

**Tashi Khongertsang  
Narrator**

**Dorjee Norbu and Charles Lenz  
Minnesota Historical Society  
Interviewers**

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

**August 24, 2005  
Tibet's Corner (Tashi Khongertsang's Restaurant)  
Minneapolis, Minnesota**

**Dorjee Norbu** - DN  
**Tashi Khongertsang** - TK  
**Charles Lenz** - CL

**DN:** Hi. My name is Dorjee Norbu and today is Wednesday, August 24, 2005. We are about to interview Tashi Khongertsang at his restaurant, Tibet's Corner. And present with me today are myself, the primary interviewer, Tashi Khongertsang, and Charles Lenz, the secondary interviewer.

Can you just say your name and spell it?

**TK:** My name is Tashi Khongertsang. T-a-s-h-i K-h-o-n-g-e-r-t-s-a-n-g.

**DN:** First of all, can you tell me a little bit about yourself? Where and when you were born and some general information about your family?

**TK:** Well, I was born 1974 and I was born in India. My parents moved to Nepal. That's where I grew up and I went to school in India.

**DN:** And where did you go to school in India?

**TK:** Kalingpong. That's like Northern India. I went to a Catholic school.

**DN:** A Catholic school?

**TK:** Yes.

**DN:** And were there other Tibetan students at that Catholic school?

**TK:** Oh, yes. Absolutely. Yes. You know, like back home, if you go to the Catholic school it's supposed to be like a private school where you have better education and stuff. That's how I was—learned to speak a little English and stuff. So that's like a privilege, actually.

**DN:** And did you have a hard time kind of building relationships with the students?

**TK:** Not at all. No. Not at all. Because I mean I started my—I mean I started school when I was young. At the same school, you know. I didn't have any problems with anybody.

**DN:** Do you have any siblings, any brothers and sisters?

**TK:** I do. I have a sister. Her name is DD and she lives here in Minneapolis.

**DN:** So are you the only son in the family?

**TK:** Yes. I'm the only son. Yes. Just me and my sister. She's younger and I'm older.

**DN:** And what did your family do in Nepal?

**TK:** My parents, they had a restaurant, actually. They were in the restaurant business when they were in Nepal. So that's how I always wanted to open a restaurant here in Minneapolis.

**DN:** So speaking of Minneapolis, when did you first become interested in moving to the United States?

**TK:** Oh, that was when I was really young, because I have families in Seattle that came here like fifty years ago, I think I should say. And then my sister came here when she was really young and then after that she got a little homesick. Then she came back to Nepal. Then she went back to school there again. And after that she came back and then I—you know, like I've always had family here, so we always communicate in letters and stuff. Yes. I always thought like I will be here some day. Just loved it. I mean I just love coming to this country.

**DN:** So then did you come here as part of the thousand Tibetans immigration?<sup>1</sup>

**TK:** No. No. No. I came individually.

**DN:** Can you explain the process a little bit?

---

<sup>1</sup> 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.

**TK:** Yes. Sure. Yes. Actually, I was in my teens when I came here. So pretty much like my aunt, she adopted me. That's how I came to America. That's how I got my green card. And now I'm a U.S. citizen.

**DN:** And did your aunt live in Minnesota?

**TK:** No. She lives in Seattle, Washington, actually.

**DN:** So when did you move to Minnesota and why?

**TK:** Minnesota, I think that was 1996. I came here because my sister was living here at the time and actually I was planning to move to New York. Then on my way I came to see my sister and then, you know, just like one week, two weeks and then I just happened to stay here. I just liked it. Everything was fine here. So I just ended up here. And I've been living since 1996.

**DN:** Is there like things about Minnesota that you liked?

**TK:** One thing I like about Minnesota is, I see so many of my own people. Like Tibetans.

**DN:** Large community here.

**TK:** Yes. Exactly. And then when there is like gatherings and stuff is always fun, you know. Just to see my people.

**DN:** Can you just describe like your first few months or—?

**TK:** The first few months . . . in Seattle, actually, I should say. I was very young and it was during winter, which was raining at the time in Seattle, all the time. It was really depressing. I came here and then I was—little strange to see like the neighbors not talking to each other and like, you know. Those are things that got really . . . yes. That was really hard for me. And after a couple months I should say, just was fun. I mean I started meeting people. More friends. It was fun.

