The Changes of the Social Status of Tibetan Women in Nomadic Area: A Survey on the Women in Nyerong County

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Abstract: Tibetan nomadic women’s social status has been rapidly promoted since the democratic reform in Tibet, they enjoy legal rights and interests in terms of marriage, birth, family, education, undertaking and etc. Meanwhile, they have played an important role in every aspect of the society and appear to have a good mental outlook.

Gender study in China was initiated in the 1980s and it received full attention after the 1990s. Due to the factors such as different location and ethnic background, imbalance is existed in this field. That is, research of the women with minority background is still remained in its preliminary stage.

Study of Tibetan women has been carried out during the last decade and the research perspectives and the range of the field have gradually expanded. As the research focus has switched and the improvement of the women’s education, the gender study is not limited to just issue an annual report by women’s organizations and a report on the comparison of the women’s social status by the government, it extended into research on the performance of the women in the fields of economics and education which indeed brought new outlook of the women. Nonetheless, the research outcomes of gender studies in Tibet are still in the primary stage in general and there is no any formal research on the women in nomadic area has been carried in particular.

This article is written based on an anthropological fieldwork in nomadic area of Tibet carried by a group of researchers from TASS recently as well as the data of the survey on the social history of Tibet conducted by ethnologists from CASS in Beijing in the late 1950s and beginning of the 1960s.

Fieldwork Carried Out in the Region and Its Result

Animal husbandry plays an important role in Tibetan economy, and the pastoral area occupies a large proportion of the total area of Tibetan Autonomous Region. There are 73 counties in total in the Tibet Autonomous Region, among which 14 are animal husbandry counties including Damshong, Drongpa, Saga, Nakchu, Lhari, Nyerong, Amdo, Xianza, Bangga, Bachen, Nyima, Gegye, Gertse, Tshochen. While 24 counties are semi-agriculture or
semi-animal husbandry and they are Chusum, tshomy, Tshona, Nangkhatse, Ngamring, Shethongmon, Khangmar, Yadong, Gangpa, Biru, Lhundrub, Kongpo Gyamda, Chamdo, Jongda, Gongjo, Riwuche, Dingching, Drayab, Basho, Sok, Pureng, Tsada, Gar, Rutok. The northern and north-western parts of Tibet are the complete animal husbandry area which account for more than half of the land resource and two-thirds grassland resource of the region. The western and southern parts of Tibet are areas of combination of agriculture and animal husbandry. Whereas the eastern part is traditionally a land of agriculture, forest and grass, and they are the main sources of economic income. There is also a large proportion of the area appropriate for developing animal husbandry.

Nakchu Prefecture is located in the north of Tibet and it has an area of 420,000 square kilometers. Chamdo Prefecture is situated in the east, next to Nakchu Prefecture. While Lhasa, Ningchi and Shigatse are located in the south and Ngari Prefecture is located in the west, adjacent to Xinjiang. The average altitude of Ngari Prefecture is 4500 meters. The whole northern Tibet is called “Changtang” and it consist of millions of square kilometers. Changtang is the main resources of animal husbandry in Tibet.

As the developments of agriculture and township areas has been the main focus of recent studies on Tibet, it is hardly see there is any academic research carried out in Tibetan pastoral area, especially that of the Tibetan women in nomadic areas. The research team named The Social Status Change of Tibetan Women since the Democratic Reform had carried out a fieldwork from May 23rd to July second in 2010 in Nyerong County of Nakchu Prefecture. In addition to that the team also visited Nachu Regional Archives to collect information. During this period, the research team gained a better understanding of the ongoing situation of the nomadic women at the time through holding meeting, interviewing individual and analyzing archives materials. Nakchu Prefecture has 10 counties, one administrative district, 114 townships, 1311 administrative villages. Up to the end of 2007, the total population of Nakchu prefecture was 414,554 including female population of 205,988, which covered 49.6% of the total population. In the east of Nakchu Prefecture there are Biru, Lhari, Bachen and Sok counties and these counties bear completely different characteristics from the majority areas of the Prefecture. These four counties are connected to Chamdo Prefecture in the east, Ningchi Prefecture in the south, Yushul Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture of Qinghai in the north respectively. These are the only counties with river valley and, semi-agriculture and semi-animal husbandry area in northern Tibet. There are forestry, rivers and natural limestone caves in some of these areas. There are Bangga, Xiantsa, and Nyima counties and a special administrative region called Shuanghu Special Administrative Region which made the western part of the Nakchu Prefecture and it is traditionally called “No man’s land” as the population in this area is small. This vast plateau is the core place of northern Tibet and it is the main base of Tibetan animal husbandry.
Nyerong County is located in the northern part of the Nagchu Prefecture and its county is about 4700 meters and there are mountains and gullies one after another. Some mountains in the northwest are covered by snow around the year.

