

## Chapter 14

# Change and Continuity in a Nomadic Pastoralism Community in the Tibet Autonomous Region, 1959–2009

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**Abstract** This chapter examines the process of change and adaptation that a group of Tibetan nomadic pastoralists have experienced from the traditional (pre-socialist) period to the present. The data are based on anthropological fieldwork over a 25-year period conducted in Phala, a nomadic community located about 500 km west of Lhasa in the Tibet Autonomous Region.

**Keywords** Nomads • Pastures • Change • Stocking rates • Privatization • Fencing

### 14.1 Introduction

Tibetan nomadic pastoralists have resided on the Qinghai-Tibet Plateau (QTP) at altitudes too high for farming for centuries, if not millennia. All share certain basic features—they raise combinations of four kinds of livestock (yak, sheep, goats, and horses) that graze all year on natural vegetation—about 4 months on fresh vegetation and 8 months on senescent vegetation.<sup>1</sup> They all also move their livestock seasonally at least several times a year, harvesting a wide variety of products from their animals, some of which they consume directly and some they trade with neighbouring farmers or, nowadays, sell to outsider traders and nearby towns. However, beyond such basic aspects of the nomadic pastoral adaptation, it is difficult to generalize about socio-political-historical organization and environmental conditions, either at present or in the traditional (pre-socialist) era because the QTP contains significant diversity. Ecologically, the western part of the QTP is higher and drier, and nomads living there predominately raise sheep and goats, whereas in the eastern portion, yaks were the more important animal raised.

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Politically, Tibetan nomads have existed under very different political systems. Hugh Richardson, the well-known British diplomat/historian, differentiated the Tibetan world into 'political' Tibet, the polity ruled by the Dalai Lamas, and 'ethnographic' Tibet, the other ethnic Tibetan areas in the east (Amdo and Kham) that were outside that state. In 'political' Tibet, the Tibetan government ruled continuously from the earliest times down to 1951, whereas in 'ethnographic' Tibet, the Dalai Lama's government exercised jurisdiction only in certain places and at irregular intervals with local lay or monastic chiefs being in control of districts of varying size (Richardson 1984, 1–2). Another diplomat/historian conveyed the basic political differences on the QTP as follows:

At the beginning of the present [20<sup>th</sup>] century, before the British expedition to Lhasa in 1904 and the subsequent Chinese forward movement in Kam, that portion of High Asia inhabited by Tibetan-speaking peoples, and labeled *Tibet* on European maps, consisted of three separate entities, firstly, the Lama Kingdom of Tibet with its provinces and dependencies, secondly, the semi-independent Native States of Kham under Chinese protection, and thirdly, the Kokonor [Amdo] Territory under the control of the Chinese Amban residing at Sining and Kansu. (Teichman 1922, 7–8)

These historical differences were carried over into the PRC after its creation in 1949. The Dalai Lama's Tibet was transformed into the Tibet Autonomous Region, and the ethnic Tibetan areas in the east (Kham and Amdo) were incorporated into different administrative units—the provinces of Qinghai, Gansu, Sichuan and Yunnan. Consequently, for many organizational, administrative, linguistic and even sub-cultural aspects, today's nomadic pastoralists derive from very different backgrounds and administrations. Compounding this is the fact that over the past two decades, the pastoral policies of the current Chinese government have been implemented differently in the TAR and in eastern areas like Qinghai.

Beijing's pastoral policies are based on the belief that serious pasture degradation is underway on the QTP due to livestock overstocking which it considers is primarily the result of the irrational management system of Tibetan nomads whose focus, the government claims, is solely on each household raising as many animals as possible without consideration of the carrying capacity and future of the grasslands. The government and Chinese scientists see this as a classic example of the 'Tragedy of the Commons'. For example, the English language *China Daily* newspaper (27 January 1987) reported that 15% of China's grasslands had deteriorated by the mid-1970s and that this had increased to 30% by the mid-1980s. Similarly, a Chinese scientific expedition to the QTP reported a 113% increase in herd size during the 23-year period from 1959 to 1981, that is to say, a 3.3% increase per annum with a doubling time of 21 years. The same source explained the reasons for this as:

To date, the animal structure in Tibet is ... irrational ... The increased rate of total animals had been the main criterion for measuring the development of animal husbandry and no attention has been paid to [the yields of] animal products. (Chen et al. 1984, 51)