**DN:** And have you traveled back to India?

**TK:** I have, actually. I went back to Nepal like two years ago. I went to India, too. Because I went to India. The reason I went to India was like I've never been to Dharamsala before. So that's like a first time I was going back. So I went back to see where His Holiness<sup>2</sup> residence is. So yes.

**DN:** And how was that experience?

---

<sup>2</sup> His Holiness the Dalai Lama.

**TK:** It was great, actually. When I—yes. When I got to Dharamsala it was like little Tibet there, you know. I see all these Tibetans there. It's really, I mean, amazing. I loved it. I loved it. I just loved it. Yes. It was fun.

**DN:** And did you also attend teachings when His Holiness was here?

**TK:** Absolutely. Yes. I always do. Yes. It's always like everything—you know, I mean, I respect so much—yes. Absolutely. Whenever I get a chance. Like in the United States, whenever he is here in States, I try to. But sometimes like staying—like restaurants, especially restaurant business, is really time occupying or something. I can't make it. But I really, really like—in my heart I always want to go.

**DN:** When you first moved to Minnesota, what were some things that you did? Like your jobs?

**TK:** Oh! What I did. Okay. I worked a couple like department stores, like Marshall Fields. I worked there for a little bit. I didn't do a whole lot of jobs. Actually like—I came to America like really young but I had only like three different jobs. I've always been like sticking to one job all the time. I don't like going job hunting. I just don't like that stuff. So I'm always like sticking to one job. So after that, yes, I got like an offer from Bloomingdales and then I went to Bloomingdales. Worked there for a couple years. After that I came here. Opened this place up.

**DN:** So like when did the idea of opening your—or starting your own business, when did that first come to your mind?

**TK:** Because I'm always dedicated when I'm working, you know. I'm working for somebody I'm always giving a hundred and ten percent. So what I thought is like, if I do it myself it will be a lot better. I mean I can do more. And that's like—yes. Business. I mean I didn't grow up like working for anybody. So when I came here that was a little hard, you know, working like eight to five. That was a little hard, actually, to tell the truth. So to open up my own business, like I can—I mean no matter what I don't have a boss, you know. I can do whatever I want, pretty much.

**DN:** So it's that feeling of kind of independence?

**TK:** Absolutely. Yes. I do. Yes. Independent part. Yes. True.

**DN:** So is there any other reasons why you opened the restaurant besides—?

**TK:** To introduce my culture, Tibetan. Because like the Midwest, especially like Minnesota, and I heard like—I mean there's so many people they don't even know about Tibet and stuff. So you know, this is like part of introducing our culture, our people where we from, what things we are going through right now. Like people can learn a lot when they come to my restaurant, actually. So that's the reason.

**DN:** A good reason. Yes. And what were some difficulties that you encountered being one of the first people in our community to open a Tibetan restaurant?

**TK:** Very, very challenging. Restaurant business is really challenging. I mean there's so many restaurants. We are like really small. Like really, really small compared to the big ones around here. Just my neighbors. They all like big, big ones. And then like—I mean I made my mistake, I think. I mean like—but I was always learning. And the people were really nice around here. They always gave me like second chance, third chance. That's like first when they came here they didn't experience, you know, when they ate something, they didn't really like it. Pretty soon they came back. They thought, "Okay." And me, too. I can feel them sometimes. I always wanted to. Yes. The best I can, actually.

**DN:** What type of like food do you serve here?

**TK:** We serve Tibetan food.

**DN:** Do you serve mostly Tibetan food?

**TK:** Yes. That's what I tried to say. Yes. All Tibetan.

**DN:** Are there some like non-Tibetan dishes?

**TK:** There are but, yes. Yes, there is. There is. There is a couple dishes like more Nepali more Indian dishes. That's how we got influenced, I think.

