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Resistance to Marriage, Family Responsibilities, and Mobility: A Turbulent Life Story from Kyidrong

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Abstract

Tsering, the eldest of three daughters in a sonless household, was designated to perpetuate the family by marrying a matrilocally resident husband. She did not like the chosen man and thus decided, against her family's wishes, to remain single. Tsering was subsequently caught up in the destruction of Tibet's religious institutions and social order during the Cultural Revolution. As border dwellers, her family escaped to Nepal when persecution became too intense, but then returned once the situation stabilized. Because Tsering's mother decided to remain in Nepal, she accepted her duty of caring for an aging parent and never returned to her natal village. Tsering's life story sheds light on the nexus of gender, social status, and mobility among Tibetan commoners during the turbulent mid-twentieth century. It underscores how women in Kyidrong had agency, albeit the consequences of resisting marital expectations could be substantial even in a society where female non-marriage was both common and acceptable.

Keywords

Marriage; gender; family; Cultural Revolution; Tibet

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Setting the Scene

Previous efforts to reconstruct the contours of Tibetan village life prior to the 1960s, that is, the life of “ordinary” Tibetans, focused disproportionately on social and economic structures (e.g. Carrasco 1959, Goldstein 1971a; 1971b; 1978, Dargyay 1982, Thargyal 2007, Childs 2008, Bischoff and Mullard 2017), albeit some glimpses into the lives of individuals did emerge (e.g., Aziz 1978, Goldstein 1986). Deeper perspectives on laypeople’s lives have come mostly through biographical and autobiographical writings of people who were anything but ordinary, for example, members of Tibet’s nobility (e.g., Tsarong 2000, Sadutshang 2015),¹ people who attained education and prominence in exile (Norbu 1974), or individuals who told their life stories to foreign scholars (Goldstein et al. 1997; 2004). Women whose biographies have been recorded are mostly religious figures (e.g., Kollmar-Paulenz 1998, Havnevik 1999, Allione 2000, Schaeffer 2004, Diemberger 2014) or members of the ruling classes (Taring 1986, Yuthok 1990, Taklha 2001, Ronis 2011).² Despite growing attention to those who “escaped the historian’s net” (Ramble et al. 2013), significant gaps in knowledge remain.

For this volume the editors have asked contributors to consider the creative potential found in ordinary lives for shaping gender, class, marriage, and other social factors. Anthropologists have a long history of tacking between structural approaches that provide skeletal frameworks of social and cultural life and individual life stories that add flesh to the bones. Structural approaches inform us of rules and prescriptions; individual life stories tell us the myriad means by which people navigate a system in ways that both conform with and depart from normative expectations. This study falls in the latter category by presenting the life story of Tsering, a laywoman from Kyidrong.³ As a member of a taxpayer household subject to *Ganden Podrang* (དགའ་ལྷན་པོ་བླང་), the Tibetan government based in Lhasa (1642–1959), Tsering’s family held heritable rights to till land in the 1950s and thus had mid-level

status in Tibetan society. They lived in a geopolitical peripheral zone at the border of Tibet and Nepal, which proved crucial for mobility and security when Tsering’s life was disrupted by events both within and beyond her control. First, Tsering refused to consummate her marriage with a man her parents brought into the household, a steadfast decision that brought strife into the family. Second, her father’s former status as a village leader—a position that he was assigned to and held reluctantly—marked the family for persecution during the 1960s whirlwind of China’s Cultural Revolution. Tsering’s story is part of a broader study of demography and family dynamics based on a household register titled *Earth-Dog Year [1958] Household Contract Being a Census [of Land and People] in the Nine Divisions of Kyidrong District* which was completed, witnessed, and sealed in early July 1958.⁴

The document records the names of 2,845 individuals by village, household, name, age, and relationship within the household. To make better sense of the lives of laypeople, in 1999 and 2000 one of us (GC) interviewed as many people listed therein as possible. Although denied permission to conduct research in Kyidrong, interviewees were not hard to locate; a large proportion of the population was living in exile in Nepal and India.⁵ Aided by the register, most interviewees retained vivid recollections of their family as they were constituted in 1958, presumably because the document was compiled just before the political upheaval of 1959 that led many Kyidrong residents to subsequently depart into exile during the 1960s. Tsering was no exception. Yet in contrast to most interviews that centered primarily on household dynamics, Tsering needed little prompting to launch into a detailed account of her life story. After establishing that she lived with her mother, two sisters, and a man identified as a *magpa* (མཉམ་པ་; matrilocally resident husband), Tsering spoke uninterrupted for over an hour about her family life in Kyidrong, the difficulties she underwent while married to the *magpa*, and her harrowing experiences during the Cultural Revolution (1966–1976) that led to flight

into exile where, decades later, the interview took place. Among the roughly 180 people interviewed for this project nobody went into such extensive personal detail as Tsering. We cannot say what prompted Tsering to divulge to a relative stranger her life's trials and tribulations. Perhaps she felt she had found a sympathetic ear to release emotions pent up for decades in her small, insular community of exiles. And although we verified the most important events we certainly cannot substantiate everything she narrated. Nevertheless, Tsering's recollections provide insight into gender, marriage, and agency under the constraints of family responsibilities during a critical time in Tibet's history.

