Testimony reveals pre-trial torture of Tibetan businessman-philanthropist

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“To tell you in simple words, even if we kill or handicap you, we are not liable under the law.”

Newly revealed testimony from a Tibetan businessman and philanthropist who is in critical health after years of torture and imprisonment documents the horrifying abuse he received in pre-trial detention.

Dorjee Tashi (多吉扎西), considered one of the wealthiest people in Tibet, received a life sentence in 2010 in the wake of the Chinese government’s crackdown on mass Tibetan protests in spring 2008. Dorjee is currently serving in the Tibet Autonomous Region (TAR) Prison No 1, colloquially known as Drapchi Prison, where Tibetan prisoners are known to be tortured during their incarceration. His wife Sonam Choedon (索朗曲珍) has not been allowed to see him since December 2019.

Dorjee was a successful businessman who owned a luxury hotel chain and real estate companies in Tibet when he was arrested in July 2008. He was framed as a “secessionist” by spiteful and vindictive political and party leaders taking advantage of the political situation in the wake of the mass Tibetan protests. While political charges were later dropped, he was declared guilty of “loan fraud” and sentenced to life imprisonment by the Lhasa Intermediate People’s Court on May 17, 2010. The court of second instance the TAR People’s Higher Court upheld the verdict on July 26, 2010. Dorjee was then 36 years old.

Torture testimony

The International Campaign for Tibet has obtained Dorjee Tashi’s testimony about the torture and ill-treatment he experienced during his pre-trial detention. The testimony was part of his 2013-14 petition for retrial.

The testimony covers four months of his pre-trial detention in the Tibetan capital of Lhasa in 2008—before his transfer to a detention center in Mainling (Chinese: Milin) County in Nyingtri (Chinese: Linzhi)—and details torture practices such as beatings with electric batons, being cuffed to an iron bar and hung in the air, simulation of suffocation, pouring hot chili fluid through nostrils and sleep deprivation.

The testimony is also remarkable as it identifies individuals directly responsible for carrying out acts of torture as officers affiliated with the central government’s Ministry of Public Security, the Tibet Autonomous Region Public Security Bureau and the Mainling County Public Security Bureau in the then-Nyingtri Prefecture. It corresponds to other reports on the use of torture in Tibet and to findings of independent international human rights experts.

After years of Dorjee’s imprisonment having a low profile since 2010, it has now come to light that Dorjee Tashi has steadfastly denied any political involvement despite the torture he faced during pretrial interrogation sessions.

Dorjee’s testimony has been translated from Chinese and is included at the end of this report.
ICT quote

The International Campaign for Tibet calls for Dorjee Tashi’s immediate release and an independent and impartial investigation into the credible reports of his torture and ill-treatment. Those responsible for acts that constitute torture must be held accountable and brought to justice to end the culture of impunity in the Chinese Communist Party’s rule in Tibet.

While in detention, Dorjee Tashi must immediately receive medical treatment, and his wife and other family members, as well as his lawyer, must be granted access to him.

ICT said: “We call on the international community, governments and United Nations human rights experts to urgently raise Dorjee Tashi’s case with the government of China. His life is in imminent danger while he is serving a sentence that has been handed down in an unfair trial with credible reports of torture and ill-treatment. Dorjee Tashi is a victim of the lawlessness in Tibet where merely standing out is enough to get a Tibetan persecuted. That is unacceptable.”

Early life and work of Dorjee Tashi

Born on Oct. 25, 1973, and once recognized as one of the “ten outstanding youth in Tibet” by the Chinese government, Dorjee became a member of the Communist Party of China in 2003. His philanthropy work had been widely praised by the government of the Tibet Autonomous Region as an outstanding contribution to poverty alleviation and economic development in Tibet.

His company Tibet Manasarovar Group (Chinese: Xīzàng shén hú jítuán) owned a chain of luxury hotels in Tibet, including the famous Yak Hotel in Lhasa.