Nyerong belongs to inland dry climate due to high altitude, thin air and the cold and dry climate. The average air temperature in January is about 25°C and the lowest temperature reaches to −20°C. This is an area without cream period throughout the year and it might snow heavily or storm even in the Summer. Therefore, it is said that the region of the north is an area with long winter and no summer, and the oxygen content only reaches to 60% of the plain area. It blows wind almost whole year, a highland semi-drought and seasonally wind sub-cold climate. There are one township, 158 villages and neighborhood committees under the jurisdiction of Nyerong County with 8041 households and 31,292 people, among whom 29,045 is animal husbandry population and 2247 is urban and township population. There are Tibetan and Han Chinese inhabiting in this county and Tibetans occupy over 95% of the total population. (data resource: Nakchu Prefectural Government Website on June 19th of 2009)

The Social Situation of Tibetan Women in Pastoral Area in the Past

Tibetan women in pastoral area had certain status in the families comparing to women in agricultural areas, but they suffered discrimination in the society before the ‘democratic reform’ in Tibet. During the informal discussion held by the research team in Nyerong County, we found from the stories, proverbs, and the experiences of older generations that nomadic women were discriminated in the past. For example, “women and dogs”, “turf turned to black because of voles, men became bad because of women”, “mother of seven daughters is the master of seven dogs”, “the dog is counted as meat, women are not counted as human.” It was normal for sons to inherit father’s prosperity in the old society, but daughters always had no rights to do so.

The oldest woman who participated in the informal discussion with the research team is 63 years old and the youngest is 32 years old. Beside the oldest one, experienced the old Tibet when she was young, the others do not have any experience. Their knowledge about the old society gained through their parents or the elders who told them that there was no concept of houses and people lived in tents all the time in the past. Women delivered their children in a cow stable and only a few women were allowed to deliver their children at the corner of their tents.

Situation of the women in the old society was miserable. One could see the hard-
ship of life of being maids of the nomadic lords from the following descriptions recorded in a report in the 1950s:

Lives of maids (or female workers) were even more difficult, they had to get up by dawn and started cooking tea, collect and rub cow dung, twist wool, rub velvet ropes; in the day time they had to milk, process butter, carry water, cook tea and etc.; in the evening, they had to take care animals, cook dinner, serve the masters; at night they had to mill Tsampa and so on. There was not a minute of idle time for them during the whole day. They had neither enough food nor clothing, usually had to sleep outside of the tent except for few of them who had adobe could sleep inside. It is said that there was a custom to discriminate women in Nakchu and it is a taboo for maids to sleep inside the tent.

Maids were not allowed to give birth inside houses so that they had to deliver in the open - air thick growth grass, they did not had any prenatal rest except having a short rest and little better diet within two days postpartum. After two days, they had to go back to work, the babies had to leave home and just let them cry but there was nobody to take care of them. The master would not support the babies any longer after they were two years old; it was the mothers' responsibilities to take a total care of the babies beside heavy work; if they missed any working time, their wages would be buckled.

Due to the lack of awareness to protect and respect women in the society at that time, the right of the women in nomadic area had no guarantee. From the reports as well as our own fieldwork result show that Tibetan army abused nomadic women so that women were afraid of going out to graze or visit the monasteries. [5] It is said that there was a maid named Ganggar in Maima tribe and she worked as a maid for the noble family of Ngangmu Cho since she was 16 year old. She was raped by her master and pregnant. Since she could not finish heavy labors any longer so she was kicked out by her master and had to live the rest of her life in a miserable way. [6] Children born without fathers were always raised by women and the single women may only receive one cow or few sheep from the men. All the single mothers always lived at the lowest level in the society and bearing heavy responsibilities of raising their children.

There was no any law and code issued by the old Tibetan government which protect and guarantee women's rights and interest. On the contrary, an old code of Tibet states that "do not gave women the rights to discuss about state affairs", "slaves and women are not allowed to participate in military administration matters" and so on. That is, women didn't have any right of participating and talking in any kind of political rally of the tribes or social gathering. Women had no any right to get education.

Before 'democratic reform', the commercial development in Nyerong was very backward and the basic way of trading was to barter. Nomads took their livestock products
to agricultural area and exchanged them with agricultural products for daily necessities. In
military, packing salt and goods, doing business and etc. Women were always engaged in
crochet and other housework etc. What men did might be harder than that of women, how-
ever, women beard heavy load of works and they were the ones who got up earliest in
the morning and went to bed latest at night in the families.

As it is showed by the following example, there were many taboos for women in
terms of production and living in nomadic area in the old Tibet:

Strange women were not allowed to enter cattle ring because it was thought she
would bring disasters to the master; Women from other households were not allowed
to visit a household as a guest when animals of this household were felt ill; not al-
lowed women to get in a tent that not belongs to their relatives because it was
thought that ghost and devil would attach to these women’s bodies and they would
cause death to the people and animals of the visited household; maids who were
hired at the time were not allowed to enter in the masters’ tents after it got dark;
women were not allowed to shout in the evening, or they would bring ghost and
devil; strange women were not allowed to walk to the backside of a tent where the
prayer flags hanging on, neither do they allowed to walk back nor forth with the in-
ner pillars because this was the place where the holy religious offerings laid; not al-
lowed women to put their clothes on scriptures; women were not allowed to touch
the amulet and other holy things on men’s bodies because these things were thought
to save men from disasters, and it would malfunctioned after touched by women; not
allowed women to go to monasteries from June to August in Tibetan calendar, or it
would be big snow disaster in the winter, etc.