Tsering's Family Background

Prior to 1959 Kyidrong was a district-level administrative unit (རྫོང་) under Ganden Phodrang. Most of Kyidrong's residents were classified as legally bound subjects (མི་སྲིད་) who were divided into two broad categories. Taxpayers (ཁུངས་པ་) held a formal land tenure document referred to as a tax basis (ཁུངས་རྒྱུན་) granting them the heritable right to farm a specified amount of land. Taxpayers could lose that privilege by failing to fulfill tax obligations which included an annual grain payment and corvée labor (Surkhang 1966; 1986, Goldstein 1971a, Dargyay 1982, Travers et al. 2023). Members of the other main category, small householders (སྤྱོད་ཚུངས་པ་, literally, small smoke) did not hold a tax basis. They had few tax obligations yet lacked the economic security that comes with land tenure. Small householders generally worked for taxpayers in exchange for food and shelter.

The land tenure system provided Kyidrong's taxpayers a strong incentive to practice fraternal polyandry because they had access to set amounts of land that could be inherited but usually not expanded. Through polyandry, taxpayer households adhered to a monomartial norm (Goldstein 1971a; 1978, Fjeld 2022), meaning one marriage within the household per generation. Norms of patrilineal descent and patrilocal marital residence led to a preference for parents

to keep sons at home and send daughters out in marriage. A family with three sons and three daughters would, ideally, find one bride for at least two of the sons (the third could join the marriage or become a monk) while trying to send each daughter to another household in marriage. Those who did not have a male heir could bring in a *magpa* to marry one or more of the daughters. Although polyandry was the preferred form of marriage, monogamy was common in households with only a single son or daughter, and polygyny could occur in households with no sons but several daughters.

Tsering was born into a government taxpayer (གཞུང་རྒྱུན་པ་) family with a modest landholding. Her maternal grandfather had been a competent and reliable small householder. Tsering explained:

If you leased land, then there were many taxes. Some households found it very difficult to meet all the tax obligations and ran away; I know of at least two households that were abandoned in my village because of the tax obligations.

Tsering's maternal grandfather was raised to taxpayer status when the government granted him one such abandoned land lease. But he was reluctant to take on the new responsibilities. Tsering recalled:

The Kyidrong Dzong asked my grandfather to take over a taxpaying household in our village [one that had been abandoned by others] but he refused because he would incur tax obligations. They told him if he refused, he would have to move to [name of another village in Kyidrong District]. But the tax obligations there were even higher; people would run away because of the heavy tax burdens. So, he decided to stay in our village [as a newly elevated taxpayer]. That is how we ended up as taxpayers.

Tsering's grandfather and his wife had no sons, so they brought in a *magpa* to marry

their daughter, Tsering's mother. She had three daughters—Tsering was the eldest—and no son. The family struggled under the onerous tax burden:

We underwent many hardships. We had heavy tax obligations. For example, if you have a few good cows, you are required to pay butter tax. Then, there is the grain tax, and whatever little money you have they take it away. In the old society, I was very young, and I had to go work on road construction without any pay. This was part of compulsory service (ལྷ་ལག་). My parents were old, and my two sisters too young, so they could not go for compulsory service. There were no choices then.

Despite being unable to read or write, Tsering's father was appointed the village *dingpön* (ཐིང་པོན་; local leader), a weighty responsibility that entailed helping resolve disputes, making sure people paid their taxes, and compiling raw data for the household register. Tsering recalls:

When it was time for a *dingpön* to leave his position, he would recommend a name to the *dzongpön* (རྫོང་པོན་; District Commissioner) who in turn would issue an official letter instructing that person to be the next *dingpön*. You don't have any choice but to follow the order. You cannot refuse it because your plea is not accepted. For example, my father's name was recommended by the previous *dingpön*. But my father did not know how to read or write. He was the only male in our household at that time; we didn't have enough labor in our household. I think other people recommended his name for no other reason than to spite him. My father was not a shrewd person, he was just a simple man. He was very kind, so I think other people thought they could do anything to him and that he would fail in his position.

My mother and father were very concerned because they did not have enough labor force or any other male to help run the household. They approached the District Commissioner and offered a roll of butter as a request to relieve my father of the position. He took the butter but informed my father that there was no way he can refuse to serve. He had no choice but to serve as the *dingpön*.