Besides “Shigatse Qinsangyuan Ecological Farming Comprehensive Development Company,” he also owned the “Shigatse Oasis Real Estate Development Company” and “Manasarovar Real Estate Development Company,” according to High Peak Pure Earth’s translation of the then-profile page of Dorjee Tashi on the popular website TibetCul.com.

For his businesses and philanthropy, he received multiple awards from the CCP and the government of the TAR, the Gannan (Tibetan: Kanlho) Prefecture government in Gansu and the Shigatse Communist Youth League. He received the “Tibet May Fourth Youth Medal” and was also appointed as a chancellor of Jianhua Vocational High School in Nanchong City in Sichuan.

His social welfare undertakings, like helping and providing cash donations to the widowed and elderly and the children of poor workers in Lhasa’s Tsemonling nursery school, and mobilizing fund and volunteers during earthquakes and floods in Shigatse, won him many accolades.

Arrest

Soon after the March 2008 pan-Tibet mass protests over China’s rule in Tibet, officials branded the protests a result of foreign interference. Dorjee was arrested allegedly for providing covert support to Tibetan protestors and for alleged connections with the exile Tibetan community. China’s Ministry of Public Security took an unusually direct charge in investigating Dorjee’s suspected political loyalty and tortured him to reveal imaginary political masters and foreign connections.

The political allegations against Dorjee were later dropped. But Dorjee was indicted for “loan fraud” and sentenced to life in prison with deprivation of political rights for life by the Lhasa Intermediate People’s Court.

In separate hearings, Dorjee Tashi’s elder brother Dorjee Tseten (多吉次旦) was sentenced to six years in prison, and his relatives Dhugkar Tsering (豆尕次仁) and Tsultrim (崔称) were sentenced to five- and two-years imprisonment respectively.
Legal expert opinion points at injustice and discrimination

The sentence against Dorjee Tashi was unjust, and his trial politically manipulated directly by the powerful Ministry of Public Security. A committee of six high-profile Chinese legal experts in their expert opinion in October 2018 concluded that Dorjee was wrongfully convicted for “loan fraud” when the case could have been “capital misappropriation,” a lesser offense. In a copy of the opinion published on the Rights Defender (维权网) blog, the experts committee at the Beijing-based Zheng Xin Law Firm concluded that life imprisonment for misappropriating 1.5 million yuan funds was not just. The experts recommended the sentence be commuted to a fixed-term imprisonment.

The group also found that Dorjee’s life imprisonment was discriminatory, as Chinese businessmen refusing to plead guilty to loan fraud of 53 million yuan in the TAR—compared to Dorjee’s capital misappropriation of 1.5 million yuan—were sentenced to 15 years in prison around the same time in 2010. The experts further pointed out that the presiding judge of the TAR Higher People’s Court, Yang Tingyi (杨庭轶), and acting judge Li Ruihong (李瑞红) worked on both cases on the same indictment of loan fraud but with different verdicts. The Chinese businessmen, who managed to reduce their sentences, are now out of prison, while Dorjee still languishes in prison with his appeals turned down and human rights lawyers barred from taking up his case.

People with knowledge of Dorjee’s finances point out that “loan fraud” is only a pretext to destroy him. They argue that a criminal case is untenable against Dorjee as there was no person who was defrauded of the loan and the case lacked a victim. Secondly, Dorjee’s loan from the bank was guaranteed with his property as collateral. And most importantly, the principal and the interest of the loan have been fully repaid.

Repression of Tibetans

Observers believe that the accusations of both political disloyalty and financial irregularities served as a pretext for spiteful leaders to get revenge on Dorjee. For turning down a few corrupt political and security leaders’ demand for a villa, he was reviled by spiteful leaders, according to people familiar with Dorjee’s life and businesses.

Dorjee Tashi’s detention also speaks of a particularly repressive environment when Chinese authorities clamped down harshly on any real or imagined Tibetan protest in the aftermath of the Tibet-wide protest against Chinese rule in March 2008. Dorjee Tashi, then a member of the Chinese Communist Party and delegate of the “Chinese People’s Political Consultative Conference,” was not spared from the CCP’s clampdown in Tibet.

