Development, Society, and Environment in Tibet

Papers Presented at a Panel of the 7th Seminar of the International Association for Tibetan Studies, Graz 1995

Edited by
Graham E. Clarke †
FROM NOMADS TO RANCHERS:
MANAGING PASTURE AMONG ETHNIC TIBETANS IN SICHUAN

by

Nancy E. Levine, Los Angeles

This paper considers traditional social systems and pasture management among Golog Tibetans and some of the consequences of recent government programmes to develop pastoralism. The paper derives from three months of field research conducted in Serthar (gSer Thar, Chin. Seda) ‘county’ (Chin. xian), in northern Sichuan province during the summer of 1994 (Map 4). The population studied is known as dBal Shul gSer Thar or mGo Log gSer Thar. It formed a ‘confederacy’ organised on segmentary lineage principles which stood independent of any state control until the middle of the twentieth century. Genealogical materials suggest that the confederacy had its beginnings some 350 years ago, although such dates are highly speculative.

The current region covers 12,185 sq.km, and approximately 75 per cent of this land is devoted to pastoralism. In 1990, the census recorded 33,649 people, of whom 93 per cent were ethnically Tibetan (31,357). The latter are mostly pastoralists, although there also are a number of agriculturalists in lower lying areas to the south.

Today there are 5,233 households administratively organised into pastoral ‘rural townships’ (Chin. xiang). In the past, Serthar was organised as a confederacy of 48 separate Tsho Ba, or local kin-based groups. These were of widely varying size, and each had customary rights to tracts of land of varying extent, which its members utilised at different seasons of the year. The Tsho Ba were subdivided into ‘encampments’ (Ru Rogs or Ru ’Khor), which ranged in size between five and ten households. Each encampment had rights to a set of seasonal grazing areas within the wider ‘tribal’ pasture and camped within its grazing lands. These areas’ boundaries were marked by natural features of the landscape, like ridges, watercourses, and so on.

Each Tsho Ba was headed by a leader (dPen po), who was a member of the dominant or founding clan, and a second-in-command (Blon po), who was selected for his competence and who belonged to another clan. Each encampment also had a leader cum representative (known as bcu dPen, literally ‘leader of ten’). According to historical documents, the tribal leaders determined the timing of seasonal movements and herding destinations, as well as assigning the rotation of Tsho Ba members to keep guard over the pasture and fight for its defence. They also negotiated the amount to be paid in compensation when someone was killed.

---

1 I carried out this fieldwork in part with Hai Miao and in part with Gelek (see Gelek this volume and main proceedings, Volume I).

2 Elsewhere in this volume the term ‘union’ has been used to refer to this form of political organisation rather than ‘confederation’: the latter term as used here should not be taken to imply the existence of centralised state institutions.

3 Tsho Ba, here pronounced ‘tsho wa’.

4 People today often speak about the system of Ra mDa’ (literally, fence arrow), ‘a pursuit posse formed in reaction to a robbery or raid’ (Ekvall 1964: 1122).
Traditionally, the Tsho Ba also were subordinate to a single chief or head (dPon Chen), who was a member of the dBal Shul clan, the clan which first occupied Serthar and continued to dominate the confederacy. The chief had several ministers beneath him selected for their abilities and drawn from different clans than himself. The chief was the final authority in matters of internal disputes and relations with neighbouring peoples.

Disputes in the past seem to have arisen primarily over illicit encroachments by the people and animals of one group into other Tsho Ba lands, thefts of herd animals, and the inevitable consequences of fighting over land and cattle, that is, recompense for lives lost in fighting. Minor disputes between tribes, for example, over thefts of animals, were settled first by the leaders of those tribes. If the two had bad relations, the leader of a third group might be called in or another individual known for his mediating skills (gZu ba mkHan, Jo Tha, or Jo dPon). If the mediators failed, disputants would seek resolution from the dBal Shul leader, particularly if fighting were involved. Another option was to have the disputants take an oath in front of the gods, in response to the notion that people were afraid to swear falsely.