**DN:** Different cultural influences?

**TK:** Yes. Living in Nepal and India like myself.

**DN:** And what type of customers do you get usually?

**TK:** Usually more, I don't know. Like more liberal. [Chuckles] People want to—they're not scared of trying different foods.

**DN:** New things.

**TK:** Yes. Exactly. Like Tibet, you know. They think like, "Wow!" They think like—I don't know. Some are a little scared to try a food. Some people, I mean most of the people that come here have traveled somewhere.

**DN:** Have known—?

**TK:** Yes. Exactly.

**DN:** They know about Tibet or—?

**TK:** Right. Exactly. There's a connection here or there. Yes.

**DN:** So what is like the general reaction of customers to Tibetan food? Is there like a dish that's really popular?

**TK:** Oh, that momos.<sup>3</sup> Momos are the best here. Yes. We do our momos and we try to bring it a steamer so they can eat really fresh. They enjoy. Because some people they don't know how to eat momos. I try to explain it sometimes, you know. Like how we eat. Usually eat it with hand. Take the tip off. There's like juice inside. Usually people ask for like forks or knives. Then they take away all the best part of the momo, I guess. But sometimes when I get a chance I try to explain but sometimes I'm really too busy to explain that. But then they really enjoy momos.

**DN:** Because that's all part of the culture.

**TK:** Exactly.

**DN:** So we just hosted the Minnesota—the Tibetan Association of Minnesota.<sup>4</sup> We just hosted a Midwest party. Did that bring a lot of business to your restaurant?

**TK:** You know, you'll be surprised. Actually, yes, that's what I was thinking, too, but we were closed at the same time. We want to close during His Holiness time.<sup>5</sup> We were closed. We wanted to have a good time, too. So it is not only business all the time. So yes, we want to be part of community. We want to do what they are doing. Yes. But I was right. One of my friends, he was here from Dallas, actually, for that occasion. We were sitting in the bar next door and then like, yes, I was seeing a lot of people coming by because we were closed. "You lost one business." He was like counting, you know. [Chuckles] "There's another one." Yes. We did miss a lot of customers but still that's fine, you know.

**DN:** In talking about community, what do you think of the Tibetan community here?

**TK:** The Tibetan community here. I think it's like, to me, I like seeing this new generation, guys, kids. Like you guys doing, getting involved. I like seeing that more, actually. I'm not into this older generations. The mentality. I'm more into this young generation.

[Tape interruption]

**DN:** So have you noticed any changes in the Tibetan community over your period of time in Minnesota? Any positive or negative changes that you've noticed?

**TK:** I should say—as I said, like yes, this younger generation is getting involved.

---

<sup>3</sup> Tibetan dumplings.

<sup>4</sup> Tibetan American Foundation of Minnesota.

<sup>5</sup> Tibetans celebrate the birthday of His Holiness the Dalai Lama on July, 6<sup>th</sup>.

**DN:** That's a positive?

**TK:** Yes. This thing, I think, is positive to me personally. So, yes. My friends, actually they're getting more involved now in our community. Which I like.

**DN:** And how do you find it different from the community that you grew up in? Like in India. Can you compare the two communities? The Tibetan community here and the one in Nepal or—?

**TK:** Not really. I mean Tibetans are actually—one thing I like about Tibetans is like, you know, wherever we are in this world I think, you know, we always stick together. Wherever we are. We try to build like little things together. That is always growing. Like Nepal, too. I mean Nepal is always like that but when I came here I was surprised, too, when I saw like during New Years or like some occasions. We always come together and then we are celebrate—we are always involved. It's not a big difference.

**DN:** And are you involved in any groups or are you active in the community?

**TK:** Not really. No. See, this is what I do. This is like introducing my culture. This is like—to me, as I said, it's not—I mean I'm doing business, for sure. But still part of what I'm doing is like I'm introducing myself. Like our culture, our people.

