The Remaking of Home, Community, and Self: Rangeland Fencing, Resettlement, and the Resilience of Tibetan Pastoralists

by

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A dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree of
Doctor of Philosophy
(Anthropology)
in The University of Michigan
2022

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Acknowledgements

This dissertation could not have been completed without the generous support of many people and the resources of numerous institutions. First and foremost, I would like to express my deepest gratitude to my dissertation committee, who generously provided knowledge, expertise, and kind mentorship. My advisor, Professor Erik Mueggler, has offered me the advice I needed when I needed it most. He always believed in my ability to work on a meaningful and rigorous research, which provided the intellectual space that allowed this project to develop at my own pace without much pressure and stress. Professor's Mueggler's guidance and modeling of scholarly rigor inspire my engagement with Anthropology and in-depth ethnographic studies. Professor Stuart Kirsch has been a kind mentor since my early graduate career. He has provided critical advice on comparative studies of pastoralism and land-based property rights and relations in a global context, and I am grateful for our many conversations about the scholarly and ethical dimensions of Anthropology. Professor Krisztina Fehevary, too, has been an essential guide in my doctoral training. I'm very grateful for her support and generosity. Professor Emily Yeh has been a stalwart supporter since I was a college student. I've tremendously benefited from sustained scholarly conversations with her on Tibetan environmentalism; contested notions of land and ontology; nature and society relations, among other topics. Last but not least, Professor Donald Lopez offered me help when I needed it most. His meticulous comments on specific Buddhist terms in my dissertation taught me what it means to carry out research with scrupulous attention to detail. Thank you!

I have also benefited from the wider community of the Anthropology Department at the

University of Michigan. Professor Webb Keane always reminded me to base anthropological theories on rich ethnographic studies. He also kindly encouraged me write about my first encounter with Franz Boas's concept of cultural relativism and how it emancipated my entire being as a high school student. Thank you for your kind encouragement! Many thanks also go to other professors in the department, including Kelly Askew, Ruth Behar, Jatin Dua, Matthew Hull, Jennifer Hsieh, Alaina Lemon, Mike McGovern, Yasmin Moll, Damani Partridge, Holly Peters-Golden, Gayle Rubin, Andrew Shryock, Michael Lempert, and Bruce Manheim.

I am also grateful to the community of graduate students at the University of Michigan. Special thanks go to my friends Puninder Singh, Sheng Long, Amelia Frank-Vitale, Katherine Dimmery, Sam Shuman, Adrienne Lagman, Eric Haynie, Simeneh Gebremariam, Amanda Kaminsky, Eryn Talevich, Magalena Zegarra, Yeon-ju-Bae, James Meador. Thank you for your moral support and kind friendship!

Charlene Makley deserves a special mention. Words cannot express my gratitude to Professor Makley for her many years of support and mentorship. Thanks also go to senior colleagues in the field of Tibetan studies, including Lama Jabb, Janet Gyatso, Nicole Willock, Tim Thurston, and Leonard van der Kuijp, all of whose collegiality and support I have enjoyed at conferences and coffee shops across the globe.

I also could not have undertaken this journey without the support and help of many mentors and friends in my two field sites, namely Kirti Ribo and Gongri. Special thanks go to Konchok Palsang, Akhu Kabzung Gyatso, and Ane Drolma. I also would like to thank numerous other interlocutors for patiently answering my endless and sometimes weird questions for so many years. This dissertation has largely come through your generosity and kindness.

A number of institutions supported the research and writing of this dissertation. An

International Dissertation Research Fellowship from the Social Science Research Council (SSRC) funded the fieldwork research for this dissertation. At the University of Michigan, I thank the Rackham Graduate School, which generously supported me with a predoctoral fellowship and a Rackham Humanities Research Fellowship during the writing stage. Summer research fellowships from the Lieberthal-Rogel Center for Chinese Studies were vital during the preliminary phase of my research.

My warm and heartfelt thanks go to my family for their tremendous support and hope they had given to me. I deeply thank my parents, Xiawo Tsering and Kadro Drolma, for their unconditional love and trust. My two beautiful sisters, Aje Shatso and Namtso have also been generous with their love and encouragement despite the long distance between us. I would like to express my gratitude to my parents-in-law for their kindness and support. You treated me like your own son. Many thanks also go to my sister-in-law Aje Jopa, and her beautiful daughter, Yangji for their unfailing support and encouragement. How could I forget my love of life, Drukmo Khar, who loved, supported, encouraged, and helped me get through this long and sometimes difficult journey. Your belief in me has kept my spirits and motivation high during this process. Loba and Dago (our two beautiful boys), you mean everything to us!

Table of Contents

Acknowledgements ii

List of Figures vi

Abstract ix

Introduction 1

Chapter 1 Centering Indigenous Narratives of Land and Land Degradation: Contested Causes of and Responses to Desertification in Eastern Tibet 22

Chapter 2 "What really matters is fairness": Division of Land, Rangeland Fencing, and Community Restoration in Kirti Ribo 47

Chapter 3 The Politics of Standardizing and Subordinating Subjects: The Nomadic Settlement Project in Gongri Community 70

Chapter 4 Seeing Schooling as the State: Localization of Institutionalized State Schooling in Kirti Ribo Community 95

Chapter 5 From Embodied Learning to Disembodied Schooling: Learning from the Ancestral Land and Restoring Land-based Relationships 119

Chapter 6 Co-theorizing Alternative Narratives of Tibetan Pastoralists and their Communities through Indigenous Documentary Films 151

Conclusion 183

Bibliography 192

List of Figures

Figure 1: Study sites: Kirti Ribo and Gongri. Map by Atelier Golok 1994 8

Figure 2: Expansion of sand in winter. 2010. Photo by Konchok Palsang.....23

Figure 3: Female herders tossing seeds onto sandy areas of grassland for yaks to trample upon 25

Figure 4: Remnants of the cannon shots. 2016. Photo by Gongbo.....32

Figure 5: A mining company firing cannons into the sky. Painting by Yutse Aud pal 34

Figure 6: Chinese soldiers draining the wetland in Dzorge County in the 1960s. Painting by Yutse Aud pal 35

Figure 7: Fenced strips of grassland in Kirti Ribo community. 2019. Photo by the author 36

Figure 8: The disruption that rangeland fencing created for the animals and landscape. Painting by Yutse Aud pal 38

Figure 9: Poisoning plateau pika and causing the death of many birds. By Yutse Aud pal 38

Figure 10: Yaks trampling the seeds into the soil and fertilizing the land with yak dung. 2010. Photo by Palsang.....41

Figure 11: Local monks and a Buddhist lama performing gter ritual. Photo by the author, 2016. 43

Figure 12: Grassland biodiversity that has been renewed in the footsteps of the Kirti Ribo yaks. By Yutse Aud pal.....45

Figure 13: Gongri community's winter pastureland. Winter, 2014. Photo by author. 72

Figure 14: The background of Ane Drolma's winter house back in the village (the one in the right). Winter 2012. Photo by author. 74

Figure 15: Tibetan Yak-hair-tent. Summer, 2019. Photo by Gongbo. 79

Figure 16: Gongri Settlement House at the County Seat. Winter 2014. Photo by author. 87

Figure 17: Tibetan Street Cleaners at Gesar Square. Summer 2019. Photo by author. 90

Figure 18: First School Building-Teachers' Office-built in 1997 105

Figure 19: The School Gate-built in 1998. 1997. Photo by Akhu. 107

Figure 20: Untitled -by a local Tibetan artist, 2018.....111

Figure 21: An Image of a Tibetan Boarding School.....120

Figure 22: Children are praying before each flower is assigned to them. Photo by Shingse, 2021 128

Figure 23: Children are searching for their flowers with Akhu and his teammates, photo by Shingse, 2021 130

Figure 24: Children running down a slope to look for their flower friends. Photo by Shingse 2021.....131

Figure 25: Posing for a picture upon finding their flower friends. Photo by Shingse 2021 131

Figure 26: Moment of joy captured right after discovering her flower friend. Photo by Shingse 2021.....132

Figure 27: An elder from Kirti Ribo community is introducing the history of their community. Photo by Konchok Palsang 2015. 137

Figure 28: All the attendees are riding horses to learn from the land and the elders. Photo by Drok Rilma 2021.....140

Figure 29: The attendees are cooking lunch, making milk tea in groups. Photo by the author. 2019.....141

Figure 30: The attendees are counting and naming flowers and plants in front of the elders. Photo by Drukmo Khar. 2019. 142

Figure 31: Each presenter is sharing views and commitments during the last day of Droklam Ringmo. Photo by the author. 2019. 145

Figure 32: Three written goals in Tibetan language 153

Figure 33: A bird caught up in the barbed wire. Still from Yetak's film. 160

Figure 34: A Tibetan antelope caught in barbed wire. Still from Yetak's film. 163

Figure 35: Gongbo editing his films while herding his animals. 2018. Photo by the author. 165

Figure 36: Coexistence of cranes, yaks, and Tibetan pastoralists. 2019. Photo by Gongbo. 167

Figure 37: Tibetan plateau pikas. Still from Dazi's film. 171

Figure 38: A dead pika upon eating the poison. Still from Dazi's film.....172

Figure 39: Showing documentary films to Kirti Ribo community members. 2018. Photo by the author. 175

Figure 40: Answering questions from the audience. 2021. Photo by Yetak. 178

Abstract

This dissertation explores how differently positioned Tibetan pastoralists have responded to and coped with Chinese state-led rangeland fencing and resettlement policies in the past three decades. Based on long-term ethnographic research in two Tibetan nomadic communities, namely Kirti Ribo in Dzorge County, Sichuan Province, and Gongri in today's Qinghai Province, it describes how a wide range of ordinary Tibetan pastoralists exercise their own slice of agency in the face of hegemonic narratives and policies. The existing scholarship on this topic has largely focused on the impact of the development policies and discourses on the political economy of Tibetan pastoralists, and as well as the spatial restructuring of Tibetan landscapes. However, this dissertation aims to demonstrate that the impact of large-scale policies such as rangeland fencing and resettlement has been taking place at a much deeper level, one that is not visible in the spatial restructuring of the landscape, yet is very consequential in Tibetan pastoralists' social, cultural, and individual transformations today. That is, such top-down policies have been designed to create inferior persons by annihilating people's belief in their ancestral land, in their languages, in their cultural heritage, and ultimately in themselves. Institutionalized schooling plays a pivotal role in these processes. Recognizing the deep impact of such polices and narratives on the minds of ordinary Tibetans is one goal for this dissertation. My main goal is to present a series of cases of the responses of differently positioned Tibetan pastoralists to the various forces undermining their culture, land, language, and community.

In Chapter One, based on my ethnographic research in Kirti Ribo, I discuss Tibetan

pastoralists' narratives of their landscape and their own explanations for land degradation, which often draws on a hybrid and interlocking ontology of causes. In doing so, this chapter offers an ethnographic critique of the tendency to blame Tibetan pastoralists and their animals as the primary destroyers of their land in the name of overgrazing. Chapter Two delves further into the resilience of Tibetan pastoralists by exploring the coping mechanisms of two Tibetan pastoral communities in Kirti Ribo, after their communal land was divided to individual households and clusters of households. Chapter Three presents how a multitude of actors in Gongri community have come to view, respond, and cope with the nomadic settlement project by turning state development projects into business opportunities. Chapter Four is a different case, where a Buddhist monk, namely Akhu Kabuzng Gyatso relied on the state to localize the benefits of institutionalized schooling in Kirti Ribo community. The content of Chapter Three is less inspiring than the content of Chapter Four, but both are realities on the ground.

Chapter Five continues the theme of resilience of Tibetan pastoralists by exploring two innovative land-based educational programs in eastern Tibet, which brought together Tibetan elders, youth, college students, and children with the aim of strengthening intergenerational collaborations to revitalize place-based relationships and responsibilities. Chapter Six revisits the creativity and resilience of Tibetan pastoralists by exploring how a group of Tibetan herders and a few college students in Kirti Ribo have relied on documentary films to present alternative narratives of their land, people, animals, and plants. Many of the community leaders that I consider in these two last chapters exemplify in their work the versatile possibilities of politically engaged work beyond text and beyond academia.

The primary goal of this dissertation lies in synchronizing my academic aims and academic knowledge production with the multifaceted needs of communities that I've worked

closely over the years. By presenting my interlocutors as co-ethnographers and/or co-theorists who are also capable of producing theories of their lives and the life in general, I have tried not to alter, adjust, or refurbish Tibetan experiences to fit the existing social theories in the West. However, by reincorporating silenced voices into my study, such as Tibetan herders and women, and by centering the creativity and resilience of Tibetan pastoralists in the face of ongoing struggles, I aim to produce a richness of ethnographic work that hopefully can serve anthropology, Tibetan Studies, and my home communities.

Introduction

Let me first introduce you to the geographical heart of my ethnography. The Tibetan Plateau is largely a grazing land, "vast expanse of rolling meadows and grass steppes extend across western China to the Himalayan Mountains in the south and to India in the West, covering an area comparable in size to roughly one-third of the contiguous United States[1]" (Hopping and Yeh 2018). It is the source of most of East, Southeast, and South Asia's major rivers upon which an estimated 1.2 billion people depend (Immerzeel et al., 2010). Archaeological and ecological research suggests that the formation of a pastoralists' environment in the Tibetan highlands began about 8,800 years ago (Miehe et al. 2008). According to indigenous origin stories from eastern Tibet, long ago, the Tibetan Plateau was once occupied by rhinoceros and elephants. It has had nine occupiers since the primordial time—wild yaks, wild asses, dog-like wolves, foxes, rhinoceros, elephants, pikas, birds, and insects, all living in groups of off the magnificent snow, beautiful rivers, and invigorating grass and woods. On the other hand, read the opening lines of any Chinese scientific publication or Chinese policy document on the Tibetan Plateau and you will likely see one (or all) of the following descriptors: Harsh environment, cold weather, dry land, wasteland, and fragile ecology.[2]

I also grew up in an environment where I saw (or was made to see) my homeland as a wasteland of nonachievement in a Tibetan nomadic community in northeastern Tibet. This

1 Kelly Kopping & Emily Yeh. Dismantling Assumptions about Grassland Degradation on the Tibetan Plateau. Sept. 26, 2018. https://www.colorado.edu/geography/2018/09/26/dismantling-assumptions-about-grassland-degradation-tibetan-plateau

2 Harsh environment (环境恶劣), cold weather (气候寒冷), dry land(旱地), wasteland(荒地), fragile ecology(生态脆弱)。

dissertation is not what some anthropologists would call "auto-ethnography," however, it has personal interjections to highlight what it was like to live through what I call the political production of human inferiority, which serves as one of the central concepts of this dissertation as you will see later in the introduction and throughout the chapters. To situate the specific topic of my dissertation, namely rangeland fencing, resettlement, and the resilience of Tibetan pastoralists within the larger historical and political context of China and Tibet, since the Maoist years (1950s), the reframing of the Tibetan environment as the sovereign property of the Chinese state has been a process of erasing indigenous Tibetan' affective and historical relationships to their ancestral land. Since the mid-1990s, Tibetan pastoralists have been confronted with a mandatory rangeland fencing policy, which, through its use of barbed-wire fencing, has significantly altered traditional communal grazing customs through practices of dividing, quantifying, and bounding land in a new language of units, laws, and contracts (Bauer 2005). According to this policy and the Chinese state's land laws, all the grassland is legally owned by the new legal category, namely the collective, and the Tibetan pastoralists only have use rights over their ancestral land for 50 years. In this sense, it was not privatization of land, but privatization of use rights for a period by turning the original inhabitants into temporary users of their ancestral land. This was followed by a mass relocation policy, starting in 2016, which has resettled and relocated at least one million Tibetan pastoralists from pastoral villages into concrete urban and semi-urban settlement towns as part of China's "Nomadic Settlement Project[3]" (Ch. *Mumin dingju gongcheng*). This number elides as much as it reveals, because it is critical to recognize the diversity of experiences resulting from the divergent implementation of this mass relocation policy at different scales and staggered phases—all operating across the vast

3 See Human Rights Watch Report 2013: "they say we should be grateful: Mass Rehousing and Relocation Programs in Tibetan areas of China"

and variegated space of the Tibetan Plateau (Cencetti 2011; Gyal and Bauer 2015, Ptáčková 2011, 2020).

Underpinning the rangeland fencing policy is the presumption that overgrazing leads to grassland degradation, a notion which draws upon assumptions from the *Tragedy of the Commons*[4] (Hardin 1968)—namely, that common property, such as communal pasture use is not only damaging to the environment, but also deeply irrational. This imposed narrative of overgrazing has long been employed to justify a suite of top-down policies on the Tibetan Plateau which combine the free-market mechanism with advocacy for land privatization, "scientifically-guided" land management through rangeland fencing, and "green" development through the mass relocation of Tibetan pastoralists (Yeh 2005; Levine 2015). As a result, rural Tibetans, especially Tibetan pastoralists were increasingly subject to Chinese state's experts' evaluations of their "quality" (Ch. *suzhi*), their capacity for modernizing development and enlightened stewardship of lands. Such discourses reframed China's west in the language of economic and ecological crisis and zoned it as an indispensable region providing "ecological services" to the east (Yeh 2009). Central state development and conservation policies thus provided local officials with frameworks and incentives to lay the blame for economic marginalization and land degradation at the feet of "backward" Tibetans and rezone formerly communal lands to fall under state bureaus' control.

When I was first committed to bringing the more nuanced analytic tools of anthropology and ethnography to bear in grasping the multiple facets of rangeland fencing and resettlement as they play out across Tibetan areas of China about a decade ago, a large body of literature on the

4 The Chinese term for Tragedy of Commons is Gongdibeiju and it is commonly used in rangeland fencing policy documents. See an analysis of use of this term in Li Jing and Yang Zhe. 2013. Accessed in March 2022 https://www.doc88.com/p-9837156717427.html.

social production of space in the context of state and capitalist development agendas offered me an analytical language to explore how spatial restructuring contributes to the maintenance of power of one group over another in processes that include both the surveillance of and control over bodies and their movements through space (Foucault 1967; Rabinow 1982; Castells 1983; Holston 1989, Lefebvre 1991). Drawing insights from scholars who address both the institutional forces that produce certain architectural (spatial) forms of social control and the lived experiences of residents (Lawrence and Low 1990; Lizhang 2001; Yeh 2013), I tried to find an alternative path from theories of structure that have a tendency to turn people into abject victims of governmentality and theories of practice that have a tendency to romanticize the creativity and strategies of groups or individuals already caught in the nets of control and discipline.

From early on, I learned from my ethnographic research, as well as my own lived experiences that the rangeland fencing, and resettlement policies do not just build lifeless "environments" and "infrastructures." Rather, these policies are attempts to actively constitute types of valued (and devalued) persons across spaces and times. In other words, land policies such as the large-scale rangeland fencing in the 1990s, conservation policies in the early 2000s and, most recently, the Nomadic Settlement Project have been introduced to Tibetans as a package that includes civilizing missions such as *educating* the nomads, *modernizing* the nomads, or *uplifting* the human quality of the Tibetan nomads. The existing scholarship on this topic has largely focused on the impact of the development policies and discourses on the political economy of Tibetan pastoralists, and the spatial restructuring of Tibetan landscapes. However, I argue that the corrosive impact of such top-down policies in pastoral Tibet has been taking place at a much deeper level, one that is not visible in the spatial restructuring of the landscape, yet is very consequential in Tibetan pastoralists' social, cultural, and individual

transformations today. This dissertation aims to understand what happens when external narratives and evaluations "annihilate a people's belief in their names, in their languages, in their environment, in their heritage of struggle, in their unity, in their capacities and ultimately in themselves" (Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o 1986, p 3). I call this process of eliminating people's belief in their culture, in their land and languages –by planting doubt in themselves – the political production of human inferiority.

What kind of displacement is this then? In his seminal book, "Slow Violence: Environmentalism of the Poor," Rob Nixon purposed "a more radical notion of displacement, one that, instead of referring solely to the movement of people from their places of belonging, refers rather to the loss of the land and resources beneath them." The spatial restructuring of Tibetan pastoral landscape through rangeland fencing and forced resettlement takes place at the most intimate levels of home and land but drawing insights from Nixon's notion of displacement without moving, I would like to draw readers' attention to a form of invisible yet deeply felt displacement where the displaced, or Tibetan pastoralists in this case, internalize the negative images imposed by the powerful state. This internalization of externally imposed human inferiority does not only affect Tibetan pastoralists' cultural and even political choices in ordinary living, but it also truly stops their own springs of life. Recognizing the corrosive impact of such policies and narratives on the minds of ordinary Tibetans is one goal for this dissertation. My main goal is to present my understanding of the responses of differently positioned Tibetan pastoralists to the various coercive forces undermining their culture, land, language, and community.

Let me further illustrate what I mean by the political production of human inferiority through a personal story in service of a larger argument, and I do so at the expense of

reawakening past hurts, both personal and collective. In 1997, the local government built a boarding school in my nomadic pastoral village in northeastern Tibet. Based on a lottery, I was one of seven students recruited by the school for its inaugural class. Most families in the village were against sending their children to the school. As a result, they had to pay heavy monetary fines. The school itself only offered hot water and steamed bread for breakfast, lunch, and dinner. Thanks to our mother-like yaks, we grew up consuming yak yoghurt, yak butter and milk. The temperature in the sparse concrete building sank to below twenty degrees Celsius in the winter. All the students had cracks on their hands and feet; our cheeks were mostly red. The teachers instructed us in both Chinese and Tibetan.

Apart from teaching these subjects, the school had a larger mission: to alter our fundamental values and minds. Through interactions with our teachers—Tibetans from the lowland farming areas who had recently graduated from Chinese universities—we came to realize that our bodies were not "clean" enough, that our speech was not "civilized" enough, and that we had to seek out a "better" life. Anything could be done to mold us into this ideal modern subject. Beating was more than acceptable; thus, the pain was constant[5]. One's freezing hands getting hit with a bamboo stick is truly the worst. As Tibetans say, "Pain may get old, but one never forgets it."

"If you don't want to lead the backward lives of your parents, study hard"; "If you don't study hard, you will be nothing but a stupid nomad." Our teachers drove us to hate our heritage, our elders, and even our parents. As embodiments of the state, they were there to plant the sense in us that a good life was on the outside, and not in our communities. They were there to punish us for being the children of Tibetan nomads. As children, we felt ashamed of our cultural

5 I am not trying to say that beating students is a new invention in Tibetan society. In our case, violence was justified in the name of molding us into ideal modern subjects. We were made to feel grateful for receiving corporal punishment.

background; we developed an antipathy to our socio-cultural world itself.

However, this was then, but now my status has changed from “a stupid nomad kid” to a scholar of Tibetan pastoralists with privileges and affiliations with world-class universities, while also standing above the immediate struggles of the past yet remain bonded through memory with an anxious sense of personal and collective responsibility. This ethnography emerges from these complex networks of both personal and collective relations, commitments, and responsibilities.

Field sites: Kirti Ribo and Gongri

This ethnography is primary based on my close interactions with two Tibetan pastoral communities. The first, KirtiRibo, is a pastoral community of nomadic herders with a population of around 3400 as of 2019, located 80 kilometers away from today’s Dzorge County, Sichuan Province, China. I spent a total of two years in Kirti Ribo from 2017-2019 and conducted hundreds of interviews and participated in a wide range of local community projects. The second community is Gongri, a pastoral community with a population of around 3600, located in Huangnan Prefecture, Qinghai Province, China. Although I was born and raised in this region, and conducted many summers of ethnographic research since 2012, I was not socially or politically active in this field site due to security reasons. Doing fieldwork research outside of one’s hometown approved to be a safer choice.

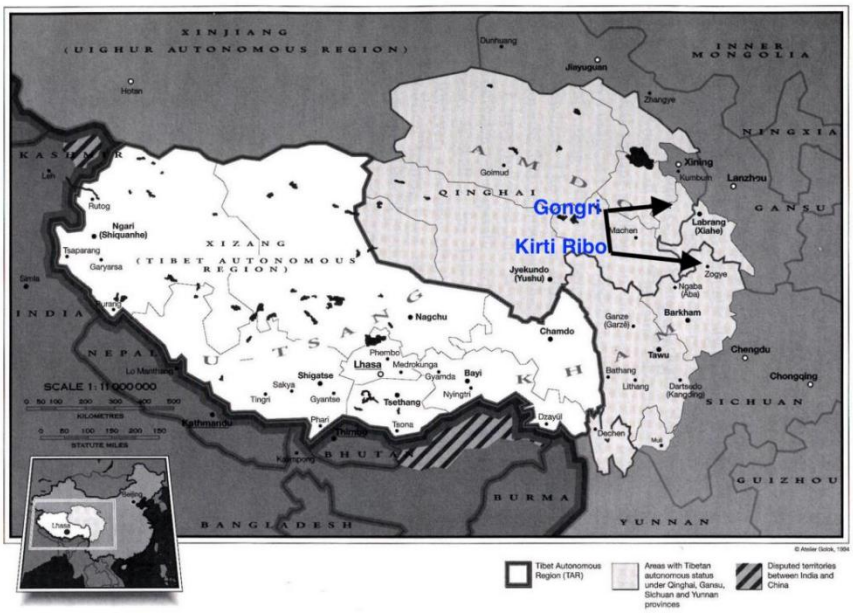


Figure 1: Study sites: Kirti Ribo and Gongri. Map by Atelier Golok 1994

Although several hundred miles apart, their residents speak the same dialect of Tibetan language with minor differences. Apart from these two communities, I've also had interactions with other Tibetan pastoral communities and engaged in conversations with hundreds of Tibetan pastoralists in a dozen Tibetan communities. The dissertation is not intended to be a total account of cultures or histories of neither Kirti Ribo nor Gongri community. Taking contemporary social realities across the Tibetan Plateau as the contingent outcomes of large-scale Chinese state development policies, my ethnographic methods do not treat localities as isolated islands of culture and locals as mere purveyors of collective beliefs and practices. This approach instead requires comparative, ethnographically grounded, and ethically responsible relationships within a broader analytical horizon, such that local processes are inextricably linked to the trans-local, and locals are politically and analytically commensurate agents.

Beyond politics of denunciation and facile binaries

In his 2011 article, "Toward a left art of government: from 'Foucauldian critique' to Foucauldian politics," anthropologist James Ferguson argued that many contemporary uses of Foucauldian analysis of power or 'critique power' (as it is often put), "lead to a rather sterile form of political engagement, in which denunciation (the politics of the 'anti') takes the place of positive political programs" (61). Instead of envisioning alternative forms of political engagement or empirical experimentation, Ferguson claimed that "moralistic denunciation takes center" in the scholarship on power and politics. As such, his critique is that many scholars have taken the job of exposing an oppressive system "as a satisfactory end to the matter" (62). While acknowledging that the job of exposing an oppressive system is not an easy task and it has its own value, from my critical perspective as a native anthropologist I also recognize that our professional knowledge of power structures is not a solution. Therefore, I'm committed to "an engaged anthropology practice where professional knowledge serves the communities from which that knowledge is derived" (Perley 2011, p3). An engaged anthropology must go beyond the discipline's 'writing culture' moment by extending our concerns from the 'politics of representation' to the 'politics of participation,' as Kirsch argued (2018), while also not losing sight of the complexities and heterogeneities of communities that we work with (Tsing 1993).

The rangeland fencing policy of the 1990s, and the ongoing resettlement policies in Tibetan areas have brought tremendous changes and challenges to the lifestyles of Tibetan pastoralists. Yet, reports by human rights organizations and mainstream media on these policies tend to perpetuate the stereotypical images of Tibetans as either peaceful followers Tibetan Buddhism or abject victims of Chinese oppression. On the other hand, the exaggerated and triumphant narratives of Tibetan pastoralists enjoying modern and comfortable lives that are ubiquitously featured in Chinese mainstream media equally distort the everyday challenges and

complexities faced by many Tibetan pastoralists today. In a 2015 *New York Times* report, it says, "By the year's end, Beijing claims it will have moved the remaining 1.2 million herders into towns that provide access to schools, electricity, and modern health care…ecologists in China and abroad say the scientific foundations of nomad resettlement are dubious. Anthropologists who have studied government-built relocation centers have documented chronic unemployment, alcoholism and fraying of millenniums-old traditions"[6] (Jacob 2015). As the chapters in this ethnography will demonstrate, the on-the-ground realities and social conditions of Tibetan pastoralists are far more dynamic, and far more resilient than allowed for in a description like, "chronic unemployment, alcoholism, and the fraying of millenniums-old traditions."

When I was doing long-term ethnographic research in two pastoral communities and interacting with a dozen other pastoral communities over the years through short-term visits and sustained conversations, I was at times inspired by the creativities and resilience of Tibetan pastoralists and their efforts to create alternative pathways of cultural and community rejuvenation that are different from the top-down state narratives. I was at times also disappointed, perhaps naively, by the actions of some Tibetan pastoralists and community leaders who have actively embraced top-down state-led policies such as the nomadic settlement project by strategically turning state development projects into 'business opportunities.' What pained me the most during my research was the realization that many Tibetan pastoralists had internalized their externally imposed inferiority. The Chinese state's systematic efforts to belittle and delegitimize Tibetan pastoralists' way of life manifested in their daily speech. Whenever they answered my questions, their responses were prefaced with self-deprecating expressions such as "Of course, as a nomad, I don't have any knowledge and education" or, "You were one

6 See New York Times article, *China Fences its Nomads, and an Ancient Life Withers,* accessed in May 2022 https://www.nytimes.com/2015/07/12/world/asia/china-fences-in-its-nomads-and-an-ancient-life-withers.html

of us, but then you managed to get a good education, but now you are wasting your time with us again." Many indeed have stopped believing in themselves just as we did when we were children. Still, there are also other Tibetan community leaders and ordinary residents who are fundamentally challenging the narrative of Tibetan pastoralists' cultural backwardness by constituting alternative forms of participation and social space, by both coping with and contesting marginalization within limited political space.

Narratives are like mirrors in which we see ourselves. In some narratives, we see hope yet in others we see despair. Some narratives offer both. We ethnographers, perhaps all storytellers, live by the imposition of a narrative line upon disparate images and events, memories, and embodied experiences. We must learn to freeze the shifting experiences to tell a story and make an argument. Anthropologists such as Kleinman and Kleinman critiqued anthropological interpretations of experience by cautioning, "Ethnography does participate in this professional transformation of an experience-rich and near human subject into a dehumanizing object, a caricature of experience" (1995: 96-97). By centering the multiplicity of voices of Tibetan pastoralists, this ethnography aims to articulate in words and conceptualize theoretically not just what is seen and observed, but also what is felt and sensed both by the author and his interlocutors. The chosen topic of this dissertation is disheartening at times, but this is not a doomsday ethnography. In his recent book, "The Heartbeat of Wounded Knee: Native America from 1890 to the Present" (2019), Native American anthropologist and writer David Treuer laid out the core focus of his book as follows, "It is adamantly, unashamedly, about Indian life rather than Indian death…the usual story told about us –or rather about 'the Indian' – is one of diminution and death, beginning in untrammeled freedom and communion with the earth and ending on reservations, which are seen as nothing more than basins of perpetual

suffering" (p 9). He further claims, "We often, too often, agree with accounts of our own demise: for many years –too many years. I understood my reservation, Leech Lake Reservation in northern Minnesota, only as a place of abject suffering, a 'nowhere place' where nothing happened and good ideas went to die. I saw it as in America but not *of* America. I saw myself and my tribe as a ruined people whose greatness lay behind us" (27). Both Treuer and I are lucky enough to have managed to stay outside of our past experiences and have come to be in privileged positions to analyze the corrosive impact of colonialism as outsiders/insiders, analysts/actors, and observers/advocates. The images of one's homeland as shockingly backward, or nothing else but a wasteland of nonachievement implanted in a colonial child "take years to eradicate, if they ever can be" (wa Thiong'o 1986, p 17, Shepherd 2019).

Konchok Palsang is a visionary community leader who was born and raised in Kirti Ribo community and his many years of efforts to restore the vitality of his community's land has been widely recognized across the Tibetan plateau. After mulled over disparaging discourses and narratives on Tibetan pastoralists for a while in the summer of 2019, he turned to me and said, "Huatse, the more I think about it, the local government and environmentalists are talking about land degradation and/or desertification as a big problem these days, yet real degradation is taking place in people's hearts. Many people no longer see their homeland as a place of value. How can we restore degradation that is taking place in the land as well as in people's hearts?" To answer to this question, or to envision alternative forms of political engagement, or most importantly to reverse the powerful state's political production of human inferiority, this dissertation brings into view the ingenuity and resourcefulness of Tibetan pastoralists through a narrative that offers hope, understanding, and food for thought for creating a better society regardless of external conditions.

Guided by this mission of reversing hegemonic narratives of land degradation and cultural backwardness in pastoral Tibet, in **Chapter One**, I discuss Tibetan pastoralists' narratives of their landscape and their own explanations for land degradation, which often draw on a hybrid ontology of causes, including those of Chinese policies since the 1950s, state-led mining, and the loss of their land's vitality. By focusing on a case study of a community-led land restoration project in Kirti Ribo under the leadership of Konchok Palsang, as well as a group of indigenous artists' efforts to construct an alternative narrative of pastoralists' connections to their land, this chapter demonstrates the indispensable relationship between Tibetan pastoralists, their livestock, and their land's future sustainability –a relationship which has been ignored in the Chinese state's technocratic and top-down environmental discourses and policies. Although I presented myself to my Tibetan interlocutors as just a researcher by asking them endless questions, the communities where I worked, welcomed me as a native son with education and knowledge. Community elders often would say to me, "Ok, you are going to write something about us, our land, and our animals. Please don't forget to write the primary causes of land degradation (as well as community degradation) from our perspectives." Chapter One aims to partly fulfill the primary wish of those elders.

The theme of ingenuity and resilience of Tibetan pastoralists continues in **Chapter Two**, which focuses on the coping mechanisms of two Tibetan pastoral communities in Kirti Ribo, after their communal land was divided to individual households and clusters of households. By comparatively analyzing how these two sub-communities in Kirti Ribo with potentially common interests and needs could create (or fail to create) their own systems and institutions within limited political space, this chapter probes into the processes of utilizing limited common resources *and* creating a just society by highlighting the various cultural resources that

community leaders have leveraged to defend the collective prosperity and community fortune in the face of division of people and land. This chapter argues that the existing scholarship on the effect of rangeland fencing policy on plant species, biodiversity, biomass, and vegetation densities largely overlooks the deeply rooted social and cultural impacts of rangeland fencing policy on the lives of Tibetan pastoralists including changing death ritual practices and community hospitality cultures.

Although I was mostly inspired by the works of many community leaders, my ethnography privileges a wide range of voices, including those of men, women, and children. As mentioned before, there were times when I was also perplexed and disappointed by the active participation of community leaders in projects like nomadic settlement while also ignoring the interests of the larger community. My goal is not just to present Tibetan community leaders as noble people who only care about their communities, but also as humans with flaws and personal interests. In this light, **Chapter Three** explores how a multitude of actors on the ground in Gongri community have come to view, respond, and cope with the nomadic settlement project by simultaneously relying on and incorporating the new space, and by constituting alternative forms of participation and social space. This chapter argues that if we are to understand the multiplicity of interactions and actors at play in the process of implementing nomadic settlement project in Tibetan pastoral areas in general, as well as in Gongri community, we need to develop models of understanding these relationships that acknowledge their complexity. There are many actors with divergent stakes in the outcome of these projects. From the perspective of those who stand to profit from its implementation –be they county-level administrators or construction contractor, or even some community leaders –resettlement was often seen as a *xiangmu,* a project can become a profitable business.