If my father were a shrewd person, he could have made some money for himself. Instead, my father could not force people to pay their tax obligations. He would borrow money from people to pay the tax obligations to the *dzong*. He got himself into debt because some poor people could not pay their tax obligations and offered him instead a small plot of their land in lieu of tax payments. We did not have a lot of money, so there was no choice. I don't understand how an illiterate person was made *dingpön*.

Tsering's father's status as a government representative would eventually have negative ramifications for the family which, ironically, had been part of the landless class of small householders only one generation earlier.

Resisting Marriage

As noted above, the household struggled to fulfill its tax obligations due to an acute labor shortage. This prompted Tsering's parents to bring a *magpa* into the home when she was only 15 years old. But the marriage went against Tsering's wishes. She lamented:

Our parents decided to bring the *magpa* for us daughters because we were very young and there were no sons to take over the household. But I had no interest [in the marital arrangement] because I felt that the groom was too old for me, 10 or 11 years older than me. I was 15, my

sister Nyima was five years younger, and Sumchog was only seven years old then. I said we don't need a husband who is much older than us. Our parents did not listen to us. They said they need the labor to support the household. They kept the groom.

I did not have any interest [in the marriage]. Despite my disagreement, I had to live with the arrangement. For about six or seven years I had no physical relationship with the groom. My mother used to beat me constantly to make me accept the *magpa* but I had no interest at all. I never liked him and had no feelings of the heart for him. After receiving constant beatings from my mother, I was forced to maintain marital relationship with the groom. However, I did not get pregnant. Later, the *magpa* complained that I don't like him, and it is causing him embarrassment. He told me that I could leave the household. He said he will take my two younger sisters as wives and if they didn't agree, then he said he will bring in a wife of his own choice. He told me that he will stay in my household. So, my younger sisters agreed to be his wives.

According to Tsering's recollection, the *magpa* joined her household in 1956. She remained a reluctant partner in marriage into the 1960s after which the *magpa* took her youngest sisters as his wives. All this coincided with the disintegration of Tibetan society under the onslaught of the Cultural Revolution.

Political Turmoil

According to Tsering:

My father passed away when I was 17 (1957 or 1958). Not long afterward, the Chinese came. They started the reform in our place when I was 24 (1964). The fact that my father had been a *dingpön* adversely affected our family. In our village, there were

some households that had two taxable land units (ཀོང་); they had prime land and were wealthy. They were not labeled as feudal lord representatives (མངའ་ཚབ་) but we were because my father had served as a *dingpön*. Although they did not physically torture or imprison us, they did label us as feudal lord representatives. They mistreated us and confiscated our land and property. Our household suffered a lot during the reforms because we were a small, five-member family. I am not exactly sure how they calculated the redistribution but most of our landholding and livestock were taken away. We had 15 *dzomo* (yak-cow hybrid) but were left with seven; eight were taken away for redistribution to the poor households. We had five oxen, and they took away the two healthy ones. We had ten cows, seven calf-bearing and three young ones. They took away five adult cows. In total, they took away 15 head of livestock. They even took away parts of our house including the vegetable plot, leaving us with nowhere to grow vegetables. We endured many hardships.

The social upheaval began in the sixth month of the Horse Year [1966]. Several people were imprisoned. A meeting was called, and people were informed that they must come and watch the punishment. One leader ordered us to sit down and said we don't have to speak. There was the Tibetan leader [a former *dingpön* in Kyirong], a Chinese official, and a woman cadre from our village. I was trembling, I could not speak. They knew that I was very scared. I was told it is okay if I can't speak and was told to sit down. I sat down and I was feeling extremely scared. After lots of lecturing, we were told that the prisoners would be put to a struggle session (འཕྲུལ་འཛིང་). We were told to think very carefully and that if we didn't, we would be arrested and put

to a struggle session as well.⁶ They were very cruel, especially to one lama.

The next day, all the prisoners were dragged by their hands to the struggle session. If one was unable to walk, they just dragged the person like a log. The prisoners were all lined up and kicked. Although we didn't have to speak or partake in the beatings, they watched us to check if anyone dared to shed tears. The woman cadre carried out the interrogation of the lama. When they were beating him, we were told that our faces would be watched to see if anyone sheds tears or expressed sympathy. We would be interrogated if we showed any signs of sympathy. Even if we felt sympathy, we had no choice but to watch it without showing any emotion. They tortured the lama so badly. They would subject him to beatings, and when he fell to the ground, they would pull him up by the ears. There were two persons, Tibetans, standing on either side who would pull him up by the ears every time he slumped to the ground. At the end of the session his ears were hugely swollen and bleeding.

We were deeply disturbed and saddened. They said we should think carefully and behave accordingly. We couldn't help but think what we would do if subjected to such torture and were afraid they might also subject us to torture like they did to the lama. My mother and I were particularly concerned. I believe our *magpa* was not questioned because he came from an ordinary farming family. My mother and I were questioned because my father served as a *dingpön*. My mother was not beaten though, only questioned.