**DN:** Through this restaurant.

**TK:** Yes. Everyday thing. And then I always have to stay positive. I don't want them to experience—when they come to my restaurant to see someone, you know, with a bad experience. So I have to always be positive. So when they see me they think like, “Oh, this Tibetans are nice people,” or something. I mean I have to keep up with this thing.

**DN:** Because you're representing the larger community.

**TK:** Exactly.

**DN:** I'm just curious. Is there a story behind why you named it Tibet Corner? Tibet's Corner?

**TK:** Sure. Yes. I mean, yes, is a little—always wanted to put a Tibetan name on it because there are so many other people like Nepalese opening up Tibetan restaurant and then people get it confused with Nepal and Tibet. You know, they're two different countries. People think like, “Okay, Nepal.” Because I mean I have friends—before I opened this place up they went to some other restaurants and they think it's a Tibetan restaurant or something. But it is not. They are totally different—we are totally different country, different—everything is different. So that's the reason I put it up there. Tibet's Corner so that people know, okay, it's Tibet's Corner. So they say it. I have some really beautiful names I have come up, you know. But still Tibet's Corner was like something, you know, people who can drive by and see. Tibet. Okay, that's it. They know.

**DN:** Simple. Yes.

**CL:** When you first thought about opening the restaurant did you look to other Tibetan restaurants in like New York or San Francisco?

**TK:** Not really. No. But I did do my little research on the website and stuff. I went to the website. But I mean—yes. I’ve been to New York. Just a couple times. But I never got—I mean I just went to one Tibetan restaurant there. But at that time I didn’t have that idea of opening a restaurant when I was there at that time. And San Francisco, too. Like when I went to Seattle there, a couple—not Tibetan but Nepali and a couple Nepali restaurants. So, yes. Not really, actually.

**CL:** How about the menu? Would you—first of all would you say that you have more Western customers or more—?

**TK:** Totally Western customers. Ninety-five percent Western customers.

**CL:** When you thought about the menu and looking over the menu here, there are some, you know, Western choices and a few Nepali and a few Indian things. But even the Tibetan dishes are a little bit—like did you think about preparing traditional Tibetan things for an American audience, about how you might change them or make them?

**TK:** I did. Like, yes, on noodles, soups. Usually Tibetans we prefer more meat and stuff. But like Western customers I try to add more veg. Yes, little changes here and there. But not with the dumplings or momos. They’re always going to be momos. [Chuckles] Like the noodles and stuff. Yes. I try to add a little veg, more veg, actually. People seem to like that more. The Western customers like that. So whenever I have Tibetan customers come by, I have to tell the chef or cook, “This is Tibetan,” so he knows to cook Tibetan.

**DN:** And when did you exactly open the restaurant?

**TK:** Christmas Eve of . . . 2002?

**DN:** So it’s been about two and a half or almost three years.

**TK:** No, no, no. Actually 2003.

**CL:** Yes.

**TK:** The reason we opened on Christmas Eve was like, you know, this approach. We are a little nervous. So we thought like there won’t be a lot of customers, but Christmas Eve, and it was just the opposite. A bunch of people came in and we’re like, “Oh!” And running around. Yes.

**CL:** What are some of the changes that you—or have you made any changes since you opened up at all?

**TK:** I did. I did. We were serving tsampa.<sup>6</sup> That's like a staple Tibetan dish. So, yes. I mean those were like not really working here, I should say. My personally—as myself, too, I don't eat a lot of tsampa. So those are the things we took out and we added like veg kind of dish. Like when I think about—like customers, when they think about Tibet they think about Buddhism and then they think about veg and all that stuff. So you know—yes. We did little changes.