Tibetan pastoralists as political and analytical agents

Many researchers in Tibetan Studies both in the West and inside Tibet are enamored of the richness of Tibetan texts, but we should not forget the very people who had provided the economic and material resources for Tibetan monasteries so the monk-scholars for centuries could engage in religious and philosophical ideas and produce texts without immediate concerns about basic needs. Tibetan pastoralists and farmers have been the backbone of Tibetan civilization, and they have been important political actors all along. Historically, anthropology as a discipline tends to treat 'the natives' as just source of information but not as equal analytical agents. In recent years, however, global south thinkers and indigenous scholars have argued that a true pathway to knowledge diversity is to acknowledge the fact that all humans have the capacity to produce theories of the world in which they live in various forms and mediums (Smith 1999). As Leanne Simpson writes, "A 'theory' in its simplest form is an explanation of a phenomenon, and Nishnaabeg stories in this way form part of the theoretical basis of our intelligence" (2016:150). In a similar vein, Tibetan pastoralists also have been analyzing, engaging, adapting, as well as contesting the rapid changes being thrust upon them by the Chinese state development polices.

In his ethnographic study of the interactions between the Chinese state and local environmentalists in southwest China (2013), anthropologist Michael Hathaway argued, critiquing James Scott's concept of 'politics of resistance" that he observed more of the art of engagement rather than the art of resistance in his field site. Hathaway's alternative concept, namely 'the art of engagement' is a helpful analytical framework to understand how differently positioned Tibetan pastoralists have been creatively coping with and strategically responding to

large-scale state-led projects that often challenge the very foundations of their social existence. Tibetan pastoralists have also learned some lessons from their long-term engagement, though mostly not voluntary engagement, but no choice, with the Chinese state apparatus. Through their close interactions with top-down state development policies, Tibetan pastoralists have been actively analyzing the nature, as well as the duration of the state-project economy. One way is to immediately cooperate and embrace the policies, because those who initially cooperate gain certain benefits. For example, the communities that initially agreed to fence their communal land got fences for free. A second way is to resist for a period, with the risk of getting stick, but state development projects are like rainstorm or wind. If one can endure the worst part of the rainstorm, or a given policy, then new leaders will come and new leaders will have new priorities and new projects to implement, often ignoring the previous projects.

Large-scale polices such as rangeland fencing, and resettlement policies were often accompanied by aggressive education policies, exhorting the children of Tibetan pastoralists to attend state schools if they wanted to seek a better life. To continue the theme of resilience, ingenuity and resourcefulness of Tibetan pastoralists, **Chapter Four**[7] focuses on an ethnographic study of a Buddhist monk and community leader's effort to build a primary school in his home village in Kirti Ribo in 1990, and further explores how his community members' views of him and his school have changed over time. This chapter relates Tibetan pastoralists' shifting values of schooling to the larger social and political context, particularly what I call the ubiquitous Chinese *xiangmu* (project) economy. Although state schooling is highly contested, it has been one of the driving forces of social change in Tibetan pastoral areas today, and it plays a central role in the political production of human inferiority.

7 Chapter Four was published as a peer-reviewed article in *Critical Asian Studies* (Gyal 2019).

In *Standing with and Speaking as Faith: A Feminist-Indigenous Approach to Inquiry* (2014), Kim TallBear argues that any form of engagement that keeps the researcher-researched divide is a colonial affair. Instead, she suggests that anthropologists should work "to seek out and articulate overlapping respective intellectual, ethical, and institution building projects…to share goals and desires while staying engaged in critical conversation and producing new knowledge and insights" (2014:1-2). In a similar vein, under the leadership of Konchok Palsang and Kirti Ribo community elders, I was involved in co-organizing land-based educational events in KirtiRibo community over three summers, which brought together Tibetan elders, youth, and college students with the aim of strengthening intergenerational collaborations to revitalize place-based relationships and action. The elders shared stories and sacred narratives of places and explained their significance to the wellbeing of the community while the college students used their writing, artistic talents, and multimedia skills to record, express, and rejuvenate their indigenous land-based knowledge, learning, and practice. I also closely observed a similar land-based educational program, initiated by another community leader in a different pastoral community not far from Kirti Ribo, which invited Tibetan children to learn from their ancestral land by creating intimate relationships between them and indigenous flowers. These events are some of the most uplifting examples of undoing the harms inflicted upon the Tibetans by the political production of human inferiority. By drawing insights from Critical Indigenous Studies scholars who see the revitalization of indigenous ways of relating to land as essential to the mission of empowering indigenous communities and undoing the harms of settler colonialisms, **Chapter Five** offers an example of an indigenous cultural resurgence movement in a Tibetan context. Indigenous scholar Kyle Whyte writes, "Humans who identify themselves as indigenous often seek to express a prior or more original claim to a place in contrast to

individuals they consider to be settlers or newcomers. Such claims are often expressed through place-based descriptions of relationships." I use indigeneity as primarily an analytical term that refers to land-based relationships and knowledge among humans and nonhuman operatives on the Tibetan plateau over many generations, so as an analytical term, indigeneity is not an externally adopted term by the Tibetans. [8]

Translation is inevitably a form of transduction. For example, the term "pastoralists" in English evokes images of past, outdated, or even tribal. The Tibetan term Drokpa refers to people who have led a dynamic lifestyle in the quiet realm of vast grassland and high mountains. Drok according to Tibetan dictionaries means quiet place, and pa refers to people, thus the literal meaning is people who have live in a quiet place. Tibetan pastoralists don't live in the past. In his influential book, *Time and the Other: How Anthropology Makes its Objects,* anthropologist Johannes Fabians demanded ethnographers to recognize the people whom they study as their coevals. He claimed that the empirical foundation of anthropology is ethnographic research, and then the contradiction arises, as he stated, "when the same ethnographers represent their knowledge in teaching and writing they do this in terms of a discourse that consistently places those who are talked about in a time other than that of the one who talks. (1983, 22). In the case of Tibetan pastoralists, like many parts of the world, media's omnipresence in their daily lives have changed the landscape of their understanding of themselves and their ways of communicating to a much larger world. How do Tibetan pastoralists participate in it by producing work that can be distributed in a wide range of formats?

Chapter Six, the last chapter of this dissertation, revisits the theme of resilience of

8 Further discussions on the use of indigeneity in Tibetan context, See Yeh. 2007. Tibetan Indigeneity: Translations, Resemblances, and Uptake; and Dawa Lokyitsang, 2017. Are Tibetans Indigenous? Accessed in May 2022. https://lhakardiaries.com/2017/12/27/are-tibetans-indigenous/

Tibetan pastoralists by exploring how a group of Tibetan herders and a few college students in Kirti Ribo have relied on documentary films to present alternative narratives of their land, people, animals, plants, and other species such as cranes with the dual purpose of preserving their cultures, as well as constructing critical responses to state development discourses and narratives. This chapter will demonstrate that documentary films as a medium has offered unique opportunities to Tibetan herders to share their stories from their own perspectives. Many of the filmmakers, or co-ethnographers that I consider in this chapter, as well as the three films that I analyze –exemplify in their work the versatile possibilities of politically engaged work. This case study also reinforces a crucial point expressed by indigenous scholar Linda Smith about two decades ago, "When Indigenous peoples become the researchers and not merely the researched, the activity of research is transformed. Questions are framed differently, priorities are ranked differently, problems are defined differently, and people participate on different terms" (1999: 59).

Conducting ethnography is often like a yeti catching marmots

The Yeti, or Dremo in Tibetan is a mythical creature that is said to live in the Himalayan mountains, and it only feeds on marmots. It sees a marmot, grabs it, and puts it under the arm – saving the delicious morsel for later. And then the Yeti sees another marmot and reaches his arm and grabs it –while the first marmot runs away. The poor Yeti keeps catching marmots all day long, but in the end, it only has one marmot under the arm. Notwithstanding well-prepared research questions, detailed note-taking skills, sophisticated data storage techniques and technologies, the process of conducting ethnographic research can't be confined to the scope of pre-planned research agendas. This Tibetan saying (doing something is like a yeti catching

marmots) alludes to an image of bumbling effort and the pitfalls of greed. In part, the experience of doing fieldwork research is seeking out knowledge and/or information and in that process forgetting is also part of the experience. There is also an aspect of greed in the sense that collecting more information is merrier. In the end, professional transformation of experiences into disembodied text analyses is a process of extreme selection and reorganization. Thus, I acknowledge that the selective work contained in this dissertation, is an "ethnography of the particular" (Abu-Luhod 1991) because of the partiality of my position, the requirement of creating a narrative, and the limitations of attention span.

Beyond the processes of conducting ethnographic research by participating in the social lives of community members, during fieldwork research, I was also committed to various causes of my interlocutors by involving in community land restoration and cultural resurgence initiatives. This process entailed con-constructing projects in which Tibetan pastoralists acted as co-ethnographers and theoretical agents by co-producing accounts that traveled beyond small academic circles. In her book *Learning to be an Anthropologist and Remaining "Native"* (2001), native American anthropologist and educator Beatrice Medicine writes, "The late Ed Dozeir, a Puebko anthropologist, once commented that many native Americans 'went into anthropology as a means of helping their people' (summer 1948). This suggests strong interest in the application of anthropological knowledge and is tied to the Native idea of education, no matter in what field, as a means of alleviating the problems and providing self-help among Native groups" (2001, 4-5). For both Dozier and Medicine, anthropology is conceived as an application that can be used to provide help for native peoples. In a similar vein, the primary goal of my own scholarship lies in synchronizing our academic aims and academic knowledge production with the multifaceted concerns of the communities that we closely work with while

also portraying our interlocutors as complex political and analytical agents.

The theme of this dissertation is simple. It can be captured by a Tibetan saying that goes, "if the tiger has eighteen great leaps, the fox has nineteen hiding holes." This saying presents an image of well-preparedness for all eventualities. As for hiding, in fact, Tibetan pastoralists are not hiding, and instead we are fighting our own battle for survival and dignity in our own ways, sometimes consciously, sometimes by default. To quote Kleinman and Kleinman once again, "It is our opinion that a contextual focus on experience-near categories for ethnography should begin with the defining characteristics of *overbearing practical relevance* in the processes and forms of experience. That is to say, *something is at stake* for all of us in the daily round of happenings and transactions" (1995:97; italics in the original). This is also where the core concern of this ethnography lies –what is at stake for the Tibetan pastoral communities if they all see themselves as a people with no knowledge, no intelligence, no skills, and their homeland as just a wasteland of nonachievement? How do then the children of Tibetan pastoralists continue to grow up in an environment where their world is associated with low status, humiliation, corporal punishment, or even downright stupidity? By highlighting the ingenuity, intelligence, fallibility, and the resourcefulness of differently positioned Tibetan pastoralists, this ethnography is directed toward becoming part of the solution by envisioning alternative futures, as well as aiming to undo some of the harms.

Chapter 1

Centering Indigenous Narratives of Land and Land Degradation: Contested Causes of and Responses to Desertification in Eastern Tibet

Introduction: Yaks and Biodiversity

Summer is pleasant in Kirti Ribo. Two beautiful rivers converge on the village's wide-open, verdant grassland during the warmer months and flow gently alongside the summer pasture. However, in winter, as one local poet jokingly put it, "Both people and animals eat wind."[9] Elder residents of the village of Kirti Ribo in Dzorge County remember having sandy patches on their grassland more than sixty years ago, but the expansion of dunes and presence of sand in their winter pasture, covering the walls of sheep and yak enclosures, is a more recent phenomenon[10].

9 All the personal quotes in this paper are from my interviews and personal interactions.
10 Desertification, in this context, refers to the process of former grasslands failing to regrow after being covered with sand blown in from nearby sandy areas. There is also sand under the topsoil in some areas of Kirti Ribo



Figure 2: Expansion of sand in winter. 2010. Photo by Konchok Palsang

In 2010, under the leadership of Konchok Palsang (henceforth Palsang), Kirti Ribo community elders determined to plant local grass seeds in the desertified areas of their village with the hope of halting sand expansion. The community elders gathered to discuss three key issues. First, they had to ascertain that the grass seeds they were using would not be burned by the sun's rays. Next, they had to make sure that these seeds would not be blown by the wind. Finally, the elders wanted to take the biodiversity of their grassland into consideration by ensuring that no single kind of grass would monopolize the land. The Kirti Ribo elders then asked, "How can we achieve these goals?"

The solution to their conundrum came from an ordinary female herder Tsomo, who told her fellow villagers, "We should let the hooves of our yaks push the seeds into the sand and the soil. Yak's hooves cannot be replaced with any other technology because yaks also carry seeds in their body hair. As yaks trample the soil where the seeds are planted, all kinds of seeds from the yaks' hair and hooves will mingle with one another. Yak dung is also the best fertilizer for the growth of many kinds of grasses and flowers." This practice of allowing yaks to trample upon

grass seed in Kirti Ribo inspired Konchok Palsang, a group of Indigenous artists, and I to collaboratively illustrate this new practice in the form of modified Buddhist *thangka* paintings, in which the characters were not deities, but rather ordinary Tibetans from the Kirti Ribo community, including female Tibetan herders.

Palsang is a highly respected member of the Kirti Ribo community. He is in his early forties and, for over a decade, has been leading his community in an ongoing campaign to restore the vitality of their grassland. Palsang experienced a revelatory moment in 2010, when Tsomo advised Kirti Ribo villagers to use their yaks' hooves to trample newly-sown seeds into the soil. According to Palsang, this seeming simple advice contains the core message of the importance of biodiversity, not as a fancy theoretical concept, but as practice. Palsang followed Tsomo's advice and employed yaks and sheep in his larger efforts to restore Kirti Ribo grassland. He also enlisted the help of Buddhist monks to heal the earth and community artists to create a different narrative concerning the relationship between Tibetan pastoralists, their animals, and the future sustainability of their land. I will elaborate more on this case study later in the chapter.



Figure 3: Female herders tossing seeds onto sandy areas of grassland for yaks to trample upon[11].

One may assume that there is not much to argue about regarding the intimate relationship between indigenous Tibetan pastoralists, their livestock, and the future sustainability of their land, as they appear to be in a commonsensical relationship with one another. However, since the late 1990s, Tibetan pastoralists have been confronted with a Chinese state-led mandatory rangeland fencing policy, premised on assumptions made in the *Tragedy of the Commons*[12], which portrays pastoralists and their animals as overgrazing destroyers of grassland. This rangeland fencing policy was followed by a large-scale ecological migration policy in 2006 called the Nomadic Settlement Project, which, again in the name of conservation and the prevention of overgrazing, resettled over one million Tibetan pastoralists and placed them into urban and semi-urban settlement towns (Bauer and Gyal 2015). The Chinese state continues to blame overgrazing for any form of land degradation, which has resulted in far-reaching policies that impact the very existence of Tibetan pastoralists. Despite the plethora of information available on these specific policies and their inability to address ecological issues on the plateau, there is a notable lack of scholarship on Tibetan pastoralists' own views and narratives of what is causing grassland degradation and desertification[13].

Developed in the late 1970s, indigeneity as a political term was intended to recognize

11 Images of paintings included in this chapter were commissioned by Konchok Palsang after he and I had collaboratively drafted a narrative. The twelve artists are from Nyenbo Yutse in Golok, and they call themselves *Yutse Aud pal* or གཡུ་རྩེ་ཨུད་དཔལ། Which means the Blue Poppy of Yutse. Blue poppy (Meconopsis) is the artists' hometown is said to be unique and famous, hence they use this name for their group.

12 Underpinning these policies is the presumption that overgrazing leads to grassland degradation, a notion that draws on certain assumptions about the *Tragedy of the Commons* (Hardin 1968), namely that extensive mobile pastoralism based on communal pasture inevitably leads to grassland degradation. Political economist Elinor Ostrom has famously critiqued Hardin's notion of the 'Tragedy of the Commons' (1990). The Chinese term for Tragedy of Commons is *Gongdibeiju*, and it is commonly used as a rationale for rangeland fencing in Chinese policy documents.

13 When I refer to Tibetan pastoralists as a collective, I do not mean to suggest that all Tibetan pastoralists share the same views and have the same regard for the earth. In fact, some Tibetan pastoralists were initially lured into collaboration with the Chinese state by the promises of cash payments, an urban, modern life, and images on their televisions. For more on this nuanced issue, see Chapter 5).

both diversity and singularity within various native peoples' movements by creating a political mission based on solidarity. When I refer to Tibetan pastoralists as indigenous, I primarily use it as an analytical category, which refers to a more complex system of land-based relationships among humans and nonhuman operatives in a particular place over many generations (Whyte 2016). This chapter draws inspiration from Critical Indigenous Studies scholars who see the revitalization of indigenous ways of relating to land as essential to the mission of empowering indigenous communities and unmaking settler colonialisms (Moreton-Robinson 2016). Instead of portraying revitalization of indigenous ways of relating to land as mere efforts to revive a precolonial culture or simply a rigid indigenous ontology, which often leads us to a deep essentializing trap (Canessa 2018), in the Tibetan context, I argue that it is more apt to view community efforts to create alternative narratives of their land as a challenge to power and powerful narratives as development pressures heightened the stakes of land use rights throughout Tibetan regions of China. Indigenous Tibetan pastoralists' narratives of their landscape and their own explanations for land degradation often draw on a hybrid ontology of causes, including those of Chinese policies since the 1950s, state-led mining, and the loss of their land's vitality. By focusing on innovative works of community artists and leaders and their collective efforts to develop alternative narratives of and solutions for land degradation, this chapter demonstrates the indispensable relationship between Tibetan pastoralists, their livestock, and their land's future sustainability –a relationship which has been ignored in the Chinese state's technocratic and top-down environmental discourses and policies.

In his article, "The Emergence of Indigeneity: Public Intellectuals and an Indigenous Space in Southwest China," anthropologist Michael Hathaway argues that indigeneity as a social category emerged with the rise of western NGOs that started focusing on the theme of

environmental protection and sacred land in places such as Yunnan in western China in the 1990s. However, does that mean the so-called ethnic groups such as the Tibetans did not have indigenous practices or indigenous ways of relating to their land prior to the emergence of Western environment-oriented NGOs in the 1990s in southwest China? In order to understand the Tibetans' indigenous ways of relating to their ancestral land, I argue that we have to go beyond the narrow framework of environmentalism or environmental movements. Land for Tibetans has never been abstract or inert ground; it is instead profoundly local and social. As ancestral territory, land is bound up with human vitality, personhood, and agency in a moving cosmos of forces and beings impinging on human bodies and livelihoods (Karmay 1998; Huber 1999). Important material things like land, houses, and bodies are "containers" (Tib. *snod*) of "vital essences" (Tib. *bcud*) and collective fortune (Tib. *g'yang*), as well as "abodes" (Tib. *gna*) of divine beings that are vulnerable polluting harm (Tib. *gnod pa*) by wrongful human action or demonic attack. Such complex relationships between people and land are articulated in the richness of Tibetan language. My use of indigeneity is different from Hathaway's understanding of indigeneity as a contemporary social category that emerged in the 1990s in southwest China. In other words, I use indigeneity as a way to understand the Tibetans' deep historical relationships to their ancestral territory, to human and non-human beings, to fortune-bearing animals that anchor a way of life.

Dzorge: A Global Biodiversity Hotspot

Located at the first bend of the Yellow River, Dzorge grasslands and wetlands make up China's largest "intact" wetland area and one of the world's largest high-altitude peatlands (Zhang et al 2016). Dzorge is consequently recognized as a globally significant biodiversity hotspot. Over the past half century, however, its wetlands and lakes have dried up and sand

dunes have appeared and expanded. According to official reports, two hundred lakes across the county have dried up entirely, while others have turned into seasonal lakes; desertified areas have been expanding at a rate of 10% per year; and wetland area has decreased in size by 200,000 hectares since the 1960s (Yan and Wu 2005). Within Dzorge County, desertification is most severe in Maixi, Xiaman, and Tangkor townships (Deng 2012). In addition to desertification, another significant concern is the formation of black beaches, or severely degraded alpine meadows marked by the appearance of bare, black soil.

To put the topic of desertification in the larger context of China, since the 1970s, the Chinese government has been making concerted efforts to fight against the encroachment of deserts. Sober estimates provide abundant evidence of the expansion of sandy, desertified land in the northern, northwestern, and northeastern parts of the country, which has accelerated from a rate of 1560km^2 per year in the 1950s to 3436 km^2 per year in the first decade of the 2000s (Tao and Wei 2005; Jiang 2010). An estimated 3.3 million km^2 of land, or 34% of China's total land area, have been affected by desertification, and sandstorms have increased in frequency and intensity in northern China from an average of 0.5 times per year in the 1950s to 10.3 times per year between 2000-2006 (Cao 2008). Across China, "ecological migration" projects have been implemented to resettle farmers and herders off of land that has been judged mainly by local officials to be too degraded for habitation and in need of protection from human settlement (Yeh 2009a).

The conventional narrative found in official discourse and still adhered to by many PRC-based physical scientists is that desertification, like grassland degradation, is primarily caused by overgrazing and irrational land use by local farmers and herders. It is important to note that most of these farmers and herders are demographically classified as China's so-called 'minorities.

This narrative plays a key role in the Chinese state's long history of deflecting culpability for desertification and other forms of land degradation onto both past regimes and local people (Williams 1997a, 2002). In the context of Zoige, both in official documents and in Chinese academic papers, overgrazing and climate change are presented as the drivers of grassland degradation, although recent work has suggested that policies that have privatized the use of grassland and household enclosures are important drivers of degradation (Cao et al 2013). By engaging with works on the politics of scale, next, I present other possible locally specific causes and responses to land degradation and desertification in Kirti Ribo from the vantage point of Tibetan pastoralists.

Tibetan Accounts of Land Degradation

In the summer of 2015, I embarked on a preliminary research project with the aim of understanding Tibetan pastoralists' narratives of land degradation in Kirti Ribo community. At the end of three-month-long fieldwork, Konchok Palsang enthusiastically invited me to share my research findings with him and his team. After I presented my research findings, he said that this story is worth sharing to not only with the community members but to a larger audience through different communication tools. Palsang then invited a dozen community artists to illustrate Tibetan accounts of land degradation that I had collected in the form of modified Buddhist Tangkha paintings[14]. These paintings and their narratives that I include in this chapter do not have a single author but are the fruit of a collective labor.

Exploring Tibetan accounts of land degradation is a process of engaging with local observations that are taking place not only on a particular scale but also operating in a particular

14 Konchok Palsang often says that whenever he shares Tibetan accounts of land degradation through Tangkha paintings, the Tibetans find it more relatable. It is more effective than PowerPoint.

epistemology. Human geographers and cultural and linguistic anthropologists have paid attention to the politics of scale-making projects. They ask how particular scales are "assembled, made recognizable, or stabilized through various communication projects" as well as such as: "whose scale is it," "what does this scale allow us to see and know" and "what does this scale achieve and for whom" (Carr and Lempert 2016: 10, 15; Makley 2018; Tsing 2015). Human geographical approach in particular have drawn our attention to the ways in which scale is always socially constructed, historically contingent, and politically contest (Smith 1990; Marston 2000). In the context of Tibetan pastoral land, the government continues to deflect culpability for any form of land degradation on local herders in the name of overgrazing and this explanation or justification has been applied to all Tibetans pastoral communities on a large scale while ignoring locally specific explanations for land degradation.

Like published scientific account, Kirti Ribo villagers also have sophisticated, observation-based explanations for land degradation. Instead of pointing out a single cause (such as overgrazing), their explanations trace multiple interacting factors. However, some factors are more consequential and damaging to the very foundations of their community. The elders in Kirti Ribo tell the origin story of their community as follows: A long time ago, seven horse riders arrived at the intersection of the Yellow River and Mechu River. When their ancestors first came, they did a thorough examination of this land by carefully interpreting its topography to find an auspicious site for the future prosperity of their community. The beauty and abundance of this land immediately attracted them, and they decided to reside here. While there is a rich corpus of Tibetan literature on geomantic examinations and analysis (*Sa dpyad*), one of the essential qualities for a suitable construction site, whether it be for a monastery, village, or even a house, is that it be completely surrounded by mountains. In particular, the community's

foundation depends on the qualities of the "mountains in the back" (Tib. *rgyab ri*).

First and foremost, many Kirti Ribo community herders listed gold mining just over the provincial border in the town of Machu in Gansu Province as not only the primary cause of land degradation in their area, but also the major contributing factor to the collapse of their community's foundation (Tib. *gzhi)*. Mining is mentioned rarely and obliquely (mostly as an irrational use of resources) in the scientific literature on desertification and land degradation in Zoige, but it was the top reason given by Tibetan villagers for the expansion of sand dunes over the last two decades. The mine is owned by the Machu County Ge'erhe Gold Mining LLC, part of Machu County's efforts to attract outside technology and investment, and it started in 1990. The mining in Machu town, however, has been taking place in the mountains right behind Kirti Ribo for over three decades. Many elders in Kirti Ribo would lament in tears about the loss of mountains behind their community. "If your community does not have an anchored (*brten po*) mountain in the back, that means your community has become an orphan," explained an elder, sighing as his eyes scanned the land. Many Tibetan herders, especially the older generation interpret misfortunes in the land, including desertification and drought as manifestations of the very collapse of their community's foundation.

Apart from older generations' reading of expanding sandy areas as a sign of the loss of the land's vitality, as well as the collapse of community's foundation, the younger generation of Tibetan herders also interpret the effects of mining in terms of a total disruption of annual rain and precipitation. Normally, the month of May, as the local saying goes, is the time "when both the grass and the water go mad," implying that it is the prime month for grass growth and water levels. If the rain comes too early, say in the month of April, it is not considered ideal. This is explained in the common saying, "The thunder shouldn't come late; the rain shouldn't come

early," meaning that if one hears thunder early in April, it's a sign of impending rain in May, which is the golden time for rain. The worst time for rain is the months of June and July, as rain during this period does not aid the grass in growth. There are different local vocabularies for different types of rain. The most preferred type is called '*jam 'bab*, meaning soft rainfall, which typically lasts for days. The less preferred rain is the abrupt or angry rain—*char sha* or *drag 'bab*—which only lasts for a short period of time. As for snow, if snow falls early in the year during the months of October or November, some elders say that is a sign that more rain will come in the following year. And, for struggling livestock, the worst time for snow is the months of January, February, and March, owing to scarce grass buried under the snow.



Figure 4: Remnants of the cannon shots. 2016. Photo by Gongbo

Many villagers explained that ever since the gold-mining company started operations about three decades ago, its use of cloud seeding by firing cannons into the sky has totally

disrupted the nature of annual rain. Whenever there is rain or dark clouds hovering in the sky, the mining company attempts to divert their direction by firing cannons. As one Kirti Ribo villager explained, “We don’t know much about what exactly is going on at the mining site because it is off-limits to outsiders. Whenever dark clouds appear in the sky, we hear loud shooting noises from the mining site, and later we can find the remnants of what they use to shoot into the sky on our grassland.” Kirti Ribo villagers talk about the years between 2006 to 2015 as a long-term drought (*than pa*), one that resulted in the loss of water in their soil and growing sand expansion, as winter winds blew sand and soil onto the winter encampment. Though *than pa* can be translated as drought, for Tibetan pastoralists it does not necessarily mean that there is less rain or precipitation. Rather, it means that the rain either did not arrive when it was needed, and/or did not descend in favorable forms such as ‘*jam ‘bab,* or soft rainfall. In other words, Kirti Ribo villagers are in strong agreement that sand dunes have expanded, and grassland has degraded due to inadequate rain during the fifth Tibetan month, the most critical time for vegetation growth, as well as changing precipitation patterns, in which rain has not arrived when needed or where it not fallen in favorable forms, such as ‘soft rainfall.’



Figure 5: A mining company firing cannons into the sky. Painting by Yutse Aud pal

In addition to the effects of mining over the past three decades, villagers in Kirti Ribo also discuss the drainage of Dzorge wetlands during the collective period as a cause of land degradation and desertification today. The collectivization period in China started in 1953, when the farmers were first organized in small mutual help teams. Later, these small teams were gradually merged into lower agrarian cooperatives. During the Great Leap Forward (1958-1962), these small cooperatives would be merged into huge People's Communes, which led to one of the biggest famines in the world, costing the lives of over 30 million people (MacFarquhar, 1983; Lin, Justin 1990). From the 1960s to the late 1970s, the Chinese government in Kirti Ribo alone turned more than 400mu (26.6 hectares) of grassland into wheat fields, primarily to feed horses for soldiers (rather than drainage for rangeland, as is more common). The wheat fields have never fully recovered to grassland even after wheat-planting ended in 1982, and the grass quality in these areas is worse and less dense than in others. Especially in the winter, the wind easily blows the soil from the unrecovered wheat fields and covers the grassland with both soil

and sand. Villagers also point to the past practice of cutting and digging in the grassland to build sod walls[15] as fences as a cause of desertification. In Kirti Ribo, for example, several fences were built in 1986 as a boundary when the area was divided into small villages for administrative purposes.



Figure 6: Chinese soldiers draining the wetland in Dzorge County in the 1960s. Painting by Yutse Aud pal

As illustrated in the above painting, this campaign to drain Dzorge wetlands on a larger scale was and continues to be damaging to the grassland ecosystem. Two cranes are leaving the place while another crane, most likely a mother crane is still protecting her baby cranes right next to the project site of draining the wetland.

Some herders acknowledge that overgrazing in some areas, especially those where individual households graze their animals on enclosed land, can lead to desertification, but find it

15 After the collectivization period ended in 1984, sod walls were used to create boundaries between newly created administrative villages.

laughable to only blame overgrazing as the primary cause. As one elderly villager noted, “If science says that overgrazing is the primary reason for desertification prior to the implementation of the fencing policy, then this science thing is also nonsense.” In fact, many herders emphasized how yaks, sheep, horses, and goats, which are affectionately known as the four fortune-bearing animals, have played an important role in not only nurturing but also creating the pastoral landscape with their dung and seasonal movements for centuries.



Figure 7: Fenced strips of grassland in Kirti Ribo community. 2019. Photo by the author

In contrast to much of Dzorge County, where rangeland division was implemented in 1996, the villagers of Kirti Ribo resisted the policy until 2008 –I will elaborate more on this topic in Chapter Two. After resisting the rangeland fencing policy for over a decade, Kirti Ribo community embarked on a year of uncertainty by dividing their communally used land into the three administrative villages of Garsar, Tshako, Tseshul in 2008. Since then, different rangeland use-systems have emerged, ones that resemble the more traditional communal grazing practices,

and others that followed the state's vision of more individualized and privatized use of the rangeland at the household level. In the chapter two, we will explore how different sub-communities within Kirti Ribo have responded to the Chinese state's rangeland fencing policy. Although they have had less time to witness the environmental effects of rangeland division, many of these pastoralists claim that the fenced areas of individual households are visibly enduring soil degradation compared to the multi-household lands without fences. Herders are adamant that the pastures that are getting worse, rather than better, are the ones where pastures have been divided up to individual households, or groups of less than ten households, and fenced in small strips of land since 2008. As one herder explained for example, "In these strips of land, the livestock, particularly sheep, just walk back and forth from the front to the back, all day long. The animals destroy more grass by trampling than grazing." Another village herder said, "The rangeland division policy brought this issue of overgrazing by halting seasonal movement, and this is increasingly becoming apparent to any avid observer of the land."



Figure 8: The disruption that rangeland fencing created for the animals and landscape. Painting by Yutse Aud pal

Lastly, another reason Tibetan herders cite as a cause for land degradation and desertification is the mass poisoning of pikas. Plateau pikas, a small burrowing relative of the rabbit, have long been considered a pest by the Chinese government, and blamed for causing soil erosion, degradation, and desertification. This has led to mass poisoning of their burrows across the plateau, in an attempt to eradicate them. Tibetan herders generally oppose the campaigns, as many say that this goes against the way that things work in the natural world. They also observe that the eradication campaigns are ineffective, with more pikas returning each year.



Figure 9: Poisoning plateau pika and causing the death of many birds. By Yutse Aud pal

Recent ecological studies have also suggested that, rather than being a cause of overgrazing, pikas are only an indicator of degradation, and act as a keystone species (Smith and

Foggin 2006). Over 30 species on the plateau prey on pika, and, ironically, many of them are animals protected at the national level. Furthermore, recent research has shown that soil where pika live holds more water, as the animals' burrowing behavior mixes the wetter top layer of soil with the dryer soil deeper down to hold more water and reduce surface run-off (Wilson and Smith 2015; Yeh and Gaerrang 2021). However, pika eradication campaigns still dominate the policies of the region to this day[16].

The above-mentioned Tibetan accounts of land degradation and desertification provide a clear illustration of the long-standing insight that different processes are determinative at different spatial scales of observation (Levin 1992; Sayre 2005). For example, the ways in which local weather patterns change and how it is being disrupted by local mining projects matter for herders of Kirti Ribo. Rather than connecting this to regional or plateau-wide climate change, villagers directly attribute this to the weather modification practices of the nearby gold mine, across the provincial border of Machu, but very close to their village. Many community members also see the draining of wetland as a major cause for land degradation, so is the mass poisoning of plateau pikas. Although the rangeland fencing policy was introduced as a way to restore the grassland by tackling the problem of "overgrazing", however, it has generated the opposite result from the vantage point of Tibetan herders. In the remaining section, we will explore the ways in which Kirti Ribo community members have responded to restore the vitality of their land.

Local Responses: Healing the Land and Restoring Community

16 As recent as March 19th, 2022, in the name of ecological preservation, *People's Daily* reported that Shidao County in Sichuan Province's Gartse Prefecture used 70 tons of poison to kill 80 thousand plateau pikas. Link accessed on April 28th 2022. https://wap.peopleapp.com/article/rmh27621524/rmh27621524

After the Kirti Ribo elders and Konchok Palsang (or Palsang) decided to adopt the seed-sowing techniques discussed earlier in this article, a project committee was established in 2010. Palsang at the time works for a Winrock International Project, Tibetan Sustainability Environmental Resources for Increased Economic Growth (TSERING). Because of his relations with both the local community and various government offices, Palsang was able to bring together the Dzoge Forestry Bureau and the Sichuan Province Grassland Research Institute (Meinert and Gudehus 2013). This committee was composed of at least one person from each family in Kirti Ribo. Initially, fifteen herders received training from the Dzorge Forestry Bureau and Sichuan Province Grassland Research Institute in grass-sowing techniques, as well as the use of fences for protection of newly seeded areas. These trainees then instructed 150 volunteers from the Kirti Ribo community. The actual sowing and planting were done over a period of four days, with labor provided by community members. They planted oats, annual grass, and sibiricus, a perennial local grass. Since 2010, the Kirti Ribo villagers have been planting local grass in desertified areas once a year until 2020, using yaks to trample the seeds into the soil, and fertilizing the land with yak dung.