Until today, the number of killed, tortured and arbitrarily detained Tibetans from 2008 remains unknown, as no independent Chinese or international investigation into such reports has been conducted ever since.

Dorjee’s testimony

The following is a segment from Dorjee Tashi’s testimony about his torture during his pretrial detention in fall 2008. The segment comes from testimony prepared in 2013-2014 for petitioning the government of China for a retrial of Dorjee’s case.

The petition was rejected in 2019 after being ignored for six years. Dorjee exhausted all remedial procedures in over a decade of futile attempts to seek justice, and China has also prevented human rights lawyers in Beijing from taking up Dorjee’s case.

The translation of the testimony is maintained in its original form except, for the sub-headlines and annotations inserted by ICT for purposes of clarity.
The harrowing ordeal of Dorjee Tashi during pretrial detention

Start of interrogation

I was taken to the interrogation cell at 1:30pm on July 10, 2008. Upon arrival, the officers made me sign a document for interrogation.¹

On July 13, rotating interrogation teams, comprising of 3 to 5 officers, interrogated me every four hours nonstop. An officer with the family name Xue(薛) was the main interrogator that day. Later I came to know that Xue held multiple concurrent designations as the Deputy Secretary of Milin County Party Committee², Secretary of the County Political and Legal Committee and Director of the County Public Security Bureau (米林县委副书记、县政法委书记和县公安局局长). The others in the interrogation teams comprised of Ngodup (欧珠) and Nyima Tsering (尼玛次仁) from the Tibet Autonomous Region Public Security Bureau(西藏自治区公安厅). Wang (王), the Deputy Director of Milin County Public Security Bureau in Nyingtri Prefecture³ (林芝市米林县公安局副局长), Jigme(晋美) and Phuntsok (平措) from the township level Public Security Bureau in Nyingtri (林芝县之乡或镇公安处) were also part of the interrogation team.⁴ The interrogation centered around the minute details of my life. The officers interrogated me about my family, the lead staffs in charge of running my businesses, how I started my business, the current status of my company, the incomes of my businesses, and my relationship with the authorities.

The interrogators would come with a list of names and pictures and order me to identify them and whether I have had any relations with them or not. I had no sleep for two days and nights, but I gave my full cooperation and answered truthfully to the officers as my life history is clean without any wrongdoing. Initially I thought that the interrogation committee must have mistaken me for someone else. I hoped that the interrogation would conclude soon, and I would be set free. It soon turned out how childish and ignorant my thoughts were. The interrogation prolonged and it turned extremely dark and merciless.

Ministry of Public Security takes charge of interrogation

The dawn of July 13 is a day I would never forget in my life. Two plain clothe officers from the central government’s Ministry of Public Security(公安部) arrived in the interrogation cell along with the interrogation team’s Jigme and Ngodup. One of the officers goes by the family name Liu (刘) and the other’s family name was Ma (马). It quickly turned out that Liu was the interrogation leader. Liu looked straight into my face and said,

Dorjee Tashi. Your case is political, and the Ministry of Public Security has taken charge of your case. You should tell us truth and only the truth. We are neither from the ordinary public security bureau nor the state security bureau. We are public security officers with a special mandate and with special powers. The National People’s Congress cannot interfere in our work as our mandate is specially empowered. To tell you in simple words, even if we kill or handicap you, we are not liable under the law. No leader in the Tibet autonomous region can protect you. We have been tapping your phone for many years now. We have all the documentary

¹ It is believed that the interrogation took place in a military barrack in Lhasa. Dorjee was led there with a black hood over his head with hands and legs cuffed. Every time he was moved around, he was always hooded and cuffed.
² Mainling County is in Nyingtri (Tibetan: Nyingtri) prefectural-level city in the southeast of Tibet Autonomous Region.
³ Nyingtri Autonomous Prefecture has since then been redesignated as Nyingtri Autonomous Prefectural-level City.
⁴ The interrogation team comprised of officers from four administrative levels at the central government (Beijing), regional (Tibet Autonomous Region), county (Mainling County in Nyingtri prefecture level city) and township (under Mainling County) levels. The officers in the interrogation team are identified as Liu, Ma, Xue, Wang, Nyima Tsering, Ngodup, Jigme and Phuntsok.
proof of your crime. You should cooperate with us fully. If you do not cooperate, we will take you to Beijing and make your life miserable.

