



We are pleased to announce the next Friends of the Kern Institute lecture:

**From Tibet to Darjeeling:
Reflections on Tibetan Society and Colonialism in the Early Twentieth Century**

by Dr. Tenzin Tsepak (Leiden University)

Date: Friday, November 13, 2026

Time: 16.00h

Venue: Leiden University, Herta Mohr, room 0.16

The lecture will be followed by drinks in the LIAS common room in Herta Mohr, first floor.

Abstract

Since the establishment of the British colony of Darjeeling in the eastern Himalayas, this region has attracted successive streams of laborers, refugees, and immigrants from neighboring Nepal, Bhutan, Sikkim, and Tibet. In this presentation, I will discuss three men whose lives became interconnected within the district of Darjeeling and who all eventually assisted the Dutch Orientalist Johan van Manen: Karma Sumdhon Paul (born in Darjeeling to a family originally from Tibet, 1888–1976); Trin Chen (a Lhasa native who moved to Darjeeling in 1914 after the collapse of the Qing dynasty, 1893–1943); Phüntsook Lungtok (originally, a court scribe based at the Potala Palace, who later settled in Darjeeling in 1915, 1882–1926). Looking closely into how these men viewed the British Raj and its society vis-à-vis Tibetan society, I observe that they were often critical of the society, religious institutions, and governance of Tibet, rather than providing romanticized images. Although their perspectives are subjective, geographically focused on Central Tibet, and not fully representative of the entire Tibetan region, their accounts nevertheless present us with crucial early examples of Tibetan history recorded “from below”.

Biography

Dr. Tenzin Tsepak is a Postdoctoral Researcher at Leiden University working on the ERC-funded “The Van Manen Project”. His research focuses on twentieth-century Tibetan-language autobiographies written by Van Manen’s assistants, material now held at the Leiden University Library and the Wereldmuseum Leiden. Tenzin Tsepak seeks to integrate the lives, perspectives, and agency of these men into the broader historiography of Tibet, the Himalayas, Sino-Tibetan history, and Tibet’s encounter with the West. His research within this field has been published in *Modern Asian Studies*. An annotated translation of Trin Chen’s autobiography is forthcoming.