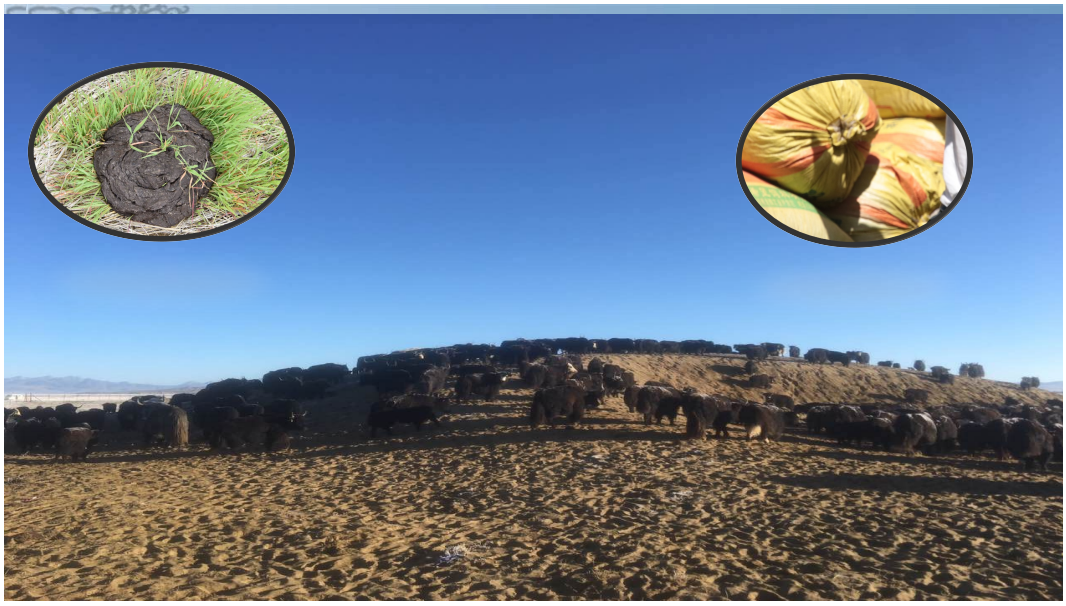


Figure 10: Yaks trampling the seeds into the soil and fertilizing the land with yak dung. 2010. Photo by Palsang

Palsang's effort to center the voices of Tibetan pastoralists by portraying them as real experts of their land has also resonated with his fellow Kirti Ribo community members. This community-led sustainability project has become of the most innovative conservation practices in eastern Tibet. The Kirti Ribo community's decade long effort to restore their land by incorporating yaks and yak dung has reinforced the notion that Tibetan pastoralists and their animals are inseparable from the sustainability of their land. Although Palsang got some support from the Dzorge Forestry Bureau and Sichuan Province Grassland Research Institute, his community-led conservation work was not appreciated by the Dzorge County government. In fact, Palsang said that the Dzorge County government warned him to stop this project countless times; however, he was able to continue this project until 2020, thanks to the staunch support of Kirti Ribo community leaders and his community members. In 2020, Palsang could no longer resist warnings from the county government and decided to put an end to this project. In fact, Palsang had been aware all along that the county government could stop his work whenever they wanted. Therefore, he has been documenting his work through both documentary films and in collaboration with a local writer and me. We have also crafted and published a Tibetan children's book that focuses on the Tibetan accounts of land degradation and the importance of yaks to the larger grassland ecosystem (Palsang, Gyap and Gyal 2019).

I would like to end this chapter with another related local conservation project initiated by Kirti Ribo community leaders, including Palsang. Tibetan pastoralists in Kirti Ribo commonly interpret the loss of the land's vitality as a consequence of a disequilibrium between the vessel-like external world and its inner beings.[17] After enduring many years of drought and

17 Tib. *phyi snod kyi 'jig rten dang nang bcud kyi sems can do ma mnyam pa*

expanding deserts, in 2015, the villagers of Kirti Ribo sought instructions from their foundational Buddhist teacher, Lama Kirti Rinpoche, who currently resides in India, to restore the vitality of their land. In a written letter, Lama Kirti Rinpoche recommended that the villagers bury treasure bundles under vulnerable rivers and wellsprings. In the summer of 2016, Kirti Ribo community members invited a local Lama from Taktsang Lamo Monastery and seven monks to heed the Rinpoche's instruction and bury treasure bundles under the earth. The aim of this initiative was to restore disappearing water levels by healing the land and placating the river-gods (*klu*). These treasure bundles consist of a mixture of minerals, soil from special sites, foods such as barley and wheat, and medicines that are placed in small cloth bags. Monks chant and consecrate the bundles for seven days. After this consecration period, the bags are buried under special places or thrown into important lakes. As one Tibetan saying goes, "If the underground is full of treasure, the people on the ground will have an abundance of wealth."

The Tibetan word for "mine" ("that which people extract from the land") and that of the buried treasure bundles are the same. Both are called *gter*. *Gter 'jog* means to bury treasure bundles; *gter bsko* means to extract minerals from the land. For Tibetan pastoralists, burying treasure bundles is a practice of engaging in a reciprocal relationship between non-human beings, such as the river-god in the land, and people. One of the reasons that Tibetan pastoralists put medicine in these ritual objects is to "heal the vulnerable river-god, just in the same way that a person would take medicine when he or she is ill," explains the Lama who instructed the Kirti Ribo community to bury treasure bundles in the summer of 2016. He further commented, "Today, the problem is there is unprecedented disequilibrium between the vessel-like world and its inner beings because we take too much from it while giving almost nothing back to the foundational land."



Figure 11 : Local monks and a Buddhist lama performing gter ritual. Photo by the author, 2016. In the summer of 2016, Kirti Ribo organized a series of *gter* ritual practices.

Before the Lama and the monks buried the treasure bundles, they placed smoldering yak dung on the offering platform. After placing three spoons of roasted barley flour mixed with butter on the fire, they poured a few drops of milk on top of it, grabbed some barley, and made libations in the direction of the mountains, where the village's protective deities are believed to reside. Following this offering, they proceeded to bury the treasure bundles in the earth. As evidenced by these practices, there are intergenerational differences in how Tibetan pastoralists interpret the drastic changes and destruction taking place on their land. And yet, though there are multiple interacting factors which contribute to land degradation and desert expansion from the vantage point of Tibetans pastoralists, the majority of Tibetan pastoralists agree in identifying one fundamental mistake: *taking without giving.*

Conclusion: Does History Repeat Itself?

The Chinese state's environmental discourses have continuously portrayed Indigenous

Tibetan pastoralists and their animals, especially yaks, as destroyers of the grassland. Over the past three decades, large-scale rangeland fencing, and ecological resettlement policies have been implemented and justified in the name of tackling overgrazing. Does history repeat itself? In 1800, forty million buffalo roamed the North American plains, but, sadly, through a combined effort of the American military, government-mandated rangeland policies, and hunters, that number was reduced to only a few hundred by 1902 (Punke 2016). The Native American environmental scholar and activist, Winona Laduke, powerfully states, "Buffalo determine landscapes. By their sheer numbers, weight, and behavior, they cultivated the prairie, which is the single largest ecosystem in North America. The destruction of the herd set in motion the ongoing ecological and now, economic crisis that afflicts the Great Plains" (2015: 143). In a similar vein, Tibetan yaks, sheep, horses, and goats, determine the landscape of the Tibetan Plateau. Today, top-down environmental and development policies on the plateau threaten the existence of both Tibetan pastoralists and their animals, with far-reaching ecological and economic consequences. This is however not a doomsday ethnography. By drawing insights from scholars who have argued that overgrazing as a certain type of hegemonic discourse at particular scales allow us to see some things but not others. In particular, Tibetan pastoralists' own understandings of land degradation and explanations for desertification are often ignored in the Chinese state's technocratic and top-down environmental discourses and policies.

Is there then a glimpse of hope in this story? This question brings to mind the insightful words of an elderly woman from Kirti Ribo: "In traditional stories, reincorporating the four fortune-bearing animals into our lives always symbolizes the beginning of an auspicious time, a new era, and with it a promise of restoration, so we can restore our land under the help of our animals."



Figure 12: Grassland biodiversity that has been renewed in the footsteps of the Kirti Ribo yaks. By Yutse Aud pal

Most traditionnel Tibetan stories and folktales end on an auspicious note. To keep with this tradition, I draw this chapter to a close with a painting of budding trees and flowers, which emerged from the footprints of the precious yaks that renewed the desertified areas of Dzorge County. Konchok Palsang's concerted efforts to restore his community by bringing people together to work on projects that would be beneficial to the whole community has been both inspiring and successful. Through this project of planting local grass seeds in the areas that are becoming desert by incorporating yaks and yak dung as fertilizer was particularly galvanizing in his community. However, there are still deep divides within KirtiRibo community. Elders in Kirti Ribo often say that the rangeland fencing policy is like throwing a piece of bone to a group of dogs (*khyi gseng la rus pa 'phang*). As dogs would fight among them to get the bone that was tossed to them, the rangeland fencing policy was like the bone in the sense that it was tossed to them by the Chinese state in the late 1990s, and it has created many fights among villagers and villages. In the following chapter, we will explore how different sub-communities within Kirti

Ribo have responded to the Chinese state's rangeland fencing policy.

Chapter 2

"What really matters is fairness": Division of Land, Rangeland Fencing, and Community Restoration in Kirti Ribo

Introduction

Kirti Ribo villagers recall that it was a foggy morning in the summer of 2008. It was an important day for Kirti Ribo, a Tibetan pastoral community of around four-hundred households located in today's Dzorge County, Aba Zangzu (Qiangzu) Autonomous Prefecture, Sichuan Province, China. After resisting the Chinese state-led rangeland fencing policy for a decade, Kirti Ribo community was pressured by the county government to divide their pastoral land into three portions. To inaugurate this event of division with an auspicious beginning, the villagers brought large bags of roasted barley flour mixed with juniper leaves, and together they made a big offering to the community's mountain deity[18]. To determine then which part of their land belongs to which sub-community, the village representatives had divided their communal land into three portions, under the help of an elderly man from a neighboring pastoral community, who has a reputation of dividing the pastoral land fairly[19]. The villagers knew some parts of the land has better access to water sources, and better soil quality, hence the results would inevitably not be equal[20]. As the smoke from the offering was gradually ascending into the sky, Kirti Ribo

18 Making offerings to the mountain deity also creates a perception of fairness in the sense that not all the results, bad or good, are not determined only by men.
19 One may think that many communities would turn over their resource division to an outsider, regardless of reputation. However, in Kirti Ribo, inviting an outsider person was the fairest thing to do for the larger community.
20 Other than water point and soil quality, a family's legacy/history with a piece of land also affect the division, i.e., some families would draw their connection to and ownership of a particular land by saying, "we've been herding animals on this patch of land every summer for generations."

community leaders, all men, wrote each sub-village's name on a small piece of paper and then placed it inside a fist-size ball of tsampa, a common Tibetan and Himalayan staple food made from barley flour, yak butter and cheese with milk tea. Upon putting the names of sub-villages inside three equal-size tsampa balls, they invited a kind-hearted community member to pick up each tshampa ball in random order. By pointing at the drawing of each division of the land on a piece of paper, three community elders unwrapped the Tsampa balls, read out the village's name, and then openly announced the result. Thus did Kirti Ribo community allocate their land to three sub-communities in 2008.

Reflecting on the memories of that day, a village herder said, "There was both tension and laughter. The way the community leaders divided the land, and the subsequent results were very fair. Nobody could challenge the result of Tsampa lottery other than blaming one's own bad karma. It was fair. *What really matters is fairness*.

After Kirti Ribo allocated their communal land by lot in 2008, different rangeland use-systems also emerged, some both resemble the more traditional communal grazing practices, and others that followed the state's vision of more individualized and privatized use of the rangeland. Some scholars term such mixed systems as the multi-household management pattern (MMP), which refers to two or more households jointly managing the land without fences between individual household pastures; and the single-household management pattern (SMP), which refers to individual household management of land with fences separating their land from that of other households (Cao et al 2011, 217). As noted in the Introduction, since the mid- 1990s, Tibetan pastoralists have been confronted with the Chinese government's a mandatory rangeland fencing policy, which has greatly altered traditional communal grazing customs by dividing, numbering, quantifying, bounding, and framing the ancestral land of Tibetan pastoralists in a

new language of units, laws, and contracts. Underpinning this policy is the presumption that traditional grazing regimes leads to grassland degradation, a notion that draws on certain assumptions about the *Tragedy of the Commons* (Hardin 1968), namely that extensive mobile pastoralism based on communal pasture use is not only environmentally unfriendly but also irrational (Bauer 2005; Zhaoli 2005, Bauer and Nyima 2011). In this framing, the land is owned by the Chinese state; and the Tibetan pastoralists have use rights over their land for over fifty years. Because the land is claimed by the state, the state can also claim the prerogative of managing it. By the early 2000s, "about 70% of China's usable rangeland was leased through long term contracts; 68% being contracted to individual households and the rest to groups of households or villages" (Cao et al, 2011, p 218; Gongbuzeren et al, 2015).

The collectivization policy arrived in Kirti Ribo in 1958 and soon after all their animals were collectivized, and people's communes (Tib. *mnyam las khang*) were established. Like elsewhere in China, the creation of people's communes brought hunger and famine to many Tibetan communities. Elders in Kirti Ribo, however, often express their gratitude to a powerful community leader at the time who had made sure that people had enough to eat even during the collectivization period. In 1984, the collectivization period ended in Kirti Ribo and then in the early 1980s, the Chinese government instituted what is now known in English as the Household Responsibility System, which dissolved the people's communes, distributing their major property, mainly animals in the context of pastoral Tibet, to their members. In the late 1990s, the rangeland fencing policy was introduced and implemented in a top-down fashion in most Tibetan pastoral communities, however, Kirti Ribo community resisted it until 2008[21].

The existing scholarship on this topic in Tibet has largely focused on the effect of

21 See Levine 2015 for a detailed history of important inflectional points in social, cultural, and political transformations of Tibetan pastoral communities since the 1940s.

rangeland fencing policy on climate change, plant species, biodiversity, biomass, and vegetation densities (Cao et al 2011a; Gao-lin et all 2009; Harris et al 2016; Xiang Mingxue 2021). As a Tibetan pastoralist jokingly said, “Researchers come here occasionally with lots of electronic equipment to study something on the land. They seem to be more interested in the cranes and plants. They are also like cranes. They come during the summer and leave when it is cold. We don’t understand their language and they don’t understand our language, so we can’t really have a conversation.” There are a few ethnographic and comparative studies that explore the social and economic impacts of rangeland fencing policy; and how Tibetan pastoralists make decisions as they go about coping with changes in land use and new herding practices (Cao et al 2011b; Yeh et al; 2017).

Specifically, there remains a notable lack of scholarly attention to the deeply rooted social and cultural impacts of rangeland fencing policy on the lives of Tibetan pastoralists and how they cope with drastic changes in land use practices. By comparatively analyzing how two sub-communities in Kirti Ribo with potentially common interests and needs created (or failed to create) their own systems and institutions within a limited political space to achieve complex objectives, this chapter probes into the processes of utilizing limited common resources *and* the makings of a just society (Ostrom 1990, Ellickson 1991). The focus of this chapter, and indeed this thesis, is not the powerlessness of Tibetan pastoralists caught up in the web of various oppressions. Instead, it highlights the ingenuity of Tibetan pastoralists, and the various cultural resources that community leaders have leveraged to defend the collective prosperity and community fortune in the face of division of people and land. It explores how two sub-communities of Kirti Ribo confront and strategically cope with the rangeland fencing policy by both employing traditional knowledge of herding animals and creatively establishing new local

institutions.

Critical indigenous studies and decolonial studies have been fundamentally questioning dominant knowledge production practices by mobilizing indigenous epistemologies to serve as not just foundation of knowledge, but also the very methods of producing and evaluating knowledge (Moreton-Robinson 2016; Simpson 2015; Justice 2016). This shift provides a more appropriate perspective to view Tibetan pastoralists' notions of land not as just rangeland or a resource. Tibetan pastoralists have long co-existed with yaks, sheep, horses, and goats, which are lovingly known as four fortune-bearers of the community (Tib. *Gyang ra sgo bzhi*). The land as ancestral territory, on which a multitude of beings depend, has never been wasteland or inert ground for the Tibetans; it is instead profoundly social and spiritual in the sense that the land is bound up with human vitality, personhood, and agency (Makley 2018). Appreciating and understanding the complexity of these belief systems is central to understanding the Tibetan pastoralist's world built on these foundations—the relationship of people to their ancestral territory, to human and non-human beings, to fortune-bearing animals that anchor a way of life. However, the state-led policy of dividing, numbering, quantifying, fencing the communal grazing land has seeped into every aspect of Tibetan pastoralists' daily experiences of land use today. In other words, the ancestral land of Tibetan pastoralists has been forcefully framed in a new language of units, laws, and contracts. As such, this chapter argues that neither a singular focus on indigenous notions of land (or indigenous ontology), nor an exclusive focus on the state concept of property/contracts is a sufficient framework for the rigorous ethnographic investigations of the competing, and sometimes overlapping, locally specific experiences of land use practices in pastoral Tibet today.

In recent years, anthropology has seen a revived focus on the very fact of difference in

human experiences in some circles in the U.S and Europe by largely drawing on the influential work of the Brazilian anthropologist Eduardo Viveiros de Castro (1998; 2006; Empson 2011, Kohn 2013, Descola, 2013Holbraad and Pedersen 2017). Within this tradition, some scholars argue that some communities do not live in different cultures, but also in different words, and this turn is called *ontological turn.* However, I hold that a rigorous ethnographic investigation of competing notions of place and land must not focus exclusively on radical alterity nor on the modern legal conceptions of property. In actual practice of daily life, competing notions of land bleed into each other, even as they operate on unequal grounds. This particular case study also cannot be said to be a representative of the ways in which most pastoralists communities are coping with the rangeland fencing policy today.

Resisting Rangeland Fencing and Restoring Community

Elderly residents of Kirti Ribo emphasize that their community has always been comprised of students of the Lama KirtiRinpoche lineage. In 1748, when the fifth Kirti Rinpoche, Lobsang Tenba Gyaltsen founded the Taktsang Lhamo monastery, Kirti Ribo was designated as the place to graze animals offered to him by leaders in Dzorge and adjacent areas[22]. The people of Kirti Ribo, thus, were the herders and guardians of Kirti Rinpoche's livestock until the late nineteenth century[23]. Most people in Kirti Ribo today, especially the elderly, claim to be loyal students of Kirti incarnate lamas and declare that their commitment has never wavered, even during the Cultural Revolution in the 1960s. When the fencing policy was introduced to Kirti Ribo community in 1999 by the county government, the community elders

22 Kirti Ribo communities had animals of their own, but as part of their memory, they take pride in being the grazers of Lama Kirti Rinpoche's livestock.
23 Cf. Konchok Rinchen. 1995. *The History of Kirti Khachukha* (publisher's name was not included in the book)

argued that the communal land use was more beneficial for the overall wellbeing of their community. A community leader who is in his seventies said with a Tibetan expression, “The fencing policy was like throwing a bone to a group of dogs, so the dogs would fight to get a piece of the bone.” Kirti Ribo community feared that the fencing policy would sow seeds of conflicts. Although the land was not divided to individual households, Kirti Ribo community leaders created a system in which the families with more animals were made to pay cash annually to families with less animals or no animals. As time went by, conflicts emerged as livestock poor households felt that families with more animals were not paying enough. Many community members felt a deep sense of unfairness. In addition, 2008 was China’s Olympic year and state development policies such as rangeland fencing were also intensified; hence there was external pressure for Kirti community to divide their communal land. This chapter explores how two sub-communities of Kirti Ribo coped differently with the rangeland fencing policy. Pelu village, a small community with a population of two-hundred fifty and forty-six households in 2008 decided to communally use their land on a smaller scale by both relying on traditional grazing practices and creatively establishing new local institutions. Whereas Garsar village, which has almost the same number of households as Pelu village, decided to divide their land into individual household plots and fenced each household’s land to establish clear boundaries. How do these two rangeland-use systems generate socially, culturally, and ecologically?

Case study 1: Pelu Village

Residents of Pelu village recall 2008 as a year of uncertainty. As one village elder recalled, “We didn’t know whether it would be good to divide the land to individual households

or not. Everything was uncertain. Fences, including barbed wire fences, were expensive[24].” After a dozen meetings and many discussions, the village elders encouraged the rest of the community members to collectively use their land, at least for a year or two. Pelu village can be grouped into four yak-hair tent groups (Tib. *Sbra' kha*), which means that the villagers are closely related to each other based on kinship; and people in each group are close to each other by blood[25]. Each yak-hair tent group is consisted of fourteen to fifteen households. People don't marry each other within Pelu community. Marriage takes places between three sub-communities of the larger Kirti Ribo community. To briefly explain what roughly can be translated as yak-hair tent groups, the ceremony for a newly wedded couple entails preparing a yak-hair tent by relatives of both families. The couple's close relatives contribute animals, such as yaks and sheep for the newly wedded couple to start a family. Some households in the larger community of Kirti Ribo contribute at least one sheep, depending on one's closeness to the family of a given couple.

Rather than viewing community members as part of a communal whole, the Household Responsibility system divided the community into discrete household units. All the residents who were born before 2008 were registered in the Household Responsibility System and each resident was assigned to have use-rights over 156 mu of land (approximately 10 hectares) for fifty years. People who were born after 2008 do not have use-rights over any land, and the land of family members deceased since 2008 are retained by their families. In her influential book, *Governing the Commons: The Evolution of Institutions for Collective Action* (1990), Elinor Ostrom, demonstrated that when common-pool resources such as pastures, fishing water and forests are jointly used, in time, rules are established for how these are to be cared for and used

24 Since Kirti Ribo didn't cooperate with the county government initially in the late 1990s, they didn't get any government subsidies for fencing.

in a way that is both economically and ecologically sustainable. This conclusion challenged the commonly held notion that natural resources that were collectively used by their users would be over-exploited and destroyed in the long-term. By studying the interaction of people and ecosystems for many years, Ostrom showed that communally managed natural resources by groups of people can prevent degradation without government intervention. However, Ostrom's general theory of natural resource management takes place in a vacuum, where state power, historical events, and powerful leaders play little to no role[26]. In what follows, we look at Pelu community's ways of coping with rangeland fencing policy.

Since 2008, eight village headmen have closely worked together to devise and monitor a set of rules to collectively use their land. As it was introduced to by the Chinese state officials, sheep has become the primary unit for calculating and controlling the stocking rate of individual households. One yak was decided to be equivalent of five sheep, and one horse was to six sheep. An externally imposed grazing limit has not been imposed by Kirti Ribo, but like herders elsewhere, community members make their own judgements about the fertility of the land and the number of livestock their land can sustain (see also Yeh et al 2017). Since 2008, the Chinese word, *Yang danwei* (sheep unit) has become a common loanword in the everyday language of Tibetan pastoralists and their ways of relating to the land. Many are not even aware that it is a Chinese word. The land was divided according to the number of members in each household (i.e., infants, children and seniors received land share or use rights as adults). Each family member, if officially registered in the Household Responsibility System in 2008, was given use-rights over 156 mu (10.4 hectares) of land. Newborns after 2008 have no use-rights over any

26 I don't intend to idolize or make normative the notion that all community leaders act altruistically on behalf of the community in Kirti Ribo. However, most of my interviewees repeatedly stressed the importance of having a true community leader in trying times.

land, and the land of the deceased since then are used by their family members. Each year, since 2008, the eight village headmen have several important decisions to make. To clarify, the eight village headmen is consisted of one chair, and seven assistants. Each year, depending on the quality of the grass and the amount of rain, they collectively decide how many sheep each family member is allowed to graze on the collective land in a given year. For example, in 2009, each family member was allowed to graze 75 sheep. Once this number is determined, the village headmen visit each household and count the number of animals four times a year, and then they translate each household's livestock rates into sheep units. For example, a household of five family members registered to have use-rights over their land in 2008 would be able to graze 75x5=375 sheep on their collectively used land. This hypothetical household's ten yaks would equal sixty sheep, and their four would equal twenty-four sheep. This number would be added to the number of sheep of that household. If the total number of sheep exceeded their allowed rate of 375 sheep, then this household would have to make a payment for the extra animals. If the total number was lower than 375 sheep, then they would receive payments from other households. The eight village headmen had to meticulously count the number of each household's animals and then calculate the payments that had to be paid by the families that had more animals and the payments that should be received to the families that have fewer or no animals.

During years when there was abundant rain and grass, each family member was allowed to graze 75-85 sheep on each person-unit of collectively used land in a given year. However, for example, from 2010 to 2013, when a series of damaging drought hit the region, the eight village headmen decided that fewer animals should be grazed on the collective land. The lowest rate since 2008 has been 60 sheep per household member. As mentioned before, families with fewer

animals or no animals can rent out their land to families with more animals in their own community. It is the village headmen's responsibility to balance this process by collecting payments from families and redistributing it to families with fewer or no animals using sheep as the primary unit. Before 2016, the rental cost per sheep was about 80 RMB (equivalent to 14 dollars). For example, if one household member was allowed to graze 75 sheep in a given year, the rental value of their livestock in cash was 75x80=6000 RMB. Since 2016, Pelu community has allowed each household member to graze 80 sheep on their communal land, and the rent cost per sheep is about 100 RMB. 80x100=8000 RMB. A household of five members with no animals would get 8000x5=40,000 RMB (about 5715 US dollars) from the community. If you find these numbers a bit confusing, then the task of converting yaks and horses into a sheep unit, and then calculating how much each household is supposed to receive from or pay to other households with fewer animals, is even more challenging.

The term limit of the village leader and his seven assistants is three years. After three years of community service, a big meeting is convened to select the next village leader and his seven assistants. One male family member from each household must attend this meeting. The village leader and his assistants usually nominate the next village leader, but the ultimate decisions are put to a vote at this meeting. The most important task is to appoint a capable and compassionate village leader, who will put the fellow community members' concerns and interests before his. Under his leadership, the seven assistants are expected to aid his plans to advance the well-being of the community[27]. Since 2011, the second village leader and his seven assistants have come up with a financial resource for the community. At the beginning of each year, each household member who has use-rights over land, must contribute five sheep worth of

27 There are four yak hair tent groups or *sbra kha* within Pelu community. Each yak hair tent group can choose two assistants. However, the yak hair tent group where the villager leader is from can only choose one assistant.

rent cash. For example, if the rent cost of a sheep is 100 RMB, then each household contributes 5x100=500 RMB to the community's common fund. As of 2019, there were 243 household members who were officially registered to have use-rights over their land in 2008. If we multiply 500 RMB by a population of 243, it adds up to 121,000 RMB (about USD 17,285) per year.

The village leader and his assistants administer this common fund and use it to strengthen the vitality of the community by investing in a few areas. First, each year they use this money to invite around twenty Tibetan Buddhist monks from Taktsang Lamo Monastery to chant Buddhist scriptures for the betterment and prosperity of the community. They also invite their village Lama to restore the vitality of their land by burying treasure bundles under important sites and wellsprings. Second, when nearby pastoral communities complete the construction of a temple or a monastery (Tib. *'grub ston*), there is a tradition of giving gifts, mainly cash and *khatak*, a white scarf that symbolizes purity. The community's money is partly used for such gifts. Third, Gongbo is a young man in his early thirties. He is known for his genuine care for the community and his oratory skills. He has started a loan program in 2011 for his fellow community members, especially to those families that were financially struggling. "I had two goals to start this loan program. One, I wanted the community's cash to grow exponentially year by year; and two, my goal was to lend it to households at low interest." In 2019, Pelu village had about 60,000 RMB in the community fund, (about USD 85,714) and about 20 percent of the households in the community were taking loans at low rates of interest.

Gongbo and the subsequent leaders made detailed transparency rules to gain the trust of the community. For example, the village leader and his assistant can't use a dime from the community fund, and they must provide detailed reports to the community members twice a year, one at the beginning of the year and another at the end of the year. All the work that goes

into administrating the community's cash is voluntary work with zero payments for the village leader and his assistants. This work ranges from counting the livestock rate of each household four times a year, calculating the village's number of animals in sheep unit, redistributing cash to those households that have fewer animals, and collecting cash from those households that have more animals, to administrating the community fund. A village leader to whom I spoke in the summer of 2019 said, "There are really a few days in a year that you are free, but we do this for the community and for all of us." He commented, "There are many costs to being a village leader. For example, if you represent your village to give a gift to another village in a faraway area on important occasions, according to our rules, we can use the community's money for the gift, just the gift, but we can't use it for our expenses. It is very good to be that way."

As mentioned previously, the community leaders count the number of animals of each household four times a year to make sure that no household is breaking the rules. Gongbo said, "Very few households break the rules, but occasional infractions happen. When they happen, we have a set of creative punishments. Coming up with creative punishments is very important to the unity of the community." By creative punishments, Gongbo meant strategies to hold the rule breakers accountable for their actions without hurting their feelings. For example, if a household breaks the rule by allowing more animals on their communal land than their limit, the village leaders require them to make additional contributions to the annual cost of inviting Tibetan Buddhist monks to chant scriptures for the well-being of the community. Gongbo said, "The very few households that have broken rules are willing to contribute to something that will also bring benefits to their families. This kind of punishment does not hurt their feelings, so we can continue to work together." Based on many field studies, Ostrom famously identified eight

"design principles" of stable local common pool resource management.[28] I introduced these principles to the community leaders of Pelu village and invited other members of the community to comment on the applicability of Ostrom's principles. Gongbo jokingly said with laughter, "This famous scholar's principles hold so much truth. However, if one can get a Nobel Prize for identifying these principles, then we should get one too because we already know and have applied many of these principles." Many villagers emphasized that the most important thing is to have a leader who takes the well-being of the community seriously, or someone who puts the interests of the community before his. Many cited a Tibetan saying to highlight the importance of having a real leader with a big heart. The saying goes, "in the heart of an inferior man, there is not space even for a needle. In the heart of a mediocre man, there is space for a spear. In the heart of a superior man, there is space enough for an eagle to soar." To quell conflicts and reduce uncertainty in trying times, many community members expressed the sense that a community needs a leader with a heart big enough for an eagle to fly.

Case study 2: Garsar Village

Garsar village, a small community with a population of two-hundred eighty persons and fifty households in 2019 decided to divide their land to individual households in 2008. Why was Garsar village not able to coordinate their strategies and create institutions to communally use their land? In my interviews with people who had opposed the communal grazing system, all expressed that there wasn't a good leader who could come up with a system that was fair. The households that opposed it were mostly families with very few livestock. One Tibetan herder said, "The households that had more animals were not paying enough fees to the livestock poor

28 Please see Ostrom's 8 design principles for Common Pool Resource (CPR) Institution here: https://www.onthecommons.org/magazine/elinor-ostroms-8-principles-managing-commmons

households. In addition, the community leaders always came up with rules what were mostly in favor of households with more livestock. Livestock-poor households were mostly ignored." Another villager said, "Once the land is divided, we can lease our land whenever we want. This is especially convenient for livestock poor households or households with no livestock."

Many community members of Garsar village said that they had a great leader but unfortunately, he passed away in 2009, which was one year after the Kirti Ribo community divided their land to three sub-communities. If Kargo (the esteemed leader) was still alive, many Garsar villagers believed that he would have come up with a just system. He would not disfavor households with few livestock over households with more livestock. During the Cultural Revolution (1967-1977), when Taktshang Lhamo monastery was destroyed and monks were forced to disrobe and leave, Kirti Ribo community welcomed two-hundred displaced monks to stay in their village. Although he was a young man, Kargo was a respected community leader at the time, and under his leadership, Kirti Ribo community arranged for a monk to stay in each household. After the Cultural Revolution, most of these monks returned to Taktsang Lhamo monastery. This was no easy feat during the height of Cultural Revolution, and upon the occurrence of this event, Kargo was arrested, and he spent 18 years in prison. After he was released from prison, he continued to serve as a community leader in Kirti Ribo until the last days of his life. Many Kirti Ribo community members still affectionately praise Kargo and his ability to rise to difficult occasions, be they the Cultural Revolution or the rangeland fencing policy. Many expressed that Kargo attended to the diverse needs of his community with care and compassion, especially during trying times. After his passing, Garsar village didn't have someone who could replace the leadership skills of Kargo.

One of the major conclusions of Elinor Ostrom's studies of management of common-pool

resources is that "When appropriators act independently in relationship to a common pool resource generating scarce resource units, the total net benefits they obtain usually will be less than could have achieved if they had coordinated their strategies in some way" (1990, p 38). The total benefits here is mostly referring to economic benefits, but in the remaining section of this chapter, we will comparatively explore what the abovementioned two rangeland management systems have generated socially, culturally, economically, and ecologically. Which system is more beneficial for the overall wellbeing of the community?

"We can't live without yak dung"

It was in the summer of 2019. After Ane Tseyang – a herder from Pelu village – milked her female yaks, she returned to her yak-hair-tent, and poured the milk into a big wooden bucket. As she added more yak dung to the adobe stove, the shadows of the flames played on the walls, supplying both heat and warmth, she answered my question, "Would you prefer the land to be used by collective households or by individual households?" To which she replied, "I always worry about the prospect of not having enough yak dung if we decided to use the land individually. My family only has twelve yaks, and that would not provide enough yak dung to last through the year. We don't have any sheep. We need yak dung every day to cook food, to make tea, to heat the room in winter. I wouldn't even know how to cook without yak dung. We can't live without yak dung. I'm very thankful that so far, I can collect yak dung from our collectively used land." To address the concerns of livestock poor households that do not have enough yak dung to last throughout the year, the eight village headmen have come up with a system. Pelu village has a fenced reserve pasture area to help reduce the risk of livestock losses during lean seasons, mainly winter and spring. During critical times in a year, all the households

in the community can let their struggling animals graze this reserve grass. When the community is using the reserved pasture (mainly during the winter), only the poor livestock households can collect the yak dung there. In my interviews with other women in Pelu village, they too listed having enough yak dung as the most important benefit of collectively using their land.

By contrast, in Garsar, many women – especially women from poor livestock households – said that they don't have enough yak dung and families with fenced land often don't allow them to collect yak dung from their land. One woman said, "Many men don't know this problem because they are not responsible for cooking food. We women know how important it is to have enough yak dung to really sustain the family." Since Garsar village doesn't have a system that allows livestock-poor households to access yak dung, many families must buy yak and sheep dung from nearby villages. One bag of dried yak dung costs around 5RMB, and most families need at least two bags of yak dung per day. Households in Pelu community with few or no animals don't have this cost.

"Land is degrading in fenced areas"

As mentioned earlier, Kirti Ribo resisted the rangeland fencing policy on the grounds that it would diminish the prosperity of their community and sow seeds of conflicts among its villagers. According to locals, the ecological consequences of rangeland fencing have gone far beyond their initial expectations. Herders are adamant that the pastures which are declining are those which have been divided up and fenced by individual households and smaller units (less than ten households) into small strips of land since 2008. One herder from Garsar explained, "In these strips of land, the livestock, particularly sheep, just walk back and forth from the front to the back, all day long. The animals destroy more grass by trampling than grazing." Another

herder stated, “The rangeland division policy brought this issue of overgrazing by halting seasonal movement.” Another herder mentioned the unequal distribution of yak dung within fenced areas, “In some fenced areas, there is too much yak dung as some families don’t immediately collect them or wait until the dung dies up. Yet, some other families collect all the yak dung from their fenced area without leaving anything for the soil. The land is declining in fenced areas.”

Households with few animals or no livestock households in Garsar village lease their land to both insiders and outsiders from other communities. Most households lease their land for a short period of time. As noted by Bauer and Nyima, “Leasing can…lead to unintended outcomes: lessees have little incentive to invest in grasslands or use them sustainably, a problem compounded by the usually short-term (1-year) nature of the leases. Such imperfections in the land rental market mean that lessees will have incentives to overstock and run-down rented land relative to their own contracted pastures (2011, p27).” This observation equally applies to Garsar village, where the lessees overly use their rented land without much care for the land. This is, in effect, a kind of tragedy of the commons, created by private ownership of land as opposed to the problem Hardin though he was pointing out.

“Today, Pelu is the wealthiest village in Kirti Ribo”

Prior to 2008, Garsar was considered the wealthiest of the three villages, with more yaks and sheep than the other two. Today, however it is considered the least wealthy. As of 2019, Garsar village allowed each household member to graze 6-70 sheep unit equivalents on their household pastureland whereas Pelu household members can graze 70-80 sheep unit equivalents on their communally grazed land. Since many households in Pelu village have been able to graze

more animals on their communally used land, Pelu has had a rising reputation of being the wealthiest village. Nor is it just a question of number. As one herder from Garsar explained, "Many households in Pelu have been able to graze more animals on their communal land. Not only that, but their animals also produce more offspring than our animals. It's been hard for our sheep to produce offspring every year on our fenced land." Muslim livestock buyers in the nearby county corroborated that livestock from Pelu are better, fatter, and fetch higher prices than those from other villages.

Some families in Garsar insisted that there are benefits to individual household management, given that fencing saves labor. However, while some appreciate the labor saving, another elderly man in his 1970s from Pelu expressed the views of many when he stated, "fencing is not good for the people either because many men have nothing to do, and they waste their time in teahouses every day. It's not good for the wellbeing of the people and the animals as both are becoming less and less healthy. Those people who sit in teahouses every day have problems such as high blood pressure these days. This is a new disease. I have never heard such an ailment before." Household fencing also allows families to rent out their pastures to other herders. However, the number of renters of these fenced strips of land have decreased over time with increasing awareness of the degradation of these pastures relative to communally owned land. More broadly, there is an emerging understanding in Kirti Ribo that the degradation of land in fenced areas, degeneration of communal lands, and deteriorating health of both people and the animals are closely related to each other.

