

Common Folk Oral History Collection
Interview OR.0016.01 : Tape 1

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Location of Interview: Mag Xiang, Panam County, Tibet Autonomous Region, China

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Name: Chabsi Mimang [tib. chab srid mi dmangs]

Gender: Female

Age: 54

Date of Birth: 1946

Abstract

Chabsi Mimang was from a poor, landless family in the Old Society. At the age of eleven [1957], her family sent her to be the servant of a butcher in her area and she did not return until 1961, two years after the Democratic Reforms began. In this interview, she talks about the difficulties of her early life under the old system, the changes that occurred after 1959, the mutual aid teams that were formed and the villagers' fears that the old system would return. She talks about how at age sixteen she joined the Youth League, and at the age of nineteen, she was selected as an "activist." She describes the reactions of the common people to the new political education sessions and to the redistribution of property during the democratic reforms. She also describes the establishment of the new class structure, class separation and class persecution-- which she describes her conflicted feelings about.

Tape 1

Q: First of all, tell us in detail about your household.

A: My family was a landless household. My mother is eighty-four years old now and my father died at the age of seventy.

Q: [... unclear] how old are you?

A: I am fifty-five years old [54 in western system]. I remained at home until I was eleven.

Q: What did you do at home up to the age of eleven?

A: Until eleven, I looked after the cows. When I was eleven, there was a butcher in our village who was classified at the time of the Cultural Revolution as a middle-class farmer. He had arable land, and I became his servant from the age of eleven to thirteen. It was during the old society. I became thirteen in 1959 when liberation came into force.

Q: During your time as a servant, what were your main duties?

A: I had to herd goats and sheep, and do whatever they asked of me. I used to go with my late father to Gyantse on business trips [for her master] to sell rapeseed oil. We traveled a lot. We exchanged rapeseed oil for rapeseed grain in the Gyantse area. Then we brought back the rapeseed grain and pressed it into oil. Then we would go back to Gyantse and exchange the oil for more rapeseed. My master sent me for this oil business along with my father. We had to face a lot of hardships doing this.

Q: What do you get in exchange for the oil?

A: We took rapeseed in exchange, and then we converted that seed into oil and sold it.

Q: Was there any profit in this business?

A: I don't know. In exchange for one tin of oil, we got ten khe of rapeseed. The highest rate we got was twenty khe.

I stayed with this family until the age of twelve. When I was twelve, after Liberation, the family became very poor. However, I still had to stay with them for another two years. All told, I stayed with them as their servant for four years [from age 11-15].

Q: Did this family give you food?

A: The family I served was not very bad. They were butchers and were considered to be low caste. So they considered that although I was a pauper, I was from a clean caste, so therefore, except for bag and all other food items, whatever the quality of the food, they distributed it equally to all the family members.

When my Tibetan boots wore out, I pleated hay and repaired them and carried on in that condition for a long time. My late father couldn't repair his boots and went with torn shoes. He faced many difficulties. My father was bedridden for a long time and faced a lot of hardships.

Because my mother was at home, the family I was serving gave me a small plot of arable land that was the worst quality field [tib. tha shing (tha zhing)] as my wage. It was just one dongke. I worked very hard and I was very careful in work so they gave me some treats and some used clothes. At this time I shaved my hair and didn't keep long hair as it was difficult to get time to clean it. I wore a knitted red cap in those days. Consequently, when I went to sell oil wearing this, many people called me "little monk" [injung]. Nowadays, whenever I wear good clothes, I feel awkward as I recall my past. I used to wear a shaggy woolen dress with goat skin attached as sleeves [very poor quality].

Q: Whom [what lord] did your mother serve?

A: My mother was a subject of the Gabshi [aristocratic] family of Gyantse. My grandmother died of beatings. My mother was born in Lhasa. My mother was a subject of a different lord than my father. Later they were working under one master. After my grandmother died in Lhasa, my mother was brought back to her hometown by her relatives and sent to a poor lord who was known as Labrang Traga [tib. bla brang brag dkar?] in our actual birthplace. My mother had ten children, five of whom died and five who are living. We are three daughters and two sons. My parents looked after my youngest brother and my elder sister is at Gyatsoshung [xiang]. I was left in the lower village.

Q: Were the children kept in different places?

A: The children were kept everywhere. After democratic reforms, everyone got their own land, goats and sheep.

Q: During that period, did you need to pay any "human-lease" taxes [tib. mibo] to your lord?

A: Yes. we needed to pay a mibo fee of three ngüsang per year. My grandfather's lord was known as Gyango Gyaku and the family name where my father served was Chugpo Thungchog of Dűjung district. Now that place is Dűjung Xiang. We had no choice but to serve under them. I mostly went to sell mustard oil.