**Traditional Land Tenure**

Rights over pasture land are of paramount interest to nomadic pastoralists. Land is the ultimate source of wealth and security, and the sole means by which pastoralists can achieve their goals of maintaining healthy animals and seeing their herds increase to the point where, as those in Serthar describe it, they cover the plain and hillside. Because Serthar stood outside a centralised state such rights were highly insecure. Tsho Ba could depend on nothing except the threat or actual exercise of force to ensure continuing rights over land.

Yet such rights to land never could be fixed. While some groups inevitably increased in numbers of households and animals, others experienced declining populations, and groups which had grown large and strong tried to take advantage of groups which were small and weak. There were various ways of encroaching on others’ land, with varying degrees of permanency. The stronger group could occupy the land of a weaker group for so brief a period that they might not be noticed or their incursion could be overlooked; or they could move onto the land for a season and then make that land part of their annual migrations. When a group took over another's territory, it had to be prepared to back up its invasion with force. It also might happen that a group with land to spare let another group share or use its pasture, while stipulating that this was not a permanent land transfer. Yet, ultimately, the extent of the pasture a group could expect to utilise depended on its size and, more specifically, the size of the armed force available to it.

One person we spoke to said, ‘If one Tsho Ba had many animals and little land, while another had much land and few animals, the result would depend on the relative strength of the two groups. If strong, the first would take land from the second. If the second was strong, it could not. If the two had good relations, the land might be lent, for free. If people from a neighbouring agricultural community lost a battle and came here, they might be given land.’

Whereas the rights of tribes to certain tracts of land were fixed – unless and until other tribes took them by force – the rights of encampments were fluid. The camping sites and grazing grounds of the various encampments could be changed from one section of tribal territory to another, reportedly at the discretion of group leaders and in response to the encampment’s needs or the state of their relations with their leaders. Ekvall, who lived among Golog situated south and west of Lake Qinghai between 1926 and 1941, similarly reports that encampment grazing sites might be changed from year to year upon ‘consultation and agreement within the tribe’ (1954: 46). However their winter camping sites seem to have been more permanent, supporting a sense
of ‘ownership’ by specific encampment groups. In addition, households within the encampment had ‘individual and exclusive rights over certain family hayfields’ near these winter sites (Ekvall 1954: 46-7).5

**Economic Reforms**

Upon their incorporation into a modern nation state, life changed irrevocably for Serthar’s pastoralists. This change was so radical that people customarily describe it as a shift in ‘worlds’ (Jig rTen), from the old to the new. Not only was the productive system altered, grazing sites also were reallocated in Serthar, and some pastoralists were forced to move to other locations. Adding to these problems was the loss of a substantial portion of the traditional grazing lands belonging to a number of Tsho Ba. This occurred when Serthar was assigned to Sichuan province and some land was left behind with, or taken over by, Qinghai, reportedly because the cadres there were more powerful. This event contributed to a massive deficiency in pasture, which came to be felt more and more strongly as the human and animal population recovered from the losses of the early 1960s. The lands were recovered in 1986, which led to yet another redistribution of land, as I will describe below.

Collectives (mNyam Las Khang) were established in Serthar in approximately 1960, the timing varying for the different Tsho Ba. The first steps involved the formation of co-operatives and the assignment of class status. As many people said, the introduction of reforms was quite gradual, so much so that it is difficult to say when one stage began and the other ended. By the later years of the collective period, arrangements for work were in place that did not diverge from the following commune (Mi dMangs Kung Hre) period. Serthar eventually was divided into 17 brigades, or communes, which conjoined numbers of formerly separate Tsho Ba, which, in turn, were internally divided into 97 production teams (Ru Khag). At that time, the larger commune held all productive resources, although the smaller production teams were the effectively functioning units (cf. Clarke for central Tibet 1987: 33). Within each production team, people were assigned to one type of labour or another, e.g., yak or sheep herding, milking, butter production and so on. The features of commune organisation were fairly uniform throughout nomadic Tibetan areas and have been described elsewhere (Goldstein and Beall 1990: 142-4).

Communes were dissolved in the early 1980s. At that time commune animals were divided among all their members, according to calculations which differed in different communes and took account of both numbers of members and numbers of workers. In addition, some of the commune animals also were available for purchase, at very low prices. With the demise of the communes, the householder/individual responsibility system (Khyim Tshang ’sGag Tshan Len or ‘Gan dKris Lam Lugs) began.