"Taking care of the dead is the community's job"

Akhu Donko is an eighty-year-old man from Garsar community. In my conversations

with him on the cultural impact of rangeland fencing, he shared some of his deep concerns about the fact that fewer and fewer villagers are attending to the ritual practices for the dead. He shared a Tibetan saying that goes, "One never touches the dead bodies of close family members." What this saying implies is that whenever someone dies in the community, it has always been the community's job to attend to the elaborate death ritual practices for the deceased person. Whenever someone dies, it has been the community's job to invite a Buddhist Lama to recite the necessary prayers before the dead body is taken to the sky burial site. Traditionally, all the households in Kirti Ribo would bring a butter lamp, or some cash when someone dies in the community. One must also know how to carefully and deftly break the corpse's spine so that it can be folded and carried to the burial site. Kirti Ribo community's sky burial site is in the vicinity of Taktsang Lhamo monastery, and it takes about one hour and thirty minutes by car to the burial site. Once at the site, one must know how to chop up the limbs with axes or knives so the waiting vultures can eat easily. When only bones remain, one must know how to pound them into a pulp, mix it with roasted barley flour and yak butter, and then offer it to the vultures, i.e., Himalayan griffons or lammergeiers.

Akhu Donko shared an anecdote with me. In the summer of 2019, a seventy-seven-year-old woman died in Garsar village, and Akhu Donko went to help the family. He was shocked to learn that only her brothers were there to take care of the dead body. Only a few people came from the community to help. "Without the help a community," Akhu Donko asked, "who will take care of the dead?" Elders in Kirti Ribo often say that the rangeland fencing policy is like throwing a piece of bone to a group of dogs (*khyi gseng la rus pa 'phang*). As dogs fight among themselves to get a bone tossed to them, the rangeland fencing policy is equated to that bone, in the sense that land was tossed to the Tibetans by the Chinese state, and it has created many fights

among villagers and villages. Akhu Donko said that at least in Pelu community, the community still take cares of their dead. By contrast, in my interviews with Garsar villagers, many lamented the fact that more and more dead bodies are not cared for in the manner they were in the past and that death ritual customs no longer have the power to maintain a sense of community and interconnectedness. One woman herder said, "There is no unity in our community. Some households don't even allow you to collect yak dung from their fenced land, let alone take care of a deceased person." Many Garsar villagers acknowledge that Pelu has been doing well socially, economically, and ecologically mainly because they have good community leaders who are just and fair. Here I would like to invoke the insights of famous Tibetan comedian and writer Menla-kyap, whose voice is synonymous with original critique and public conscience in the minds of many Tibetans, especially in Amdo region of Tibet. In a comedy skit on Tibetan pastoralists' changing relationships to and experiences of their land, *The Golden Fatherland* (Tib. *gser mdog gi pha' sa* 2008), he says, "We used to fight over the land. Nowadays, we fight over the grass." This pithy summary aptly captures the differences between the old fights over the land among different pastoral communities, and the new fights over the grass within the same community. According to Menla-kyap's subtle analysis of this transition, the former fights were more concerned with claiming ownership over a community's land; the latter fights are caused by one family's animals transgressing into another household's fenced land, resulting in ugly fights over the grass between families, or even between the siblings. In this sense, the former fights were imbued with dignity and the latter fights evince embarrassment. The difference between *Sa'* and *rtsa'* should be noted here. Sa' refers to soil, its history and vitality – the memories of a place, the affective and embodied relationships to the land – whereas *rtsa* is just a resource. In Garsar village, it can be said that many households are fighting over grass, whereas,

Pelu community has been making concerted efforts to fight for its communal land.

Conclusion

Rangeland fencing policies have unfolded differently in different parts of pastoral Tibet. This case study does not claim to represent how other pastoral communities have coped with and adapted to the rangeland fencing policy. Nevertheless, this case study sheds lights on how Tibetan communities have been coping with the rangeland fencing policy by simultaneously relying on and incorporating the official language, and by constituting alternative forms of participation and social space. The barbed-wire fencing policy of the 1990s, and the ongoing development policies in Tibetan areas have brought tremendous changes to the lifestyles of pastoralists. Yet, reports by human rights organizations and activists in the West on these policies tend to perpetuate the stereotypical image of Tibetans as either peaceful followers of Tibetan Buddhism or just abject victims of Chinese oppression.[29] On the other hand, the exaggerated and triumphant narratives of Tibetan pastoralists enjoying modern and comfortable lives that are ubiquitously featured in Chinese media equally distort the everyday challenges and complexities faced by many Tibetan pastoralists today. In addition, due to very limited research access, especially to foreigners, scholarly works on these issues have barely scratched the surface of the causes and implications of such changes for Tibetans and Tibetan livelihoods writ large.

Elinor Ostrom's principles for communal management of common resources proved to be helpful for thinking about the complex conditions that are critical for the emergence of social, common property regimes that are culturally, economically, and ecologically sustainable. However, the most critical condition mentioned by Kirti Ribo community members is the existence of a real community

29 See NYT 2015 report "China Fences in its Nomads, and an Ancient Life Withers"

leader who would take care of the well-being of the community by putting the community's interests before anyone else's, including himself. Indeed, Pelu community has had several community leaders who have been working for the community without any monetary return for many years. Toward the end of my fieldwork, an elder from Pelu community, who also had served as a community leader for three years, shared some inspiring words, "It's a wonderful moment when people are striving for something bigger, more beautiful, more connected. I hope people can find within themselves the resources to put the overall wellbeing of the community forward during trying and uncertain times. This is not an easy matter because to do something good for the community, we also need to accept sacrifice individually. People are smart. People always know who is a genuine and who is not a genuine leader."

Chapter 3

The Politics of Standardizing and Subordinating Subjects: The Nomadic Settlement Project in Gongri Community

Introduction

In this chapter, we further explore how differently positioned Tibetan pastoralists strategically engage with top-down Chinese state development policies by focusing on my second field site, namely Gongri[30], a remote mountain community of nomadic herders in today's Qinghai province with a population of 3110 persons and 601 households in 2019 with an area of around 267460 mu of land (equivalent to 178,3 sq km). Residents of Gongri above thirty years old of age are eighty percent herders with an average flock of twenty yaks, one-hundred sheep, and one horse. Although rangeland fencing policy was implemented in a top-down fashion in 1999, most herders graze yaks and sheep on their fenced land and rent other families' land when they do not have enough grass for their animals. Only around fifty percent of people who are under thirty years of age are herders in Gongri. Many of them work as taxi drivers, and others work on construction projects at the county seat. Most of the people who are under twenty-years of age attend school either in their community or at the county seat. County education department officials often lecture the parents in Gongri to send their children to schools at the county seat in order to move forward.

Gongri is similar to Kirti Ribo community in several respects. They speak the same

30 Gongri is a pseudonym, whereas Kirti Ribo is not. What I described about the Gongri community leader's effort to take advantage of the nomadic settlement project could be used to hold against them. For security reasons, I use a pseudonym.

dialect of Tibetan. Unlike other Tibetan pastoral communities in Guoluo and Yushu, Yartsa or caterpillar fungus, an expensive medical herb, neither grows in Kirti Ribo nor in Gongri; however, Yartsa has been an important source of cash income for many Tibetan pastoralists today. Gongri is also different from Kirti Ribo in several other respects. Although Gongri community has been facing issues of land degradation or soil erosion, there are no areas that are becoming desert in Gongri. Gongri community resisted the rangeland fencing policy for over a year and then they agreed, or to put it more aptly, they were made to agree to implement this policy in 1999. Whereas Kirti Ribo community resisted it until 2008. Kirti Ribo community elders managed to convince the Dzorge County government to implement the nomadic settlement project on their original winter grazing land, so arguably the nomadic settlement project did not bring many changes to the lifestyle of Tibetan pastoralists in Kirti Ribo community.

As mentioned in the Introduction, through their close interactions with top-down state development policies, Tibetan pastoralists have been actively analyzing the nature, as well as the duration of the state-project economy. One way is to immediately cooperate and embrace the policies, because those initially cooperate gain certain benefits. For example, Gongri community got fences for free after they were made to agree to divide their land to individual and/or clusters of households in 1999. Another way is to resist it for a period, with the risk of getting stick, but state development projects are like rainstorm or wind. If one or a community can endure the worst part of the rainstorm, or a given policy, then new leaders will come and new leaders will have priorities and new projects to implement, often ignoring the previous ones.



Figure 13: Gongri community's winter pastureland. Winter, 2014. Photo by author.

An elder who was involved in the initial negotiations with county government officials about rangeland fencing in Gongri community said, "Going against state policies would be just like an egg hitting rocks. It is better to follow the orders from the top because whenever a new policy is introduced, the higher ups also don't know what they are trying to do, so if the village elders can respond fast enough, they can work with the government officials to address local needs." Ane Yangko, elderly woman in her 80s, shared her thoughts with a sigh in the summer of 2018, "There are always self-serving people in the community who compete to work with county government officials to implement policies. Huatse, you don't know what had happened in our community during the Cultural Revolution[31] and the collectivization period. In the name of class struggle, villagers who had fewer animals interrogated and tortured other villagers who had more

31 The Cultural Revolution, headed by Chairman Mao, arrived in Gongri in 1968. It pitted community members against one another in the name of class struggle and punishing the bourgeoise class.

animals. Many community members were arrested. Many succumbed to starvation. Truly heartbreaking was that some community members even interrogated our main Lama Rinpoche[32]. Some of these people are still alive today." Ane Yangko and her generation have never healed from the invisible scars of the past. Her generation also sees their homeland as a basin of abject suffering as they personally had experienced much pain inflicted upon them by their very fellow community members in the name of class struggle during the Cultural Revolution that lasted for about a decade from 1967 to 1977. In Gongri community today, people refer to the people who were so enthusiastic about interrogating their fellow community members during the Cultural Revolution as mad people (Tib. *smyon pa*). With an understanding of this historical background, this chapter aims to draw the readers' attention to what anthropologist Michael Hathaway (2013) calls 'the art of engagement' as opposed to James Scott's concept, 'the art of resistance' as a way to understand how differently positioned Tibetan pastoralists in Gongri community have come to view, respond, and cope with the Nomadic Settlement Project by simultaneously relying on and incorporating the new space, and by constituting alternative forms of participation and social space. In doing so, this chapter further illustrates how the political production of human inferiority and the ordinary villager's internalization of the externally imposed inferiority in the name of bettering education and bettering human quality, affects Tibetan pastoralists' social and cultural transformations in ordinary living today.

'Life still goes on…'

Ane Drolma[33] is in her late forties. In 2010, she moved to the newly built settlement town

32 Some community members in Gongri also challenged and interrogated their main Lama Rinpoche, and as of 2012, some of the interrogators were still alive. As a result, many villagers were suspicious of these people and thought that they would once again embrace top-down state development policies and betray their community.
33 All names of people in this chapter are pseudonyms. I have not also mentioned the name of the county seat to protect the safety of my interlocutors.

on the periphery of Jentsa county seat in today's Qinghai Province, with her husband and their seven-year-old for the purpose of sending their son to a good school. Before Ane Drolma's family moved to the settlement town, they led a nomadic pastoral life, living in an adobe house in winter and a canvas tent in summer and moving with their roughly twenty yaks and one-hundred-fifty sheep –an average flock in these parts –to new pastures as needed.



Figure 14: The background of Ane Drolma's winter house back in the village (the one in the right). Winter 2012. Photo by author.

While I was staying with Ane Drolma's family in the winter of 2012 and 2014, Ane shared with me a mixture of feelings about her new life. She proudly said, "I sell bread in the street these days. Initially, I was shy to just sit in the street and sell bread, especially when I saw people from my village. Now I am getting more and more used to it. I make some money from selling bread to support my family. Since January, I have never asked for any money from my husband." After a pause, she continued, "I would not have many complaints about our life here if there was a place for me to make offerings to mountain deities." Like other Tibetans in Gongri

village, making offerings to mountain deities is an essential part of her life: it brings safety, purity, and prosperity to their families. Yet we cannot reduce Ane Drolma's concerns here to trivial exotic sentimentality or superstitious beliefs (Chin. *Mixin*), as the Chinese state development discourse, as well as some of the so-called modern Tibetan New Thinkers, would pompously assume[34]. For Ane Drolma and many other Tibetans with whom I spoke over the years, not being able to make offerings to mountain deities threatens the very core of their personhood, and how they relate to their environment as the world around them changes drastically. Many Gongri villagers expressed sentiments like, "We live right next to the town's landfill. It's hard to find a clean place to make offerings with trash from the landfill blowing into to your courtyard."

Later on, I realized that a place to make offerings is not the only thing that Ane Drolma felt she needed as I learned more details of her life in the resettlement town. Ane said, "There is no toilet here [in the resettlement]. It is a pain to travel to the public toilets on the main street every day." At this moment, I bluntly asked Ane, "Why doesn't your family move back to Gongri, your home village, if there is not even a toilet here!" Ane mused on this while making some tea on her newly bought electronic plate before reply, "You know Huatse, my family sold all our sheep and yaks very recently. Without any livestock, how could we lead a life in the village now? Plus, our son can get good schooling here, so it is better to stay. Also, people in the village would say that we did not manage to lead a good life here if we go back. At least, I can make some money from selling bread here. It is a tough job, *yet life still goes on, right* (Tib. *'tso ba de ltar bud 'gro ni red, de red la?*)

34 The final chapters of Wuqi's dissertation, *Tradition and Modernity: Cultural Continuum and Transition among Tibetans in Amdo*, address the rise of Tibetan 'New Thinkers' in the late 1990s and early 2000s. These 'New Thinkers' espouse the view that Tibetan culture and religion have been a hindrance to Tibetan development and modernity. See also Gaerrang 2015.

As Ane Drolma's narratives suggest, the ongoing resettlement of Tibetan nomads into urban areas under the aegis of the Nomadic Settlement Project (Chin. *Muming dingju gongcheng*) since 2006 has created tremendous changes and challenges for pastoralists (Tsering Dondrup 2012; Gruschke and Breur 2017; Bauer and Gyal 2015; Tan 2018; Ptackova 2020). At the same time, such changes in Gongri are complex co-productions of outsiders' influence and some insiders' active engagement with these changes –a point I elaborate later in the chapter. Generally, reports by human rights organizations[35] and activists in the West on resettlement among Tibetan pastoralists tend to perpetuate the stereotypical image of Tibetans as either peaceful followers Tibetan Buddhism *or* abject victims of Chinese oppression. On the other hand, the exaggerated and triumphant narratives of Tibetan pastoralists enjoying modern and comfortable lives that are ubiquitously featured in Chinese media equally distort the everyday complexities faced by the nomads I met.

My own narrative, therefore, tries to maneuver between these bifurcated views, and privileges the narratives of people like Ane Drolma, for whom the policy has had very concrete and ambivalent effects. '*Although it is a tough job* [selling bread in the street], *life still goes on…'* After observing the processes of social, spatial, and cultural changes in Gongri over a long period of time, I have come to concur with many of my interlocutor's sense that life not only still goes on –it goes on with hopes and dreams, struggles and hardships, confusions, and uncertainties.

The Politics of Standardizing and Subordinating Subjects

Today, pastoralists across the world struggle to balance increasingly demanding set of

35 For example, Human Rights Watch Report 2013.

relations: state powers that persistently exert an ordering frame through education campaigns and development initiatives, market forces that stress the survival of the fittest and corporations in strategic pursuit of raw materials (Agrawal 1999, Askew 2020). Pastoral communities around the world also lose their land to conservation. Development policies and policy narratives in pastoral Tibet fall very much within the ambit of civilizing mantras, such as bringing modernization, economic efficiency, market -oriented personhood, comfortable living and, most importantly, environmental protection and national security to China's west. The driving force of change in the Tibetan pastoral context is China's national security. At the heart of both rangeland fencing and resettlement policies is the idea that the west would remain "backward" and "unruly" if left alone or uncared for. In other words, a sense of backwardness that ostensibly poses a threat to social and political stability is transformed into the spatial and social reorganization of Tibetan pastoral regions.

In particular, since the inception of the central state led 'Great Develop the West' campaign (Chin. *Xibu dakaifa)* in 1999, the Chinese state leaders have launched large-scale development and ecological policies in today's Qinghai Province, a region Tibetans refer to as Amdo. In particular, the 2005 campaign of constructing a 'New Socialist Countryside' promulgated a specific model for building socialist 'villages' in Tibetan areas that ostensibly possess the qualities of 'sturdiness, greenness, beauty, and luster' (Chin. *Yinhua, luhua, meihua, lianghua*) as part of the larger mission 'to develop production, enrich livelihood, civilize rural habits, tidy up the villages, and democratize management'.[36] The official planning document, entitled Nationwide Nomadic Settlement Construction Project, 12th Five Year Plan, 2010 dictates that,

The Tibetan plateau, Xinjiang, and other minority nationality regions are the key areas to combat

36 Chin. *Shengchan fazhan; shenghuo kuanyu; xiangfeng wenming; cunrong zhengjie; guanli minzu*. The 'Campaign of Constructing a New Socialist Countryside' was announced at the Fifth Plenum of the Sixteenth Party Congress in October 2005. (c.f. Perry 2011: 35).

separatists and vandalistic actions. Through the implementation of the policy of the Nomadic Settlement Project, the production and living conditions of nomads will be improved, the economic development of minorities and social development will be catalyzed; thus, it effectively resists people's involvement in both internal and external hostile forces by eliminating social instabilities and maintaining national unity and stability in China's border areas (p 10).

In the broader historical and political context of China's incorporation of its western frontier zone into its national body, land policies have increasingly been used as a tool for nation-building and territorial consolidation (Sun 1929; Rohlf 2003; Makley 2018; Yeh 2013). The official narratives laid out in the above document falls very much within the ambit of what anthropologist Makley calls "authoritarian capitalism", such as bringing modernization, economic efficiency, market-oriented personhood, comfortable living and, most importantly, national security to China's west (Makley 2018). At the heart of policies such as Rangeland Fencing, and the Nomadic Settlement is the idea that the west would remain "backward" and "unruly" if left alone or uncared for. Repeatedly mentioned in the official document is the statement that the Nomadic Settlement Project will replace nomadic 'ground-shacks" (Chin. *Diwozi*) with comfortable concrete houses[37]. According to this portrayal, nomadic previous residences were ostensibly close to collapse in stark contrast to durable and modern brick or concrete houses.

Before even the Nomadic Settlement houses were built, Tibetan pastoralists had been living in adobe houses during the winter season and mostly in yak-hair and canvas tents during the summer season. Tibetans call yaks *nor*, which means treasure for an important reason. That is, yaks are the primary source of life on the grassland. They provide milk, meat, and yak dung for fuel, yak skins for cushions and carpets, and yak-hair-tents for people to dwell in, among others. Tibetan pastoralists have lived in their black yak-hair-tents[38] for as long as anyone can

37 See the open official planning document for detailed contrasts between old/ 'soon-to-be collapsed' nomadic houses and new settlement houses.

38 To make a yak-hair tent, first people clean up all the yak hair. Then they hand-spun into yarn and waving into rectangular shapes like carpet in different sizes. After that, they join those rectangular carpet by stitching them into two halves of cuboidal

remember.



Figure 15: Tibetan Yak-hair-tent. Summer, 2019. Photo by Gongbo.

I do not intend to overly romanticize life on the Tibetan Plateau. Having grown up in a nomadic family as a child myself, I know that herding yaks and sheep in winter can be very harsh as temperature sinks to minus degrees Celsius. However, Tibetan pastoralists are not so concerned with issues such as cold weather or having enough oxygen. They weather gets cold in the winter, but it's not so difficult if your body is ensconced in warm sheep-skin robes. Likewise, though a snowstorm might kill a large number of the animals you depend on for survival, a strong culture of mutual aid and resilience helps you cope with uncertainty in trying times. As one Tibetan herder in Gongri recounted to me, "Apart from the collectivization period of the 1950s, someone dying of hunger or poverty was unheard of in the long history of our community." More often than not, external assessments of the Tibetan Plateau that references its

shape. To pitch a yak-hair tent, it needs two wooden poles and ten to twelve shorter wooden poles, and long ropes made out of yak hair. Yak-hair tent is very elastic; hence it can resist strong hails.

"harsh environment," "cold weather," "dry land" "wasteland" and "fragile ecology" only serve to advance and justify the policies and interventions of the Chinese state in Tibet.

As eminent Kenyan scholar and writer Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o has noted that the effect of the cultural bomb unleashed by the imperial state is to "annihilate a people's belief in their names, in their languages, in their capacities and ultimately in themselves" (1986, 3). Scholars of Tibetan have focused on the impact of the Chinese state development policies and discourses on the political economy of Tibetan pastoralists (Fischer 2013; Levine 2015; Bum 2019, Ptáčková 2021). The spatial restructuring of Tibetan pastoral landscape through rangeland fencing and resettlement policies takes place at the most intimate levels of people's mind. Here, I would like to draw readers attention to a form of invisible yet deeply felt displacement where the Tibetan pastoralists internalize the negative image imposed by the Chinese state. This internalization of externally imposed human inferiority does not only affect Tibetan pastoralists' cultural and even political choices in ordinary living, but it also truly stops their own springs of life. For instance, the opening speech made by the township leader in a mixture of Tibetan and Chinese at a village meeting that I observed in 2012 highlights this point:

> Today, our *zhuyao mudi* (main goal) in coming here is to educate the nomads (Tib: *slob gso gtong gi yong ni yin).* First and foremost, I want to talk about education. Gongri village has a very small pool of students studying at the county level schools compared to other farming villages. Why is that? Why is that? This has to do with your old thinking (Tib: *bsam blo rnying pa*). Many parents in your village are knowingly ruining your kids' future by asking them to herd animals with you. If you do not want to want your kids to lead the kind of life you have had, you have to send them to school, especially schools at the county seat where education quality is better than in the villages and the people have higher human quality (Chin. *Su zhi*). Our country has invested a lot of money to build resettlement houses at the county seat for nomads, so I highly encourage you to take advantage of this very good policy and let your kids get a better education at the county…

The speech starts with a Chinese loanword for purpose, which draws attention to the speaker's level of education and social status. Not that every single use of a Chinese loanword indexes high status, but the word *purpose* is associated with townspeople, who are, unlike the

nomads, purportedly purposeful or people with goals. The speaker then states the goal of the meeting: 'to educate the nomads.' The speaker differentiates himself from nomads and represents himself as an 'educated' person or a 'person from the county seat'. Here I find Russian philosopher and linguist Mikhail Bakhtin's notion of 'voices' to be a helpful analytical tool for unpacking the multiplicity of agencies in this speech. For Bakhtin, the voices of separate actors are found in the complex rhetoric produced by a single speaker. 'Voices' for Bakhtin are not just individuals, but characters or types, who stand for collectives (Agha 2005). At stake here is not only one official talking down to nomads, but a collective mentality against nomads for ostensibly lagging behind in education. When the speaker shifts his voice to the state, reprimanding Gongri villagers for not moving into the settlement town to get a 'formal education' for their kids, he is voicing the State's perspective, articulating, and reemphasizing the patron-client relationship between the 'benevolent' state and the 'unappreciated' nomads (Yeh 2007). In turn, the State has escalated its efforts to exhort Tibetan pastoralists to send their kids to schools in urban towns, where they will have the opportunity to get a 'formal education' and to move forward –a strong incentive for Tibetan pastoralists to resettle.

On a rainy day in August 2010, long before Ane Drolma's family moved to the settlement town, my host father Akhu Tsering, who is in his late forties, returns home from herding sheep on his family's fenced pastureland. His Tibetan robe is totally soaked. His hands and legs are trembling from the cold and his face looks tired. Water drips from the brim of his hat. Ane Drolma swiftly brings him some dry clothes before adding more dung to the stove to keep the house warm. Tsering sits by the stove and drinks his milk tea with hands still trembling. As the flames in the stove grow, the house starts to warm warmer. Then Ane Drolma, Akhu Tsering and I discuss his arduous day:

“You must be very tired. You should have come home before the rainstorm”, says Ane while serving us more hot tea.

Akhu Tsering responded somewhat angrily, “Of course, I would have come home before the rainstorm if I could. But our family’s sheep run to the upper village’s pastureland. If I hadn’t gone up to drive them back, those families in the upper village would have thrown stones at our stray sheep and broken their legs.”

“Yes, they would definitely do that. Good that you managed to drive our sheep back home”, Ane Drolma replied.

After Akhu Tsering had drunk some tea, he talked about his livelihood after all the communal land in his village was reallocated to individual households in 1999:

“Huatse, it’s very hard to lead a nomadic life these days. All the grasslands are fenced. Animals are not like people. They just go everywhere when they are hungry. But if they go onto another family’s pastureland, it causes conflicts between the families. Many families get into serious fights because of that, even among siblings. So, we always have to keep eyes on our sheep and yaks. It’s very tiring. What I’m most concerned with is my son’s future. I seriously want my family to move to the county seat, but my wife disagrees with doing that.”

Ane Drolma joined our conversation.

“If we moved to the county seat, who would take care of our family’s sheep and yaks?”

“If we let my brother’s family use our pastureland, I am sure they would help us take care of some of our animals.”

“Without money, how could we lead a life in the county? People say that you need cash to buy everything, even water.”

“We could open a small restaurant. Plus, many families in our village send their kids to

school at the county seat. We also should think about our little son's future", Akhu Tsering explained.

"Restaurant…huh, you know how to run a restaurant? We can send our son to the boarding school in our village", Ane Drolma insisted.

"People say the teaching quality in our village is bad! Good teachers don't come to teach in a village like ours. Families send their kids to schools at the county seat. We also don't want to ruin our son's future. You don't know such things!"

This brief exchange illustrates how families weighed the positives and negatives of changing their way of life. Above all, it is clear that many parents were convinced by what they were being constantly lectured by the county government officials, which is that if they are not sending their children to schools at the county seat, then they are ruining the lives of their children. This internalization of externally imposed human inferiority or what I call the political production of human inferiority plays a pivotal role in the ordinary life decisions of Tibetan pastoralists.

"**The Nomadic Settlement Project is just another *Xiangmu***"

From the foregoing discussions, it might seem there is little to understand about the cause of the nomadic settlement formation in Tibetan areas in general in Gongri in particular beyond the power of the State and its development agendas. Much of what has been described here can also be characterized as the State and/or the local government catalyzing change *but not fully driving it* at the local level (Stasch 2013). Tibetan pastoralists are not against change, but they neither determine the direction nor the pace of changes in their lifestyle. This point becomes clear as we delve into the details of who initiated the nomadic settlement project in Gongri and

how it was carried out. As noted earlier in the chapter, the transformation wrought by the Nomadic Settlement Project in Gongri was a complex co-production of outside influence and a few insiders' active embracing of these changes[39], guided by the experience of *going against state policies would be just like an egg hitting rocks.*

In the remaining space, I aim to present a nuanced account of how the Nomadic Settlement Project in Gongri first got started, and who was involved in the implementation process of the project. Naturally this particular case is not necessarily representative of the Nomadic Settlement Projects in other Tibetan pastoral regions. Yet the general internal logic of the project, the implementation projects and the main actors typically involved are more or less the same. The Nomadic Settlement Project was also introduced to the Tibetan pastoralists as an ecological policy or a solution to overgrazing by removing them out of their grassland (Cencetti 2011). In an interview with a local government official, I inquired as to his views on the relationship between the Nomadic Settlement Project and ecological protection. He first burst into laughter and then said, "Connection with ecological projection!? Who cares about that? The Nomadic Settlement Project is just another *xiangmu* (project). As I will illustrate in the Chapter 4, *xiangmu* is a Chinese word and doing *xiangmu* is oftentimes equated with doing *business* in the common language of my interlocutors, which implies a monetary gain for certain group of people. For some village elders and village leaders[40], township and county government dignitaries, the pursuit of settlement policy was, from the beginning, a means of securing *xiangmu* money. The most important thing from the perspective of the local government is to

39 By 'outside influence', I mean the development agenda that undergirds the Nomadic Settlement Project; by 'insiders', I mean Gongri village elders and officially appointed village heads.
40 Village elders (Tib. *sde ba'I rgan po*) are influential local figures, who have traditionally played an critical role in their communities, e.g., mitigating local disputes, delivering wedding speeches, and initiating religious ceremonies. Village leaders (Chin. *Cunzhang*) are officially elected and they closely work with township level officials by convening meetings, introducing new policies and distributing government subsidies.

complete a project so they have something to show when Provincial and Prefectural government officials inspect their work (Bauer 2005). Many of my interlocutors judged the power of officials by how many (or big) *xiangmu* they are responsible for. As they say, "This county official has many *xiangmu*, to judge one's level of power.

The Nomadic Settlement Project in Gongri was first initiated with the purchase by four community leaders of a piece of land from a farming village on the outskirts of the county seat in 2009. During my fieldwork, I interviewed two of these village elders, whom I refer to as Donkho and Tashi. Donkho is in his early seventies and Tashi is in his late sixties. Half of Donkho's family is engaged in herding in Gongri village, while the other half had already moved to the county seat prior to the Nomadic Settlement Project. After the nomadic settlement town was built in 2009, Tashi moved to the county seat with his four grandchildren while the rest of his family remained in Gongri village. In an interview, Donkho said:

> I realized that there is a new *xiangmu* of building settled houses (Tib, *gtan bsdod khang pa*) near county towns in other pastoral regions. I got the idea to have a similar project implemented in our county because so many families from Gongri have been renting houses at the county seat. Some families moved here to send their kids to school. Other moved because they have sick family to take care of. In total, we have 87 families from Gongri who live at the county seat, but many do not have houses. So, three village elders and I decided to initiate this project.

Donkho and Tashi, who also invited two village elders and a village leader to join their group, came up with a scheme to buy land from a semi-urban Tibetan village on the outskirts of the county seat. Initially, Donkho and Tashi told Gongri villagers that they planned to buy a piece of land and then request *xiangmu* money to build settlement houses. Donkho told me that the primary goal of this project was provide houses for families from Gongri village that rented small rooms at the county seat so that they could send their children to school or take care of the medical needs of relatives. At the same time, he said, "Our (referring to his cohort) interests are

interlinked with the goal of building houses for families without homes at the county seat".

Once Donkho and his cohort had bought a piece of land large enough to build 87 settlement houses, they named it "the land of village elders". Their plan was to sell parcels of land to each family for 5,000 RMB (around 850 US dollars), and then use that money to pay for the land. Since 5,000 was not a large sum of money for land, many families initially showed great interest. But this process became more complicated as Donkho, and his cohorts tried to garner support from the county government to build settlement houses on the land. According to Donkho and his cohorts, this was not because Gongri families did not want house to be built on the land that they bought but because one county government head, whom I call Zoba here, condemned Donkho and his cohorts' project, telling Gongri villagers that they did not need to pay for the land.

Donkho and his cohorts finally managed to buy a piece of land and then they requested a *xiangmu* to build settlement houses for Gongri community. They charged each family 5,000 RMB and demanded an additional 5, 000 RMB family contribution to the local county government. In 2009, 87 settlement houses were built. But did those families who did not have houses at the county seat, who had been mentioned in Donkho's initial request for this *xiangmu,* receive settlement houses? The answer is far more complex than 'yes' or 'no.'



Figure 16: Gongri Settlement House at the County Seat. Winter 2014. Photo by author.

Donkho, repeatedly insisted that he and his cohorts bought this land for the sake of Gongri families lacking houses at the county seat; however, as our conversation continued, he also admitted that this was also a kind of business (Tib. *Tshong)*:

> We had promised that we would provide houses to poor families as long as they paid for it. Having made our primary goal clear, everyone knew we also had our personal interests in doing this project. So, we asked these families to support our business.

Indeed, their project turned out to be quite a business. In the process of buying the land, garnering support from top county government officials and building the concrete settlement houses, Donkho and his cohort spent more than 2,000RMB (312 US dollars) making offerings to mountain deities to avoid obstacles[41]; they also bribed[42] local government officials to get the *xiangmu* money to build the settlement houses. Once the settlement houses were built, houses were allocated to families who could afford the 5,000 RMB for land and 5,000 for a family

41 *Obstacles* here should be understood in the context of Tibetan's relationship to land. Land, houses, and bodies are essential 'containers' (Tib. *gnod*) of 'vital essences' (Tib. *bcud*) and the 'abodes' (Tib. *gnas*) of various empowered beings such as earth-gods (Tib. *sa bdag)* and water-gods. (Tib. *klu bdag*). These supernatural beings have the power to harm as well as to project human affairs. On the other hand, Donkho and his cohorts made offerings to the mountain deities to win the protection of mountain deities. On the other hand, they bribed top local government officials to help them realize their project. In these days, local people are responding to the project of Nomadic Settlement Project with hybrid notions of authority, time and space.
42 Cash, expensive alcoholic beverage, meat (sheep or yak), butter, yoghurt and milk are commonly offered as bribes to top government officials (personal communication).

contribution. Only a few families that did not have houses at the county seat could afford such costs.

Donkho and his cohort have close personal connections with the high county government officials. Moreover, there were more than a dozen of local entrepreneurs who bought houses in the settlement town and managed to sell them for a higher price, mostly to Tibetan residents from farming areas near the county buildings. Dondrup, a local businessman whom I interviewed, used the household registers of other families (mostly his relatives) to buy seven houses at the settlement town. Speculation that real estate close to the county town will get more and more expensive as the county town expands created a short-lived but lucrative market for settlement houses in 2010, even though the location of the settlement town is adjacent to the county's biggest open landfill.

In 2010, Donkho and his cohort sold all the land that they bought from a farming community on the outskirts of the county seat. As many villagers from Gongri attested, Donkho and his cohort greatly benefited from this project, as did some high county leaders. Gongri community elders and community leaders can be self-serving, as can top county officials, but they do not necessarily offend all villagers. The Gongri villagers who created and lived in the settlement town have done so more through processes consensus formation among themselves, rather than under the direct influence of a single actor, be it the local county government or village elders. However, it should be clear by now that it is mainly village elders and leaders who have the close connections with top township and county government officials, county government officials who are good at competing for *xiangmu*, and that local Tibetan businessmen who have entrepreneurial prowess 'ate' portions of the settlement house *xiangmu.*

An Ethnographic Voice of Navigating an Urban Terrain

In the remaining section, I would like to ethnographically present what it means to leave one's homeland and lead a life in an unfamiliar urban space. External narratives of Tibetan pastoral land undergird the logic of rangeland fencing and mass relocation policies and these policies have concrete impacts on the lives of Tibetan pastoralists. Within the existing scholarship on Tibet, poorly understood and rarely studied is how ordinary Tibetan pastoralists, particularly mothers and sisters have come to respond to and live with the drastic changes wrought by these policies in their everyday lives. Let me now take you to the precarious world of a Tibetan sister who has left her nomadic homeland, Gongri, and has taken up a job as a street cleaner in a Tibetan County. I will center her voice in the following ethnographic account.

Nowadays, Namtso says, "few people call us by our names. Most simply call us, "shit collectors."

I came to the county seat in 2009. I left two brothers and a sister back in our Droksa village. I'm the oldest. After the Chinese government divided the communal lands among each household in the late 1990s,[43] my siblings had nothing to do. All you need to do is to drive the animals to your fenced land in the morning, then the animals come back in the evening. Unlike before, you don't need to carefully graze and nurture the animals. We had a family discussion and agreed it would be better for the family if I could earn a salary in town. Around that time, our village leader said the county government was looking for workers to clean trash from the streets. He also said one would not get this job easily if one didn't have a close relationship with higher-ups in the county seat. By that, he meant we had to offer at least a sheep to a higher-ranked leader. We followed his advice, and, just like that, I got this job.