Liu then continued,

What relations do you have with the Dalai? What are your engagements with the Dalai’s activities? Who in your family and friends work in the Dalai’s organization?

I was surprised at Liu’s questions. Without any doubt, I answered,

I am a member of the Communist Party of China. After thorough scrutiny, I am admitted as a member of the Party. I am politically clean. The local government has supported my social welfare activities and contributions to the society. I am also a delegate of the Chinese People’s Political Consultative Conference. I will provide my full cooperation to the central government’s investigation. I hope the central government will decide on me based on facts and the truth.

Beginning of torture

This back-and-forth question and answer went on till 6pm that day. Although I did not get sleep for more than 70 hours, I persevered in giving my answers courageously. Liu became angry at me. He dragged a wooden chair and told me to stand on it. He handcuffed me at my back and tied me to the top of interrogation cell’s iron bar. He then pulled the chair beneath my feet. My body weighing 95 kilograms was hung like an object. The hard iron handcuff pierced through my skin and flesh. The pain was excruciating. Tired from the days and nights of interrogation, I passed out. But Liu would hit me with an electric baton all over my body and the electric shock brought me back to consciousness. When I gained consciousness, I could hear Liu angrily say,

Member of the Party? Delegate of the National People’s Political Consultative Conference? All those praises and rewards are good for nothing. I have tamed tigers in Beijing. You are nothing for me to tame. After the 314 incident in Lhasa, we have killed people like you during investigation. Nobody can do anything about it. If you do not cooperate, you too will meet the same fate.

Tied to the iron bar with feet dangling in the air, I would again faint. Liu would again bring me back to consciousness using the electric baton. After being hung for many hours, I was dropped down to the floor. After some time, I was again hung up in the air. Jigme and Ngodup from the interrogation team saw me being tortured. Torture continued till the next morning. Then other officers from the interrogation team arrived in the interrogation cell.

On July 14, the interrogation continued nonstop. Officer Xue continued the interrogation in the morning. I told him Liu and Ma already interrogated me. Xue said, “They are leaders with high rank. We can’t do anything about that.” Xue continued the interrogation throughout the day repeating the same questions and told me to tell the truth. At 8pm, Liu and Ma came back again to the interrogation cell. Liu said that I should tell the truth about a five-year-old phone conversation. I had nothing to reply to baseless accusations. They continued to torture me like the previous night until the morning interrogation team arrived. When I was dropped down to floor, I could not move all my four limbs. They lifted me and put me on the interrogation chair.

From July 13 to 17, daytime interrogation is relatively lighter than the night. During the day, they would interrogate me about political matters, bribery and corruption, tax evasion and finances. During the night, Liu and Ma would repeat the same questions with torture by hanging me in the air tied to the iron bar and hitting me with the excruciatingly painful electric baton.

My shoulder swelled and the flesh and skin raptured at some areas forming bloody wounds after five continuous days and nights of interrogation and torture. They did not give me any proper food. Besides losing

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The 314 Incident refers to the Tibetan mass protests in Lhasa on March 14, 2008.
consciousness due to torture, I was dying for sleep when I was in a conscious state. Whenever, I fell into momentary sleep, I forgot about the pain and torture. I would dream of bed during that momentary sleep.