Throughout these transitions, some of the Tsho Ba remained on their traditional grazing lands. Others were moved to other regions, for a variety of reasons. In some cases, groups from more populous areas went to less densely settled regions. Some of the smaller Tsho Ba were moved to and conjoined with other groups. We can take the example of ‘On Za Tsho Ba. In August 1959, the population of this Tsho Ba was moved to a region approximately two days’

---

5 Ekvall also states, ‘Making hay results in development of rudimentary family right to usufruct of the soil. Each tenthhold comes to have its own permanent exclusive right to cut hay on certain hayfields near the winter quarters’ (1968: 35).

6 Plans for the establishment of communes began, apparently, as early as 1966. Among the reasons for this is the economy of scale possible in a larger organisational unit which could be used to invest in more efficient technologies, to develop large scale pastoralist production and to expand so-called ‘sideline work’ (Zhor Las), that is, part-time work which supplemented basic subsistence production.
horseback ride to the north and remained there for three months. They then spent six months in another site for ‘socialist education’ and then were moved to a location a few hours’ ride from their traditional site. There they were assigned a productive and fertile valley. At the time of the animal distribution, however, they were assigned to a completely different ‘rural township’ from the administrative unit which had governed them during the collective and commune periods. Finally, in 1986, when grazing land was redistributed, they returned to their previous range. This happened after Serthar had won back a large amount of its traditional grazing lands from Qinghai province. At this time, Serthar Tsho Ba who had been moved to other locales were offered the option of returning to their traditional sites. On Za chose to do so and twenty-seven years after they had left it returned to a set of grazing lands nearly identical to the one they had utilised in the past.

There were a number of criteria which determined how much land a given Tsho Ba received in the 1986 distribution. A disproportionately large share went to Tsho Ba located close by the lands recovered from Qinghai. Beyond that, numbers of cattle and numbers of people affected how much acreage a given ‘rural township’ received (one person said that this depended 60 per cent on animals and 40 per cent on people). In addition to these factors, there was a policy which allowed Tsho Ba to get their traditional grasslands back. A final, if covert, consideration was local politics. That is, Tsho Ba which got on well with the government authorities received relatively more land. The official policy was summarised in the following phrase: reasonable grassland in quantity and quality, reasonable animal composition, and reasonable and compatible encampments. The end result, however, was a reshuffling of Tsho Ba on a massive scale.

Since the 1986 redistribution, Tsho Ba have remained on the sites assigned to them. The outcome has been more favourable for some groups than others. The more fortunate Tsho Ba – due to factors of location (being closer to the newly available land, for example) or good relations with the government officials who were conducting the redistribution – did well for themselves. Others received inadequate lands. The latter situation was particularly likely to happen to Tsho Ba living near the town, which stands on what used to be the finest grazing land in Serthar. Groups near town were far from the land claimed from Qinghai and also lost a number of sites to the rapidly expanding town or to other Tsho Ba displaced by the town. A second and equally intractable problem is that varying rates of growth in human and animal populations have subverted all the careful planning and calculations of eight years previously. Some groups have grown rapidly and now find their resource base inadequate to support their animals. Overtaxed pasture is easily damaged, and the downward spiral of overgrazing on deteriorating pasture is hard to reverse. To illustrate the consequences, one of the groups we studied now has fewer animals than in 1983 and 64 per cent of the animals, per capita, of the other two surveyed groups. The seriousness of this problem should be apparent when one realises that no reallocations or adjustments are anticipated in future, and the imbalances are sure to worsen.

Similar problems have been reported for other nomadic pastoralists. For example, in far western Tibet land was allocated jointly to encampments, and such allocations were meant to be permanent:

Currently there is no ongoing system of pasture reallocation to accommodate local fluctuations in the number of livestock ... Local differentiation in livestock numbers, however, has become noticeable in the seven years since 1981 ... some areas ... have excess pasture while others ... have too little.