43 Since the late 1990s, Tibetan pastoralists have been confronted with a mandatory rangeland fencing policy, premised on Tragedy of the Commons assumptions, which has greatly altered traditional communal grazing practices. It also created a surplus of labor by easing the ways to graze animals with fencing materials.

Now I have been doing this work for about ten years. Huatse, you invited me to talk about my life and my work, so I'm just saying whatever comes to my mind. Of course, I'm aware that none of what I'm saying has any value.

"Of course, there is value in your story," I said. The scorching sunshine hits on the concrete pavement of Gesar Square, making both of our eyes uncomfortable.



Figure 17: Tibetan Street Cleaners at Gesar Square. Summer 2019. Photo by author.

When I first came to the county seat, I missed the pastureland so much. I was twenty-five years old, but I had not even realized the beauty of Droksa before leaving. If you lay your eyes on Tibetan pastureland, you would be amazed by the rich variety of plants and flowers growing amidst all types of grasses. You would also marvel at the transforming landscape, as the grasslands of summer turn from green to golden in the fall. I spent twenty years of my life carefully grazing and nurturing hundreds of yaks, sheep, and horses on the grassland. I miss them as much as I miss my family.

With my friends, we used to graze our animals while playing and laughing. I loved to

sing songs in the open space. Although I still miss Droksa so much, if I went home, people would say I did not manage to help my family, so I have been trying my best to do this work. At least, when I get my salary at the end of each month, I am able to buy some vegetables, medicine, and snacks for the kids in the family. So, life is not too bad. At least, I can send my two kids to a good school here at the county seat.

I'm someone who has bad Karma. I've had a problem with my left eye for a long time. It's always watery. Eye drops sometimes help.

Many people may not know this. The street cleaners have to wear a very bright uniform. Many must have seen it before. The bright green color of the uniform we have to wear every day makes your eyes very uncomfortable, especially when the scorching sunshine shines on your clothes. Sometimes, I wonder if wearing a pair of sunglasses might help block the sunshine and be good for my eyes. However, I'm too shy to wear them. People might ridicule me, saying that a "shit collector" is wearing a fancy pair of sunglasses. People who wear sunglasses here in the country seat are either those who work for the government, or those who have nothing to do but just wander the streets. It seems many people think that wearing a pair of sunglass adds additional beauty.

One day, I guess people might call me a "blind shit collector," ha, ha, ha! She laughed. Then I also laughed.

Wearing impractical uniforms is only one of many rules. During the day, we need to collect litter and sweep Gesar Square. At night, we have to take turns losing sleep to protect facilities at the square such as trash bins, around 2-3 a.m., drunks often come to the square, and they shit and pee everywhere. If we told them not to do that, they would pompously say, "Does the square belong to the shit collectors?"

There were many times that they also beat us.

Still, at Gesar Square, our main worry isn't cleaning up the drunks' shit or puke. According to our rules, if we are unable to protect the facilities at the Gesar Square, our bosses deduct the cost of the trash bins from our monthly salaries. Our month salary isn't that much in the first place.

The saying that it's hard for people to understand another's pain: isn't that so true? Huatse, Isn't that so true?

Namtso is fully aware that her current life is very hard, and she misses the pastureland where she grew up, however, her desire for her children to get good education outweighs any of her current struggles. In my further conversations with Namtso, she repeatedly said, "Huatse, I don't want my kids to become someone like me who doesn't know anything other than cleaning the street." Anthropologists and/or social scientists in general often use ethnographic stories in service of a larger argument. We academics also seldom let stories breathe; we seldom let stories speak for themselves. If we let stories breath, I believe stories can generate a theory and a deep understanding of their own. So, I hope that some of the issues in this story will find echoes in your hearts, as it did in mine.

Conclusion

It was a very hot day. The blistering sunshine was heating up the concrete streets of the county seat. Ane Drolma sat in the broiling air of the market where she sells bread each day. At noon, I went with her to buy a hat to counter the heat. We entered a shop and she tried on several, making the smartly dressed shopkeeper impatient. "If you're not going to buy one, don't try on all my hats!" She scolds, as if Ane Drolma was a troublesome teenager. In response to this

rudeness, Ane threw the hat she was trying on back at the shopkeeper and began to walk away.

"You nomads!" The shopkeeper exclaimed with contempt.

"So?" replied Ane. "Aren't nomads' people too?"

How have Tibetan nomads like Ane Drolma and sister Namtso come to live in a world where they feel constantly scorned and embattled? What does it mean to be identified as 'nomad' (Tib. *'brog pa*) even if you make a precious living by selling bread in the street or sweeping the floors of the concrete street? In this chapter, I've tried to answer these questions by viewing the Nomadic Settlement Project as first and foremost a project of producing human inferiority, for example, by presenting *education* as a panacea for Tibetan pastoralists to "catch" up with "civilized" urban dwellers in terms of human and economic development, and by portraying Tibetan pastoralists as anomalies of proper development.

Many of the above-outlined strands of ethnography in this chapter might seem familiar. One might even get the impression that there is little to understand about the Nomadic Settlement Project beyond state domination and developmentalists ideologies. However, there are also distinctively Tibetan agencies intertwined with these processes of hegemonic transformation, such that it would be a mistake to give an account centered only on the Chinese state. Not all Gongri villagers are victims of the Nomadic Settlement Project. For example, as you know that people like Donkho and his cohort enjoyed elevated status and frequently mingled with the managerial and political elites of the county government. At the same time, ordinary people like Ane Drolma and sister Namtso face many challenges and discrimination in day-to-day life. Moreover, even those who did not move to the settlement town in Gongri have found themselves marginalized, disconnected, and persecuted on many levels: they are constantly described as "backward" villagers, needing education and human quality that will only be

possible if they move into an urban settlement town or send their children to schools at the county headquarters. Although people like Donkho are the community leaders of Gongri, they are not trusted by most Gongri community members. In the following chapter, we will focus on an ethnographic study, exploring the ways in which Kirti Ribo has strategically and creatively responded to the hegemonic narrative, *send your children to schools outside of your community if you don't want to ruin their futures*, which has served as a driving force for both rangeland fencing and resettlement policies across the Tibetan plateau.

Chapter 4

Seeing Schooling as the State: Localization of Institutionalized State Schooling in Kirti Ribo Community

As mentioned in Chapter Three, Chinese state-led land policies in Tibet such as the large-scale fencing of traditional nomads grazing pastureland with barbed wire in the 1990s, conversation policies in the early 2000s and, most recently, the Nomadic Settlement Project have been introduced to the Tibetans as a package that includes civilizing missions such as *educating* the nomads, *modernizing* the nomads, or *uplifting* (Chin. *tigao*) the human quality (Chin. *suzhi*) of the Tibetan nomads. It can be argued that more consequential than the spatial restructuring of the Tibetan landscape has been the state's inculcation of civil governance into the everyday ordering of local life by promulgating narratives such as "replace your nomads' ground-shacks (Chin. *diwozi*) with comfortable concrete houses" or "don't ruin the futures of your children by stopping them from attending schools at the county seat." It is often the Tibetan government officials, who originally hailed from mostly farming Tibetan communities, take up the task of educating their own people, and singing the virtues of the so-called formal education. However, there are also Tibetan community leaders who have selectively localized the benefits of institutionalized state schooling.

To highlight the visions and resilience of Tibetan pastoralists, or to find hope in darkness, we will explore the nexus of relationships between schooling, and social and cultural changes in pastoral Tibet by focusing on a case study of a Buddhist monk's persistent effort to build a

primary school in his home village in the eastern region of Tibet in 1990, and on how Tibetan villagers' views of him and his school project have changed over time. This chapter also aims to relate Tibetan pastoralists' shifting values of schooling to the larger social and political context, particularly the ubiquitous Chinese *xiangmu* (project) economy and Tibetan pastoralists' ever-increasing dependence on the state. Although state schooling is highly contested, it has been one of the driving forces of social change in Tibetan pastoral areas today.

The Story Begins with Building a School

In 1990, in eastern Tibet, Akhu Kabsang Gyatso (henceforth Akhu),[44] began building a primary school in his home pastoral village, Kirti Ribo. When he first started this project, Akhu most likely had underestimated the impending challenges on the horizon. Soon after he began, he learned that his endeavor to build a primary school in his home village was vehemently opposed by most villagers—manifested mainly by their refusal to send their children to his school.

Reminiscing on the early days of the school, Akhu recalled, "For many years, most villagers really despised me for making them send their children to school. Some women even directly cursed in my face for taking their children away from them." This indeed was a big insult, as Buddhist monks are usually treated with respect. Akhu had decided to become a Buddhist monk at the age of thirty, right after the tumultuous years of the Cultural Revolution (1967-1978), when he left his partner and two children, and joined the Taktshang Lhamo Monastery, located thirty kilometers from his hometown. He was not one of those monks who was adept at Buddhist philosophy and performed well on the debating ground. However, his building skills, primarily of houses, was appreciated by many in his monastic community, as

44 *Akhu* has two meanings in Amdo Tibetan: as a colloquial term for monk, and as an honorific term for uncle. People in Kirti Ribo address Akhu Kabsang Gyatso as "Akhu" in the sense of his identity as a monk and as a respected elder.

there were many ruined temples to rebuild following the mass destruction of temples and monasteries during the Cultural Revolution.

In 1990, after more than a decade in the monastery, Akhu, at the age of 42, returned to his pastoral community and started a primary school, a feat many villagers in Kirti Ribo today think was very difficult at the time. According to them, the local government had made five attempts to build a primary school prior to Akhu but failed.[45] Over the years since, Akhu has become one of the most respected figures in his community. Yet twenty years ago most villagers had viewed and treated him as a dishonorable man and an enthusiastic follower of the Chinese state, a "China-lover" (Tib. *rgya dga'*).

In this chapter, I use Akhu's persistent effort to build and sustain a primary school in his pastoral village, the motivations underpinning his actions, and the contestations and later praise that have accompanied his school project as a case study to explore three interrelated questions. First, how to understand Tibetan pastoralists' adamant reluctance to send their children to school in the 1990s? Second, how have Tibetan pastoralists' views of schooling changed over time as they rapidly move from a subsistence economy to a mainly cash-based economy where the value of money is supposed to supersede all other values? And finally, how are Tibetan pastoralists' shifting views towards education related to the drastic social and cultural changes largely wrought by state-led development projects, particularly the ubiquitous Chinese *xiangmu* (project) economy in the past few decades?[46] In doing so, I argue that institutionalized education has become part and parcel of China's state development, modernization, and state incorporation

45 Compulsory education was made into law in 1986 in inner China (*neidi*) and adopted in Sichuan Province in 1995. However, prior to this, the local government in Dzorge County had made a concerted effort to push secular education as early as the late 1980s.

46 *Xiangmu* specifically refers to central and provincial government subsidies that have been funneled from the central government to local counties via provincial and prefectural government bodies, particularly in places where they have "the official status as either impoverished or as ethnic regions" in China. See Ben Hillman (2014, p 121-127).

efforts in Tibetan pastoral areas. Akhu's school building efforts were a particular localizing and place-making project, and as such an effective response to state development pressures that both creatively rely on development discourse and challenges it to localize education benefits in Tibetan terms. This case study is an example of what anthropologist Michael Hathaway calls "the politics of engagement" (2013).

Brief Background on Institutionalized Schooling

Since 1995, Tibetan pastoralists in Sichuan Province have been required to comply with China's nine-year compulsory education law, which was passed in 1986. Tibetan pastoralists have also more recently been exhorted to send their children to schools in urban or semi-urban settlement towns. As early as the late 1980s, the local government in Dzorge County started a concerted effort to build primary schools in its pastoral areas, although the compulsory schooling policy was not in effect until 1995. Moreover, as mentioned in Chapter Three, enabling pastoralist children to receive a quality education was central to the state's justification for the mass relocation of Tibetan pastoralists into urban or semi-urban settlement towns, starting in 2006 (Zhoumaoka 2015)

The Education Consolidation Policy (*chedian bingxiao*) was implemented in some parts of Qinghai Province in 2008 (Shamo Thar 2017).[47] As a result, many Tibetan pastoralists in eastern Tibet have increasingly been required to send their children to schools in urban towns (Shamo Thar 2017; Makley 2018). Education officials claim that in urban settings pastoralists will have the opportunity to receive a formal education and improve their lives —a strong incentive for Tibetan pastoralists to resettle as part of the state's larger inculcation of civil

47 This policy reached Kirti Ribo in 2013.

governance into the everyday ordering of local life (Gyal 2015). As the policy of relocating Tibetan pastoralists from their villages to concrete housing blocks is an attempt to actively constitute types of valued (and devalued) persons across space and time, secular school buildings and school consolidation policies can be viewed as part of a process of "etatization", or in Charlene Makley's words, "time and space-seizing projects to re-orient and settle Tibetan citizens of the PRC nation-state" (Verdery 1996, 40; Makley 2018, 160).

Seeing Schooling as the State

Promoting education had been a challenge for many years in Tibetan pastoral regions (Postiglione, et al 2009, 2012; Bangsbo 2008, 2004; Dyer 2006; Bass 1998). In fact, for over a decade, scholars of educational policies of Tibet have been debating the reasons for this. Using case studies in two pastoralist prefectures, Postiglione et al. (2012) listed six obstacles that have hindered providing education in Tibetan pastoralist areas: difficulty in recruiting teachers, the labor requirements of pastoral families, Tibetan pastoralist conceptions of wealth and suspicion of business people, relatively poor proficiency in Chinese among pastoralists, a lack of vocational training programs, and a general lack of interest in the long term value of education (Postiglione et, al, 2012, 93-94). Ellen Bangsbo has pointed out that a need for school-age children's labor has been the main reason for keeping children out of school, while the long distance to schools, irrelevance of school learning to daily life, and unemployment after graduation are contributing factors (Bangsbo 2008, 71). Nicola Schneider has described how a contemporary monastery in Kham Minyag has continued to play an important role in providing necessary facilities and services, including a school to the pastoral community, emphasizing the role of religious leaders in Tibetan modernity (Schneider 2016). Similarly, Bangsbo has argued

that community-run schools, which are commonly initiated by Tibetan lamas, are much preferred by parents "because they better harmonize with values of the Tibetan community than government schools."[48]

In Kirti Ribo, the process of building a primary school was neither smooth nor uncontested despite the fact that it was started by a relatively respected local Tibetan monk (Akhu Kabsang Gyatso) and despite the fact that Akhu creatively sought to make the school culturally appropriate by incorporating locally recognized values and idioms. In this case, an important reason why villagers adamantly refused to send their kids to Akhu's school was that they regarded education as a project of the state – a key factor that has been overlooked by scholars.

My interlocutors also provided me with other reasons that are common across pastoral communities. After the tumultuous years of the collectivization period came to an end in 1981, pastoral families worked very hard to make ends meet by raising the livestock that had been reallocated to them. As one interlocutor said, "We really needed our children to help us with grazing and herding the animals." Another interlocutor, who was in his late seventies, said, "Back then, we did not know that one could depend on education to make a living." What he literally meant was that, in the past, pastoralists could not depend on "*rig gnas*" ("culture" or "education*"*) to feed themselves.

Additionally, there were other reasons why some Tibetan pastoralists in Kirti Ribo, especially mothers, were not in favor of sending their children, particularly girls, to school. As Akhu made it mandatory for each family to send at least one child to his school, ages ranged

48 Bangsbo 2008, 70. The differences between community schools and government schools are not very clear in Tibetan pastoral areas, as community schools often become government schools. In the case of Akhu's primary school, it started as a community school but in 1993 was made into a government school, when Akhu was appointed the headmaster.

from seven to seventeen. Some mothers I interviewed told me they were concerned that their daughters might get pregnant if they went to school, as they had heard that several girls had become pregnant in the early 1990s when they attended. One mother of four children, who was in her late sixties, said, "I was very worried that my children might get attacked by stray dogs and wolves on their way to school. I was also very worried that they might drown in the big rivers nearby."[49] This mother therefore did not send any of her four kids to school, a decision that she now has some regrets about, as people nowadays often tell her that she had ruined the lives of her kids by allowing them an education.

Reasons like these surely explained many parents' initial unwillingness to send their children to school. However, as I delved into more stories about the initial interactions between villagers, Akhu, and his school project, it became clear that there was another reason why the villagers in Kirti Ribo initially had been vehemently opposed to Akhu's school project, captured in villagers' use of the term, "China-lover" (Tib. *Rgya dga'*).[50] That is, Kirti Ribo villagers, first and foremost, viewed education as the purview of the state, and refused to cooperate with the local state by not sending their children to Akhu's school. I am not arguing that Kirti Ribo is different from other pastoral communities in its initial resistance to schooling as Tibetan pastoralists in my previous field site in Qinghai also refused to send their children to school in the 1990s. Rather, my argument is that it is important to consider resistance to the state as a major factor in understanding educational policies on the Tibetan plateau.

In 1990, Akhu first shared his idea of building a primary school in Kirti Ribo with the

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49 The Kirti Ribo community is located at the intersection of the Yellow River and Machu River. In Tibetan, it is called *rma rme 'dres mdo*.

50 The idiom does not necessarily speak ill of the Chinese people in general. Rather, it refers to Tibetans who overly show their political allegiance to the Chinese state by conspicuously complying with the state policies. One can trace the origin of this term back to the Cultural Revolution era (1966-1977), when certain members of the community voluntarily embraced class struggle and made a show of interrogating other supposedly wealthy members of their own community in the name of class struggle (Tib. *gral rim*), utilizing the state as a source of power (Pema Bhum 1999; Siu 1989).

village head, who subsequently promised to support Akhu's school project. With his support, Akhu recruited sixty-seven students for the first class, which met in a small canvas tent and a sod brick house. But within less than a year, more than half of the students dropped out. In my conversations with Akhu, he used a reoccurring phrase: "Once you set out to reach a certain goal, perseverance is the indispensable key" (Tib. *dmigs 'ben bzhag tshar na snying rus bskyed rgyu ni gtso bo red*). Akhu said that this was his word of encouragement to himself in the 1990s. In 1992, with the support of the village head and the local township government, Akhu made it mandatory to send at least one child from each family to his school, citing local government efforts in Dzorge to encourage secular education. He also announced that families which did not comply with this rule would have to pay a fine of 700 RMB. The village head at the time played an important role in enforcing this fine. However, the drop-out rate showed no signs of abating. The fine was increased to 1400 RMB, and then to 2800 RMB, but the drop-out rate remained unchanged until the early 2000s. An additional factor was perceived competition with Taktshang Lhamo monastery, which needed boys to train as monks.[51]

In villagers' eyes, Akhu's frequent mingling with the village head and his decision to make schooling mandatory, punishable by a fine, resembled the actions of a typical China-lover.

Kirti Ribo villagers still remember bitter stories of individuals in the community who had literally become mad (Tib. *smyos dang ni red*)[52] during the Cultural Revolution by acting as a China-lover (Mueggler 2001; Makley 2005). As Akhu initially started the school voluntarily, and then forced the villagers to pay fines if they failed to send at least one child to the school, most of the villagers were discontented with the ways in which force and the state's support were used to

51 During my research, I did not hear anyone specifically mention that they were siding with the monastery. In fact, not many children went on to become monks at Takstang Lhamo monastery in the 1990s, regardless of whether or not they attended school.
52 The Tibetan expression *smyos dang ni red* in this context is partly synonymous with the Chinese term *jijifengzi*. Tibetans who overly use state power to interrogate other supposedly wealthy Tibetans are also locally perceived to be literally mad (Tib. *smyon pa*).

run Akhu's primary school. From the outset, building a primary school in their community, villagers whom I interviewed told me, was also in the interest of the state. As an elder said, "It was first and foremost the state's goal to build a school in our village." As such, most of the villagers sensed that Akhu supported the state's efforts, which created an "us" versus "him" relationship between the villagers and Akhu. From this perspective of education as an extension of the state, the villagers' initial reluctance was also an act of deliberate resistance. In other words, drawing on their historical memories, for villagers Akhu's school did not represent what the state is, but rather what the state does. Those who seek to understand why Tibetan pastoralists were unwilling to send their children to school during the early years of reforms in the PRC should not just focus on concerns about the altitude, long distance, and child labor needs. The tension also lies in the dimensions of contested notions of state and competing political ideologies, real or imagined.

Localization of Akhu's Primary School

Akhu Kabsang Gyatso coped with and responded to villagers' vehement disapproval of his school project by incorporating locally recognized values and idioms into it. He was staunchly committed to making the best use of the school to strengthen his patron community (Tib. *lha sde*), a common identity valued by the villagers as fervent followers of the Kirti Rinpoche lineage. He has also consistently advocated for and used the Tibetan language as the medium of instruction in the school.

Two things stood out in Akhu's retrospective reflections on his initial motivations to build a school. First, he had been very uncomfortable with the ways in which his hometown was regarded by the local cadres at the time, who often said that Kirti Ribo was like a prison and no

teachers would be willing to come to teach there. This had given Akhu a strong sense that the local cadres were belittling his hometown for being remote, backward, cold, and far from the county seat. Second, he did not believe he was good at pursuing high-level Buddhist studies. Instead, he thought building a school would also count toward accumulating merit, thus fulfilling the duty of a Buddhist monk by doing something good for his community. Driven by an ethical commitment to change and challenge the perceived backward image of his home community, coupled with his passion to accumulate Buddhist merit (Tib. *dge ba*), Akhu embarked on his plan to build a primary school in his community in 1990. A student who had enrolled in the first cohort recalled, "When Akhu first started the school, we only had a small sod brick house and a small canvas tent for classrooms. The classrooms were extremely cold during the winter." In my conversations with Akhu, he was not very reflective on the initial quality of education he was able to offer. I sensed that he believed that pain is a necessary part of the learning process, a logic perhaps he had learned from his own monastic education. When Akhu was confronted with most villagers' criticisms that he was a China-lover, he had to make great efforts to demonstrate his integrity and more importantly his genuine ethical commitment to serve his community.

During my interview with Akhu, he told me a personal story several times. Later, I learned that most of the villagers have heard this story. Briefly, when Akhu was about twenty-eight, the Tibetan head of the local township had asked him to join the Communist Party. However, Akhu politely declined. In response, the head of the local township had asked Akhu if he couldn't trust the party. He replied, "I fully trust the party, but I really don't trust myself. And I really can't say any bad things about religion." Even when the local leader tried to convince Akhu to join the party several times in subsequent years, he politely declined. This was right after the Cultural Revolution, and the political climate was very intense. Had Akhu joined the

party at that time, he would have become a local cadre, earning a generous monthly salary. He told this story about refusing to become a *lishaypa*, or a government official worker, to prove to villagers that his school project was neither self-serving nor contrary to his religious beliefs. In hindsight, Akhu remembers the time when his integrity was called into question by his fellow villagers in the 1990s who called him a China-lover, as a time when his feelings were deeply hurt. However, he did not give up.

Instead, he tried to align the school project with the views and values of the villagers, as well as his own values. He did so by localizing the school. One example is the style of the school buildings, which incorporate local Buddhist beliefs and values into the design.



Figure 18: First School Building-Teachers' Office-built in 1997[53]

At first glance, the building in Figure 6 does not look like a school office, but a temple. In the early 1990s, convincing the villagers to send their children to school felt like an

53 Akhu has kept a photo album, containing many images of school buildings and important events that took place at the school since the early 1990s. I've received this photo from Akhu's album, and I've also received the permission from Akhu to reprint this photo of teachers' office in this paper. This image is used courtesy of the actual school.

insurmountable challenge. At the same time, it was equally challenging to attract good and trained teachers. Hence, Akhu had decided the first school building should be a nice and warm school office for teachers. In addition, he believed that having a shrine where he could make daily offerings to the Buddha Dharma and the Kirti Rinpoche lineage would bring an auspicious beginning for school development's future. Akhu's building skills, which he had gained by rebuilding ruined temples after the chaos of the Cultural Revolution when he was a monk in Kirti Monastery, became very useful in localizing the school.

In Figure 6, the turquoise color of the rooftop resembles the rooftop of a medicine department (Tib. *sman pa gra' tshang*) in a monastery. In addition, turquoise is a precious element in Tibetan medicine. The second floor of this building is a guesthouse for visiting local lamas and government officials. An offering altar is located on the first floor behind the glass veranda. The first floor is the teachers' office. The Eight Auspicious Symbols[54] are painted on the wall above the windows. Two Tibetan verses are inscribed in the red rectangular boxes in between the windows. The verse on the right reads, "Located on the riverbank of the Yellow River in the Land of the Snow, this place derives its name from its own lama." The second verse reads, "This verdant green grassland hosts a special school for the younger generations; may hundreds and thousands of students turn their minds toward learning and studying the ten sciences." Funding for construction of this school office came from multiple sources, including a local lama and the county education department. Akhu also held multiple fundraising events in his and other villages. After this school office was built in 1997, the county government officials questioned Akhu about why he was building a temple for the village, not a school office. In response, Akhu argued that it was important to recognize local values in the design of the school

54 *The Eight Auspicious Symbols* are: The Parasol; two golden fish; the Conch Shell; the Lotus; the Eternal Know; the Banner of Victory; the Vase; and the Dharma wheel.

building so that the school would not look so foreign. He argued that that would encourage villagers to send their children to school.



Figure 19: The School Gate-built in 1998. 1997. Photo by Akhu.

Makley (2018) analyzes a "treasure bundle" (tib. *gter*) practice performed as part of a school gate construction project in Rebgong as an example of what she calls “material and semiotic conversions” (179). Treasure bundles consist of a mixture of precious minerals, food such as barley and wheat, and medicine that are placed in small cloth bags. Then, monks chant and consecrate them (Jacoby 2014). After that, these bags are buried under special places (Tib. *gnas ‘gang can*), or thrown into famous lakes. A Tibetan saying goes, “If the underground is full of treasure, the people on the ground will have an abundance of wealth.” As a villager commented, “Placing treasure bundles is a very noble thing to do because these days most people are too busy with extracting things from the land; treasure bundle practice does the opposite.” In the example Makley cites, a concrete school gate was converted into a Tibetan Buddhist abode through the Tibetan ritual practice of placing a treasure bundle in the gate's cement roof *(*190). In

Figure 2, we see another example of a treasure bundle practice, in which Akhu made a concerted effort to harmonize the school's construction with the values of local villagers.[55] This school gate was built in 1998. In order to protect the land from its soil demons (Tib. *sa dgra'*), Akhu invited several monks to consecrate the land on which the gate would be built, and then several treasure bundles were buried under the gate.

In Figure 2, students are lined up, holding Tibetan scarves in their hands, and welcoming local dignitaries, including two important local lamas and high government officials. This is another case in which Akhu combined his religious beliefs with his commitment to provide education to his community by inviting the villagers to participate in the school's opening ceremony. Akhu explained that the land on which he built the school was very wrathful (Tib. *sa btsan bo red*) and part of the reason that the local government was not able to build a school in Kirti Ribo was that they had not known about this. Drawing on a long tradition, Akhu also emphasized that burying treasure bundles under the gate of his school was of utmost importance for the school's future growth and sustainability.

These two examples demonstrate the ways in which Akhu coped with and strategically responded to villagers' initial disapproval by recognizing and validating local values. Since 1990, more than 600 students have graduated from this primary school. As of 2017, fifty Kirti Ribo residents with official jobs, mainly teachers, are graduates of the school. Akhu's active role as an advocate for his community has been increasingly noted in Kirti Ribo, and many villagers whom I interacted with spoke highly of his personal qualities, such as his long-term commitment, selflessness, pure heart, and perseverance. Nevertheless, the process of building a primary school in Kirti Ribo, and Akhu's active role in it, was intensely contested, as illustrated

55 For example, in addition to architecture, Akhu emphasized Tibetan language in the curriculum.

by his being labeled a China-lover.

The Prevalence of the *Xiangmu* Economy

Kirti Ribo villagers' reluctance to send their children to school in the 1990s and early 2000s also shifted because of broad shifts in the regional political economy. Specifically, the cash economy has become predominant as largely a result of state-led *xiangmu* ("project")-induced development policies. This in turn has shaped Tibetan pastoralists' shifting values of schooling, and changes in valuation of different forms livelihood among parents in Kirti Ribo.

In 1999, China's central government introduced the "Develop the West" campaign[56] (*xibu da kaifa*). The campaign has unfolded in a suite of large-scale policies aimed at increasing economic development and protecting the environment on the Tibetan plateau while presenting the Chinese state as first and foremost a benevolent figure (Yeh and Mark Henderson 2008). As part of this campaign Tibetan pastoralists have encountered development projects aimed at resettlement, land reallocation, and enclosure. Indubitably, the campaign has brought tangible benefits in the form of roads, houses, and electricity to rural Tibetan communities. However, scholars of Tibet have also noted that the benefits of the state-sponsored development efforts have been unevenly distributed across and within ethnic and rural-urban divides. Since the start of the Develop the West campaign, central and provincial government subsidies have become the primary source of revenue for most local counties in China's western regions (Fischer 2004, 2013; Makley 2013). In particular, locales that have the official status of either impoverished counties (*pinkunxian*) or ethnic areas (*minzu diqu*) receive more central government subsidies than do others (Hillman 2014). As local authorities in China's western region have increasingly

56 Lai 2002; Goodman2004a.

come to depend on fiscal transfers, they are exhorted to make every effort to capture revenue for their respective localities (Hillman 2014, 121; Makley 2018).[57] Moreover, securing or capturing a development project grant plays a vital role in evaluating officials' performance, and the process of visiting multiple higher-level offices with the aim of securing state funding is, in local Chinese terms, called "chasing projects.[58] (*pao xiangmu*).

Today, *xiangmu* is one of the most frequently used Chinese loanwords among Tibetans, particularly pastoralists. This reflects the strong influence that development projects have had on everyday life, including changing valuations of life choices and shifting views of schools. Local artists and writers also reflect on the causes and implications of *xiangmu*-induced development policies as they play out across the Tibetan plateau (see figure 3).[59]



57 In his 2012 Ph.D. dissertation, Yundannima (Yonten Nyima) points out that development project funding for each level of government is distributed by the level right above it, and regional officials at each level are "more accountable to higher-level officials than to the state (*rgyal khab*), other lower officials and the public." See Yundannima 2012, 209.
58 See Hillman 2014 for a detailed analysis of competition over state funds among local officials in China's west. Also see Makley 2018; and Yonten Nyima 2012.
59 Resettlement of Tibetan pastoralists is the theme of Tibetan writer Tsering Dondrup's short novel, "The Valley of Black Foxes" (Tib. *Wa nag lung ba*). For a translation, see Tenzin Dickie 2017.

Figure 20: Untitled -by a local Tibetan artist[60], 2018.

This drawing aptly illustrates the salience of *xiangmu* and its powerful influence in the lives of Tibetan pastoralists. In the drawing, *xiangmu* is shown in the form of strong wind, while actors are doggedly running after the money that comes with the wind. Wind is a widely used metaphor in Tibetan. Cold wind, (*Grang rlung*) violent wind (*Drag rlung*), or just wind (*rlung*) are frequently used in modern Tibetan literature.[61]

While two individuals at the front fight other over *xiangmu* money, a well-dressed man behind them runs after *xiangmu* money, a large bag in his hands. In the back, two other men chase *xiangmu* money. Contained in the wind are the two Chinese characters for *xiangmu*, the half-effaced Tibetan word for this (*rnam grangs*), and the Chinese characters for *dibao,* which refers to government compensation for resettled pastoralists. [62] From the howling wind*,* cash is falling into the bags of the people who are running after it, and the wind is blowing in the direction of a Tibetan yak-hair tent, a symbol of Tibetan pastoralism and its precarious way of life. Under the wind is a running yak (also symbolic of Tibetan pastoralism), and someone being blown away by the wind while raising one hand upward requesting xiangmu money. This painting illustrates the key social fact that *xiangmu* money is not equally distributed. Tibetans in general and Tibetan pastoralists in particular are not the dominant actors in the state development project business, a reality indicated by the artist's use of non-Tibetan aesthetics, and portrayal of Tibetans in typical "Western" clothes, including neck ties.

60 This drawing first appeared on Wechat, the most widely used social media app in China, in the summer of 2018. Later, I've received permission from the local artist who would like to remain anonymous to reprint this drawing in this paper.
61 Jabb 2015. According to Jabb, "this poetic device is abundantly deployed to express the politically unspeakable and to articulate the indescribable." See Jabb 2015, 105.
62 *Dibao*, families that are eligible for minimum government funding, received between 1000 and 3000 RMB per month in Kirti Ribo at the time of this research, depending on the number of members in their households. People aged sixty and above received 100 to 200RMB per month; those aged seventy and above, 200 to 300 RMB per month; and those aged eighty and above 300 to 400 RMB per month. These amounts are adjusted every year. I found the whole system of Dibao very complicated, and villagers themselves were very confused with eligibility requirements and procedures.

Doing *xiangmu* is often equated with doing business, with an implication of monetary gain for a certain group of people. For example, some village elders and leaders I spoke to felt that, for township and county government elites, the pursuit of resettlement policy was from the beginning a means of securing *xiangmu* money. With so many state-led development policies in recent decades, there are many *xiangmu* for county government officials to do. *Xiangmu* are plentiful, but also ephemeral. The most important thing from the perspective of local officials is to complete a project so they have something to show when provincial and prefectural officials inspect their work (Bauer 2005). Many of my interlocutors in Kirti Ribo, as well as in my previous field site judge the power of officials by the number and scope of *xiangmu* they are responsible for. Moreover, Tibetan pastoralists in Kirti Ribo also judge the power of their village leader based on how many *xiangmu* he brings to his community.[63]

As such, the penetration of a series of *xiangmu* projects into the lives of Tibetan pastoralists has been consequential in redefining their understanding of wealth and community prosperity. The state entices people to desire new forms of livelihoods different from their supposedly "backward" pastoralist lifestyle. For example, most people in Kirti Ribo assume that households which include a salaried government worker *are* better positioned in the new changing economy. Most people also share the view that villages that have better connections with top county government officials are more likely to bring more *xiangmu* to their communities. As Tenba, the head of Garsar village, a sub-village of Kirti Ribo, expressed:

> All *lishaypa* (government employees) from my village are teachers. That is not a good thing because other villages have *lishaypa* who work in the government sectors at the level of township and county, and hence manage to capture *xiangmu* money for their dewas.[64] I wish we had more *lishaypa* from my village who are

63 Charlene Makley has described a similar phenomenon in Rebgong, where the villagers expect village officials to bring more school projects or funding to their community. Makley 2018, 117-118.
64 *Dewa* refers to villages, which is the primary sovereign unit for community in Tibetan areas of Amdo. Kirti Ribo is called a *lha sde* because of a close relationship with Kirti Rinpoche lineage.

working for the local township and ideally for the county government.

I asked Tenba why there are no people from Kirti Ribo that work in the government sectors. He replied:

> My village does not have any powerful person who can pull his fellow villagers up. (Tib. *yar la 'then ni yod ni ma red*) … thanks to Akhu Kabsang Gyatso, we have about fifty *lishaypa* in our village, all of them are teachers. If Akhu hadn't started the school in the early 1990s, we would not have any *lishaypa* in our community today.

In conversations like this, we can see that the recognition of the value of Akhu's school can also be understood in terms of a changing social world in which Tibetan pastoralists have been increasingly encouraged by the state to achieve "the soaring heights of modern progress (Makley 2018, 148). Simultaneously, Tibetan pastoralists have been exhorted by the local government to take advantage of the *xiangmu* economy by configuring habits, aspirations, and beliefs.

In sum, as the cash economy has become paramount in Kirti Ribo and traditional communal grazing practices have become less and less feasible, most villagers are acutely aware that their way of life is changing in ways over which they have no control. As most parents today often say, "I am concerned with the future of my children." In Kirti Ribo, families that include a salaried government employee are coping better with these ongoing social and economic changes. It is not that parents consider grazing animals to be inherently difficult, but rather that they have come to experience grazing animals as increasingly difficult in recent years. This has forced them to consider other livelihood prospects for their children. Sending them to school, with the hope of them becoming government worker, is one such option.

