I. LATSE CONTEMPORARY TIBETAN CULTURAL LIBRARY

Gray Tuttle: What is the mission of the library?

Pema Bhum: Tibetan culture has a past, present and future. We thought that many institutions and libraries focused on the past of Tibetan culture. But the present Tibetan culture is changing. It is different from the old culture in which religion, Tibetan Buddhism, was very important. The present culture is mixed up with Chinese and Western cultures. The whole world is changing; communication is much more frequent. So, we wanted to face the challenges that some part of Tibetan culture is reforming. This present part—as far as we know—is not the focus of any other library or institution. Now many people are interested in Tibetan Buddhism. In many decades, people will look back and see a gap in research on the modern Tibetan situation, and we will fill this gap when people look back. That is why we are interested in contemporary Tibet.

GT: Do you only think about looking back from twenty years in the future?

PB: Good point. These days there is a great deal of publishing activity and many writers in Tibet, but recent publications are not accessible outside of Tibet. We want people to have access to many media. We are thinking that this institute can be a bridge between Tibetans and Tibetologists in Western countries and Tibet. Each side has its own strengths. If the two strengths melt together this will move forward, improve Tibetan studies. Like this year, from November 7th to the 9th, we will host a workshop on Gedun Choephel (1903–1951). Tibet’s first
critical thinker about Tibetan religion and literature, the first Tibetan to ask “Is this right or not?” and go to India to check, and the first person to encounter Western knowledge and introduce it into Tibet. We have invited six people from inside Tibet—such as Gedun Choephel’s widow, daughter, and cousin—and ten from outside Tibet. We are trying to gather his materials to create an archive to make available to research scholars and everyone who wants to know about Tibetan cultures. We also plan to invite not just scholars, but also performers and artists to lecture, to exchange knowledge and thoughts. We have a biweekly movie series. Last week (July 5, 2003) we showed films on Muslims in Tibet and a documentary of Alexandra David-Neel’s journey to Tibet.

GT: What are some of the other activities the library holds?

PB: We try to break the conception that a library is just books and reading materials. Tibetan culture is something we can hear and see from tapes, CDs, and real people, while paying attention to the different customs of specific areas. We hope to invite experts to demonstrate calligraphy, how we make pens, ink, and how to hold the paper. Also, we have, I think, the biggest collection of videotapes and VCDs, with over a thousand items. So we focus not just on reading but also hearing and seeing.

GT: Why is the library here in New York?

PB: The main reason is that New York is a world cultural city, a good place to share different nations’ cultures. Also, I don’t know if it is true, but we say that there are 5,000 Tibetans (from both China and India) in New York, New Jersey, Connecticut, and Boston. Taken together, maybe it is true.

GT: If things changed, would you like to see the library move to Tibet?

PB: This is beyond my position to answer, as Trace has built this library. But I am sure that Trace wants to build more libraries and to support the cultural tradition in Tibet. They are aware of the lack of public libraries there.

GT: What are some of the unique holdings of the library?

PB: This library is unique for three reasons. First, most contemporary Tibetan writers’ works are here, with hardly a single book missing. As far as we know, no other library has gathered as much in contemporary writers’ work. Secondly, we also collect all related Chinese materials; government publications, as well as works by individual writers