Q: Did your father need to pay mibo?

A: Both parents needed to pay the mibo fee. They earned money to pay their mibo by selling tamarisk (tib. pema [sphen ma]) bushes to people [for firewood]. My parents had a few poor cows, but we never had a chance to have butter at home. We would put a little fresh cheese in our tsamba for our meals.

Q: Where did you get the money to pay your mibo tax?

A: We sold butter and also collected tamarisk bushes for firewood. We got these from the hills and sold them to people in other areas. During those days, these bushes were abundant in the hills due to there being fewer people. By selling the pema and butter, we were able to pay the mibo taxes.

In our village there were fourteen families. Eleven of these were taxpayer households [treba] and three were poor families. If we failed to pay the mibo fee, my parents were beaten by their lords. My parents suffered great hardships in their lives. Sometimes they had to pay their mibo by borrowing money from other families. Later, they had to work very hard to save some money to pay back their loans, and at the same time be able to feed their children. During those days, unpaid loans were known as "sel khung [tib. sel khungs]." In Tibetan, this term means the part that has to be cleared up. By the time the democratic reforms came into force [1959], my parents had been able to clear up their loans. In 1959, when I was thirteen, democratic reforms came into force and in 1960, I was able to return to my own home at the age of fourteen.

Q: What was the reason you returned home [from where you were working as a servant]?

A: Due to democratic reforms, every individual received land, goats, and sheep. Consequently, I had to look after these. At home our agriculture fields were badly damaged by frost and bad weather and we had to face a lot of hardships. After returning, we joined a mutual aid team.

Q: What happened in the initial stage of democratic reforms?

A: In the beginning, many Han Chinese came and gave speeches that were translated and explained to the common people. Just before the delimitation of classes began, some members of the households that had been tshab [agents of the landlords] had been appointed as the leaders of our village since at that time we did not know who would be classified as tshab, middle-class and poor-class.

Q: Were these tshab households treba households?

A: The tshab were the people who ordered the landless households to do work in the village. They were the people who caused the hardships for the landless families.

Q: During this period of time, what did those tshab leaders do in the village?

A: They held many meetings and taught people many songs like "socialism is good" in which the words of the songs raised the consciousness toward socialism.

The villagers were very afraid of them [the Chinese cadres]. They did not consider that the coming of the [Chinese cadres] was a good thing. The [Chinese cadres] told us that they had come to our village for the purpose of helping us and they wanted to hear our life stories in the old society. However, many people were afraid to say bad things about the old society.

Q: Why were most common people afraid?

A: Because they had experienced great oppression during the feudal serf system. People were afraid that even if the Chinese destroyed the old system, it might come back later and they might again face oppression at the hands of the agents of the land owners. In fact, they did not believe that those lords would be overthrown.

Q: Before the Work Team [tib. las don ru khag] came, had you heard about the uprising in Lhasa and the Dalai Lama's escape to India?

A: We heard that the Dalai Lama escaped from his bedroom in Norbulinga, leaving behind even his quilt and blankets.

Before that, Gyantse had been badly damaged by a flood that washed away many families. At that time, a road construction project was launched by the Chinese to build a road from Gyantse to Shigatse. Many people participated in that construction. The Chinese Government was paying construction workers with silver dayan coins from China. My older sister went to work on that. The Chinese government also distributed plenty of rice due to the acute shortage of food among the masses in those days.

The Work Team that arrived in our village announced to us that the Chinese Communist government had toppled the feudal serf system and the Chinese Communists had come on our behalf. In our village, there was a Chinese cadre named Xiao Dong. His interpreter was a woman from Kham named Tsering Chöde. She used to lecture us about democratic reforms. We planted trees in the village. The families in our village were divided into several small groups. In each group, a person was appointed as the group leader. Then some people who had better knowledge or understanding were selected as "activists" (hurtsönpa [tib. hur brtson pa]) among the villagers.

After this, they started to calculate the degree of oppression committed by the lords and the rich families. According to the amount [as they calculated it], those who were found to have certain degrees of oppression were categorized as logjöpä [reactionaries]. The next category was the tshab. The houses of the families in these strata were confiscated and sealed [locked up], and the individuals were detained. The nation was very wise in making such a policy.

In the initial stage, they [the upper class or tshab] were appointed as leaders and were told to preach to the people about democratic reforms. In the next stage, the work team arrived and started educating people about democratic reforms. However, the people were still afraid of the tshab because during the feudal serf system they had to rely on them even for food. The people were still afraid that if they criticized them now, bad consequences may take place afterwards.