**CL:** How is Tibetan tea received by your American customers?

**TK:** To tell the truth, you know, it's like fifty-fifty I should say. Fifty-fifty. Some people they really love it. I mean they ask—they come here just to go. You know, they come here and, “Can I get like two to go or something?” Some, they just don't like it. I have to explain them how you drink that, too, actually. Like Tibetan tea is usually, there is like butter floating, so you have to blow that out first and then you take a sip. When I get a chance to say it, I try to explain. So yes, but I have—yes, I have a lot of my friends, actually. They just love it. They come here. They want that first thing. First of all they want—when they come in. They want Tibetan tea. That's how they start. [Chuckles] It's like fifty-fifty, I should say.

**DN:** And how many people like do you currently employ?

**TK:** Employ, not really. It's like family thing, I should say. I like to keep it that way. It's all in the family. Family and friends help me out.

**DN:** How did you manage to get such a good location?

**TK:** Oh, I know. I know. Exactly. This is like—if I wanted—always wanted to open a restaurant. But if I wanted to open up a restaurant I always wanted to open I mean like Uptown or like Dinkytown, you know. Those are the only two locations I really like. Then when I was—I always, when I was not even here, I used to ride around here. Now I'm really familiar with this neighborhood here. So and then I saw this restaurant. All of this wasn't working. You know the previous owner; he didn't take care of it too much. So it wasn't working. So I just thought, “Maybe I can open up a spot, a restaurant here. It would be perfect.” We just came up totally and then, yes. This thing and then next thing, next thing.

**DN:** And did you change the interior to kind of—?

**TK:** Yes. I did. I totally change, actually. Everything is changed here. And then I did everything myself, too. It's like—we saved a lot of money, actually. Paintings and then I had one carpenter actually work for me. We just built this wall up a little bit. But most paintings and everything I did myself.

---

<sup>6</sup> Roasted barley flour.

**DN:** And does your restaurant, does it resemble the business that you had in Nepal?

**TK:** It does. Yes. Nepal, actually.

**DN:** The one that your dad owns?

**TK:** Yes. Small Tibetan restaurant. Same thing here. It's like Blue Moon Restaurant.

**DN:** It's called Blue Moon?

**TK:** Yes. They call it Blue Moon Tashi. That's my nickname, actually.

**CL:** Where in Nepal is your parents' restaurant?

**TK:** Boudhanath. So a lot of friends from Nepal, they call me Blue Moon Tashi. Tashi is very common name. So you know, they call me . . . So I got my license plate, Blue Moon. [Chuckles]

**DN:** It hasn't changed to Tibet Corner Tashi?

**TK:** No, it hasn't. [Chuckles] But, yes, in Minnesota I think it's getting there. Yes.

**CL:** How do your parents feel about you now owning a restaurant?

**TK:** They're proud, actually. They're very proud. But as I say, is very challenging. I am putting a lot of hours every day and my life is totally changed. Like before I used to work Monday to Friday you know, eight to five. Weekends off. I go partying. Do the stuffs. But now is totally different. I put like thirteen, fourteen hours a day and then only Mondays I have the day off and then that day and I have other stuffs for restaurants to be done. Calling up the vendors and stuff. So, yes, it's really challenging. But they are really proud. Yes. For sure. It's like first Tibetan restaurant.

**CL:** Do you think there's a reason why, with such a large Tibetan community here? And they've been here for, you know, many for quite a while. People have opened up shops, you know, here in Minneapolis and in St. Paul and Stillwater, all over the place. Why do you think no one had opened a Tibetan restaurant until now?

**TK:** Yes, the Tibetan community, I don't know. I have to tell—the Tibetan community, someone, you know, they don't like taking the risk. It's risky. I mean you have to invest a lot of money when you open up a restaurant. So nobody—I mean, everybody has got ideas and everything but they don't want to take the risk. “Oh, what if it doesn't work?” Or else maybe the location, too. They might haven't gotten the best location they want to open up at. Like Tibetan restaurants usually—to me, you know, it works like in this kind of neighborhood. Like in Uptown. I don't think it's going to work if you open one in downtown. That sort of thing. So yes, location, maybe.