This negative portrayal of traditional pastoralism has become the dominant government view in China and has resulted in the government taking a proactive role in dealing with Tibetan pastoralists, especially those in Qinghai Province where environmental degradation in the grassland area that contains the headwaters of the

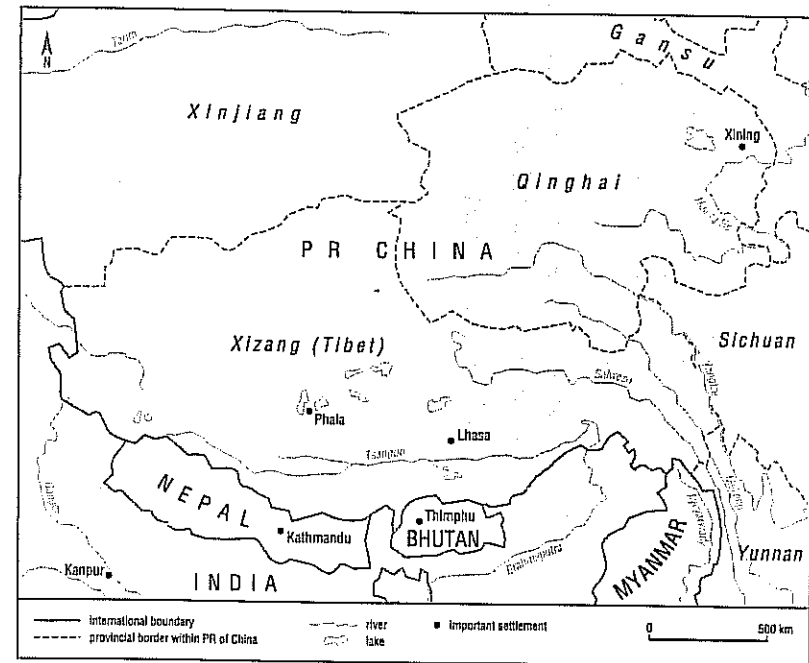


Fig. 14.1 Location of the fieldwork region in Phala (Source: Based on design by Goldstein)

Yangtze and Yellow Rivers (which impact millions of people in the lowlands of China and Southeast Asia) brought grassland conservation in the QTP to the forefront of Beijing's attention. The Chinese government has responded by developing policies that sought to radically reorganize the traditional pastoral management system and transform the nomadic pastoralists into something akin to small family ranchers who would control their own pastures and adopt modern 'scientific' strategies of animal husbandry and grassland management. To this end, starting in Qinghai, it has instituted a series of major policy interventions including the privatization and fencing of pastures on a household basis, sedentarization, the resettlement of herders to towns and programmes that set aside pasture areas for varying periods of time.

The situation of Tibetan pastoralists in Qinghai, however, differs in significant ways from that found in the TAR where very little research has been done and very little is known. This chapter, therefore, seeks to expand our understanding of Tibetan pastoralism on the QTP by means of a case study of a nomadic pastoralist area in the TAR called Phala (tib. *bar la*) that is located about 500 km west of Lhasa (Fig. 14.1). Anthropological research was started there by the author and his colleague Professor Cynthia M. Beall in 1986 and has continued for the past 25 years, including stints of fieldwork in 1986, 1987–1988, 1990, 1993, 1997, 1998, 2000,

2005, 2009 and most recently in 2011. Whilst no single case study can exemplify the entire situation of nomads in the TAR since there are significant internal differences, it is hoped that the data from Phala will provide a sorely needed balance to the view of Tibetan pastoralism that is based on the situation in Qinghai Province.

## 14.2 Phala in the Traditional Era: The Lagyab Lhojang Pastoral Estate

The Phala nomads traditionally were not an autonomous 'tribal' unit operating on the periphery of a state polity. Rather, they were part and parcel of the traditional Tibetan state that was ruled by the Dalai Lamas since 1642. The politico-economic structure of this polity was similar to that of medieval Europe in the sense that the land was organized around the institution of the *manorial estate*. All land in Tibet was owned by the state, but large portions of it had been granted to aristocratic families, monasteries and incarnate lamas to provide them income. These manorial estates were self-contained entities that in farming areas combined the means of production—economically productive *arable land*—with a hereditarily bound peasant labour force whose role it was to work that land and thereby convert it into an economically productive resource for the lord.