My mother and I talked about jumping into the river, thinking it was better to drown than be subjected to

torture. We went down to the river and vowed to jump in. Two other people had done it, a father and son. But when we saw the river, we could not jump. It was deep and the thought of jumping into it too scary. My mother lamented our situation and said we can only seek protection by putting faith in the precious ones (དཀོན་མཚོན།; Buddha, Dharma, Sangha). We came back home and thought about escaping but the roads were all watched. If we went high into the mountains, the snow was too deep. It was almost impossible to run away. We had no choice but to put our faith in and seek protection from the precious ones.

The situation continued to deteriorate as Tsering bore witness to attacks on the very religious institutions in which she sought solace. She recollects:

When the Chinese came and took over everything, we were not allowed anywhere near the monastery [nearby the village]. The monastery had many religious artifacts, which were all controlled by the new [Tibetan] leader. The monastery was turned into a prison and storehouse for winter fodder. How beautiful the monastery was! It was gleaming like gold from outside. It had many artifacts including ivory, Buddha's relics (རིང་བསྐྱེལ་), statues, and paintings. People had no idea what the leader did with all those artifacts and did not dare ask about it.

Our leader and the cadres spoke out against people's beliefs in gods and spirits, arguing, "If you light up a butter lamp, of course the butter will burn. If your gods can drink water, why is the water still there [in the water offerings at the altar]? If there is really a god, it should drink the water offerings." We used to propitiate water spirits (ལྷ་) and have blessed vases (བྱམ་པ་) in our houses for this purpose. The leader

ordered people to bring the vases; he destroyed them all. He said he will search every corner of the house if anyone dares to hold on to a vase. He further threatened people with beatings and imprisonment if they tried to hide them. Everyone gave their vases away because they were too scared to resist. He destroyed all the vases. The leader was saying all these crazy things and went berserk by ordering everything connected to deities and spirits destroyed. He destroyed all the sites for propitiating water spirits (ལྷ་ཁང་) and cut down trees where spirits are believed to reside. He said nobody can see these so-called deities and spirits, that this was all fabricated by the Dalai Lama and part of the old society's conservative thinking (ལྗང་ལྷ་ལྷོང་གྲོ་གྲོ་; literally, green-brained).

Then they collected all the scriptures and religious paintings from the monasteries so they could be burned. We were told to help. I went and helped carry a scripture or two, but then slipped away. After a while, they came and asked me where I went. I said I had diarrhea and had to go and defecate [laughing aloud]. They said I was oldbrained and would like to follow the Dalai Lama. I denied it and said I had to go because I had diarrhea. They admonished me for taking a whole day to defecate. Of course, it is true that I was feeling unhappy and didn't want to partake in the burning. But I stuck to my story.

I could not go near the place where everything was being burned. I was too shocked and almost fell unconscious. We were told to come to watch the burning, but I did not go. It was a very scary and disturbing sight; I could not go anywhere near it. They were enjoying and rejoicing in what they were doing. I was scared, distressed, and felt helpless. I was lamenting to myself, "What have we done to see such things? All the

scriptures we have preserved and revered are now being desecrated and burned!"

Because the situation was so dangerous, we thought if we were somehow able to reach the Nepal border, it will be fine even if we have nothing to eat or drink. We ran away in the fourth month of the Sheep Year [May 1967]. We left with the remaining livestock and came to the border. We knew we were going to a foreign country, and we thought the livestock would feed us by providing milk. We left all our possessions behind because we could not carry much on our backs. When we reached the border, we were stopped by the leaders [from the village] who had 21 people armed with swords in their belts and spears in their hands. They confiscated all our livestock. It was our Tibetan leaders who were the worst. When they snatched our livestock, there were no Chinese present. It was our village leaders who came down and took away our livestock. It was the leaders from our own village who mistreated us.

After they drove back the livestock, we continued with our plan to run away. We thought we would manage to survive in a foreign land by finding something to eat. If things went bad, we thought we could resort to begging to survive. We continued to the border. We were all devastated and crying. My mother threw dirt on her head [a way of grieving a loss]. She suffered the most. First, it was the reform period when things were taken away and redistributed, and then the remaining livestock were confiscated.

With only knitted blankets, the clothing on our backs, and a pot or two to cook and eat from, the five of us (Tsering, her mother and two sisters, and the *magma*) came down

and stayed at Thugmon [a village in Rasuwa District, Nepal] for about a year.