Nevertheless, the analysis and classification of social enemies, like the tshab, was carried out and those labeled had their houses confiscated and sealed. All the serf-owners and ngatsab [same as tshab] were reformed. During the time of the feudal serf system, two families called Nangsog and Shechey even claimed to have rights over the wild berries found on the hills. The common people had no right to eat even wild berries. I myself went to steal some of these.

All of the houses of the reactionaries and agents of the landlords were sealed up. From their confiscated houses, common people who did not have clothing and shoes got clothes and shoes, etcetera. The Work Team workers resided in the common people's houses and distributed food and clothes equally. Still, the common people had doubts. In their minds, they had fears that if they utilized the things they were being given, afterwards if the feudal lords returned to power, they might beat them again. The Work Teams were giving assurances to common people that the old feudal serf system would not return to power and that they need not worry about this. A People's Liberation Army soldier told people, "All serf-owners or tshab are your enemies. They sucked your blood and sweat, and made you suffer. We have come to Tibet according to the order of Chairman Mao. We made a long March with no food to eat and we even had to hunt birds for our survival." There were no roads and the People's Liberation Army had to cross over the mountains.

During the reform period, meetings were held daily and classifications were done. Villages were also divided and placed under different rural townships [ch. xiang] and other rural administrative units. For example, Mada xiang and Maphu xiang. Then the system of Mutual Aid Teams was established within the villages and leaders were appointed for each group.

Q: Who were appointed as the team heads?

A: The heads of teams were selected from the poor people.

Then the calculation of the amount of seeds to be sown for each field was done [for land reforms], and seeds were distributed accordingly. People in our area were not efficient and hardworking so they misinformed the authorities in order to get more seeds than were actually required for sowing. Thus, they fell into trouble during the harvest payment with the authorities [since this was based on the amount of seed received rather than the actual yield, so they had to pay more grain than they had]. At this time the authorities divided the fields.

Q: How much land did you get?

A: We had eight to nine members in our family and received ten khe of land. Previously these fields belonged to two families. One was classified as a middle class farmer and the other as a rich class farmer. We shared fields that had belonged to two feudal lords named Tregang and Gyasa. These two feudal lords were classified as "reactionaries" and their houses and property were confiscated.

Q: What was the reason for Gyasa being classified as a reactionary?

A: He was the village headman and had power and huge land holdings. He had four or five male and female servants. Our village area had one reactionary and one tshab household. The Tregang family was the tshab. He [the head] was sent for reinvestigation in 1962. Gyasa's land, house and all of his belongings from the things in his altar room to his animals were confiscated. They were given a small house to live in. The head of the Gyasa family was imprisoned.

Q: How and why was Gyasa's house sealed? Tell us about it.

A: At a meeting, the Chinese announced that the reactionary Gyasa had suppressed and bullied the common people. Also in that meeting, all of his past conduct, such as suppressing, humiliating, and oppressing the common people, were proved to his face. His action had reached the limit [of oppression] and as a result of this he was put in jail. Thus, he was jailed and his house was sealed. His family members were put in their donkey's corral to live. They were provided some basic necessities.

Q: How were his properties distributed among the common people?

A: All of his property was distributed to the poor people. Their land was distributed among the poor households and their clothes and food were also given to those poor households who were short of these items.

Q: What was the method of distribution?

A: Grains and tsamba were distributed by measuring ladles-full. His lands were distributed to the poor. Clothes were given to the poor. Most of his property was distributed between his previous servants and the remainder to the common people.

Q: Did they give a lot of property to the servants?

A: Yes, that is right. The servants who suffered the most were given the largest part of the property and the rest distributed among the common people.

Q: Did Gyasa undergo public struggle sessions [thamdzing]?

A: Yes, he had struggle sessions.

Q: In your memory, during the democratic reforms, how did the first struggle session take place?

A: First of all, information was sent declaring that so and so social enemies would be facing a public struggle session today and people from each area were asked to prepare to say slogans at the session in which the criticism and beatings were to take place. In addition to these, each village was required to provide some people who would be responsible to hold down the enemies' heads, or do other activities in the meeting. Now, when we think of it, those actions were not right.

Q: Please explain to us in detail how you carried these out.

A: First, of all the local militia (tib. yūma [yul dmag]) and security personnel (tib. denja leje [bde 'jags las byas]), or in Chinese, gonganju, would bring the person to the meeting place or the site for the struggle session with his head bent down. Then the common people had to yell slogans.

Q: How did the people yell slogans?