Tibet also contained what we can think of as purely pastoral estates. Like farming estates, these pastoral estates were controlled by lords, who were either aristocrats, monasteries, incarnate lamas or the government itself, and combined the means of production—economically productive *pasture land*—with attached nomadic pastoralists whose role was to raise livestock and pay taxes of animal products like butter to their lord, that is, to transform the grassland resource into economic profit for the lord.

Phala was part of a large pastoral estate called Lagyab Lhojang (tib. *la rgyab lho byang*) whose lord was one of Tibet's most powerful religious incarnations, the line of Panchen Lamas.<sup>2</sup> All the pastureland used by the Phala nomads, therefore, belonged to the Panchen Lama who administered it through a staff of managers and local officials.<sup>3</sup>

Lagyab Lhojang encompassed an area of about 2,500 km<sup>2</sup>, all of which was situated between 4,700 m and about 5,500 m. Internally, it was divided into ten nomad groups called *tsho* (tib. *tsho*), one of which was Phala. The entire area was headed by a chief called the Garpön who was chosen from the nomads by the lord. Each *tsho* also had a headman chosen from the local nomads. Within each *tsho*, the most important social and economic unit was the extended household since it was the unit in which primary management and production decisions were made.

A core element of Lagyab Lhojang's pastoral management system was a sophisticated triennial system of pasture reallocation that insured stable income for the lord whilst preventing the degradation of his valuable resource through overgrazing.

Traditionally, Lagyab Lhojang's ten *tsho* were divided into hundreds of pasture areas of various sizes, each of which had explicitly demarked borders that were

identified by geographical markers such as streams and hillocks and formally recorded in a register book. Each named pasture was considered suitable to support a fixed number of livestock calculated on the basis of a measurement unit called a *marke* [tib. *mar khal*].

In the 1950s, a one *marke* unit of pasture in Phala had a carrying capacity of 13 yaks or yak equivalents (each yak being equivalent to seven goats or six sheep). Thus, a one *marke* unit of pasture had a carrying capacity of 13 yaks or 91 goats or 78 sheep (or some combination). This rating system was monitored by the lord who allocated pasture units to his nomad subject households on the basis of the number of animals each household held. For example, a household with 26 yaks (or yak equivalents) would be given exclusive usufruct rights over specific pastures having a total rating of two *marke*. These *marke* were defined by vegetative productivity not areal size, in other words, a larger pasture area with poor vegetation could be rated as having fewer *marke* than a smaller one with higher quality grass.

This system of pasture allocation, however, was not permanent. Instead, pastures were reallocated by the lord every 3 years based on a livestock census. Households whose livestock had increased over the previous 3 years received additional pastures according to the new number of yak equivalents they held at the time of the triennial census, and those whose herd had decreased over the prior 3 years lost pastures. Following this reallocation, each household again had exclusive usufruct rights over its new set of pastures for the next 3 years.

The long-term viability of this flexible pasture allocation system rested on an indigenous assumption that uncontrollable variables such as disease and climatic disasters such as blizzards operated unevenly, for example, wiping out many animals in one locality but not others. Data on livestock in Phala from de-collectivization in 1981 to 1988 reveals such fluctuations, showing decreases in herd size for 5 years, followed by a substantial increase in the sixth year (Table 14.1).

This same pattern also occurred at the household level. For example, whilst some households in Phala suffered 100% neonatal mortality of sheep and goats in the spring of 1988, their neighbours lost none or just a few percent. And, in the early summer of 1986, one area just west of Phala lost about 30% of its sheep and goats due to a snow storm, although Phala was unaffected. Such fluctuations can be seen clearly in Table 14.2.