Contestations over School Consolidation

Though parents are now willing to send their children to school, conflicts over educational policy have not ended. Though Akhu was an early adopter of the state's educational policies, he has opposed the School Consolidation Policy (*chedian bingxiao*), which, he has argued, will not help the children of Kirti Ribo.

The state began a policy of rural school consolidation in the lowland rural areas of China in the early 1980s, yet its implementation was only accelerated in the early 2000s (Mei, Fang, Yuanyan 2014). Between 2001 and 2010, 371,470 (81.3%) rural schools were closed, at a rate of sixty-nine per day (Shamo Thar 2017, 159). Since 2009, this policy, officially aimed at increasing the effectiveness and efficiency of rural education, has become a key part of the education system in Tibetan regions (Shamo Thar 2017; Makley 2018; Wright 2018).

During China's Olympic year in 2008, Akhu was ordered by county education department officials to step down as headmaster of his school because he was a monk. He did so, but remains a key presence, as he lives in the school. Given his popularity and people's recognition of him as a person of pure heart (Tib. *lhag sems can*), his opinions on school and village matters still have great weight. In the winter of 2013, the Dzorge County education department sought to convince him to support relocating the primary school to Maixi Township, about ten kilometers from Kirti Ribo, as part of the consolidation of three village schools. The headmaster at the time was a Tibetan from a farming community who, Akhu said, did not deeply care about the school. This is how Akhu described his initial interactions with education officials:

> They came to my house to have a discussion about relocating this school to the township. They said it's a big *xiangmu* with lots of money to use to build a great school at the township. They also said that having a big school will pave the way for providing more equal education to the children of Tibetan pastoralists in this

area.

After Akhu was notified of this consolidation plan, he said that he was absorbed in thought for many days and nights. When the representatives discussed the matter with him again a month later, he first thanked them for their concerns over the education of children in Kirti Ribo, and then politely said he could not be on board with relocating the school to the township, as that would bring much inconvenience to the local community. The representatives were not happy to hear Akhu's words of disagreement, so they spent a whole afternoon with him doing "thought work" (Ch. *sixiang gongzuo*) on the importance of consolidating small primary schools at the township level. At the end of the day, Akhu still disagreed.[65]

In the subsequent months, education authorities sent leaders from Kirti Ribo and nearby villages to try to convince Akhu to change his decision, yet once again, Akhu rejected the plan on the grounds that it would be very hard for the children of Kirti Ribo to attend primary school at such a great distance. Akhu raised concerns about attacks by stray dogs and wolves if children had to walk a great distance to school.[66] Akhu also argued that the children of Kirti Ribo would benefit from an education that allowed them to experience pastoralist culture and formal education concurrently. He unequivocally told his community members that this policy would contribute to the disintegration of their community. At that point education authorities ran out of patience and forcefully told him that he had to agree because the school consolidation policy was mandated by the government and refusing to comply could be considered a crime. In response to

65 This also caused intense friction between Akhu and two of his former students who are teachers in the school because they supported the ED's plan.

66 Many mothers cited concerns about stray dogs and the danger of drowning as reasons for not sending their children to Akhu's school in the 1990s. Although it appears that Akhu is using the same reason to argue with the education department. Akhu said that the difference is in location. He built his school in the village, arguing that wolves and stray dogs would not be of concern if the school was built in the village. The Education Department proposed to build a big school in the township, which is about ten kilometers from Kirti Ribo. Akhu vehemently opposed the school consolidation policy as he repeatedly said that this policy would also negatively contribute to the disintegration the village.

this harsh warning, Akhu told them that he would only comply if they killed him first. This tension continued until 2015, when local authorities finally gave up their plan to consolidate village schools. Akhu was able to stave off school consolidation largely due to the fact that the majority of villagers supported him and agreed with his concerns. This incident is another example of Akhu's effective response to state development pressures through his concerted efforts to localize the benefits of schooling in Tibetan terms and ways in which the broader interests of his community, Kirti Ribo, are prioritized.

Conclusion

In this chapter, I have discussed the multiple reasons why formal schooling has been a challenge in Tibetan pastoral areas in general and in the Kirti Ribo community in particular. Besides labor demands, the harsh environment, and long distances to school, I argue that for Kirti Ribo pastoralist residents, formal education was viewed as a problematic extension of the state. Tibetan pastoralists' shifting values of schooling are causally related to a ubiquitous Chinese development project economy and Tibetan pastoralists' ever-increasing dependence on the state. As the *xiangmu* economy has increasingly seeped into the daily lives of Tibetan pastoralists in the past two decades, Tibetan pastoralists in Kirti Ribo, as in similar communities, are aware that there is an urgent need to provide schooling for their children. Many parents with whom I spoke realize that their children will have to engage in alternative work in the future, as communal grazing become less and less feasible. Thus, local state officials' escalating efforts to encourage Tibetan pastoralists to send their children to school, preferably in urban settlement towns, has been one of the driving forces of social change in Tibetan pastoral areas like Kirti Ribo.

Although Akhu's initiative to build a school in Kirti Ribo was initially contested and resisted by most villagers, over time, his staunch commitment to serve his community, his qualities as a community leader, and most importantly his kind and pure heart won the hearts of most villagers. As a young resident said, "Akhu has been the founder and headmaster of this school for about eighteen years. Now he is seventy years of age. People with high official positions these days are busy with accumulating wealth for their own families like buying houses in other big cities. But Akhu is not like that. He only cares about his school and students." Indeed, Akhu to this day lives on a monthly salary of 280 RMB (forty-one US dollars) in a very modest room attached to one of the school buildings. He shares his room with his son (a teacher in the school), his daughter-in-law, and his grandson. As I was conducting ethnographic research for this paper, I learned that a local native son of Kirti Ribo, a rising Tibetan writer, who had graduated from Akhu's school in the mid-1990s, has started writing a biography of Akhu under the encouragement of a respected local figure. Approximately fifty graduates of Akhu's school who now have official jobs (mostly teachers) have collectively offered funds to cover publication costs for Akhu's future biography. They want to produce a biography that the people of Kirti Ribo can use, in part, to distinguish their community from other Tibetan communities.

Akhu's school project is a case in which ordinary Tibetans view, respond to, and cope with ongoing state-led development policies and the *xiangmu* or project economy. This decades-long project has allowed Akhu and other residents to simultaneously rely on and incorporate older spaces and practices, as well as strategically embrace certain dimensions of state-development policies. Akhu's lifelong dream has been to establish a quality school in his community, one which would be locally appropriate and strengthened the values of Kirti Ribo. I end this chapter with Akhu's word of advice:

> Many people in high positions treat *xiangmu* as if you have to implement them without considering their benefits and shortcomings. It is like forcing someone to eat more even if he is very full. That is not good. If a *xiangmu,* for example, the school consolidation policy, does not bring anything good for the community, then we should not waste the country's money. We also should realize that the country's resources too are finite.

In moments like this, Akhu offers a critique of the absurdity and the inefficiency of China's *xiangmu* economy and its role in shaping the very social existence of Tibetan pastoralists.

Chapter 5

From Embodied Learning to Disembodied Schooling: Learning from the Ancestral Land and Restoring Land-based Relationships.

Introduction

As a child growing up in a Tibetan pastoral community in the early 1990s, in hindsight, like all the other kids in the community, I was raised in an ocean of land-based knowledge and lessons, although I entirely lost my confidence in such knowledge as I started attending a boarding school at the age of seven. We played with animals, flowers, stones, and enjoyed the beauty of language through riddles, proverbs, love songs, and folktales that have passed through generation to generation for many centuries. Apart from learning the content of these cultural treasures, the source of appreciation and enjoyment was also the musically arranged words. From an early age, we learned that the power of language goes well beyond the immediate and lexical meaning. It has a beauty of its own and it is closely related to the various beings on the land. Take the following stanza from a common Tibetan folksong I still vividly remember today.

རྒྱ་མཚོ་སྒལ་དཀར་ཆོ་ལུས་ཟོས།།
ཆོ་རྣམ་རིག་དྲངས་དོན་དེ་གི་རེད།།
རྒྱ་ཤེད་གཡང་མོ་ལུག་གིས་ཟོས།།
ལུག་བ་ཁ་འཇམ་དོན་དེ་གི་རེད།།
རྒྱ་ཞོལ་འདོ་རིག་རྐུ་ཡིས་ཟོས།།
རྐུ་གོམ་ལག་བདེ་དོན་དེ་གི་རེད།།

Little antelopes eat the top part of the grass
That is why they are so clever
Fortune-bearing sheep eat the middle part of the grass
That is why their wool is so soft

Flourish horses eat the root of the grass
That is why they run so swift.

And then I went to school, a boarding school, where we only had hot water and steamed white bread for breakfast, lunch, and dinner. If I remember correctly, as a kid, I had never endured hunger, thanks to milk, yogurt, and yak meat, and thanks to my mother, who always ate less so her children could eat more. In 1997, the local government built a primary school in my nomadic-pastoral village. It was a concrete boarding school. Based on a lottery, I was one of the students the school recruited for their first class of seven. Like the parents in KirtiRibo community, most families in my home community were against sending their children to school. Families who refused to send their children to school were fined. The temperature sinks below twenty degrees Celsius in winter, so all the students had cracks on their hands and feet. Hunger was constant.



Figure 21: An Image of a Tibetan Boarding School[67]

67 I don't have any pictures of my boarding school; however, this image looks very much like our dormitory. Source: http://www.trimleng.com/

Memory is tricky, selective, and partial. If I remember correctly, what humiliated and pained me the most was not hunger. At school, we nomad kids came to learn that our bodies were not "clean" enough, that our speech was not "civilized" enough, and that we had to seek out a "better" life. Our teachers drove us to hate our heritage, our elders, and even our parents in the name of improvement and progress. We often heard teachings, to put it aptly, mostly reprimands such as: "If you don't want to lead the backward lives of your parents, study hard"; "If you don't study hard, you will be nothing but a stupid nomad." As children, it didn't take that long for us to feel ashamed of our cultural background; we even developed an antipathy to our socio-cultural world itself. The result of this education was that we saw our homeland as a place of nonachievement, and ourselves as inferior. We may misinterpret what happened to us, but we don't misexperience it. These memories are still vivid, fresh, and painful. I reawaken both personal and collective pain in serve of a larger argument about the political production of human inferiority.

In this chapter, we continue to explore the driving force of social and cultural changes in pastoral Tibet, namely the political production of human inferiority, which lies at the heart of major state-led polices in the past several decades. What is the connection between institutionalized state schooling and large-scale state-led polices such as the rangeland fencing and the mass relocation of Tibetan pastoralists into concrete settlement towns? Scholars of Tibet have noted that one of the primary reasons why more and more parents in pastoral Tibet are willing to move to urban and/or semi-urban settlement towns is the wish to create a better and brighter future for their children by sending them to schools in urban towns (Tan 2018; Bum 2019, Ptáčková 2020). But less explored is the larger historical and political context whereby Tibetan pastoralists have been exhorted to lose belief and confidence in their own lifestyle, in

their own homeland, and in themselves. I see the spatial restructuring of Tibetan pastoral landscape through rangeland fencing and resettlement as primarily attempts to create valued and devalued or inferior persons across spaces and times. And institutionalized schooling plays a vital role in this process. In alignment with the broader theme of this dissertation, namely the ingenuity and resilience of Tibetan pastoralists in the face of many struggles and challenges, this chapter also does not just focus on the corrosive impact of rangeland fencing and resettlement policies and narratives on the minds of ordinary Tibetans, but it also aims to highlight the creative responses of differently positioned Tibetan pastoralists to the various coercive forces undermining their culture, land, language, and community.

I locate this chapter within the larger and more comparative frameworks of global indigenous people's struggles for loss of land and language, abrogation of indigenous sovereignty, and the imposition of psychologically and socially destructive assimilation policies (Carroll 2015; Noelani 2016). I draw inspiration from the emerging Critical Indigenous Studies scholars who see the revitalized of indigenous ways of relating to land as essential to the mission of empowering indigenous communities and unmaking settler colonialisms (Perley 2011; Simpson 2017; Aikau 2016). Developed in the late 1970s, indigeneity as a political term was intended to recognize both diversity and singularity within various native peoples' movements by creating a political mission based on solidarity. However, debates over this concept have been complex and contested across the vast landmasses of Africa, Asia, Australia/New Zealand, and the Americas. Native communities that have been recognized as indigenous have certain rights according to the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP), which was adopted by the United Nations in 2007. Indigenous scholar Kyle Whyte claims that indigeneity refers to "systems among humans and nonhuman operatives in particular places over

many generations" (2016, 144), and he further states that "humans who identify themselves as indigenous often seek to express a prior or more original claim to a place in contrast to individuals they consider to be settlers or newcomers" (ibid). Such claims are often expressed through land-based knowledge and relationships over a long-time scale in a particular place. Tibetans in general, and Tibetan pastoralists are not being recognized as indigenous people by the People's Republic of China, however, I use indigeneity primarily as an analytical category as a way to emphasize indigenous Tibetan pastoralists' articulation and accumulation of indigenous knowledges over many generations[68].

When indigenous scholars emphasize the importance of revitalizing indigenous cultures, we should not lose sight of the fact that what we need to revitalize are indigenous cultures that are being torn apart, degraded, and erased. As anthropologist Kirsch pointed out, "indigenous claims about 'culture loss' poses a problem for contemporary definitions of culture as a process that continually undergoes change rather than something which can be damaged or lost" (2001, 167). From my own close interactions with community leaders in pastoral Tibet, I've come to learn that the community leaders are both concerned with losing concrete indigenous cultural knowledge (i.e., names and stories of plants, animal names, names of birds, folktales, proverbs, songs, prayers, biographies of mountain deities and river gods, etc.) and the younger generation's relationship to their ancestral land. Contemporary definitions of cultures as a process that is constantly changing and subject to contestations tend to ignore and overlook indigenous community leaders' concerns over preserving and rejuvenating lost cultures and languages. In the discipline of anthropology in general, there has been a tradition of privileging the flow of

68 Archaeological and ecological research suggests that the formation of an indigenous pastoralist environment in the Tibetan highlands began about 8,000 years ago (Miehe et al. 2008). According to indigenous origin stories, long ago, the Tibetan Plateau was occupied by rhinoceroses and elephants.

experience, embodiment, intuitions, and unselfconscious behavior as a prime site of observation (Boas 1910, Geertz 1974, Malinowski 1922). As a result, anthropologists have not sufficiently portrayed their interlocutors or informants as analytical agents, who are also capable of staying away from their embodied experiences and offer theoretical analysis of their world[69] through creative discourses.

One typical example of this tradition is Ingold and Kurttila's distinction between what they call MTK, traditional knowledge as enframed by modernist discourses, and LTK, traditional knowledge that is found in the everyday life of people and in people's embodied experiences (2000, 192). This distinction is problematic as it leaves no room for the native to be reflexive, critical, and analytical. We cannot reduce what we call indigenous cultural knowledge as a product of modernist discourses. As philosopher Schutz pointed out, "the meaning of any action is its corresponding projected act" (1967, 61). In other words, any action is conscious in the sense that, before we carry it out, we have a picture in our mind of what we are going to do. Schutz acknowledges that people are partly self-conscious agents who execute actions with a completed act in mind, which is a process of objectification of a perception. In his recent works on ethics, anthropologist Keane has also shown that socially recognized norms/knowledge *and* the embodied intuitions/unselfconscious habits are not mutually exclusive. In fact, they inform each other in the sense that ethics emerges out of social interactions and in turn recognizable social norms/knowledge induce people to take ethical stances in social interactions (2016, 137).

Critical indigenous studies scholars have been focusing on revitalizing indigenous ways of relating to the land with the aim of empowering their communities, however, there is a notable lack of attention in the scholarship on the importance of reintegrating language, with the land,

69 However, among early anthropologists, John Gwaltney's *Drylongso: A Self-Portrait of Black America* was an exception. Gwaltney invited the ordinary black men and women to define black America and later reordered their definitions in his book.

with the culture, and with the community within a shared conceptual framework. As Kenyan scholar and writer Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o powerfully stated, "Culture is almost indistinguishable from the language that makes possible its genesis, growth, banking, articulation and indeed its transmission from one generation to the next (1986, 15)." So, in this sense, language is "the collective memory bank of a people's experience in history" (ibid). In what follows, we explore two creative land-based educational programs initiated by two widely respected local community leaders in eastern Tibet. These programs aimed to revitalize Tibetan indigenous land-based knowledge and recover the younger generation of Tibetans from seeing their homeland as a place of knowledge by reconnecting them to their ancestral land.

Children Are Flowers: Losing One's Homeland in One's Homeland

Akhu Tashi Sangpo (henceforth Akhu) is a Buddhist monk at Pelyul Tharthang Monastery, which belongs to the Nyingma sect of Tibetan Buddhism. He was born and raised in a Tibetan nomadic community in the Golok region of Tibet, located two hours away from Kirti Ribo community in Dzorge by car. Akhu became a monk at the age of thirteen. In 2007, at the age of thirty-seven, he established an environmental preservation group, namely Nyenbo Gyurtse Environment Protection Association[70] with several of his monk friends and relatives. Under his leadership, his organization has made concerted efforts to record and document indigenous Tibetan pastoralists' knowledge of their ancestral land. In addition, his team has sought to learn new skills such as measuring how far glaciers in their home region have receded, counting the number of birds, and evaluating whether the number of lakes and springs in the region are increasing or decreasing. His team's work has been recognized by many Tibetans and Chinese

70 There are around twelve members in this organization primarily consisted of Akhu Tashi Sangpo's monk friends and local community volunteers.

conservationists and researchers. Because of his love of birds and his team's efforts to preserve endangered birds such as white eared pheasant, he has been known as Bird Lama (Ch. *Niao lama)* in certain Chinese and Western media circles; however, the Tibetans don't call him Bird Lama. In fact, he is not a Lama. The Tibetan name that he uses for himself on his WeChat account, a very popular social media app in China, is *bya rdzi*, which means bird-herder, a newly coined term based on existing expressions such as *nor rdzi,* meaning yak-herder, or *lug rdzi*, shepherd. Over the years, Akhu has been sharing his vast knowledge of Tibetan origin stories, sacred place narratives, folktales and proverbs, biographies of places and people, and biophysical knowledge of the land that have passed from generation to generation for many centuries in Tibetan language to a wide range of mainly Tibetan audience through social media apps, books, and documentary films.

In my conversations with Akhu, he repeatedly said that Tibetan children are losing their homeland in their homeland. In order to do something to reverse this trend, Akhu and his team started a land-based learning program in 2011 and have continued this program every year since then. The main purpose of this event, Akhu said is "to introduce children to their homeland," and he further explained that "it is vitally important to be acquainted with one's homeland. Before kids did not need to go to school, so when they were growing up with their parents and the elders, they heard stories when herding animals and walking from place to place. Even if children didn't commit themselves to studying plants, animals, and flowers on the land, they hear many stories on the interconnected relationships between them." After a pause, he continued, "Then, gradually, boarding schools were built, and it was not only mandatory for children to study at school during the day, but they also have to sleep there at night. Since then, time to spend with their parents, grandparents, and the elders has significantly decreased. Slowly,

children have lost their knowledge of their ancestral land. This is really akin to *losing one's homeland in one's homeland.* To tackle this issue, we started this event." After many discussions, Akhu and his team members have decided to call this event *Metok gi Byispa*, meaning *Children of Flowers.*

Since the early 1990s, thousands of boarding schools were built in both pastoral and farming regions of Tibet. The official narrative asserts that these schools have brought real education to the younger generation of Tibetan people, however, in my view, the establishment of state schools can be seen as a transition from the previous embodied learning to disembodied schooling. If children were to grow up on their own ancestral land with their families, animals, and many other beings, we should recognize that they could also learn a tremendous amount of knowledge as they grow up.

The participants range from seven to twelve years old from the local boarding schools in Golok. When Akhu and his team members initiated this event in 2011, they couldn't easily garner the support of local school administrators and the parents of children. The school administrators said that they were concerned with the safety of their students if they went on a trip to the mountains. Many parents said that it would be a waste of time to learn about flowers. Saying that taking a trip to the mountains poses a threat to the safety of children, Akhu said, is a new concern. This concern detached children from the land. Our ancestors have lived on this land for many centuries, and they have a profound attachment to this land. Our ancestral land shouldn't invoke fear, it should invoke warmth. Akhu continued, "What the parents said was both funny and sad. They said that their children should learn real knowledge at school, not about flowers. The monks have a lot of free time, so they have nothing else to do but organizing events such as *Children of Flowers*." In the past few decades, as mentioned in previous chapters,

Tibetan pastoralists indeed have become increasingly subject to externally imposed narratives of inferiority and so much so that many have stopped believing in their knowledge.



Figure 22: Children are praying before each flower is assigned to them. Photo by Shingse, 2021

Children of Flowers starts with children praying to their choice of Bodhisattva. Some pray to the Buddha of Wisdom; others pray to the Buddha of Great Compassion. In each round, ten children[71] sit around a wheel, just an ordinary wheel. A flower is placed on the wheel and Akhu turns it around. As the wheel turns, turns, and slowly stops, the child who sits in front of the flower is given that flower. "This flower" Akhu then says, "is you" and "you need to take good care of it for the rest of your life. In order to take good care of it, you need to learn about it, including its name, its kind, its relations with other plants and people. It is also an offer, a lifelong offer." Akhu learned that instead of saying that this flower is yours, children love it when you say that this flower is you, making a deep connection between the two not based on a

71 These children are from the local elementary schools. There are ten elementary schools in the region.

notion of ownership but on a relationship of similarity and interdependent existence. Akhu's team thereby named this event *Children of Flowers.*

Three guiding principles are central to this event as part of Akhu's mission to create deep care between people and the environment. First is *knowing,* which entails learning about each flower thoroughly. Second is *loving* and that is as the kids learn more about the flowers, their names, and how they configure into stories and sayings and songs, an intimate relationship of care and love is established. Akhu often says that sowing seeds of lasting care will result in good actions. The third process is protecting out of deep love and care. At the same time, understanding cause and result relationship, or the causal relationship between seed and fruit (*rgyu 'bras*) is important, as well as having firm conviction and belief (*yid ches*) in relationships of care. Equally important, Akhu said, is to have *dad pa,* which means having reverence, particularly to the land in this context. Akhu has seen documentary films in which people in other countries are being instructed to protect endangered species such as elephants from poachers under gunpoint. This approach, he said with a sigh, "truly makes me sad. We can't protect our environment and the endangered species under gunpoint. My approach is to invite people from different ages, to learn more about the environment, and from learning and knowing they can grow to love the environment, and from there they can protect the environment." Once an intimate relationship is established between children and flowers, they would never harm the land on which their friends blossom.

This event lasts for a day. After each child is assigned a picture of their flower and the flower's name with the caption "I, the godness of flowers, am offering this flower to you so you need to learn about it and take good care of it[72]." The main task of this event is to go on a

72 Tib. ང་རང་ཨེ་ཏོག་ལྷ་མོས་ཁྱེད་ལ་གནང་བ་ཡིན་པས་ངོ་ཤེས་པ་དང་བདག་སྐྱོང་གནང་རོགས།

journey to search for their flower from the land for three hours, staring at 11 am in the morning. Although all the children and Akhu and his teammates embark on the journey of searching for flowers as a group, the part where each child is tasked with looking for a particular flower is more individualized, emphasizing connections and individual responsibilities to the land. Akhu said that he has two reasons why he incorporated the prayer as part of introducing the flowers to each child. One, children's world is filled with wonder and curiosity, hence seeing each flower as a special offer from a higher being is a magical experience for the children. Two, it is less difficult to garner support from their parents if we can combine cultural knowledge with religious traditions to ensure that this event resonates with them.



Figure 23: Children are searching for their flowers with Akhu and his teammates, photo by Shingse, 2021

As children go up on the mountains scanning every corner of the land to look for their flowers, or their new life-long friends, curiosity and joy on their faces become more and more visible. Every time, when a kid finds his or her flower, he or she would unleash shouts of joy,

“I’ve found my flower! I’ve found my flower!” and then the other kids would gather around with envious eyes and wait for an elder to introduce the flower to the whole group. The euphoria of discovering a flower friend encourages the other kids to look for their friends with great enthusiasm.



Figure 24: Children running down a slope to look for their flower friends. Photo by Shingse 2021



Figure 25: Posing for a picture upon finding their flower friends. Photo by Shingse 2021



Figure 26: Moment of joy captured right after discovering her flower friend. Photo by Shingse 2021

When the children find their flower friends, an indescribable smile of joy blossoms on their faces and they would shout with excitement and in response, Akhu or one of his teammates would say, "Good. Very good. This flower is your lifelong friend now. Now you need to learn everything about this flower. You need to protect this flower and your flower's home, this land, in your whole life. I want you to visit your friend every summer. If your friend faces any challenges such as mining, you must come and protect it. When you go home, please ask your parents and grandparents to teach you about this flower." Some children are not able to find their flower friends because some flowers only grow on the top of the mountain where the temperature is cold, yet others grow at the feet of the mountains. The children who have not been able to find their flower friends during this trip feel sad initially, but this was part of Akhu's plan as he tells these children, "Don't be sad. Probably your flower friend does not grow in this area. Why does it not grow in this area? I want you to continue to look for your friend when you go home. Go with your parents and grandparents when they herd animals on the mountains. Your parents or grandparents might be able to help you find your friend." Akhu would like them to learn not just the flower's name in Tibetan but also how it configures into stories, sayings,

proverbs, songs, and largely their social and cultural world by reestablishing their relationships to their land, to their language, parents, and grandparents and to their larger community.

Upon attending this event for three times, I have come to realize that the real meaning of this land-based learning programs lies in Akhu's efforts to encourage the children of Tibetan pastoralists to see their homeland and territory as a source of knowledge as it really is, and their parents and grandparents as knowledge people endowed with wisdom and insights on land and life. It is more about restoring Tibetan children's land-based relationships to their ancestral homeland than merely learning to identify different flowers, or just documenting children's indigenous-botanical knowledge. Akhu emphasized that our land-based knowledge is rooted in the Tibetan language. It is the Tibetan languages that brings together the cumulative body of knowledge and beliefs, handed through generation to generation in a wide range of oral traditions, about the relationship of living beings with one another and with their environment. It is also a process of learning or relearning the richness of Tibetan language that is closely connected to the land and to the life of the community. Land once again becomes a learning context and the elders in the community become their mentors. They could learn the names of these plants at their schools, but the school setting deterritorializes the embodied experiences of learning from the land. As indigenous scholar Leanne Simpson writes that one central lesson of Nishnaabeg intelligence is, "If you want to learn about something, you need to take your body onto the land and do it" (2017, 165). She further claimed that when indigenous Nishnaabeg children learn *from* the land and *with* the land, "they learned what it felt like to recognized, seen, and appreciated by their community" (150). For children who have suffered the consequences of externally imposed narratives of inferiority, it is an emancipatory experience to see one's homeland as a source of knowledge, and it is a precious opportunity to stay away from a

dehumanizing world where one is constantly reminded of one's deficiencies.

Tashitso is seven years ago. She attends a local boarding school in Golok. The children who were not able to find their flowers return home with a firmer commitment to find their friends. They go home and ask their elders to accompany them and sear for their flowers on the mountains while the elders are attending to their animals. In my conversations with Tashitso's father, he said, "After our daughter participated in *Children of Flowers*, she came home and asked us to help her find Tibetan dandelion and many other flowers. Then her grandfather took her to the mountains and found her a Tibetan dandelion. Before she did not have any questions, but now she asks about everything around us –flowers, rivers, mountains, insects, birds, and animals, and she has developed a habit of documenting them in her notebook. Her notebook is her treasure now." As children continue to learn from the land, and most importantly see their ancestral land as an ocean of knowledge, their homeland also becomes their treasure.

Return: "Please Bring Your Dung Back to the Pasture"

An intellectually rigorous thinker who sought creative paths to restore land and community in eastern Tibet, Konchok Palsang (henceforth Palsang) is one of the most revered and influential indigenous community leaders in eastern Tibet. Every time Palsang gives a talk, formal or informal, to the younger generation of Tibetan pastoralists, including college students, he often invokes a Tibetan saying to anchor the focus of his speech. We have increasingly come to live in a world where we "eat grass from the pasture but carry one's dung to the forest[73]." Both the literal meaning, as well as the figurative meaning of this saying is an integral part of

73 Tib. ལ་ཟས་སྤང་ནས་བཟས།། རིལ་མ་ནག་ལས་སྐུ་བཏང་། Dung is, of course, excellent fertilizer that could help a pasture grow lush. This image is one of using resources in one place but returning the beneficial "fruit" elsewhere (Cf. Pema Shastri. *Like a Yeti Catching Marmots: A Little Treasury of Tibetan Proverbs*. Boston: Wisdom Publications.

Palsang's work.

I've already introduced Palsang to you in Chapter One. To briefly remind you, Palsang was born and raised in a nomadic pastoral community called Kirti Ribo on the eastern edge of the Tibetan Plateau, located in today's Zorge County, Ngawa (Aba) Prefecture of Sichuan Province. Located at an elevation of 3400-3750 meters, Zorge county is often referred to as the "water tower" of China and the "kidneys of the Yellow River," due to its wetland, alpine meadow, and shallow lakes which provide 30% of the source water for the Yellow River (Yan 2005). Elder residents of Kirti Ribo community remember having sandy patches on their grassland more than sixty years ago, but the expansion of dunes and presence of sand in their winter pasture, covering the walls of sheep and yak enclosure, is a more recent phenomenon. The Chinese state continues to mainly blame overgrazing for any form of land degradation, and this narrative has provided the impetus for-reaching policies that impact the very existence of Tibetan pastoralists[74].

When Konchok Palsang began a community project to address desertification in 2010 under the support of Winrock International and Sichuan Province Grassland Research Institute, he invited over twenty Kirti Ribo villagers, including men and women, and consulted with them on three key concerns. First, they must ascertain that the grass seeds would not be burned by the sunshine. Second, they must make sure that the seeds would not be blown away by the wind. Third, they must take the biodiversity of the grassland into consideration by not allowing a single kind of grass to monopolize the land. When Palsang asked, "how can we solve these problems?", they found a solution. This solution came from an ordinary female herder. Tsomo told the villagers, "We should let the hooves of yaks push the seeds into the sand and the soil. Yaks'

74 Please see pastoralists' views and narratives of what is causing grassland degradation and desertification in chapter one.

hooves cannot be replaced with any other technologies because yaks also carry seeds in their body hair. As yaks trample the soil where seeds are planted, all kinds of seeds from yaks' hair and the hooves will mingle with one another. Yak dung is also the best fertilizer for the growth of many kinds of grasses and flowers." After this female herder shared her invaluable insight, other villagers also agreed and suggested that the best way to ensure the sown grass would survive is to fertilize with yak dung and sheep dung and determined that the best time to do this is when the plants are about two inches tall. *The results have been remarkable, and it has become one of the most innovative conservation projects in eastern Tibet.*

Palsang had been advocating for the need to learn from the Tibetan pastoralists and their own knowledge about grassland; however, the advice he received from this female herder has taught him a profound lesson that he had never heard and learned from outside grassland experts. Palsang said, "After I heard her advice, there were days and nights that I just sat in my room, mulled over, and reevaluated all kinds of discourses and discriminations attributed to Drokpa people. Then, I've come to realize that desertification is not only taking place in the land, but *also in people's heart.* All kinds of discourses have muted the voices of Drokpa people. Many Drokpas have stopped believing in their own power, or in their own collective wisdom. To reflect on the deep history of Tibetan Drokpa beyond the existing disparaging views of the Drokpa social world, I've started a three-day event called, Droklam Ringmo since 2015 with the aim of inviting people to care and renew their relationships to their ancestral land[75]."

75 Tib. ཨ་མ་ཨ་ཡུལ་ལ་གཅེས་སྐྱོང་ཞིང་བ།



Figure 27: An elder from Kirti Ribo community is introducing the history of their community. Photo by Konchok Palsang 2015.

Droklam Ringmo means the *Long Path of Pastoralism*, which implies that any meaningful ecological conservation on the Tibetan Plateau must draw insights from the collective wisdom accumulated from the long path that Tibetan Drokpa have taken over for thousands of years. Palsang wanted to give an appropriate name in English and in Chinese for Droklam Ringmo. In English, he translated it as *Return*, which as a name challenges pure economic notions of development and prosperity and urges a return to an attitude of love and reverence for the land and home community. In Chinese, he translated it as *Huijia* (returning home), as this concept of returning home in Chinese evokes both warmth and love. Droklam Ringmo is a three-day event that brought together Tibetan elders, youth, and college students to think, talk, and critically reflect on individual roles and responsibilities for taking care of one's homeland.

Most Tibetan herders know that dung is an excellent fertilizer that could help a pasture grow lush. Palsang's many years of conservation work, particularly incorporating yaks and their dung in his community's efforts to restore the sandy land has demonstrated the interdependent relationship between Tibetan pastoralists, their animals, and the future sustainability of their land. The figurative meaning of *eating grass from the pasture but carrying one's dung to the forest* is that one is not caring about or attending to the very place that had nurtured you. Palsang echoed Akhu Tashi Sangpo's point, whom he regards as a dear mentor, "If prosperity or good life can only be pursued somewhere out there, if people have no respect for the elders and their collective wisdom, and if people start regarding their homeland as a backward place, do you think they would protect this land? In order to protect this land, we must restore people's intimate relationships to their ancestral land. Right now, we have a generation of young people who do not see the riches and wonders of life in their home communities. Many have stopped believing in their culture, history, and even in themselves. This is what I mean when I say that desertification is taking place in people's heart." How can we restore the desertification in people's heart? Droklam Ringmo intended to address this concern.

Droklam Ringmo: Learn, Talk, Discuss, Reflect and Plan

In the summer of 2015, Palsang started the first Droklam Ringmo. It is a three-day event. He invited around fifty villagers, including ten village elders from three sub-villages of Kirti Ribo. He also invited around thirty college students, including college graduate students, who were born and raised in Kirti Ribo. He then invited five honorary guests, including leading Tibetan community leaders, writers, thinkers, and social entrepreneurs. Akhu Tashi Sangpo was one of the honorary guests. All of them congregated on the grassland of Kirti Ribo and delivered

animated speeches on the fate of Tibetan Drokpa. One important component of this event is to ride horses through mountains, wetland, and rivers. As they moved across various landscapes, village elders from Kirti Ribo told stories or biographies of mountains, rivers, plants, flowers, and interpret their significance to the younger generation while the college students used their writing, artistic, and media skills, including documentary films to record, express, and renew their indigenous relationships to their ancestral land.

The village elders said that long ago, there was a time when this place was occupied by rhinoceros and elephants. Their place has had nine occupiers since primordial times—wild yaks, wild asses, dog-like wolves, foxes, rhinoceros, pikas, animals, birds, and insects, all living in groups off the magnificent snow, beautiful rivers, and invigorating grass and woods in this medicinal snow land. As anthropologist Keith Basso writes, "If place-making is a way of constructing the past, a venerable means of *doing* human history, it is also a way of constructing social traditions and, in the process, personal and social identities" (1996, 7). By pointing at the landscape on their horses, the village elders talked about histories of their ancestors and the trials and tribulations of a long journey, which is legendary as well as historical, personal as well as cultural. One elder said, "Sometimes, a snowstorm would kill many animals you depend on survival, but apart from the collectivization period of the 1950s, someone dying of hunger or poverty was unheard of in the long history of our community. This fortune-bearing land is a source of life. This land would never let you go hungry. This precious land has been the foundation of all happiness." The journey recalled in the elders' land-based speeches among other things is Tibetan pastoralists' ingenuity and resilience and their deep gratitude to the land. When the elders say *gyang sa po,* which can roughly be translated as the fortune-bearing land, it is filled with intimacy, as *po* in Tibetan grammar is a personifying word. *Po* refers to a person.