A: For example, when Namtso, the person who was supposed to be struggled against, was approaching the public meeting, one person from the crowd shouted slogans such as, "The evil Namtso sucked the common people's blood and sweat so doesn't he deserve to be uprooted and destroyed?" The common people who were assembled at the site then needed to shout slogans loudly. For example, "He deserves to be uprooted and punished." Then he was brought and his hands were tied behind his back in an upheld position to a board behind his back. Then his body was pulled back and forth several times.

Q: During that period what did they say?

A: Among the crowd, one of his servants criticized him saying that when he was at his house as a servant, during the day he didn't have enough food to eat and at night he faced severe cold due to insufficient bedding. He said that he had suffered a lot until the democratic reforms came into force. Then he shouted slogans such as, "Long live Chairman Mao," and "Long Live the Communist Party." The audience responded to him and shouted these slogans. The Work Team officials sat on the stage/platform and the guilty persons had to stand below with their body bent over (at the waist). Then people would stand up from the audience one after another and criticize the reactionaries. During the criticism, the speaker would shout a slogan like, "Should so and so be destroyed?" And the audience would respond by shouting, "Destroy." At this early time, I did not know how to criticize them. People might have been taught to do this by some people, but this was not done in our place.

Q: How did they do it in your area?

A: In our area they said, "All audiences and comrades please listen carefully. Today, I will demonstrate how so-and-so sucked the laboring masses' blood and sweat." Then the name of the guilty person would be called. For example, "Mapang Chönden, you have sucked the blood of common people and made them suffer. Today, all of your faulty actions must be brought to the notice of

the common people." Some people said things to her (at her ear) but did not assault her. But in several cases, some people unnecessarily beat her. Sometimes, while conducting the struggle sessions, there were several incidents involving pulling hair right out of the scalp.

Q: Previously there was no experience of struggle sessions and also no one had any knowledge of how to criticize verbally, so how did they learn?

A: By learning. The Work Team taught us to do this and that. But during the struggle session, the members of the Work Team did not tell the people to beat the reactionaries. If people beat the reactionary, the Work Team would protect the guilty person from being beaten a lot. The Work Team explained to the common people, "You have been called here with the aim of abolishing the ideology of the reactionaries, but not to assault them physically. Their ideology has to be reformed and they must be made to realize their past mistakes in order to liberate the ideological system."

Q: Those who were selected for the training of struggle sessions, how did they do it?

A: The Work Team taught the common people that while conducting struggle sessions against the social enemy, you need to explain the humiliation, oppression and suppression which you had faced during the feudal serf system. But sometimes people made mistakes while they accusing the reactionaries. For example, since speakers were required to demonstrate their suffering during the old society, once one person said to a tshab that, "When I dug manure/fertilizer for you [in the old society], you provided a ladle of barley beer to me." He really wanted to say that during the old society, the representative ordered him to do many kinds of hard work, but while he was demonstrating his suffering, he made a slip of the tongue. In the past, the servants were ordered to take out manure [from the bathroom] to be placed on their lord's agricultural field. When they completed the work, the lord gave them some food, and after the food, the servants would be given some barley beer by the ladle. It was called Kyog Khyimshar. Therefore, his accusation became praise for the lord. Such laughable incidents took place during the struggle sessions.

Q: At the time of reforms when you beat other people, what did you think of it?

A: At the time of criticizing the feudal lords, I also got angry with those reactionaries. The reason being that I suffered a lot as I didn't get enough to eat. Though I was only a child, I had anger and hatred against them. In the old society, while we were herding animals on the hillside, we were forced to pick up all the small stones that the animals dislodged and which fell on the lord's fields. And during the grain threshing after the harvest, we had to get up very early in the morning before daybreak and bring our own cattle to thresh the lord's grain. That was a real hell.

During previous times, there was only the traditional dance and song. At the time of reforms, every brigade would come and if today [as in a day in the past] there was a meeting in the xiang, the dance troop formed by the local young people would raise the communist flag, beat drums and cymbals, and dance just before the public meeting was held. Thereafter, they would stop the dance and leave their musical instruments on the ground. Then they [the work team] would explain or declare the reason for that day's public meeting and that the struggle session against so and so person would be carried out. Then we would sing the song called "Socialism is Good [tib. jitso ringlug sang]." In this song, there were words like "socialism is good" and "socialism is the family of the people."

After the reforms, the Mutual Aid Team system was established and the leaders of the Mutual Aid Teams were selected from among the poor people. A wooden board declaring the quantity of seed sown on each field was put on everyone's fields.

Q: What was written on the long wooden placard?