(Goldstein, Beall, and Cincotta 1990: 154)

---

7 These lands included 79,912 ha (1.2 million mu).
Plate 4.1 - Eastern Tibet, Washu Serthar (Wa Shui gSer Thar): new winter house enclosed by old-style sod fence and adjacent hayfield. Nancy E. Levine, September 1994

Plate 4.2 - Eastern Tibet, Washu Serthar (Wa Shui gSer Thar): traditional encampment with animals grazing on common land. Nancy E. Levine, September 1994
This region also lacks any programme for reallocating pasture in response to increases or decreases in the number of animals. Local administrative units apparently were trying to cope with the situation on a case by case basis, although:

The government is still unwilling to get involved (or entangled) in this potentially divisive issue. There was, however, universal agreement among the herders that something akin to the traditional system of reallocation is absolutely necessary.

(Goldstein and Beall 1991: 113)

In Serthar, people were accorded essentially private ownership rights over the land in 1986. These were described as the three rights of management, construction, and usage. In 1987, new encampment grazing sites were drawn up and allotted (in some cases by drawing lots) to encampments. These assignments are deemed to be permanent – at least in some of the Tsho Ba. This policy soon was shown to be problematic as well. The herds of some of the encampments grew and quickly outstripped the potential of the less favoured grazing sites, which undoubtedly has contributed to grassland degradation.

The way in which encampment grazing rights are managed apparently differs in different ethnic Tibetan pastoralist regions. Clarke reports that in Namtso officers of the neighbourhood (Groṅ bSeb) decide where the livestock may graze. They try to give people a mix of good and bad sites and give relatively more land to groups with more animals. At (Chin.) Xixapangma (Nyeman ‘county’), however, rights to area of pasture seem to be permanent (Clarke 1987: 23-4).

**Fences, Houses and the Future of Pastoralism**

Recent policies to develop nomadic pastoralist areas have been converging toward private ownership and use of pasture. The assumption is that privately owned land will be better tended than the public commons. The protection of private land is to be reinforced by fencing, which is thought also to help protect winter forage, which can be so critical to animal survival.

Fencing of pasture is not entirely new. According to Serthar’s Animal Husbandry Bureau, sod fences of massive extent were constructed and enclosed 198,000 acres of grassland during the collective and commune periods. The sod fences of the past were disappointing in many ways, however. First, their construction involved cutting sod, which damaged the thin topsoil. Second, the heavy rains of Serthar caused them to degrade, meaning that their useful life was short indeed. Now the government is encouraging the construction of smaller barbed wire fences strung on metal fence posts for the use of individual households or encampments. One problem is that such fences are expensive by local standards. They cost three yuan per metre, in addition to the posts and the rental of the machine to stretch the wire. Construction of a small fenced area to protect winter forage might cost 300 yuan, which is a large sum to the many households which are struggling to make ends meet, due to inadequate animals and little surplus to sell for cash on the market. The metal fences also have been found to be easily broken. Again stray animals can break into a site intended to be protected for winter.

Fencing may have had a longer history among the nomadic pastoralists of Qinghai. Ekvald reports that the nomads he studied in the earlier part of this century south of Lake Qinghai maintained animal pens in winter and clearly defined plots which they protected and from which

---

8 Nor would this amount of fencing protect enough grass for the entire winter; one person estimated such an enclosed site would yield only 750 kg of protected grass. To give a sense of the limited potential of these efforts, nomads in the area known as Tawu say they need to store 30 kg of grass per yak for the winter. Thus the fenced area would provide fodder for only 25 yaks.
they cut hay in autumn (1951: 46-7). More recently, near Lake Qinghai, grassland was fenced along the highway or to protect winter grass and forage crops (Clarke 1992: 405).

In addition to the fencing, the government is subsidising the construction of winter houses in Serthar, as in other pastoralist areas. The above-mentioned ’On Za Tsho Ba, for example, had 40 winter houses constructed for them during the collective and commune period. These houses have fallen into ruins. They now maintain some 25 dilapidated houses in their present winter grazing place and keep some of their goods in storage facilities in the headquarters of the ‘rural township’ as protection against theft. Winter houses are relatively rare in Serthar, but in nomadic areas of Qinghai substantial winter dwellings have been constructed and, from what I have been told, are much appreciated by the people who use them. Such housing may have had a long history too. Ekvall describes ‘plastered, slat and wattle huts’ from early in this century (1951: 46). Clarke reports that in Damshung and Lake Namtso near Lhasa there also are permanent winter settlements being built (1987: 22). In Yukhot, which is part of Tawu, an area south-west of Abar, the majority of nomads are settled, in comfortable houses underwritten by generous government subsidies. Some pastoralists still take to their tents and the high pastures in summer, while others live in year-round settlements now.