Even though women like men was indispensable labor force for daily life and ani-
mal husbandry in nomadic area, in many areas they played more important role than the
men, but the old system and tradition put women in the lowest level of the society and
they suffered much oppression of the regime and their husbands.

The Changes of the Social Status of the Women in Nomadic Area

The establishment of the new China provided legal protection and equal rights for
the men and the women. The Constitution stimulated that “women enjoy the equal rights
with men in terms of politics, culture, society, family, life and etc.” The government of
the Tibet Autonomous Region implemented The Security Law of Women’s Rights and
Interests of the People’s Republic of China and regulated that “school age girls must
be offered compulsory education. Parents or other guardians must not force school age
The county has already established a Maternal–child Healthcare Station. The women and child healthcare rate has reached up to 45%, the hospitalized delivery rate reached to 23%. New way of delivery has been obviously improved and mortality of pregnant women has been obviously declined. However, the problem of insufficiency in medicine and medical staff are still remained unsolved in many regions including Nyenrong County.

The level of education of the women is relatively low in the nomadic region. Since 1991, governments and women’s organizations at all levels carried out a project called “double study and double competition”, which means ‘study culture and study skill’ and ‘competing achievement and competing contribution about eliminating of illiteracy’ in order to promote women’s scientific and cultural quality. Recently, Nakchu Prefectural Committee has further enhanced the work of eliminating illiteracy and the total number of the eliminated illiteracy is 71,385, among whom 33,281 are women. At the end of the year 2008, 97% of the population between 15–50 years of age has been able to read and write. However, there are still 49,657 illiterate people within the region. Women’s federations at every level organized about 200 times of multi-skill training courses for women and 2615 women have been trained. Almost all the women attended the training mastered in driving, midwives, twisting sheep wool, waving, planting vegetables, haircutting, and etc.

At the end of the year 2008, there are 76,468 students in schools at every level in Nakchu Prefecture, among whom 36,638 are female students which occupied 47.9% of the total number of the students. The enrollment rate of the primary school increased from 93% in 2005 to 98.5% in 2008 and the enrollment rate of girls rose from 93% in 2005 to 93.5% in 2008.

There was not a school in Nyerong County before the ‘democratic reform’ and children could only get little education by sending them to the local monasteries. In April 1964, the first primary school was established in Nyerong County. The condition of the school at the time was very poor. There were only two teachers and about twenty students. After 1970s, primary schools were established in each district (now they are called Shang) and children started to get education. Since 1982, carried out “Three Free” policy which alleviated the burden of the mass and encouraged children to go to school. In 2004, the state invested a total amount of 1100 million RMB and established Nyerong County middle school. At the end of the year 2006, there were one middle school with 159 students, of whom 61 were girls, 6 complete primary schools, 8 Shang-center primary schools. There were 2962 students in the primary schools and girls occupied 57.6% of the total number of the students. The enrollment rate of the school aged children reached to 88% and the enrollment rate of girls was 42%.
Conclusion

Social status means the position of a social member in the society and it is generally limited by the social standard, law and custom. It is usually used to express the degree of social prestige and honor. Social status also refers to the right of having property, power and authority, and it is divided into congenital status and self-creation status. The former is decided by sex, age and family relationship and the latter is related to his or her education, occupation, marriage and so on. [11]

Through our fieldwork in Nyerong County, we found that the social status of nomadic women has been changed remarkably since the ‘Democratic Reform’.

Firstly, the situation of women getting education is changed. In the old time there was almost no any opportunity for women to get education. Since ‘Democratic Reform’, they have had the chance to get formal education. Secondly, the family status of women; women’s family status and the right of marriage has been changed. In the old time, the serf owners controlled marriage. Since the ‘Democratic Reform’, women started to enjoy the rights given by the Marriage Law and they can choose their partners with their own will. In the meantime, women in the nomadic region no longer to give birth in sheepfold. On the contrary, under the new women and child care system, more and more women are now adopting modern civilized delivery way and inviting midwife or going to local women and child health care station to deliver their children. Thirdly, the choice of the occupation of the women is extended. In the old time, nomadic women were firmly shuck in the family. Since ‘Democratic Reform’, their occupation has been multitudinous, animal husbandry and commercial has been combined, and many women who have certain knowledge and skills started to work in the townships and big cities.

The ‘Democratic Reform’ brought out a new social structure and fully liberated the women and changed their socio-political status. It made the women and men are equal and provided reliable political and legal guarantee for the nomadic women. All these improvements of the enterprise of the women can show that Tibetan women, like the men, enjoy the fruits of the social and economic developments and basic human rights.

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西藏牧区妇女的社会地位变迁：西藏那曲地区
聂荣县妇女问题调查报告

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摘要：在西藏民主改革后，西藏牧区妇女的社会地位迅速发生变化。妇女在婚姻、生育、家庭、教育和事业等方面都享有合法权利，她们在当今社会各行各业中展现出良好的精神面貌。

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