A: First they wrote the name of head of the family. Thereafter, the number of family members and the size of the field according to the volume of seed as measured by a container called Dredang kharu. It was used to measure grain. At the end of the column on the wooden placard, they wrote the total amount of seed issued to the family. Then they gave a stamped (land) certificate to every household on which the above information was written.

Q: What is the certificate?

A: The certificate [tib. lagdeb] was a paper on which all information was written such as the size of the field. It was issued during the democratic reforms. Our village and Sogang Village, which was next to us, had to use more seeds on the fields than other villagers. It was said that the government would provide us the seeds for the land. When they reported the amount of the seeds for the land, people of our village claimed a larger amount of seed than they required for each unit of land with the dubious intention that they would be able to eat the excess seed grain. But they didn't understand that the amount of seed grain issued to them would remain the same at the time of accounting after the collection of harvest. Therefore, people faced a hard time in the later stage. Our village and the Second Brigade had taken the highest amount of seed grain. During the Mutual Aid Team, for awhile we did not need to sell or give the grain to the government. Later, the government collected the donation grain and the selling grain. The donation grain was a tax levied on each field and the selling grain was the grain that each household had to sell to the government. Since people reported a high amount of seed, the government collected the donation and the selling grain according to the seed that they provided [based on a percent of the estimate yield]. Therefore, people had to sell and donate a lot of grain to the government. The government could not be blamed for this, but, rather it was the people who initially made false reports. After some of the families deposited their donation and selling grain, their grain stock was empty and they cried.

Q: Which was the highest percentage of tax, the donation grain or the selling grain ?

A: If a family had a large amount of land, they needed to sell more selling grain and had to provide more donation grain to the government. Many poor families who had gotten less fields, needed to provide donation grain but they did not need to sell the selling grain. They were exempt from the selling grain tax. So the amount of donation and selling grain really depended upon the amount of land. During the Mutual Aid Team period, people needed to compete and we really had a good time for a while.

Q: At the time of democratic reforms, when was the Mutual Aid Team established?

A: The mutual aid team was from 1959 to 1966. In 1966, a movement called the "Three Great Educations" campaign of corrective measures was held and many units attended the meetings.

Q: When did the People's Commune begin?

A: Initial training was conducted in 1966 and the actual People's Commune was formed in 1967. However, the Mutual Aid Team remained until 1966.

Q: You have said that people were happy during the Mutual Aid Team. In what way? Why?

A: After the reforms, people were given land and animals, and taxes were less, therefore people were happy and enjoyed themselves.

Q: At the time of Mutual Aid Teams, what were people saying?

A: People were saying, "We own the land and if we are allowed to continue in this way, we will be happy. We don't want more than the present happiness and not less than the present happiness." That's what the people were saying.

When I reached sixteen years, I was appointed as an "activist." Earlier, old people faced hardships and at present when we possessed our own land and animals, they felt very happy.

Q: Who had to give donation grain and selling grain?

A: The middle class and the upper class peasants. Both of these categories were required to provide the donation grain tax and the selling grain [tax].

Q: Did the poor class farmers have these taxes?

A: The poor farmers didn't have big fields so sometimes they were exempted from having to sell grain.

Q: A few families were levied high donation grain taxes. Were there ever situations where some families ended up with no grain left at their homes?

A: There were several cases of middle and rich class farmers having nothing left in their food storage because of the high taxes. Nowadays, since the abolishment of the class system, all are unified. Earlier there were five different classes, namely, the poor, the middle and rich farmers, the serf-owners, the tshab and the reactionaries.

Q: ..., how many families were there in your village at the time of reforms?

A: There were fourteen.

Q: Among the fourteen families, how many were reactionaries?

A: We had one reactionary, one tshab, one rich class, six middle class and the rest were poor families.

Q: In the village, did the farmers give land on lease between themselves?

A: Those who were beggars would give their land to others on lease. They were not able to work, so by begging they got sufficient food and drink. Otherwise, there was no one who would give out their land on lease.

Q: At what age were you selected to the post of activist member?

A: When I was sixteen, I joined the Youth League (tib. shönu detso [gzhon nu sde tshogs]). That was during the Mutual Aid Team period.

Q: How were you selected to the post of Mutual Aid Team activist?

A: I was very hard working, and I was clever and I had love and loyalty to the PRC. Due to these reasons, the government had been watching my activities. At home, the Work Team remained and I was admitted to the group of activists. Still, initially I refused to join the activists and also declined to join the Communist Party. But the government asked me to join these so I had to obey it. I was nineteen years old.

Q: Before your admittance into the Youth League what were you doing?