In Serthar there is one small Tsho Ba of settled pastoralists who live in year-round houses, most in close proximity to the town. This is not a new phenomenon; the adults who manage their herds in this way report having grown up as settled pastoralists. They note too that the town’s religious facilities long have been a magnet for those elderly persons who no longer wish to move with the animals. It was not possible to determine when this Tsho Ba settled down in town, and its members became, essentially, ranchers, rather than nomadic pastoralists.

Conclusion

Clearly all policy moves nowadays are toward the intensification of pastoralism. In addition to fencing, Serthar county offices have experimented with seeding the grassland with presumably superior forage plants, the eradication of insect and animal pests, and the introduction of improved animal breeds, in order to produce more wool and milk. None of these efforts have been successful so far. The hybrid offspring of introduced sheep ran with the ordinary herds; it was impossible to control their reproduction, and the animals quickly reverted to the indigenous breed. Dri (’Bri, female yak) impregnated by a certain breed of exotic bull required human assistance in giving birth, a service which was, needless to say, unavailable on any large scale. The introduced seeds for forage quickly were overtaken by local species, and the population of animal and insect pests have recovered from attempts to destroy them. In addition, the expenses of these efforts, which must be carried out in a sustained manner to achieve any hope of success, are very high, prohibitively so.

Moves toward fencing and housing of pastoralists and their settlement on single plots of land managed by single households are likely to continue. Inasmuch as that is so, it may be wise to consider positive and negative repercussions. Officials in Serthar who give attention to these issues argue that converting the pastoralists into ranchers will increase responsibility for the pasture. At present, they argue, the pasture is treated as a commons which all nomads exploit for their own benefit, without thought for the welfare of others and long-term sustainable animal husbandry. The result, they say, is pasture degradation.

Nonetheless enclosure, sedentarisation, and fencing can have equally negative repercussions. If the nomads become ranchers and come to be confined to fenced plots, all flexibility is removed from the system of pastoral management. Animal populations can fluctuate wildly, due to natural conditions beyond human control and the changing needs of pastoral families. One
year a large family in a region that has experienced favourable climatic conditions may find that
the size of its herd has completely outstripped the forage capacity of the land it controls. In an
adjacent valley, a family which has decreased in numbers and experienced a devastating spring
snowfall may have far more grass than it needs for the few animals remaining. At present there
are no mechanisms in place to counterbalance or compensate for such imbalances in resources.
Markets and transportation facilities are simply too undeveloped to support such an elaborate
ranching economy. Thus there is in the making a tragedy of premature enclosure potentially as
damaging as any tragedy of the commons. The consequences of the same have been observed in
Africa, where formerly common land has been privatised in the course of economic develop-
ment.

...In the varied and changeable savannahs, the only way a herder can survive is
by moving. The Masai followed the rain across their lands, leaving an area before
its resources were exhausted and returning only when it recovered. Now, confined
to a single plot, they have no alternative but to graze it until drought or overuse
brings the vegetation to an end. (Monbiot 1994: 159)

Such consequences could take place among high altitude nomadic pastoralists as well as those
in the Sahel: the possibility should be taken account of in future development planning.

REFERENCES CITED

No 237, pp 1-60. Brighton, UK.


Winston.

Goldstein, M.C. and C.M. Beall (1990), Nomads of Western Tibet. Berkeley: University of California
Press.

——— (1991), ‘Change and Continuity in Nomadic Pastoralism on the Western Tibetan Plateau’, No-
madic Peoples 28: 105-22.

Goldstein, M.C., C.M. Beall and R.P. Cincotta (1990), ‘Traditional Nomadic Pastoralism and Ecological
Conservation on Tibet’s Northern Plateau’, National Geographic Research 6: 139-56.


Sichuan Ya’an District Working Group on Se Da Place Names (1985) (Sichuansheng Ganzizangzu Ziziz-
hou Se Da Xian Di Ming Lu).