Back and Forth

Crossing the border into Nepal to escape undesirable situations was nothing new for the people of Kyidrong. In fact, the 1958 Household Register includes threats of punishment to anyone who harbored notions of fleeing, presumably to evade unpaid tax obligations, debts, or prosecution for crimes. It states:

Similarly, arrangements of marriages, entering into religious life, and exchange of subjects are not permitted without prior permission, [this applies] especially to those ignorant ones who flee to other lands thinking that they will be more secure and have a better life. Such persons making flimsy excuses to flee from the country must be stopped with tight security and the leaders and people have taken oath that such incidents will not be allowed to occur, for which cause the following persons have undertaken the oath: [seals of witnesses] (Childs 2008: 281).

Furthermore, the people of Kyidrong maintained trade relationships and close kinship ties through intermarriage and historical migrations (Lim 2008) with Nepalis in Rasuwa District (Dragpa 1997), and so Tsering and her family were not venturing into unknown territory; they probably had a social network they could rely on for at least a modicum of support. Many former Kyidrong residents interviewed for this project said that some families hedged their bets during the early years of Chinese rule. When news arrived of approaching Chinese soldiers, they moved cattle across the border into Nepal where they remained until word came that the coast was clear. The back-and-forth movement continued for some time until the situation became untenable for many, notably those deemed class enemies and thus subjected to heightened scrutiny and persecution.

Returning to Tsering's story:

My sister Sumchog became pregnant [by the *magpa*, while in Thugmon]. My mother made a big scene about the timing of pregnancy saying, "How can we feed an extra mouth in a foreign land when we have nothing?"

Sumchog decided to go back home without our knowledge. It happened during the summer while we were up in the mountains collecting medicinal herbs. I was worried because Sumchog was pregnant and on her own with no help, and I thought the Chinese would not allow her back into the home. Without informing my mother and the *magpa*, I decided to go back and look for Sumchog. When I returned, I found out that the Chinese would not allow anyone to come back. So, I decided not to go straight to our home but to my aunt's place first. She had also run away but her husband and one son had stayed back in the village.

The next day, my aunt's daughter invited me to her place. My sister Sumchog was there, and the village leader came as well. He said he heard that I arrived yesterday and asked me why I didn't go to my own home. I replied that I wanted to avoid any suspicion and that I don't want to be scolded. The leader said it is okay to return home; he returned the remaining livestock that were confiscated and said there is butter and grain to feed us. When we went back home, the livestock were there but the rest including our grain and possessions had all been taken away. We had a three-story home. The lowest level was for livestock, the middle level had a kitchen where we ate and slept, and the top level was mostly for storage. The leader, my sister and I looked around to check and I told the leader that everything was gone. The leader said he is not sure what happened and that the other officials also had

access to the house. We had left behind all our grain, and it appeared that the officials had distributed it among themselves.

My sister had not given birth yet. I told her that I had come back to get her, and we should run away before she gave birth. She said she didn't want to go now and that she would go only after giving birth, which might be in the twelfth month [of the lunar year]. After she gave birth, she did not leave right away. Instead, my other sister Nyima returned with her child [the *magpa* was the father]. I asked her why she returned when we were trying to leave. I got very frustrated. I said this is not right because our mother is down there, and we are all stuck here. I ended up staying back until Losar. After Losar, I went down. And yes, before I went down, the *magpa* himself returned!

They all stayed while I planned to go back down. I returned home one more time to check on them. They could not leave so easily now because they had very young children and the village leaders were checking on them regularly. But I had to go down to be with my mother in Thugmon. She was alone, became ill, and sent a message asking me to come down.

Meanwhile, I was told to attend a meeting. When I went, there were no other people except for my paternal uncle. We were called into the Chinese office and there was one Chinese leader who speaks Tibetan. He asked if I was scared. I said I was. He said I don't need to be scared of him, but I should be afraid of the laws because I had run away to a foreign country. Although the leaders, including the Chinese officials, said I am not allowed to leave, my mother wanted me to come. So, I requested permission to go to her. But they wouldn't let me go because I did not have children

of my own [implying that children were seen as collateral to assure their parents' return]. They said the *magpa* or one of my sisters could go if they wanted to. I told them that my mother had requested only I come down, and that her other two daughters and the *magpa* should remain. In that case, they said if my mother herself comes back, only then can I leave and said they would give me three days. I said I can't possibly return in three days from Thugmon because my mother is ill so I would have to arrange porters to carry her. I promised to come back with my mother in one week's time, though. The Chinese official told me I can't run away ever again. He said that unlike the past, when the borders were open and people could come and go whenever they wanted, the borders are closed now so you can't come and go as you please. He said I have undergone education programs here and know how things work. If I were to go to a foreign country and talk about things, there is the danger of spreading misinformation and rumors. He said I can't ever run away again and that if I try, they will send people wherever I go to catch me and bring me back. He said if they catch me again, they will not waste time educating me but instead will shoot me down. This really scared me.