For example, a deceased person is often called *drin chen po*, meaning the one to whom we are deeply grateful. Land participates in their speeches not as an abstract entity, but as a loving figure (Makley 2018).



Figure 28: All the attendees are riding horses to learn from the land and the elders. Photo by Drok Rilma 2021.

When the elders eloquently shared captivating stories of their long journey, the attendees, especially the college students, were amazed by their speech-making skills. In fact, learning the art of words, or acquiring that eloquence that is essential to deliver speeches clearly and logically, is highly valued in Tibetan pastoral communities. When college students from Kirti Ribo shared their thoughts, the vivacity, the style, the feeling at their command, and the ease with which words came to them, were simply incomparable to their elders. One village elder kindly advised the college students, "I know college students are knowledgeable, but when you talk or deliver speeches, please try to refrain from using too much formal or written Tibetan language. If you raise your voice too high, your audience will feel intimidated. Speak slowly. Try to give pleasure throughout your speech. Good speeches are short, entertaining, welcoming, and logical." A Tibetan saying goes, he continued, "Even though harsh speech has no sharp

edge, it can cut the human heart to pieces[76].” All the attendees nodded in agreement and took notes. At this moment, Palsang said, “If we just regard our homeland as a backward place and view our elders simply as uneducated, then we would be missing so much of our ancestral knowledge and wisdom.”



Figure 29 : The attendees are cooking lunch, making milk tea in groups. Photo by the author. 2019.

When it was lunch time, all the attendees were divided into small groups, and each group was tasked with collecting dried yak dung, stones for stoves, and making milk on the grassland. Groups that had more village elders first finished making milk tea. Before they ate tsampa, a staple Tibetan food (roasted barley flour mixed with yak butter and cheese and milk tea), they made offerings to the mountain deities. The community elders can fluently recite the invocation prayers from their hearts to pay respect and seek prosperity from the mountain deities. The college students and some of the honorary guests remained silent as most of them don’t know or already have forgotten such prayers, including myself. After lunch, each group was tasked with collecting and naming as many plants and flowers as they could on the grassland. Three

76 Tib. གཏམ་ལ་རྩོ་ངར་ཞེད་ཀྱང། མི་སྡིང་དུམ་ཆུར་གཏུབས།

community elders, who are known for their vast land-based ancestral knowledge served as judges.



Figure 30: The attendees are counting and naming flowers and plants in front of the elders. Photo by Drukmo Khar[77]. 2019.

The three judges eloquently said that this golden land is covered with a diversity of blossoming flora, including leopard plants, knotweed, black and white gentians, Himalayan aster, Tibetan dandelions, white wormwood, potentilla, and countless other plants and flowers. The elders were able to name more than seventy flowers and plants on the spot.

Before we close this section, I would like to introduce two more activities of Droklam Ringmo event that were designed to restore land and community-based relationships as a precondition to do any meaningful ecological conservation. As mentioned in Chapter Two, after resisting the rangeland fencing policy for over a decade, Kirti Ribo community embarked on a year of uncertainty in 2008 by dividing their communally used land to three subvillages, namely

77 There are more men participants than women in this event, however, there are equal number of college graduates, younger participants.

Garsar, Tshako, Tseshul. Since then, different land use systems have emerged, ones that resemble the more traditional communal grazing practices, and others that followed the state's vision of more individualized and privatized use of the land at the household level. Kirti Ribo initially resisted the rangeland fencing policy on the grounds that it would degenerate the prosperity of their community and sow seeds of conflicts among their villagers. One herder from Garsar village said, "Since 2008, hospitality culture has been diminishing in my village. We used to go to other families to eat lunch or dinner all the time. Families also offered their best food to their guests. These days, most people just go to a teahouse and pay five yuan for a cup of tea. There was no such a thing as teahouses prior to 2008." Lacking a strong village leader, Garsar village decided to divide their communal land to individual households in 2008. By contrast, most households in Tshako agreed to coordinate their strategies to communally use their land and there are no teahouses in their community. Tshako villagers still have kept the culture of receiving guests and enjoying meals together.

All the attendees of Droklam Ringmo were divided into small groups and then went to have lunch in the families of Tshako in their yak-hair tents. The families warmly received the attendees as guests and offer them their best food, such as yak meat, milk tea, and tsampa. At the same time, each group was tasked to learn over eighty vocabulary words related to yak hair tent, the traditional dwelling or home of Tibetan Drokpa. The group that managed to collect the most terms were given an award. Palsang said that the purpose of organizing this activity is to restore the beauty of hospitality so that human relations are not only mediated by cash, but also care and daily practices of mutual aid.

Lastly, Palsang invited families in each administrative village of Kirti Ribo to contribute a little bit of butter, cheese, roasted barley flour, brown sugar, and together with people from all

three villages, made a traditional Tibetan food, *thud* cake, a confection of tsampa, butter, sugar, and dried curd. The process of mixing, making, and eating food together, and sharing that food with the guests of Droklam Ringmo has brought all villagers together as members of the Kirti Ribo community. Palsang said that he could have bought Tibetan *thud* from somewhere else with cash, but that would not serve the purpose of bringing the villagers together and engaging in discussions related to Drokpa such as the conservation about this shared land. It's also an auspicious thing to complete something together by drawing on the resources and wisdom of all villagers. Akhu Tashi Sangpo added, "So long as people have a sense of community, so long as people view this land as their homeland, so long as they know and love this place, they would not let anyone else do any harm to this land and they themselves would not participate in such harmful endeavors. Restoring community is restoring the environment. It doesn't matter if you are Tibetan or Chinese, if one didn't have a sense of caring or an understanding relationship, then one would just see this land as a resource that can be bought, sold, and destroyed. If younger generations are cognizant and deeply appreciative of their land-based relations and identity, then such an attitude will pave a pathway toward true conservation of this medicinal land."



Figure 31: Each presenter is sharing views and commitments during the last day of Droklam Ringmo. Photo by the author. 2019.

At the concluding ceremony of Droklam Ringmo, all the participants congregated together and had a feast. Kirti Ribo community members brought meat, milk, fruit, and bread to honor the care that was invested in their ancestral land. Palsang said that the primary goal of this event is to invite all the community members and our guests to engage in the actual work of restoring their relationships to our ancestral land. No significant care or conservation can occur without a significant relationship. Without a relationship of care, real learning never occurs. At the end, each participant shared their reflections and committed in public to act on behalf of the ancestral land. The elders have committed to share their knowledge to the younger generations whenever they can and the younger generation of Tibetan pastoralist have committed to revitalizing such land-based ancestral knowledge through multimodal technologies and mediums

such as documentary films, poems, paintings, children's books, as well as academic papers. Droklam Ringmo offers a platform for community elders, college students, and their honorary guests to come together and learn, discuss, and reflect on creative ways to renew their land-based relationships and responsibilities. One elder averred at the end of the three-day event, "When we say that our younger generation need to renew their relationship to their ancestral land, we are not saying that all of you need to come back and only herd yaks and sheep, though some of you should do that too. Our wish is that the younger generation can rely on their new knowledge and new skills to revitalize our ancestral knowledge through new and creative means. There is so much that you can learn from this fortune-filled land. There is also so much you can offer to their fortune-filled land."

Conclusion

This chapter draws the reader's attention to an area of study that has often been overlooked. That is, the corrosive impact of external evaluations and discourses on the minds of many ordinary pastoralists, especially children. I partly draw on my own experiences and the various experiences of my generation to illustrate the impact of what I call the political production of human inferiority, which is a process of annihilating a people's belief in their land, in their languages, in their ancestral knowledge, in their capacities, and ultimately in themselves. Once people are made to believe that one's homeland is a place of nothingness or a backward wasteland, people often internalize such narratives and discourses, which is arguably one of the major driving forces of social, cultural, and psychological changes in pastoral Tibet today.

My second argument is theoretical. That is, if we take indigenous community leaders' efforts to revitalize and rejuvenate 'culture loss', presenting indigenous knowledge as primarily

embodied as argued by theorists such as Ingold does not do justice to the real concerns of indigenous community leaders and their efforts to restore communities and revitalize cultural knowledges. From my critical perspective as a native anthropologist, I recognize that professional knowledge of the problem of indigenous issues such as losing connections to one's land is not a solution. My ethnographic work is directed toward becoming part of the solution to the problem of indigenous displacement by participating in land-based educational programs.

Indigenous Tibetan community leaders strongly argue that if one sees one's homeland as a backward place, if a generation of people for whom only the riches and wonders of the outside world beckon them, and most importantly, if there is not an intimate land-based relationship to one's homeland, true conservation can never occur. This argument has implications for engaging with meaningful land conservation work beyond Tibet. The core message is that without a significant land-based relationship, which comes with responsibilities, no real conservation of land can occur. Land-based relationship is also rooted in the community and rooted in the language of the community. Just like the folksong at the beginning of this chapter or the forgotten prayer verses for the mountain deities, there is concrete knowledge to be gained and lost. Both Akhu Tashi Sangpo and Palsang repeatedly said that if you don't know the place, the environment, then you don't have love for it, and if you don't love, you won't protect. Guided by this seemingly simple yet powerful philosophy, both Akhu and Palsang have made concerted efforts to renew land-based relationships by organizing community-based events with the aim of strengthening intergenerational collaborations to revitalize place-based relationships and responsibilities.

During fieldwork research, I've learned that indigenous artistic and literary production such as poems, songs, stand-up comedy, documentary films, as well as children's books have

often served as sites of theoretical production, cutting-edge social commentary, and collective community messages. This is the focus of Chapter Six, which explores how documentary films as a medium has offered unique opportunities to Tibetan herders to share their stories and narratives from their own perspectives as critical responses to larger state hegemonic narratives of their communities and themselves. When Anu, a popular Tibetan music band, released their now famous song *'phur* in 2017, which means fly, it became an instant hit both inside Tibet as well as in exile Tibet. This song exhorts the Tibetans to pursue their dreams in the metaphorical language of flying. One repeated part of the lyrics goes, "Fly, if you don't fly your life will be wasted; fly, if you don't fly your life will be over." Then in a rap form, it says, "liberating yourself from this meaningless life, and believe in the wonders of life, fly!" Of course, the power of a song goes beyond its lyrics, but this message of flying, leaving a pointless life behind, somehow struck a strong chord among many Tibetans, especially the younger generation of Tibetans. Flying, although it is a metaphorical language for pursuing one's dreams, nonetheless creates an image of leaving one place to another place in one's pursuit of dreams. This message that the wonders and riches of life is somehow somewhere out there can be arguably said to be a deep internalization of the political production of one's human inferiority by seeing one's homeland as a place of nothingness. This message worried Tibetan thinker and comedian, Menla-Kyap, who is also a famous lyricist, and in response then wrote another lyric, entitled, "Don't say we need to fly" (Tib. *'phur dgos ma zer*[78]). I would like to end this chapter with the lyrics of this new song, sung by rising Tibetan singer Samdrup Tsering because both Akhu Tashi Sangpo and Konchok Palsang have tried to convey this message to a larger audience by renewing the younger generation of Tibetans' land-based relationships and responsibilities. In

78 https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PLVNNV0uano

short, one can explore the wonders of life in one's ancestral homeland, which is a powerful way to respond to the political production of human inferiority not only in the Tibetan context but also beyond.

འཕྲུང་དགོས་མ་ཟེར།

འཕྲུང་དགོས་འཕྲུང་དགོས་ཡ་ལ་མ་ཟེར་ཞ་རོགས་ན་ཆུང་ཚོ།

འཕྲུང་ནས་འགྲོ་ས་མེ་འདུག་ཞ་རོགས་ན་ཆུང་ཚོ།

རེ་བོ་གསེར་གྱིས་བཞེངས་ཡོད།

ཆུ་བོ་གསེར་གྱིས་བྱེས་ཡོད།

རང་ས་གསེར་གྱི་གསེར་གྱི་ལྷང་བ།

བཞག་ནས་གང་ལ་འཕྲུང་དགོས།

འཕྲུང་དགོས་འཕྲུང་དགོས་ཡ་ལ་མ་ཟེར་ཞ་རོགས་ན་ཆུང་ཚོ།

འཕྲུང་ནས་འགྲོ་ས་མེ་འདུག་ཞ་རོགས་ན་ཆུང་ཚོ།

ནགས་རེ་གཉེར་གྱིས་ཕྱུག་ཡོད།

སྣང་ཐང་གཡུ་ཡིས་རྒྱན་ཡོད།

རང་ས་གཡུ་ཡི་ལྷང་བ།

བཞག་ནས་གང་ལ་འཕྲུང་དགོས་ཞ་རོགས་ན་ཆུང་ཚོ།

Don’t Say We Need to Fly

Dear young friends, don’t say ‘we need to fly we need to fly’

Dear young friends, there is no place to fly

The mountains are built by gold

The rivers are written in gold

Leaving this golden homeland of ours, dear young friends,

Where are you going to fly?

Dear young friends, don’t say ‘we need to fly we need to fly’

Dear young friends, there is no place to fly

The forest is endowed by precious minerals

The grassland is decorated by turquoise

Leaving this turquoise homeland of ours, dear young friends,

Where are you going to fly?

Chapter 6

Co-theorizing Alternative Narratives of Tibetan Pastoralists and their Communities through Indigenous Documentary Films

Introduction

In this chapter, we revisit the theme of ingenuity and resilience of Tibetan pastoralists by exploring how a group of Tibetan pastoralists are using documentary films to craft and co-theorize alternative narratives of themselves and their communities. The idea that Tibetan pastoralists would be on the frontier of a technology is perhaps inconsistent with the dominant image of "traditional" or "backward" Tibetan nomads both in the West and in China. My preliminary fieldwork research in Dzorge in eastern Tibet in the summer of 2015 had coincided with Konchok Palsang's (henceforth Palsang) initial plan to establish a team of documentary filmmakers with the aim of creating opportunities and social spaces for local herders who were previously unable to get their work and voices into the public. I've already introduced you to Palsang in Chapter One and in Chapter Five.

Palsang shared his initial thoughts with me, "Huatse, you are a researcher, so you must have heard local herders say that if they knew very good Chinese, they would want to say such and such; if they knew very good Tibetan (written Tibetan), they would want to say such and such. There are real barriers for them to participate in larger discussions. They are not part of any important discussions that have far-reaching consequences for their very social existence. Video-making is amazing because they can communicate their stories and ideas effectively through

films and one can learn the basic techniques of filmmaking within a short period of time. Could we articulate a mission for this initiative together?" Palsang has a unique way of communicating his ideas with others in a way that he would always invite one to think with him and whatever idea he had raised would in the end become a product of collaborative thinking, collective discussion, and a process of co-theorizing.

On a sunny day in the summer of 2015, we gathered at Palsang's Ecology and Culture Center[79] to lay out our primary goals of making documentary films, concerning the environment, culture, and the dominant yet demeaning representations of Tibetan pastoralists. As we sat around a wooden table surrounded by beautifully designed bookshelves full of Tibetan, Chinese and English books at the center's library, Gongbo, who I will introduce as a filmmaker later in the chapter, draws our attention and asks, "What kind of stories do we want to use to talk about ourselves and our communities through the lens of documentary films? Do we want to say we are backward? Do we want to say we are poor? Do we want to say we are stupid? Or are we just going to stay quiet and live under other people's descriptions of us?" Gongbo is from the same pastoral village as Palsang, and he was one of the first eight people, six men and two women, who attended the first ten-days of training in basic techniques of filmmaking. Palsang invited his friend Akhu Drukjab, a professional Tibetan Buddhist monk photographer and filmmaker in his early fifties from the Golok region of Tibet, to teach basic techniques of both making and editing videos.

Akhu Drukjab has been taking pictures and making documentary films of rare species such as the Tibetan snow leopard in collaboration with both Chinese state media and foreign media agencies such as BBC since 2012. From his many years of experience of recording rare

79 This center is located in the town of Taktsang Lhamo monastery in Dzorge County, Sichuan Province, China. This town is also one of the most famous tourist sites in eastern Tibet. It takes about an hour and half from this town to Kirti Ribo by car.

species and plants on the Tibetan plateau, especially in his home region of Golok, he has come to believe that documentary filmmaking can be used as an effective tool to record vanishing Tibetan cultural practices and indigenous knowledge such as land-based stories, folksongs, origin stories, biophysical and cultural knowledge of mountains and rivers, etc. Therefore, he has committed to teaching voluntarily the basic techniques of making documentary films to whomever shows interests in organizing such workshops or trainings. We concurred with Akhu Drukjab's main priority of using documentary films to preserve various aspects of Tibetan cultural heritage such as folktales, sayings, proverbs, and ritual practices that are the fulcrum of the identity of many ordinary Tibetans. In addition, as Gongbo invited us to think of the role of documentary filmmaking not as mere representations of cultures but also as the production of different narratives and stories and restoring land-based relationships, we were committed to using documentary filmmaking as a way to produce alternative narratives of Tibetan pastoralists and their communities. In this sense, our goal goes beyond the framework of culture preservation. Culture preservation as a popular framework has the advantage of seeming to neutralize politics in an authoritarian political context. However, it also can easily delink indigenous people from their lands and environments. After several hours of discussion and collaborative thinking, we have set three primary goals for the group as follows.

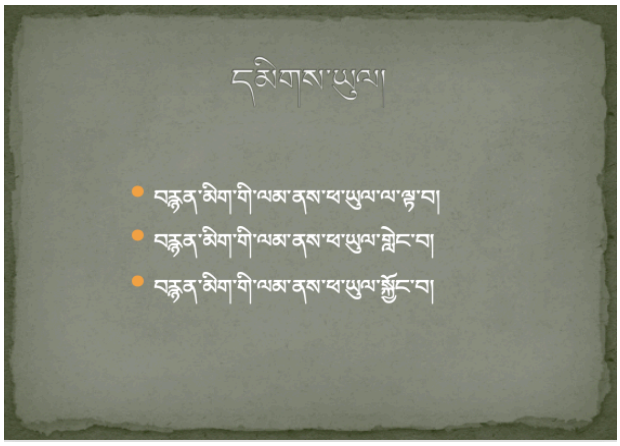


Figure 32: Three written goals in Tibetan language

The first goal is to watch or view one's homeland through the lens of films. The act of watching or viewing is an important human faculty and through the lens of films one may rediscover the richness of one's homeland. As mentioned in the Introduction and Chapter Five, a generation of Tibetan children have been taught to see their homeland as a backward place through descriptive terms such as harsh environment, fragile ecology, dryland, and wasteland, which plays a central role in producing experiences of human inferiority by annihilating people's beliefs in their environment. A holistic visual representation has the possibility of reversing processes through which Tibetan pastoral land has been misinterpreted or disrespectfully portrayed in hegemonic discourses and visual representations. The second goal of our filmmaking is to discuss issues pertaining to one's homeland through the lens of films. Our access to documentary films as a medium of communication has significantly reduced the "price of entry" in a cultural or discursive field, creating opportunities for Tibetan pastoralists who were previously unable to get their voices into the public (Wilson and Steward 2015). The third goal of our films is to nurture one's homeland through the lens of films. The Tibetan word for nurturing is *skyong*, which is often used in expressions such as nurturing children, or nurturing animals (*zoglug 'tsho skyong*). In order to nurture animals, for example, one requires knowledge, observational skills, patience, and caring. A Tibetan saying goes, "there are many who know how to graze animals (*zog lug 'tsho*), but only a few know how to nurture them (*zog lug skyong*)". Drawing inspiration from this indigenous idiom, this group also aspires to produce works that are geared toward nurturing the wellbeing of our homeland. Although most of the media-makers are men, but their partners and mothers are crucial in supporting their projects in multiple ways.

Since 2015, this initial discussion group has grown into a grassroots documentary film

crew, and it has resulted in over thirty documentary films of different lengths on a wide range of issues pertaining to the lives of Tibetan pastoralists and their communities. This initiative raises important questions for us/for anthropologists: How does indigenous media as produced by insiders challenge the power/knowledge structures and discourses through which Tibetan pastoralists have been framed and known? How does indigenous media serve as sites of theoretical production, decolonizing learning, as well as community restoration efforts by blurring the conventional boundaries between theory vs. practice; analysts vs. informants; text-based scholarship vs. multimodal forms of knowledge production? Who has the right to produce knowledge and what are the possibilities and consequences of new circulatory regimes introduced by digital technologies in a rapidly changing Tibetan pastoral environment?

My ethnographic case study does not have definitive answers to the abovementioned questions, but it invites us to learn from concrete examples and close analysis of three documentary films that were born out of the creativity and resilience of Tibetan pastoralists. By closely analyzing three representative documentary films in relation to the lives of the filmmakers, this chapter joins the previous chapters in my effort to present the people I have worked with and learned from not as just information providers, but as active analytical agents who are capable of producing theories of the world in which they live, as well as theories of issues that deeply matter to them. I argue that if we pay close attention to the ways in which our interlocutors theorize issues occurring within their communities through different mediums, be they text or films, the theories we discuss in academia will most likely be important to people themselves as well. In order to achieve this goal, we have to demystify theory and acknowledge that all people have the capacity to make normative claims to knowledge and produce theories of their lives and the life in general.

Coevalness, Co-theorizing, and Indigenous Media

In her seminal book, *Decolonizing Research Methodologies,* indigenous scholar Linda Tuhiwai Smith writes, "When Indigenous peoples become researchers and not merely the researched, the activity of research is transformed. Questions are framed differently, priorities are ranked differently, problems are defined differently, and people participate on different terms" (2012, 196). Indigenous media makers and theorists are not bound by the pressure of altering, adjusting, or refurbishing their experiences to fit the existing social theories –to make a better case for a certain trend of theorization of not their own-making. Indigenous people in general, until recently, have been the object of other people's image-making and theory-making practices in ways that were, as several indigenous scholars famously argued, mostly irrelevant and at times damaging to their lives (Vine Deloria 1988; Haunani-Kay Trask 1993). Scholars of indigenous media have noted that indigenous peoples in different parts of the world have taken up new technologies such as documentary films "as a means of revivifying relationships to their lands, local languages, traditions, and histories, and of articulating community concerns" (Turner 1990, 1992; Buddle 2004; Ginsburg 1991, 1994, 2008, 302). The production of indigenous media and other expressive forms are not just concerned with defending or preserving 'pristine' pre-colonial social relations, but such efforts are also a means of creating new and alternative discourses by gaining greater agency in the guidance of present struggles and future social transformations (Turner 1992, Boyer 2006).

Why is it important to insert one's own stories and narratives into broader discursive fields? The establishment of institutional structures are also built on discursive frameworks that shape the way phenomena are understood and normalized. For example, as mentioned in Chapter

One, in Chinese state environmental discourse, overgrazing has been presented as one of the primary causes of land degradation, while portraying Tibetan pastoralists as the destroyers of their own land. As a way to critically respond to such disparaging narratives, indigenous cultural activists (to borrow a term from Ginsburg) "are attempting to reverse processes through which aspects of their societies have been objectified, commodified, and appropriated; their media productions and writings are efforts to recover their histories, land rights, and knowledge bases as their own cultural property" (2005, 312).

To underscore what their work is really about, we have to recognize and appreciate undervalued forms of knowledge production beyond text. As anthropologist John Jackson has pointed out "academia has an arguably underdeveloped and under thematized relationship to video/film as a mechanism for producing and circulating social research –and as a potentially powerful venue/medium for theorizing and conceptualizing areas of intellectual expertise" (2014, 534). Jackson makes a powerful case for the scholarly value of filmic and other multi-modal forms knowledge production that are often underappreciated by traditional academic gatekeepers. However, there is more than scholarly value of filmic forms of knowledge production that are intrinsically meaningful within indigenous communities, not just in academia.

Scholars such as Caldwell and Banks have argued that there is a myth at the center of the theory vs. practice dichotomy as laid out in certain media studies circles: the assumption is that intellectuals in the academy are the only ones who rigorously theorize media productions although many of them don't know how to produce them. There is also a similar myth at the center of anthropological theory-making practices such that the researchers are often seen as the only ones who rigorously theorize the social and political lives of their informants, casting the

very people they study as mostly too unsophisticated and non-reflexive to provide substantive meta-discourses and theories about their lives. Indigenous media practices, as I will demonstrate in the following sections, have blurred the conventional boundaries between theory vs. practice; analysts vs. informants, text-based scholarship vs. multimodal forms of knowledge production, while challenging the colonial gaze by constructing their own visual media and stories on their own terms.

In *Time and the Other,* anthropologist Johannes Fabian states that ethnographers should recognize the people whom they study as their coevals (1983). Here Fabian points to the disconnect between ethnographic fieldwork and anthropological texts, between the act of conducting ethnographic research and the written analysis thereby produced (60). In other words, ethnographers' practice of giving accounts of past experience with cultural others freezes the Other in the past, the result of which is a denial of coeval existence by positioning the Other in a Time different than our own (61). As mentioned in the Introduction, the terms "pastoralists" or "nomads" or *mumin* in Chinese, particularly evokes images of past, outdated, and even backwardness. Drawing insight from this critique, I would like to introduce a concept of co-theorizing, which refers to the communicative practice of engaging in meta-discourse and theory-making practices through a dialogic approach in which all actors are participants in the construction of knowledge. For example, the ideas for the documentary films that I will discuss in the following sections sometimes come from individuals and sometimes they emerge out of conversations. Both in person and through a WeChat group (a popular social media app in China), we help each other conceptualize, manage, shoot, and edit the documentary films from the inception of an idea to the final production of a film. In short, we are co-ethnographers and co-theorists in practice. In what follows, I will discuss three representative documentary films in

relation to the lives of filmmakers to give you a sense of how produced films, came up with ideas, theorized certain issues, ranked priorities, and imagined certain audiances.

Barbed Wire

Yeshi Drakpa (henceforth Yetak as he has been known now) had been mulling over making a documentary film on the pernicious impact of barbed wire fence on wild animals and birds for a while. When he was growing up in Kirti Ribo and helping his family to graze their animals, he personally witnessed how the violence of barbed wire was largely taking place at the level of the flesh of animals and birds as he and his family hopefully tried to untangle them from the thorny barbs. As mentioned in Chapter Two, Kirti Ribo community resisted the rangeland fencing policy until 2008, when some households opposed fencing their communal land and some households did not. In my interview with Yetak's mother about the pros and cons of the fencing policy, she told me that for her family, it was better to have one's own land be fenced as that would give them more capacity to rent out their land. Yetak at first was conflicted, torn between the pernicious impact of barbed wire on the lives of wild animals and birds and his family's support for fencing their land. Since 2014, Yetak started collecting and taking pictures and videos of animals, both domesticated and wild, and as well as birds that were bodily enduring the violence of barbed wire with the aim of making a documentary film.



Figure 33: A bird caught up in the barbed wire. Still from Yetak's film.

Yetak is the youngest member of our film group. After graduating high school in 2008, Yetak dreamed of pursing further studies in Tibetan literature at Northwest Minzu University in today's Gansu Province, China. As a high school student, he started developing a genuine interest in Tibetan poetry and wrote many Tibetan poems. Upon graduation, he wanted to pursue further studies in the renowned Tibetan literature studies program at Northwest Minzu University. However, his college entrance exam score was a little below the requirement, so disappointedly he did not get into his dream college (personal communication). Instead of going to any other schools that he was not interested in, he decided to work for his uncle, Konchok Palsang, who was becoming a highly respected Tibetan environmentalist and community leader.

In the summer of 2018, Yetak and Palsang invited me to give a presentation at their center located in the vicinity of Taktsang Lhamo monastery. At the time, I was also exploring the history of barbed wire, and how it was invented after the Homestead Act of 1862 in America, when settlers were pouring into the West to stake their claims over land, and how the invention and mass production of barbed wire made it possible for homesteaders to claim and fence off

millions of acres in the American west (Liu 2009). Material objects such as barbed wire played a crucial role in the very act of enclosing land first in the American West in the late 19th century and then in pastoral Tibet in the late 20th century as elsewhere. Joseph Glidden, a farmer and businessman from DeKalb, Illinois, invented barbed wire in 1874 for mass use on the American Great Plains (Krell 2002). Glidden at the time was not the only person who was proposing to get a patent for different barbed wire designs, but his design was "technologically superior to other new sorts of fences" (Razac 2002), and he was the first to get a patent for his barbed wire design. Later, he became one of the wealthiest people in America. Nothing glorious about the history of barbed wire here though. Not only was it inextricably linked with the colonization that took place in the American West in the late 19th century; but also, it became the central element of the architecture of the Nazi camps; and it was later widely used in the trenches of world wars (Razac 2002).

After my presentation, Yetak enthusiastically shared his idea of making a documentary film concerning the impact of barbed wire on the lives of animals and birds with me; and he politely asked if he could interview me, specifically on the history of barbed wire for his film. I immediately accepted his request. On April 22, 2019, for Earth Day, Yetak and his uncle, Pasang, organized an event to screen fifteen five-minute long documentary films that address pressing environmental concerns on the Tibetan Plateau. As part of this event, three films were selected to receive awards[80], and the first prize went to Yetak's documentary film on barbed wire. Perhaps because of my training in anthropology and affiliation with a world class university, I was invited to serve as one of the judges along with two other people.

Yetak gave two names to his film, one in Tibetan and another one in Chinese. It has both

80 Three awards were given on that day. The first award was 1000RMB, equivalent to $150 and a trophy. The second award was 800RMB and a trophy. The third award was 500RMB, and a trophy. Palsang's Ecology and Culture Center sponsored this event.

Chinese and English subtitles. The Tibetan name is *Metal Thorns* (Tib. *Tserlcags*); and the Chinese name is *Dead in the Metal Wire* (Ch. *Siyutaisiwang*). The film opens in black and white with a gloomy scene of a barbed wire fence, cutting through an open grassland. It was snowing and the wind was shaking the fence. As the entwined barbs become more visible, the next transition was my interview on the history of barbed wire invention in America and how its repercussions reverberated throughout the country, especially in the early 1930s. American settlers' ambition to transform the prairies and plains into farmland by cutting up its sea of grasses into a patchwork of cultivated plots in the late 19th century had largely contributed to what was later known as the Dust Bowl period (Krell 2002).

The next transition moved to an interview with a committed Tibetan community leader (a local pastoralist), who is famous for his many years of efforts to protect the sacred Blue Lake of Tibet in today's Qinghai Province. His name is Namgyal, and he had been taking pictures and short videos of animals that have been officially named and recognized as the "first-grade protected species"[81] yet are often caught, stuck, and dead in the spiked strips of barbed wire fence.

81 The "first-grade protected species" (Ch. *Guojia yiji baohu dongwu*) was made into law first in 1989 by the central government in Beijing.

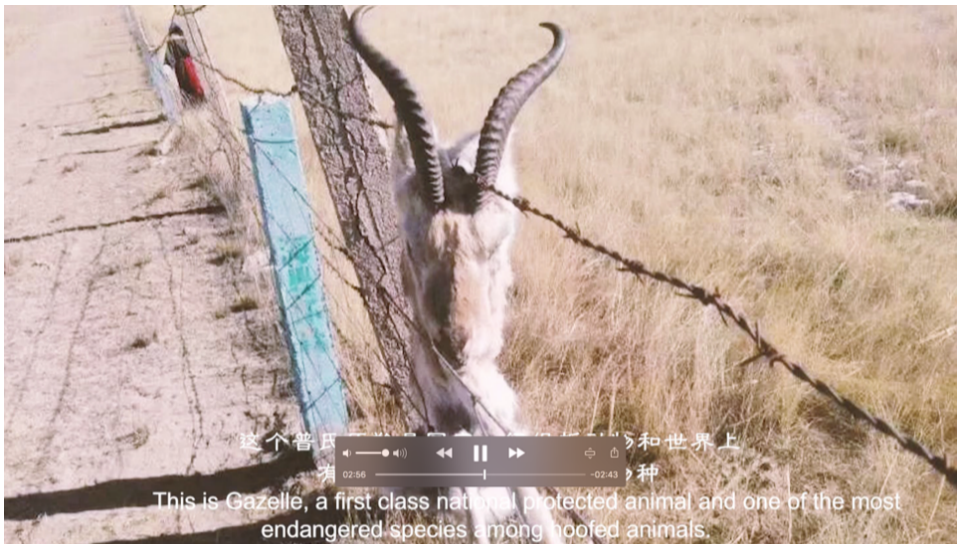


Figure 34: A Tibetan antelope caught in barbed wire. Still from Yetak's film.

By pointing at a corpse of a Tibetan gazelle that had succumbed to the pernicious violence of barbed wire fence, Namgyal shares his experiences of witnessing wild animals, such as antelopes, blue sheep, cranes, eagles, wild donkeys, either dead or dying from the captivity and entanglement of the fence. Yetak used these images of wild animals and birds writhing in pain in his documentary film. The following and final transition focuses on Tibetan pastoralists' efforts to untangle such animals from the barbed wire while a slow-pitched Tibetan music accompanied the final scenes, evoking both mourning and sadness.

In spite of its length (*5 minutes*), the film is multilayered, ranging from the history of barbed wire, the violence that has been inflicted upon the bodies of wild animals and birds by this object, to an effort to expose a deep contradiction in the Chinese state's narrative of protecting wild animals and birds. If we read this film as a text, or what anthropologist John Jackson calls "scholarship" (2014), the core argument is to question the state's own contradictory narratives of the preservation of wild animals. The Chinese state recognizes animals such as Tibetan antelopes and Tibetan gazelles as "first-grade protected species at the national level"

(Ch. *Guojia yiji baohu dongwu*) yet on the other hand the mandatory grassland fencing policy with barbed wire has been tremendously detrimental to the lives of wild animals and birds that they claim to protect.

The three films that I co-analyze in this chapter are also analytical reflections on the drastic changes wrought in the lives of Tibetan pastoralists and their cohabitants. All of the films share the characteristic feature of offering a subtle critique of the absurdity and the contradictions of China's development and conservation policies, and their roles in shaping the very existence of Tibetan pastoralists and their cohabitants. Do these critiques reach the intended audiences, including ordinary Tibetans, Chinese, as well as the Chinese state? After Yetak's documentary film on barbed wire was posted online, more than a quarter of million viewed it within two months. As Yetak said, "If someone looks at the violence of barbed wire on the Plateau in retrospect in one or two hundred years, at least this person could tell that we did not just stay quiet. Whether our critique really reaches the Chinese state, or the Chinese state will take our critique seriously is hard to say."

Crane: Tibetan Deity-bird

In Chapter Two, I introduced Gongbo to you as a charismatic and caring community leader, who was the youngest person to be elected as the head of his community at the age of twenty-six from 2013 to 2016. His fellow villagers praise him as a diligent herder, a great orator, and as someone who puts the concerns of his community before his own. Gongbo has never been to school, but he learned to read and write basic Tibetan from his monk uncle. Gongbo has been one of the most avid participants in our film group. After he got training to make documentary films in 2015, he decided to take videos and pictures of black-necked cranes. The Chinese state

has recognized black-necked cranes as an endangered species and "a first-grade protected species" since 1989. In the summer of 2018, Gongbo and I had the following conversations about his documentary film project, his discoveries of black-necked cranes, and what he would like to communicate through his documentary films to a larger audience.



Figure 35: Gongbo editing his films while herding his animals. 2018. Photo by the author.

"Huatse, I have been a herder my whole life. I also have many interests. I consider herding and nurturing animals as my most important job, and I don't have any plans to give up herding. After many years of taking videos and pictures of cranes, I have discovered something very interesting and important about the lifestyle of black-necked cranes. That is, they love to follow the Tibetan pastoralists, and our animals –yaks, sheep, and horses. Not only do they follow us wherever we go, but they also often build their nests somewhere close to us. It seems they find a safe space for them and their offspring while living close to us."

"That's a wonderful observation, Gongbo. How do Tibetan elders describe their

relationship with the black-neck crane?" I asked.

"You know that we call the cranes the deities' bird (Tib. *lhabya*) and the elders often say, "wherever there are cranes, there is ample prosperity."