New torture method

Another day in my life that I could never forget is July 18. They used a new torture method that day. In the morning, Liu and Ma accompanied by Jigme and Phuntsok arrived in the interrogation cell. My hands were cuffed behind the interrogation chair. My legs were tied by rope to a long and heavy cement cylindrical roll. They then put a plastic sack on my head and slowly tightened it. The longer the sack is tightened, the harder it gets for me to breathe. I felt that my head would explode, my eyeballs would out come out of the eye socket, and my heart and lungs would burst out of my body. I would pass out in the process. I would then be brought back to consciousness by untightening the plastic sack. Under partial consciousness, I could see that Jigme and Phuntsok discussing concerns over the torture method. But that did not help. Liu and Ma continued with the torture method and Jigme and Phuntsok quietly left the interrogation cell. Although they repeated the torture technique over a dozen time, I did not yield to their brutality. In response, they then reinforced the torture with another tactic. They tilted my head by pulling my hair and inserted an inflatable straw into my nostril. Through the straw, they sent down my nostril hot chili fluid. They then put the plastic sack on my head and tightened it. I felt that my head, eyes, and the body was burning in fire. I cried and shrieked uncontrollably. I felt that I could not breathe any longer and that death is soon. I then lost my consciousness. When I regained consciousness, it had become dusk. For four days, the interrogation team would repeatedly handcuff me to the iron bar or hang me in the air and ask me the same questions over and over again.

Altogether after twelve days and nights of torture and interrogations, my body and mind were giving up. For four days, I could not eat or drink water as I could no longer swallow anything. At night, the interrogation cell was filled with my shrieks and cries from torture. I saw some of the officers in the interrogation team even shed tear at my ordeal. The guards and officers at the interrogation center started to pay attention to my ordeal. They expressed their concerns several times to the interrogation team and especially to Liu and Ma. On July 22, twelve days after my arrest, I was taken to the detention center for the first time. Since I could no longer fend for myself, a detainee by the family name Zhao was kept in my cell to look after me.

Taming the Tibetan

But that was not the end of torture against me.

In the morning of July 23, Liu and Ma took me back to the interrogation cell again. They handcuffed me from behind to the chair. They would scold and hit me with the electric baton at the highest voltage. I would shrink into the chair and fall on the floor with my head hitting the cold and hard cement floor. I fainted. When I regained consciousness, my mouth was filled with thick blood. Liu put his feet on my head on the floor and angrily shouted, “Tibetans like you are nothing for me to tame”. Liu then tied together my wounded arms and hung me in the air again. He hit me repeatedly with the electric baton. The extremely painful torture made me pass out again. When I regained consciousness, Jigme and Nyima Tsering from the interrogation team released me to the floor and started to beat me with bamboo stick. For the first time, tears rolled out of my eyes. It was not a tear of giving up. It was my tear of anger at the constant torture. I gathered all my strength and told Jigme and Nyima Tsering,

Both of you are Tibetan. How could you be cruel to a fellow Tibetan. You two should instead be witness to my ordeal.

Liu who was standing by said,

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6 Dorjee Tashi was detained in the Tibet Autonomous Region-level police detention center, popularly known as Sitru. Sitru, is a Tibetan version of the Chinese ‘sizhidui’ or ‘Number Four unit’ just north of Utritu or Lhasa Prison. Twelve days after interrogation and torture in a military barrack, he was taken to the TAR public security detention center.
It is no use whatever you say. It is your bad luck that you are a Tibetan. If you are Chinese, you would not be here. I have special powers. If you cooperate with us, I can make your prison term be a year or two. Even if our interrogation is unsuccessful, I can make up a chargesheet and have the court pass a judgement on you.

At that moment, I became fearless. I gathered all my strength and facing Liu I spat the stenchful blood and saliva in my mouth at him. In my eyes, he is no longer a law enforcement officer but a merciless butcher. He is a disgrace to public security.

**Sympathetic gesture from the head of the detention center**

The never-ending interrogation continued.

On July 28, Liu and Ma showed up with hard rubber batons. With my feet tied together, they angrily beat me hard at the feet without the slightest mercy. My feet swelled and turned blueish with bloody bruises all over. They took me back to the detention cell in an unconscious state. The detention guards recommended that I should be taken to the hospital for emergency care. However, the interrogation team ignored them. The head of the detention center with tears in his eyes sympathetically decided that his guards when ordered by Liu and Ma to bring me to the interrogation cell henceforth can only leave after locking the iron bar gate.