**CL:** Do you think in the two plus years you've been open now, has your business grown?

**TK:** Oh, yes, yes. It's growing. And as I said, it's word of mouth. Word of mouth. I mean I didn't do any advertisement. Just small restaurant so we didn't do any advertisement. We had like free advertisement in the like *Star Tribune*, a couple newspapers and we just recently had one, in the *Onion*. They did one which was a really good article. So that helped. Then word of mouth. I have like a bunch of friends that's always telling. So people starting to know now where restaurant, authentic Tibetan restaurant, is in Twin Cities.

**DN:** And do you see more and more Tibetans coming to your restaurant?

**TK:** Oh, yes. Yes. More younger generation, I should say. They like coming to my restaurant. The old ones, I don't know. I mean they are more—pretty much busy working themselves or something. Yes, occasionally they do, too. More of the younger generation.

**DN:** And where do you see yourself in ten years?

**TK:** Ten years . . . ten years I want to be like—I want to grow. I want to grow. Open up like a couple—?

**DN:** Chains?

**TK:** Yes. Exactly.

**DN:** So you said that you first, when you moved to the United States, you first—you entered through Seattle?

**TK:** Yes.

**DN:** And how old were you at that age? Because you said you were a teenager.

**TK:** Yes. I was eighteen.

**DN:** Eighteen.

**TK:** Yes.

**DN:** And did you do—did you study at all or was it—?

**TK:** No. Not really. My parents always into business and stuff so that's like mentality always—parents want me to get into business. But there I didn't, actually. Then give me couple years just to get my papers and stuff. So, yes.

**DN:** And Seattle has a pretty small Tibetan community compared to Minnesota. Did you notice any other differences between the Tibetan—two different communities?

**TK:** Oh, yes. The Tibetan community in Seattle they are like more of the ones that came like thirty years ago, forty years ago. Something.

**DN:** Pretty well developed.

**TK:** Yes. Exactly. But here we are pretty much like new. Happened like ten, twelve years ago in Minnesota. Seattle older ones, I should say.

**DN:** So kind of adapting to the new environment. Did it help that you went to a Catholic school where you were exposed to—?

**TK:** It did. It did. It did. Yes. It did. It did. I mean not only just when I came here at least I could speak English. That was like the most important thing.

**DN:** Knowing the language.

**TK:** Exactly and then like, yes. I was into music and stuff. So it wasn't that bad actually when I came here because I mean I've traveled some other parts of the world before I came to United States. So it wasn't bad.

**CL:** You talked a little bit about when Americans come in and they order something on the menu. You always try and teach them a little bit whether it's about how to eat it properly or whatnot. Do you teach them about the food or why it's important to Tibet at all?

**TK:** See, that's the reason we changed the menu, too, and like we all introduce ourself. It's right—you can look at my menu. It's right at the end. There's a little introduction about Tibet so, you know, it's like—it's really time consuming. Sometimes when it's really busy here, you know, I can't sit with one person and tell them each and everything, so I would rather put it on the menu so that people that are interested just read it.

**DN:** Then have you tried any other like ways or do you plan on trying any different ways of like incorporating your restaurant into the community? Do you have any plans? Do you remember like you hosted a dinner here when Dr. Lobsang Sangay la was here from Harvard?

**TK:** Yes. It's really hard for me to communicate with this older generation people. I don't know. They are a little strong headed or something. And myself I am in like—if they don't care, I don't care either. That's how my mentality is, too, you know. So this younger generation I can really click. We can communicate. We can talk. So we can—absolutely we can do something.

**CL:** Have you thought about doing anything like offering cooking classes or something or how to—?

**TK:** See . . . you know what? I'm really, really small right now. It's not even been like two years. But yes, for sure. I'm always—I want to do like catering and, you know, like Festival of Nations. I want to get involved in all that stuff. As I said, I'm really small right now. Like little tiny baby. So yes, when I grow, yes. For sure.

**CL:** We want to thank you for being a part of our program here.

**TK:** Thanks a lot. A pleasure.

**CL:** Thank you very much.

Minnesota Tibetan Oral History Project  
Minnesota Historical Society