"Yes, Gongbo, we have a very intimate relationship with cranes. I'm sure you know the famous Tibetan poem about the sixth Dalai Lama, who was madly in love with a girl from Lithang in eastern Tibet, but the Tibetan government wouldn't let him marry her, so he wrote the famous poem 'Dear white deity bird crane, lend me your wing, I will not go far, just to Lithang and then come back."

"Of course, Huatse, I can recite this poem in the same way I can recite my daily prayers…haha…As you also know black-necked cranes are being recognized as an endangered species by the Chinese government. Here is what I have discovered. If they are really concerned with protecting the black-necked cranes, then there is no way to protect the crane as a separate entity. They can't say we are going to put an end to the lifestyle of Tibetan pastoralists but protect the cranes. Cranes live among us, find a safe space among us, and without our presence, they wouldn't have a home either."

"Gongbo, I think that's a powerful argument."

"Thanks, Huatse. I have been taking thousands of pictures and videos that can vividly demonstrate the interdependent and intimate relationship between the cranes, us, and our animals. You know that my film editing skills are rudimentary, but I have finally managed to produce a thirty-minute-long documentary film on this topic. I edited this film on a laptop while herding sheep and yaks, so this work didn't really disrupt my primary work. I have also made a shorter version of it as people these days don't watch long videos. I have named this film, *Mnyam gnas*, how do you say *Mnyam gnas* in Chinese and in English?"

“That’s a great name. We can say *Coexistence* in English and *Gongcun* in Chinese.”

When Gongbo and I were absorbed in our conversations, Gongbo’s wife, Tsemo joined us. “When Gongbo first carried cameras around in the village and started taking pictures and videos, initially, our villagers thought it was funny, but gradually people got used to his presence with cameras. Gongbo is not very tall, so some jokingly said the three-legged object (tripod) was taller than him and it might fall on him…ha-ha!”

“ha-ha…actually it was my wife and her friends who made fun of me and said that.” Gongbo replied with a laugh.

Then three of us burst into laughter.

“You looked funny though. Now I’m also used to having cameras around. It seems Gongbo enjoys working on his films, so I support him in whatever way I can by attending to the various needs of this family. He can also do this work while herding our animals, so I don’t need to do extra work other than on occasions when Gongbo goes out and presents his films to other people. He is always excited to share his videos with other people.” Tsemo said.



Figure 36:Coexistence of cranes, yaks, and Tibetan pastoralists. 2019. Photo by Gongbo.

Gongbo had a clear argument as presented above for this film, however, he didn't want to rely on many interviews to get his point across. As Gongbo said, "Initially, as you know that we rely on interviews and include many interviews in our films. Having too many interviews may easily bore our viewers, so in this film, I tried my best to let the images and videos speak for themselves." For example, in Figure 5, the first frame is three black-necked cranes staying close the yaks and not being intimidated by them. The second frame is a group of yaks eating grass; and the third frame is a black-yak hair tent in which Tibetan pastoralists reside. The smoke ascending into the sky right next to the black yak-hair tent is a daily offering practice called, *tshabsur* by placing roasted barley flower on *a yak dung smolder*. The fragrant smell from the smoke is said to feed the hungry ghosts.

Tibetan Plateau pikas

It was a windy early spring day in 2018 when Dazi shared his documentary film project in progress concerning the fate of Tibetan plateau pikas with me. While we were discussing his motivations to make a documentary film on pikas, he turned to me and casually said, "Huatse, don't you think both Tibetan pastoralists and plateau pikas share a similar fate?

I did not have an immediate response. In fact, my visceral reaction was sadness.

Tibetan plateau pikas, a small burrowing relative of the rabbit, have long been considered a pest by the Chinese government, and blamed for causing soil erosion, degradation, and desertification. Since the 1990s, the Chinese government has initiated a massive campaign across the Tibetan plateau of poisoning the burrows of the plateau pikas in an attempt to restore the

grassland by eradicating them[82]. Concurrently, as mentioned in Chapter One, Tibetan pastoralists have also been portrayed as destroyers of their land in the name of overgrazing. Both pastoralists and pikas have been viewed as the enemies of the grassland in the official discourse. Tibetan herders generally oppose the campaigns for various reasons including their belief that the pikas are one of the six beings that rely on their collective land. Within Tibetan ontology, pikas are considered as hungry ghosts and many view the ritual practice of returning treasure to the land and making offerings to territorial deities as an effective way to restore the fertility of the earth (Yeh and Gaerrang 2021, please also see Chapter One). Most Tibetan herders also think that the eradication campaigns are ineffective, with more pikas returning each year. Recent ecological studies have suggested that rather than being a cause of overgrazing, the ever-increasing population of the plateau pikas are only an indicator of land degradation, and further that they act as a keystone species (Harris et al 2014; Wilson and Smith 2013).

Dazi is forty-two years old in 2019. He became a Buddhist monk at the age of ten. At the age of twenty, he decided to lead a lay person's life by marrying a Tibetan girl from his home village. They have three children, one girl and two boys, and they lead a nomadic pastoral life. Dazi started taking documentary films since 2010 under the guidance of his mentor Akhu Tashi Sangpo, who is famous for his vast knowledge of birds and plants as I have already mentioned in Chapter Five. Dazi said, "I learned to switch on and off, zoom in and out a camera for the first time in 2010." His mentor Tashi Sangpo had encouraged him to take more short videos, and also told him that he is a talented filmmaker. Hearing such complimentary words from a very knowledgeable mentor, Dazi said was very encouraging. As Dazi became more familiar with the

82 As recent as March 19th 2022, in the name of ecological preservation, People's Daily reported that Shidao County in Sichuan Province's Gartse Prefecture used 70 tons of poison to kill 80 thousand plateau pikas. Link accessed on April 28th 2022. https://wap.peopleapp.com/article/rmh27621524/rmh27621524

techniques of making documentary films, he has started working on his second major documentary film[83] concerning the fate of plateau pikas since 2015.

"Dazi, what had motivated you to make a documentary film on pikas?" I asked.

"As a herder, we often hear competing narratives of plateau pikas. The government claims that the plateau pikas are a pest, so they have to be reduced significantly by killing them. Some local environmentalists say that the plateau pikas should not be killed because they play a pivotal role in the grassland ecosystem. We herders are not part of any conversation on this topic. As an ordinary herder, one thing I know is that the population of pikas is increasing year by year, leaving almost no grass for the animals to eat. To gain a deeper understanding of this complex issue, I decided to make a documentary film about it."

"Why did you choose documentary film as a medium or method to study more about this topic?" I asked.

"As someone who is interested in environmental changes, I have come to realize that you can see more details and depth through a camera lens than with your own eyes. Once you start observing phenomena around you through the lens of films, it really helps you pay attention to the details that you would never see with your own eyes, therefore, I find documentary filmmaking as an excellent tool to understand environmental changes." Dazi replied.

"What a great point. How do you manage making documentary films and the task of grazing and nurturing your animals?"

"There are times that I have to prioritize filmmaking over grazing; and there are also times that I have to prioritize grazing over filmmaking. To tell you the truth, I rely on my wife a lot. She sometimes has to take care of children and graze animals. It's surely a lot of work for

83 Prior to this project, Dazi made a documentary film on yak dung, which has been selected as one of the films for Chinese ethnology curriculum at Chinese universities.

her, but she also supports me and believes that I am doing something that goes beyond just my own personal interests. Sometimes, grazing animals is very helpful for the work of making documentary films. I always bring a camera with me whenever I graze my animals."

In July 2018, Dazi completed the film on pikas, and he also made two versions of it, one is 40 minutes in length and the other is around 15 minutes. Through close shots of the daily lives of the plateau pikas and how the grown-ups in the pika community take care of their little ones, Dazi's documentary film humanizes the plateau pikas. It can be said that he takes a Buddhist view/theory toward co-existence as fellow sentient beings on mutually constituting karmic journeys. His film exposes the violence of othering that takes place at the intimate levels of life and death. The ultimate cost of othering is that their lives are killable. The most effective way to justify the act of killing pikas is to present it as an absolute other, or a pest. The film opens with a scene of two pastoralists kids playing and building a house with stones, followed by two little pikas running around, in and out of their burrows, catching and chasing each other, or simply playing.



Figure 37: Tibetan plateau pikas. Still from Dazi's film.

By foregrounding the commonality between little humans and little pikas in their shared intrinsic interests in playing, the opening scenes of Dazi's film attempts to de-otherize the plateau pikas by presenting them as living beings that are at the fundamental level not different from human beings in the sense that all are seeking some form of happiness, and all are susceptible to pain and suffering, invoking a Buddhist theory of coexistence.

The following transition is an interview with his monk mentor, Akhu Tashi Sangbo. His mentor provides a detailed account of the importance of the plateau pikas in the larger grassland ecosystem by pointing out the Chinese government's mistake of eliminating them on a massive scale, followed by a scene of a group of Chinese workers, placing barley-like poison in the plateau pikas' burrows, using containers of plastic bottles attached to the end of a long piece of wood. These scenes then were followed by a heart-wrenching video of a plateau pika panting heavily after eating the poison, writhing in excruciating pain, and finally succumbing to it.



Figure 38: A dead pika upon eating the poison. Still from Dazi's film

To highlight the importance of the plateau pikas in the larger ecosystem, Dazi includes close and stable shots of other predators such as owls, eagles, wild cats, and foxes feeding on the plateau pikas as the main source of food. Then, the film moves to a lively discussion amongst six local Tibetan herders who argued that the government's concerted efforts to poison the plateau pikas has been very ineffective with more pikas every year. Some local herders suggested planting local grass as a wise way to restore the soil; and others suggested relying on the traditional practice of making offerings to the hungry beings by burning roasted barley flour. One herder offered a sharp critique of the state's policy to eliminate plateau pikas as an opportunity for the higher ups in the government system to get funding from the central government, even as many officials are not genuinely worried about the overpopulation of plateau pikas.

Through the experience of making this documentary film, Dazi discovered a few things about plateau pikas. One, he discovered that on the land where there is no grass or little grass, it is hard for predators like owls and eagles to catch pikas because pikas can run fast to their burrows where there is no grass and then escape their predators. Two, he's learned that the state's policy to eradicate plateau pikas by poisoning them was conceived as a temporary solution, although it can't even solve the problem temporarily. Ecologists and conservationists who argue that plateau pikas play an important role in the larger ecosystem of the grassland are concerned with the long-term health of the grassland ecosystem. Tibetan pastoralists, Dazi said, should choose the wise path. Three, Dazi mentioned the importance of local ritual practices such as making offerings to territorial deities as an effective way to restore the fertility of the earth. Moreover, he emphasized the importance of planting local grass in areas where there is no grass so the pika predators can catch them easily and their animals have enough grass to eat. After the

film was completed, in the summer of 2019, Dazi organized a group in his community to plant local grass on their land and to use yak manure as fertilizer. In doing so, both in his film and in his practice of restoring grassland, he is also making a point about the pikas and yak's symbiotic relationship.

Audience, Reception, and Critical Responses

In recent years, much indigenous media produced by and for indigenous peoples has been produced for noncommercial purposes and for internal consumption while anticipating larger audiences (Ginsburg 2014). Tibetan indigenous filmmakers are also not seeking the glossy production values of international film festivals and instead they are utilizing documentary films as a powerful medium to generate broader understandings of their relationality with a multitude of beings on their land by making subtle critiques of state narratives. As mentioned in Chapter Four, indigenous community leaders strongly argue that if one sees one's homeland as a backward place, if a generation of people think that the riches and wonders of life only exist outside of their communities, and if people can't tell their own stories from their own experiences and perspectives, preservation of one's homeland is nearly impossible. In a similar vein, the primary audience of our films are Tibetan pastoralists, and we invite them to rediscover the beauty and value of their homeland through the lens of film cameras. Toward this effort, in the summer of 2018, we screened a dozen documentary films with the community members of Kirti Ribo on their land by bringing large projectors and other necessary equipment. Our audience included men, women, and children, as well as college students from Kirti Ribo community. Upon showing the films, we invited them to share their views on the films. Some herders said that they had never seen the beauty of their homeland with their own eyes until they

watched the films. Some college students said that some films are strictly informational and overly educational, so they come across as boring. Some community elders expressed their appreciation for preserving cultural practices such as the techniques of pitching a yak-hair tent, as such knowledge is rapidly disappearing.



Figure 39: Showing documentary films to Kirti Ribo community members. 2018. Photo by the author.

As social media's omnipresence has increasingly seeped into the daily lives of Tibetan pastoralists, the use of the internet has become an important channel for sharing shorter versions of our documentary films. For example, after Yetak's film on barbed wire was shared online through the social media app, WeChat, more than a quarter of a million people viewed it. Scholars of indigenous media have pointed out that media produced by and for indigenous peoples, usually in their own languages and for internal consumption, are generally community-based rather than commercial (Turner 1992; Wilson and Stewart 2014). In a similar vein, the documentary films produced by Tibetan pastoralists were not intended to be commercial. Instead, they were first and foremost conceived and produced with the aim of creating alternative

narratives of Tibetan pastoralists and their communities.

Beyond the Tibetan pastoralists' communities, we have presented the films at different film festivals in big Chinese cities. For example, in the winter 2021, in collaboration with Charu, an innovative social enterprise in Chengdu city that provides a warm space for Tibetan-related social innovative projects, our film group co-organized the Inaugural Muren Film Festival in the city of Chengdu and Chongqing. *Muren* means nomadic peoples in Chinese, and we used the Chinese term *muren* to create a different image of nomadic peoples, who are often viewed as backward and primitive. We had collectively selected five documentary films to present at this festival and our audience included Tibetan college students, Chinese college students, Chinese people who are interested in Tibetan culture and language, as well as people who are simply curious to see films produced by *muren.* Here, our goal lies in not only preserving land-based Tibetan pastoral cultural practices through documentary films but also to transform the image of pastoralists through what one might call a "strategic traditionalism" (to borrow from Bennett and Blundell 1995) by challenging the stereotypical images of *muren.* In other words, Tibetan pastoralists have adapted filmmaking to their own social, cultural, and political needs by treating the action of video-making as itself integral to the social production of truth, particularly in their relationship to Chinese society at large.

In the remaining section, I look at how the audience reacted to our films, how the critical feedback from the audience makes us reconsider some of our practices, and how we collectively theorized the interpretive strategies and semiotic mechanisms by which our viewers decode and assign meanings to our films. The five films that were shown at the festival included Yedra's *Barbed wire,* and Yetak's most recent film, *The Wolf is Coming*, which tells the story of increasing quantity of wolves in recent years and presented how Tibetan pastoralists interpreted

the causes of the increasing wolf population. Gongbo's film on cranes was also included. Pagpa's film tells stories of a rock carving artist, and how a rock carving artist used his skills to write Buddhist scriptures on rocks, which he then placed on various mountains as a way to protect the mountains from local mining projects. Labjie's film, *Mother*, focuses on a single mother's effort to pay tuition for her college son by primarily relying on a few yaks and selling milk and yoghurt. Gongbo also presented his second film, *Water Offering*, which shows how people in his community use water to make offerings to the mountain deities before they drink it. We had selected these films based on the availability of the filmmakers. There were other films that we had wanted to present but the filmmakers were busy with herding animals so they couldn't attend the festival. These brief descriptions, of course, do not do justice to the complexities and the richness of these films, but due to limited space, I will next briefly present how the audience responded the films.

Upon showing the five films, the audience mostly praised the films, however, some also offered critical feedback and challenged our positions. A Tibetan female college student who was born and raised in a nomadic region in central Tibet asked, "I think in general these films tell powerful stories about Tibetan pastoralists. Thank you for sharing such wonderful films. However, I haven't seen a single film that was produced by a female filmmaker. If some of the filmmakers were female, what kind of topics would they focus on?" The audience applauded her question while putting us sitting in the front of the audience on a spotlight. In response, Konchok Palsang said, "Thank you for asking such a thoughtful question. We do have a few filmmakers who are female, but you are right that the majority of us are male. When we shoot our films, we try our best to include voices of men and women, elders and children, herders, and college students. We have some female filmmakers and hopefully we will be able to show their films

soon.” The audience didn’t applaud Palsang’s response. Then, the questioner politely requested if she could join the film group, and in response, Palsang said, “Yes, you can definitely join our group and share stories from your home region that you think are meaningful to you and to your community.” The audience applauded.



Figure 40: Answering questions from the audience. 2021. Photo by Yetak.

After that, a Chinese female student, who introduced herself as a MA student studying sociology at a university in Chengdu asked, “Thank you all. In general, I liked the films, but I saw a contradiction in one of the films. In Pagpa’s film, the rock carving artist says that his goal is to protect the mountains by placing carved rocks with Buddhist scriptures on the mountains, but every time, he goes to collect smooth rocks from the rivers, he takes off his shoes and walks into the rivers. I wonder if his feet would contaminate the river.” I had never thought that the audience would decode films in such an aberrant way, but I stayed quiet and instead Pagpa briefly answered her question. “Compared to the destructions caused by the local mining projects, I think the rock carving artist’s feet would cause very little contamination to the river, if

any at all. We have to see the larger picture here. Thank you." The audience applauded again as an active participant.

After the film festival was finished in Chengdu, we convened a meeting and collectively reflected on the event and co-theorized our interactions with the audience.

First, Gongbo said, "Every time, we make a film. We want to communicate certain messages through our film. We have our intended meaning. However, every time, we present our films to a larger audience, they interpret the films based on their knowledge and assumptions. How much can we really expect our audience to infer our intended meaning?"

"I was mulling over this question, too, Gongbo. I always wish that the audience can move beyond attributing their own presumptions to films and learn to understand the intended messages of films, but it seems this is not an achievable goal." Palsang replied.

"I'm sometimes concerned whether we are also not knowingly perpetuating the devaluing and stereotyping of Tibetan pastoralists in our films. When that Chinese girl was bothered by the uncleanness of rock carving artist's feet more than the local mining projects, it seems my film reinforced her pre-existing notions of Tibetan nomads as unclean, primitive and/or backward." Padpa said.

"Over the years, I've given up the idea of presenting an absolute, and total representation of Tibetan pastoralists. When we try to do that, our films come across as very informational and educational. Remember even our community members said that they were boring. So, in my films I try to tell a captivating story while not losing sight of multiple views and voices on a given issue." Yetak said.

"Yes, I agree with Yetak's point. We are also in many ways partial observers. Partial knowledge producers. Of course, we claim to know more about Tibetan pastoralists because we

speak the language and we have lived experiences, but there are also things that we ignore in our films. I'm thinking about that Tibetan girl's question. What kind of topics would they focus on if the filmmakers were all female? In order to answer this question properly, we need more female filmmakers in the future." I spoke.

"Yes, definitely." Palsang said.

Conclusion

Gongbo is not only a caring community leader, but he is also an organic intellectual and a great orator. To return to the concern that motivated this chapter, I want to revisit the questions that Gongbo had raised, which later become the central theme of the mission of our film group. "What kind of stories do we want to talk about ourselves and our communities through the lens of documentary films? Do we want to say we are backward? Do we want to say we are poor? Do we want to say we are stupid? Or are we just going to stay quiet and live under other people's descriptions of us? To illustrate the nature of my relationship with my interlocutors, the traditional anthropological framework of presenting the scholar as an authoritative 'observer' is not a sufficient framework to understand the dialogic engagement in which all individuals are participants in the construction of knowledge.

My aim is not to alter, adjust, or refurbish the experiences of Tibetan pastoralists filmmakers to fit the existing social theories that are foreign to the people that I work with and mostly irrelevant to the concerns that we all share. That is, as mentioned in the Introduction, what is at stake for the Tibetan pastoral communities if they all see themselves as a people with no knowledge, no intelligence, no skills, and their homeland as just a wasteland of nonachievement? How then do the children of Tibetan pastoralists continue to grow up in an

environment where their world is associated with low status, humiliation, corporal punishment, or even downright stupidity? By presenting my interlocutors as analytical agents who are capable of producing narratives and theories of their lives and their relationships to a multitude of beings on the Tibetan plateau, our collective goal instead lies in synchronizing our knowledge production practices with the multifaceted needs of our communities. We do this by reversing or at least challenging the colonial gaze.

Increasingly, the use of documentary filmmaking has become an important basis for Tibetan pastoralists filmmakers to enter in a larger cultural, political discursive field with the aim of recovering their histories and land-based knowledge. There is state surveillance and internet censorship, however, under the banner of culture preservation and protecting cultural heritage. It is a safe rubric that allows creativity. Tibetan pastoralists have managed to create their own stories on their own terms. Each film that I presented and analyzed in this chapter offers sharp critiques of the foundation of Chinese state's policies. For example, Yetak's powerful film on barbed wire exposes the hypocrisies and contradictions that are embedded in Chinese state's conservation policies. Gongbo's discovery of the lifestyle of endangered species of black-necked cranes is another powerful example. Gongbo's discovery is that black-necked cranes create their homes in the vicinity of Tibetan pastoralists and their animals as a way to avoid their predators. If the Chinese state is really concerned with protecting black-necked cranes, which are being characterized by the state as "first-grade protected species at national level", then the co-existence of Tibetan pastoralists and black-necked cranes has to be respected. If the homes of Tibetan pastoralists are displaced, there will be no homes for cranes either. Dazi's documentary film on Tibetan plateau pikas offers another sharp critique of the Chinese state's pika eradication campaigns by poisoning them. Dazi's argument is that if we don't want to be shortsighted, if we

are concerned with the ecosystem of grassland for hundreds of years, then mass poisoning of pikas is a grave mistake and a great tragedy.

Many of the filmmakers, or co-ethnographers that I consider in this chapter, as well as the three films that I analyze –exemplify in their work the versatile possibilities of politically engaged work that are both theoretical and practical. Tibetan pastoralists have indigenized the use of digital technologies in the interests of creating their own narratives of their own communities as a way to generate broader understandings of their histories and cultures, for wider audiences but, most importantly, for their own cultural futures. In that sense, they are concerned with both preserving cultural practices and relationships that are intrinsically meaningful to them and gaining greater agency in the guidance of their present and future social transformations by participating in larger discursive fields.

Conclusion

No one has written so intimately about the implications of Chinese state-led resettlement policy for Tibetan pastoralists as renowned Tibetan writer, Tsering Dondrup (b. 1962). And no other work has generated as many lively discussions concerning the fate of Tibetan pastoralists in Tibet as Tsering Dondrup's short story, *The Valley of Black Foxes*[84] (Tib. *Wanag Lungba*). Since its publication in 2012 in *Light Rain,* one of the foremost Tibetan language literary journals in contemporary Tibet, the sociocultural life of *The Valley of Black Foxes* has grown organically through reviews, commendations, interpretative essays, and group discussions among different generations of Tibetans inside Tibet. The story of a Tibetan nomadic or Drokpa family, wading through the quotidian uncertainties of the new space of resettlement, viscerally captured the concerns of many Tibetans, including a generation of young college Tibetan students, most of whom originally hail from Tibetan nomadic places. I would like to highlight a particular scene from *The Valley of Black Foxes* that has left an indelible mark on my memory of this reading this story that is also germane to the core argument of this dissertation.

When Sangye, the protagonist arrived in Tsezhung county with his family in a tractor. A traffic cop stopped them, and they were very scared. But the policeman paid no attention to them, and instead transfixed on the things on the tractor and then asked, "You selling antiques? Bronze pots, copper kettles, Buddha statues, Thangka paintings, old rugs, used flints, teacups, or hair ornaments from a dead relative that sort of thing?" Sangye initially did not sell anything but

[84] You can download a PDF of this story in English and the original story in Tibetan on Machik's website. Accessed in May 15 2022 https://www.machikkhabda.org/resettlement.html

as time went by, life got harder as the need for cash became more dire. Then, he took some of his family's items to the town -the saddle, stirrups, and other accessories. After a buyer carefully examined each of the items brought by Sangye, he showed interest in the saddle and raised a single singer, offering one *wan* –ten thousand yuan (1560 US dollars). Sangye misunderstood what the buyer was trying to communicate and shook his head. "Well, how much money you want for it?" asked the owner in his crude Tibetan.

"Eight thousand."

"Eight thousand?"

"Eight thousand."

"Eight thousand. Eight thousand." The buyer shook his head, and immediately counted out the money.

When the buyer raised a single finger, Sangye misunderstood it for one thousand, just one thousand, although the buyer had meant one *wan,* meaning ten thousand yuan. One may simply interpret this as a case where Sangye was not fully understanding the monetary values of objects that they had never sold before for cash. However, why was the status of his family's precious object, namely the saddle that has passed from generation to generation for centuries so low in his mind? I think this seemingly trivial interaction constitutes a case of internalizing what I call the political production of human inferiority, which is an ongoing process whereby dominant groups such as nation states lowly regard the oppressed by driving them to see their past and present as a hindrance to human flourishing, as something to be abandoned, distanced from, and ashamed of, while concurrently presenting itself as the cure. Through concrete policies and political narratives, planting doubt or "annihilating a people's belief in their names, in their languages, in their environment, in their heritage of struggle, in their unity, in their capacities and

ultimately in themselves" (wa Thiong'o 1986, p 3) is part and parcel of the process of producing human inferiority. In the broader historical and political context of China's incorporation of the western frontier zone into its national body, land policies have increasingly been used as a tool for nation-building and territorial consolidation. Land policies have never been introduced as only land policies. In the Tibetan pastoral context, land policies such as the large-scale fencing of traditional nomad grazing land with barbed wire in the late 1990s, conservation policies in the early 2000s and, most recently, the Nomadic Settlement Project, have been introduced to Tibetans as a package that includes civilizing missions such as *educating* the nomads, *modernizing* the nomads, or *uplifting* the human quality of the Tibetan nomads. The existing scholarship on this topic has largely focused on the impact of the development policies and discourses on the political economy of Tibetan pastoralists, and the spatial restructuring of Tibetan landscapes. However, I argue that the corrosive impact of Chinese colonialism in pastoral Tibet has been taking place at a much deeper level, one that is not visible in the spatial restructuring of the landscape, yet is very consequential in Tibetan pastoralists' social, cultural, and individual transformations today, namely the political production of human inferiority.

What pained me the most during my fieldwork research and when I was transcribing my interviews was the realization that many Tibetan pastoralists had internalized their externally imposed inferiority. The Chinese state's systematic efforts to belittle and delegitimize Tibetan pastoralists' way of life manifested in their daily speech. Whenever they answered my questions, almost all of their responses were prefaced with self-deprecating expressions such as "Of course, as a nomad, I don't have any knowledge and education, but if you really want to hear my thoughts, then I will say some words…" Many indeed have stopped believing in themselves just as we did when we were children. In what context then does one hates one's own culture and

one's own being? In other words, what makes people see their past and present as a "wasteland of nonachievement" and want to distance themselves from their socio-cultural world in order to seek a "better" life somewhere out there? How do the ghostly external evaluations imposed by the state come to sit inside ourselves, judging us, shaping us, putting its fingers over our eyes so we are constantly reminded of our "nothingness"? How can we restore our relationships to the very place and people and the larger socio-cultural world that have shaped and nurtured us? This dissertation tried to answer these questions, especially the last question, which is about restoring the vitality of our land, language, and community. Apart from conducting ethnographic research, I have also involved in community restoration efforts, and closely worked with Tibetan community leaders and ordinary residents who are fundamentally challenging the narrative of Tibetan pastoralists' cultural backwardness by constituting alternative forms of political participation and social space within limited political space.

This dissertation recognizes that the rangeland fencing policy of the 1990s, and the ongoing resettlement policies in Tibetan pastoral areas have brought tremendous changes not only to the lifestyle of Tibetan pastoralists but also to the ways in which Tibetan pastoralists see themselves. In addition, the Chinese state's three decades of concerted efforts to erase indigenous Tibetan pastoralism have jeopardized the well-being of people, land, language, and animals by disrupting the interdependent and historical relationships among these integrally connected facts of Tibetan life. The reframing of the Tibetan environment as the sovereign property of the Chinese state since the 1950s has been a process of erasing Tibetans' historical and indigenous relationships to their ancestral land. However, reports by human rights organizations and activists in the West on these policies tend to perpetuate the stereotypical image of Tibetans as either peaceful followers of Tibetan Buddhism or just abject victims of

Chinese oppression. On the other hand, the exaggerated and triumphant narratives of Tibetan pastoralists enjoying modern and comfortable lives that are ubiquitously featured in Chinese media equally distort the everyday challenges and complexities faced by many Tibetan pastoralists. By privileging the voices of Tibetan pastoralists, I have brought the more nuanced analytical tools of anthropology and ethnography to bear in grasping the multiple facets of the large-scale Chinese state development policies and how differently positioned Tibetan pastoralists have coped with and responded to external policies and pressures.

In recent years, anthropology has seen a revived focus on the very fact of difference in human experiences in some circles in the U.S and Europe by largely drawing on the influential work of the Brazilian anthropologist Eduardo Viveiros de Castro (1998; 2006; Empson 2011, Kohn 2013, Descola 2013 Holbraad and Pedersen 2017). Within this tradition, some scholars argue that some communities do not live in different cultures, but also in different worlds, and this turn is called *ontological turn*. Tibetan pastoralists have long co-existed with yaks, sheep, horses, and goats, which are lovingly known as the four fortune-bearers of the community (Tib. *gyan ra sgo bzhi*). The land as ancestral territory, on which a multitude of beings depend, has never been wasteland or inert ground for the Tibetans; it is instead profoundly social and spiritual in the sense that the land is bound up with human vitality, personhood, and agency (Makley 2018). Appreciating and understanding the complexity of these belief systems is central to understanding the Tibetan pastoralist's world built on these foundations—the relationship of people to their ancestral territory, to human and non-human beings, to fortune-bearing animals that anchor a way of life. However, the state-led policy of dividing, numbering, quantifying, fencing the communal grazing land has seeped into every aspect of Tibetan pastoralists' daily experiences of land use today. In other words, the ancestral land of Tibetan pastoralists has been

forcefully framed in a new language of units, laws, and contracts. Therefore, this dissertation analytically does not overly emphasize any Tibetan concepts or notions such as fortune (gyang in Tibetan) as neither a singular focus on indigenous notions of land (or indigenous ontology), nor an exclusive focus on the state concept of property/contracts is a sufficient framework for the rigorous ethnographic investigations of the competing, and sometimes overlapping, locally specific experiences of land use and land restoration practices in pastoral Tibet today. Instead, this ethnographic work focuses on a wide range of individual and community resources, including the use of media that Tibetan pastoralists have employed to confront the ongoing state-led policies that threaten their very social existence.

As a way to highlight the ingenuity and resilience of Tibetan pastoralists, Chapter One introduces a case study of Tibetan pastoralists' effort to construct their own narratives of land degradation and their own efforts to create locally specific solutions for desertification, including utilizing yak dung as fertilizer for the growth of newly sown grass seeds in areas that are becoming desert. Moreover, this also inspired a group of indigenous artists to illustrate this new practice in the form of modified Buddhist *thangka* paintings, in which the characters were not deities, but rather ordinary Tibetans from the Kirti Ribo community, including female Tibetan herders. Chapter Two takes us to Kirti Ribo community and explore how its two sub-communities have coped with the rangeland fencing policy in different ways. Chapter Three presents us both the creativity and fallibility of Tibetan community leaders in Gongri community in today's Qinghai Province. The broader theme of Chapter Four to Six is once again connected by the efforts of community leaders who have both creatively embraced certain elements of state-led projects, and as well as constructed land-based educational programs as a means of revivify their relationships to their land, languages, traditions, histories, and of articulating

broader community concerns.

While recognizing the deep impact of what I call the political production of human inferiority that lies at the heart of large-scale rangeland fencing and resettlement policies, this dissertation does not repeat the stereotypical images of Tibetans in the mainstream western media either as peaceful Buddhists or victims of Chinese oppression. In a similar vein, my narrative also rejects the model of hopeless victim of colonialism caught up in the violence of history (although that does not mean there is no violence). Instead, I see Tibetan pastoralists fighting for their own battles in their own ways. The value of centering Tibetan pastoralists' creative and courageous responses to larger-scale state-led policies lies in gaining greater agency in the guidance of our present and future social and political transformations on the ground. This purpose is more urgent than using Tibetan pastoralists' context as a way to contribute a large of body of knowledge to the field of Anthropology or Tibetan Studies.

However, by presenting my interlocutors as co-ethnographers and co-theorists, this dissertation also raises important questions for anthropologists. How does indigenous knowledge as produced by insiders challenge the power/knowledges structures and discourses? In particular, how does indigenous media serve as sites of theoretical production, as well as community restoration efforts by blurring the conventional boundaries between theory vs. practice, analysts vs. informants, text-based scholarship vs. multimodal forms of knowledge production. How can anthropologists present their interlocutors and collaborators in the field not just as information providers, but also as active analytical agents, who are also capable of producing theories of the world in which they live, as well as theories of issues that deeply matter to them? I argue that if we pay close attention to the ways in which our interlocutors theorize issues occurring within their communities through different mediums, be they text or films, the theories we discuss in

academia will most likely be important to people themselves as well. To achieve this goal, we cannot regard anthropologists as the only creators of theories or concepts. In other words, we have to be critical of our existing theoretical categories and acknowledge that all people have the capacity to make normative claims to knowledge.

The process of conducting ethnographic research involves observation of habitual practices and active explanations and theorizations of our interlocutors. As mentioned in Chapter Six, although anthropologists traditionally tend to treat habitual practices a prime site of observation, in my fieldwork research, I have also closely listened to my interlocutors' wishes and messages that they would like me to carry and convey to a larger audience. Akhu Sonam Tashi is from Kirti Ribo community, and he is in his late seventies. Before my departure, he said,

"When you go out there, Huatse, I want you to tell this to the world. We Tibetan pastoralists are the original inhabitants of this place. We've lived on this land for thousands of years. We intend to live here many more years. It is hard to say that we have always protected this land, but we have never harmed it. These days, many say that we are the destroyers of this land in the name of overgrazing. How about mining? How about barbed wire fencing? Many also say we are backward. Isn't today's economic development also based on the foundation of environmental destruction? If people say we are lagging behind, then *we are only lagging behind in destroying the earth*. We are fine with that. You tell this to the world. People need to understand this. People will understand.

Lastly, I would like to draw this dissertation to a close with Akhu Sonam Tashi's prophetic message and a common Tibetan prayer on the wellbeing of people, animals, and the environment as we continue to live through a global pandemic.

གཞོལ་འདེབས།

Tibetan Prayer

ཉིན་མོ་བདེ་ལེགས་མཚན་བདེ་ལེགས།།

ཉེ་མའི་གུང་ཡང་བདེ་ལེགས་ཤིང་།
ཉིན་མཚན་རྒྱ་ཏུ་བདེ་ལེགས་པའི།།
དཀོན་མཆོག་གསུམ་གྱིས་བཏགས་ཤོག།

May everyone have health and happiness
In the morning, at night and midday
Day in and day out
Through the blessing of the Buddha, Dharma and Spiritual Sangha.

འཇིག་རྟེན་བདེ་ཞིང་ལོ་ལེགས་དང་།།
འབྲུ་རྣམས་རྒྱས་ཤིང་ཆོས་འཕེལ་དང་།།
དགེ་ལེགས་ཐམས་ཅད་འགྲུབ་བ་དང་།།
ཡིད་ལ་འདོད་པ་ཀུན་འགྲུབ་ཤོག།

May the world be healthy, the harvest be excellent
Food grains be in abundance, spirituality flourish
Everything good and virtuous be accomplished,
And that all our wishes be fulfilled

མི་ལ་ཚེ་ཡི་བཀྲ་ཤིས་ཤོག།
ཕྱུགས་ལ་གཡང་གི་བཀྲ་ཤིས་ཤོག
ཟས་ལ་བསྟན་ཀྱི་བཀྲ་ཤིས་ཤོག།
ཕུན་སུམ་ཚོགས་པའི་བཀྲ་ཤིས་ཤོག།།

May humans have the auspiciousness of longevity!
May the animals have the auspicious of fortune and luck!
May our food have the auspiciousness of nutrients!
May we have the auspiciousness of excellence!

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