**Formally placed under arrest for the charge of “bribery”**

The interrogations continued. On August 9, I was told that I am being formally placed under arrest under the charge of “bribery”. The interrogation team told me that, “this is to ensure enough time to investigate the political nature in your case.”

After being formally placed under arrest, the frequency of interrogation sessions decreased. It may be because either the interrogation team could not get anything substantial despite their torture methods or due to concerns raised by the head of the detention center. Although I was still tied standing against the iron bar and deprived of sleep during interrogation sessions, the nonstop physical torture stopped. Instead, mental torture and deprivation of life sustenance began. When the wounds and bruises on my body showed signs of gradual healing, Zhao, who was kept in my cell as a support, was no longer detained with me. I was detained alone in the cell. Fed on rice, steamed bun, boiled water and lettuce, all other life sustaining food with nutrition was deprived from me. There was no sanitation item in the cell. After defecation, I had to use my fingers to clean up myself. The detention center in its concern to the interrogation team noted that they recognize a detainee being kept alone as going against the procedures for detention to ensure against detainee suicide in custody. They also recognized that deprivation of life sustaining nutritious food is also violation of a detainee’s basic rights.

The interrogation team in response said that

*he can decide on his own whether to commit suicide or not. You won’t be held liable for his suicide in custody.*

My life in the detention center and interrogation sessions continued.

**Threat to detain family members**

During one interrogation session, Liu and Ma affiliated to the central government’s Ministry of Public Security told me,

*Dorjee Tashi. You should plead guilty to the bribery charge against you. We know you are a mere pawn. If you reveal who is behind you, you may be released. If you do not plead guilty, you will not be able to come out of detention ever again.*

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7 By locking the gate, Liu and Ma can only interrogate from outside the iron bar gate without having access to physical contact with Dorjee.
They even threatened me that

_If you do not cooperate, we will detain your 70-year-old mother along with you. It is your responsibility if she dies. We also have many options of rounding up your wife and children._

At that moment, I stared at Liu and thought to myself how such a person without the slightest mercy and morality could even exist on this earth.8

**Cleared of political charge**

On October 25, Phuntsok and Nyima Tsering from the interrogation team verbally told me

_The political nature of your case has become clear. There is nothing against you. We are waiting for instructions from the higher authorities. After this, we will begin investigation of your finances._

**Transported to a detention center in Mainling County in Nyingtri**

At the dawn of November 14, I was suddenly moved back to the Tibet Autonomous Region Public Security Bureau detention center. At 7pm, I was transported to a detention center in Milin county in Nyingtri. That detention center is around 500 kilometers away from Lhasa. It was a small detention center only around 30 kilometers away from the border with India. Yarlung Tsangpo9 river flows along at the back of the detention center. With no sun light at all, the detention center was very dark and cold. Lit by a single bulb, there were several detainees sleeping side by side like worms on hard wooden plyboard beds. The hard and dirty quilt that the detainees wore was terribly stenchful and infested with lice. It was extremely cold in the cell during the winter. The sound of the dripping tap made the cold even worse with the sound of each water drop hitting the floor. During winter, ice forms on the sides of the bed and on the floor. Even a saliva dropped from one’s mouth quickly turns into ice on the floor. The detainees are fed twice a day. For lunch, it was noodle soup and rice porridge for dinner. The portion was very small, and the detainees felt hungry all the time. At night, armed police randomly show up and call out a detainee by his name. It was very hard to catch sleep. I was detained for 22 days in that detention center. By then, my weight had dropped down to 65 kilograms from 95 before arrest.

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8 Although we have no information of harm to Dorjee’s mother, wife and children thus far, his elder brother Dorjee Tseten (多吉次旦) was sentenced to six years in prison, and his relatives Dhuqkar Tsering (豆尕次仁) and Tsultrim (崔称) were sentenced to five and two years imprisonment respectively.

9 Yarlung Tsangpo in Tibetan is known as Brahmaputra in downstream India.
i Chinese authorities refer to His Holiness the Dalai Lama derogatorily as "Dalai" as a mark of disrespect to the Tibetan leader.

ii 95 kgs is equal to 209 lbs