process. Like at different times. I should say it's all these . . . within that process all that changes that happen. Like, I don't know about the ideal but I should say all that changes that happen. It's what's going to shape the people in the future. The Tibetan people. So I guess like

that's what we're trying to capture, I think . . . is what has shaped us through these different processes in Tibetan history.

CL: Do you think it's important to show that more often? Because I know if you take like the Landmark Center in St. Paul. Every year there's like a Tibet Day. And there they feature—they teach a little class on Tibetan writing and language for Westerners and they showcase a lot of Tibetan traditional jewelry. Sell a lot of books about Tibetan culture. Have a fashion show. All the different styles of dress from different areas in Tibet. Dance, music, food. But nobody really talks about Tibetans here in Minnesota. Do you think that that's a mistake not to directly deal with or directly bring up a topic of Tibetans now? Tibetans living in Minnesota?

TY: No. I haven't attended the Landmark event so like I really like don't know how much—I haven't experience it at all, so I don't like know.

CL: Or even you mentioned before we started this interview that the TYC is going to be having a Tibetan Youth Day or that there is a Tibetan Youth Day and the TYC is participating in that. Do you think it's important to talk about Tibetans now? The culture now as well as things past?

TY: I mean, definitely. We might have not made it more apparent but we are doing what we can to preserve what's there now which is not only bringing in what we had in the past but also sort of implementing new changes which we have learned through our lives living in America and bringing that into what makes us now.

CL: Is there anything about the project, you know, working on the project, that you discovered that you were surprised by or anything that you've learned about others or the community or yourself or about Tibetan culture?

TY: I enjoyed sort of interviewing different Tibetans and hearing their experiences here which sometimes were similar to what may dad experienced after having moved here and also just like sort of having—I learned like a little bit about oral history. So that was interesting as well. I didn't know very much about oral history. I've heard of like, oral stories that . . . I don't know how to say it. But that have been passed on for generations and things but they're not recorded and they're not like kept in a museum or anything like that. In the archive. And just learning about that process, also. A new experience. A good experience.

CL: Is there anything you'd like to add to this at all that we haven't covered in the interview? Any last words?

TY: I'm hoping that this project turns out well and I'm hoping that this will be a good reference to Tibetans in the future who want to look up Tibetan history in Minnesota and I really enjoyed working on this project.

CL: And I'm going to ask you one last question here.

TY: Okay.

CL: You mentioned, and we've talked a lot about Tibetans looking back on their past. Future Tibetans looking back on their past. We've talked about what maybe Tibetans in India might think of this project. What do you think Westerners are going to get out of this?

TY: I think for like different . . . there are other projects like Hmong project or the Indian project where they sort of, I guess, recording the immigrant history. So just to have Tibetan immigrant experience, that's like—most people generally sometimes think the immigrant experience should be sort of similar from different like . . . but it's like it has it's own differences within that. Like Tibetans. Not all Tibetans will have the same immigrant experience. People came from different backgrounds might find it easier. Some might find it difficult. So just to have all that range of difference in immigrant experience for Tibetan people recorded in Minnesota history, that's what I find . . . that's what I think is like really important, is to have all the different experiences recorded. We're not like all well off. We're not like . . . nobody was like . . . when people in the future can go back and look at it they sort of get this truth, real truth about like what actually happened. Like how it happened.

CL: All right. Well, I want to thank you very much for not only participating in this project but participating in this interview as well. You're a valuable asset to us and to the community at large or anybody else that's going to touch this stuff in the future. So thank you very, very much for your participation and time.

TY: Thank you.