I was able to leave after a week or so. I brought some butter, cheese, and a bit of *tsampa* (roasted barley flour). When I arrived in Thugmon, my sick mother was very weak. She couldn't even speak properly. When I called her, she couldn't even respond. I fed her some warm food and she started to get better. She finally regained some strength and asked, "Is this Tsering?" I said yes. Her eyes started to well with tears. She told me I should stay with her and never return home. I told her that the Chinese want me to return with her and that I should arrange porters to carry her

on their backs. My mother said she is not going to return. She said she had already decided to escape and had no intention of returning even if she gets better. She said all the roads are paved with *mani* stones (stones engraved with prayers and sacred images) and she does not dare step on those, that she would prefer death and has sought refuge in the wish fulfilling gem [His Holiness the Dalai Lama]. She said she is never going to return and that she is willing to die in a foreign land. She said she will return home only when it is free. So, I stayed back and took care of my mother. My mother passed away when I was 40 years old [around 1981]. She lived a long life. She passed away at the age of 73.

Remaining in Exile

Unlike her sisters and the *magpa*, Tsering decided to remain in Nepal. When interviewed, she lived in a one-room house in a settlement built for Tibetan refugees during the 1960s. She made a meager living by weaving for others, and with support from the Tibetan Government-in-Exile which administered four camps in the region. At the end of the interview, she explained her reasons for remaining in exile rather than returning home:

After my mother passed away in Thugmon, I came here [the settlement where the interview took place] which is my home now. I met my new partner. It was not a happy relationship because I could not have children. He treated me very badly. He would call me *shiri ma* [a curse word for barren woman?]. He said I can't live with him because I couldn't have children. He said he doesn't understand why I wanted to live with him. He said I should leave if I want to. So, I left him. He used to beat me often. My body became hardened due to constant beatings. I could not take it anymore. I felt helpless, but what could I do?

I came down here promising the officials that I would return in a week with my mother. But I never returned. I ended up staying here and it has been so many years. I came down here when I was 29 and I am 61 now. I have never crossed the bridge [at the border] since then. My sister's son is worried about my situation because I am alone and in poor health. He thinks it is a good idea to go back home to be with my family in Tibet. He is worried about how I can make it here where it is very difficult to find even firewood to cook. He asks me why I want to live here and encourages me to go back.

I don't know what to say or do. I told him if things do not get too bad, I am not too worried about dying here. The thought of going back home is too dreadful for me. I told him living back home feels like sitting on a bed of thorns. You can't even enjoy your food. You live in constant fear of getting arrested. He said I would not be arrested and that the current atmosphere is totally different now, that everything, including the policies and the leaders, has changed. I replied that we are different from other people because of our backgrounds, we were categorized as feudal lord representatives. This makes us vulnerable. I have seen and experienced myself what they did and how they think. They stopped us from practicing our religion, including lighting butter lamps and giving water offerings. They forced us to destroy everything that has to do with religion. Then, they said it is okay to offer butter lamps, practice religion and do meritorious acts. Later, they again said these things are not allowed and imposed restrictions. So, I told my nephew that you can't really believe what they say. They will say one thing today and another thing tomorrow. I follow the Dalai Lama and want to practice religion,

but one is not allowed to keep an image of the Dalai Lama. If I do that, I will be arrested. He told me that the revolution was over a long time ago and that everything including the sky and earth turned upside down (གནས་སའམགོ་ཕྱིད་སློག་ཚར་). But I lived through the times when they banned everything that has to do with religion, you couldn't even wear anything that has to do with the old society. They made us look like poor beggars.

I can't think of going back because I have witnessed the things that they did. They persecuted people mercilessly during the reform period. I still recall when I went through interrogation. I still recall how they pulled people by their ears until the ears got bloody and torn off. What will happen if I return home and things change for the worse and I end up being interrogated and persecuted? What can I do at an age when I should be preparing for my death? I dread the thought of going back home because of these memories and thoughts. I don't want to go back because it reminds me of how I felt. It was like living on a bed of thorns.

As her voice tapered off with these final words, Tsering was in tears. Her emotional response decades after witnessing and being forced to participate in violent struggle sessions and the destruction of religious texts and artifacts testifies to the long-lasting trauma inflicted by perpetrators of the Cultural Revolution.

A Life Story

Without starting with such an intention, the conversation with Tsering turned into a life story interview, a methodological approach that allows an interlocutor to narrate the “subjective essence” of their experiences (Atkinson 1998). A life story interview is not meant to gather data to fill qualitative gaps missed by other methodologies. Rather, it is often based on a simple research question: “What is the story this person wants

others to hear and what meaning does this story convey?” (Atkinson 2007: 233). The interview with Tsering started with routine questions to locate her and her household within the 1958 register, and to identify people listed therein. The succinct exchanges went on for about ten minutes until we arrived at a pivotal point. From the transcript:

GC: It says here [in the register] that your mother has three children. You were three sisters?

TK: Yes.

GC: It says here a *magpa* was brought in for the sisters.

TK: Yes.

GC: Where is the *magpa* from?

TK: He is from [name of village]. His father was [name]. When the *magpa* was married into our household, I was 15 then.

GC: 15 years old, you were very young.

Tsering: Yes, I was very young. Our parents decided to bring the *magpa* for us daughters because we were very young and there were no sons to take over the household. But I had no interest [in the marital arrangement] because I felt that the groom was too old for me, 10 or 11 years older than me.

GC: What was the *magpa's* animal cycle birth year (ལོ་རྟགས་)?

TK: Year of the Horse. I think he was ten years older than me.

GC: Okay, when the *magpa* was brought into your household, all of you sisters were very young.

TK: Yes, that is correct. I was 15, my sister Nyima was five years younger,

and Sumchog was only seven years old then. I said we don't need a husband who is much older than us

Tsering then spoke nearly uninterrupted for over an hour. The catalyst that shifted her into life story mode is clearly seen when the topic of her marriage arose. Recollections of being forced by her mother to maintain conjugal relations with a man she reviled came flooding forth, followed by traumas during the Cultural Revolution and hardships of a life in exile. The life story interview allowed Tsering some latitude to make sense of her pathway, highlighting events that she deemed most salient.

Scholars must contend with “historical erasure” (Mortensen 2020) to interpret the “‘unsaid’ of history spoken loudly in implication” (Makley 2005: 40) or the subtle “oppositional practices of time” (Hofer 2018, from Mueggler 2001) when interviewing Tibetans who still live under a government where the Cultural Revolution remains a “forbidden memory” (Woeser 2020). Detailing events in ways that counter official narratives can be hazardous. In contrast, Tsering was living in Nepal at the time of the interview. This does not mean that she freely recounted everything. Tsering spoke haltingly and in a quivering voice about certain incidents—like the torturing of a lama and the desecration of the village temple—and she never provided details of her own interrogation. However, she presumably had fewer constraints than her kin in Kyidrong to narrate events and express her opinions about them. She named perpetrators. For example, a rare instance of levity in the life story came when she recalled a local official who, as detailed above, abused his constituents by confiscating or destroying their devotional objects. Tsering revealed with a sense of irony that the man was subsequently afflicted by a spirit attack (བསེར་རྒྱུ་བ་):

[Name of official] built a toilet right on the spot where a water spirit (ལྷ) is said to reside. He did that just to prove there is no such thing as

spirits. Because of his actions, he, his daughter, and his daughter-in-law all got afflicted [by spirit attacks]. To counteract the spirit attack, he asked a lama to help. The lama recited mantras and performed rites to make healing water and blessed pills to treat the afflicted ones. They got a bit better after the treatment.

A life story like Tsering's should be understood as a subjective narrative—not an objective account of historical events and personages—a miniautobiography with a beginning, some muddled conundrums, and a resolution (Atkinson 1998). The resolution in Tsering's case was never complete, as she remained in Nepal without financial security or kin support yet determined never to return to a place—regardless of how much the situation may have improved—where she had experienced so much suffering.

Tsering's life story illustrates how a person's experiences are shaped but not entirely constrained by social guidelines and gender roles. Notably, Tsering's resistance to marrying a man she abhorred may have been somewhat unusual at the time, especially considering the importance of perpetuating a sonless taxpayer household. However, women's opposition to marriage across the Tibetan Plateau and Himalayan region is well-documented, most commonly in cases of celibate monasticism as a culturally acceptable alternative to matrimony and childbearing (Gutschow 2004, Schneider 2013). For example, Orgyan Chokyi of Dolpo became a respected religious practitioner after recognizing the suffering inherent in worldly existence, especially as it pertains to women (Schaeffer 2004). Divorce prompted at least one nun from Tingri to take up residence in a nunnery (Aziz 1978: 184–85). Saddened by the death of her one-year-old daughter, the princess Chokyi Dronma underwent a long struggle to disentangle from secular life and become a celibate nun (Diemberger 2021). Being sent as a bride to another family, especially in a society that accepts some forms of spousal abuse (Rajan 2018), can be unattractive. Monastic celibacy was one

of the few routes available for women to evade the tensions embedded in the roles of wife and mother (Schneider 2013).

A person's journey from family life to monasticism is a common theme in Tibetan societies, one that resonates in a cultural environment that values renunciation as an antidote to the pitfalls of worldly suffering. However, a topic less explored is the life trajectory of laywomen like Tsering who opts out of marriage but remains a member of the laity. It is impossible to determine whether Tsering viewed marriage as an impediment to other ambitions in life, because quite frankly not many alternatives existed for non-elite laywomen in pre-1959 Tibet. What is clear, however, is that resisting gendered expectations did not make Tsering a societal outlier: female non-marriage was common throughout Tibetan societies, including Kyidrong. As a by-product of polyandry, roughly half of Kyidrong's women aged 20-49 were not formally married into taxpayer households. The acceptability of informal unions and relatively permissive attitudes toward out-of-wedlock childbearing meant that single women and women in casual relationships could, and often did, have children—although their total fertility rate (2.2 births per woman) was lower than married women's (6.2 births per woman) (Childs 2008).

Residential options for unmarried women in Kyidrong were limited. While some became nuns, the more common solution was to move into a separate room or dwelling that was still considered a part of the household, thereby creating a twohearth (ཐང་གཉིས་) household, which included the main house and an adjunct house (ཟུར་ཁང་; see Childs 2022). In many instances retired parents preferred to live with an unmarried daughter in the adjunct house if they had a dispute with their son(s) and daughter-in-law, or if they sought a quieter environment for retirement and end-of-life religious activities. Maintaining separate hearths did not prevent unmarried women from participating in the household's productive activities. In fact, retaining them

had tangible benefits; they enhanced the labor force and provided care for aging parents.

Being unmarried and childless gave Tsering more freedom of movement than her sisters, allowing her to choose exile over homeland during the chaotic years of the Cultural Revolution. Yet one can question how much agency she really had when considering an unmarried daughter's social role as primary caretaker for aging parents. In Tsering's life story it is apparent that her choice to live in Nepal's borderlands, in the shadow of the mountains stretching high above her natal village, was influenced by a gendered sense of obligation to care for her mother. One can only speculate whether Tsering would have remained in Kyidrong had her mother passed away before she could get to her or whether she would have returned to Kyidrong had that been her mother's choice. What we can glean from Tsering's life story is that she felt a strong duty to protect and nurture her mother through illness and frailty that comes with age.

By the time her mother passed away, around 1981, Tsering had been living in exile for 14 years, unburdened by marriage and children yet haunted by memories of persecution and the wanton destruction of temples and their sacred accoutrements. She chose to remain in Nepal rather than reside on what she perceived to be “a bed of thorns.”

When interviewed in the autumn of 2000 Tsering came across as being a somewhat solitary figure, peripheral even in this close-knit community of exiles. With the passing of her mother, and a union that soured because of her alleged infertility (a common theme in both her marriages), Tsering did not have a strong support network of kin as she crept toward old age. Her sisters worried that she would suffer alone in another country; they even sent their son to ask her to return. But Tsering refused, leery that the authorities would once again turn malevolent.

In the days following the interview I (GC) saw Tsering a few more times, exchanged pleasantries and chatted briefly. The borderland refugee settlement where she lived was saturated with a musty air of decline; most young people had left for education or to seek livelihoods elsewhere, leaving a community of aging individuals. I never saw Tsering after concluding this phase of the research, and suspect that she endured a lament uttered by many elderly exiles at that time, “I will die in a foreign land.”

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Endnotes

1. Treasury of Lives has compiled many biographies of members of the Tibetan royalty (འབྲུག་རྒྱལ་པོ་; <https://treasuryoflives.org/institution/Royalty>) and the Lhasa aristocracy (སྐུ་སྲུག་ནང་མི་; <https://treasuryoflives.org/institution/Lhasa-Aristocracy>).
2. These personal recollections are an underutilized resource for research on the lives of commoners. See Melvyn Goldstein’s Tibetan Oral History Archive Project (www.loc.gov/collections/tibetan-oral-history-project/) and the Tibet Oral History Project led by Marcella Adamski (www.tibetoralhistory.org/).
3. Tsering’s name and the names of her family members are pseudonyms.
4. ས་བྱི་ལོའི་སྐྱིད་ལོང་རྒྱ་དགུའི་སློབ་མེས་གན། For a full analysis of the document see Childs 2008. The government was not the only landlord in Kyidrong. Samtenling Monastery also had considerable landholdings and enumerated its taxpaying households in similar documents, two of which, from 1939 and 1949, were published and analyzed by Schuh (1988).
5. Roughly 180 former Kyidrong residents were interviewed for this project in McLeodganj, Forsythganj, and Pandoh in India, and in Kathmandu, Shebrubensi, Bridim, Tanje, and Kanjim in Nepal.
6. For struggle sessions in Tibetan areas during the late 1950s and 1960s, see Norbu 1974, Goldstein et al. 2009, Makley 2005; 2007, Ketsun 2008, Hofer 2018, and Mortensen 2020; and, most notably, the photographs and commentary in Woesser 2020. Descriptions of struggle sessions can also be found in the interviews collected by Melvyn Goldstein and made available as part of the Tibetan Oral History Archive Project (<https://www.loc.gov/collections/tibetan-oral-history-project/about-this-collection/>) and in the Tibet Oral History Project (<https://www.tibetoralhistory.org/>).

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