Thus, in any given year, some households and sub-areas within *Lagyab Lhojang* would have expanding herds, whilst others' herds would be shrinking. Any single household, therefore, theoretically could experience sustained net growth in herd size over 3 years, whilst a neighbouring household might be experiencing decreases in livestock numbers and underutilization of their allocated pastures. Phala's triennial pasture management system accommodated this fundamental reality by re-allocating pastures every 3 years to balance the gains and losses in livestock numbers in specific areas/households. This maximized productivity by rewarding nomad households when they were successful with more pasture whilst minimizing overgrazing of the pastures by *not allowing* stocking rates to increase beyond the carrying capacity of each pasture.<sup>4</sup>

Table 14.1 Number of livestock in Phala, 1981–1988

Year	Yaks	Sheep	Goats	Total	Change from 1981	
					No.	%
1981	1,211	6,838	2,738	10,787		
1983	1,164	5,441	2,929	9,534	-1,253	-12
1984	995	4,548	2,930	8,473	-2,314	-22
1985	909	4,369	2,963	8,241	-2,546	-24
1986	898	4,276	2,950	8,124	-2,663	-25
1987	1,024	5,425	3,886	10,335	-452	-4

Source: Data derived from handwritten records found at the *xiang* headquarters and head counts conducted during the course of the authors' research (Goldstein et al. 1990)

Table 14.2 Change in total number of livestock for households in two contiguous home-based encampments (DZUK), 1981–1986 and 1986–1987

Household	Number of livestock 1981	Number of livestock 1986	% Change from 1981–1986	Number of livestock 1987	Change from
					1986–1987
DZUK A					
Household 1	361	321	-11%	153	-168 (-48%)
Household 2	306	159	-48%	213	+72 (+45%)
Household 3	296	262	-12%	376	+114 (+44%)
<b>Total</b>	<b>963</b>	<b>742</b>	<b>-23%</b>	<b>760</b>	<b>+18 (+2%)</b>
DZUK B					
Household 1	356	680	+91%	634	-46 (-7%)
Household 2	501	782	+56%	845	+63 (+8%)
Household 3	204	152	-26%	136	-16 (-11%)
Household 4	245	96	-61%	80	-16 (-17%)
Household 5	308	334	+8%	345	+11 (+3%)
Household 6	40	60	+50%	60	+0 (+0%)
<b>Total</b>	<b>1,654</b>	<b>2,104</b>	<b>+27%</b>	<b>2,100</b>	<b>-4 (0.2%)</b>

Source: Data collected by Goldstein et al. (1990)

For this system to work effectively for hundreds of years, three kinds of reallocations were utilized:

1. Shifting pasture areas every 3 years amongst households within a single nomad *tsho* such as Phala
2. Transferring one or more pasture areas from the control of one of the ten *tsho* to another
3. Moving entire households and their herds from one *tsho* where herd size had increased significantly to another *tsho* where herd size had decreased

### 14.3 The Socialist Era

#### 14.3.1 Phase One: Democratic Reforms and Collectivization (1959–1980)

The People's Republic of China incorporated political Tibet into its new state in 1951, but did not immediately end the traditional manorial estate system or dissolve the Dalai Lama's government.<sup>5</sup> The estate system, in fact, continued until the flight of the Dalai Lama to India in 1959 at which point Beijing ended the old socio-political system and began to implement 'democratic reforms', that is, changes starting the transforming of traditional society into socialist society. Consequently, in 1959, the nomads of Phala now found themselves subordinate to a new 'lord' (political entity) that held a totally different ideology about social, political and economic organization.

The initial reforms that began in 1959 involved the creation of a new class hierarchy in which the poor were valorized and placed at the apex of the social hierarchy, whilst the rich were decried as exploiters and relegated to its bottom. At this time, the government confiscated the large herd of the most powerful local nomad chief, the Garpön, redistributing his livestock and possessions to the poorest nomads. Other nomad households, however, continued to manage their production and consumption, and even those households labelled as 'rich nomads' (with the exception of the Garpön) were allowed to retain ownership over their animals and to manage their own herds. Day-to-day pastoral production, therefore, did not change although pasture allocation did.

The year 1959 was scheduled to be a triennial census year, but the new government did not want to continue a system from the manorial estate era, so it chose not to do the census/reapportionment. However, it also did not want to implement communes at this time since it felt that Tibetan herders were not ready to handle these. Consequently, they initially did nothing and told every household to keep their previously allocated pastures regardless of any increases or decreases in their herd size over the past 3 years. The system of triennial pasture reallocations, therefore, ended in 1959, but households continued to control their own pastures.

This situation did not last long, and 2 years later, in 1961, a programme called 'mutual aid' teams was instituted. It created small *Pasture Groups* consisting of several poor- and middle-class nomad households (5–15) who shared pastures and cooperated in herding and production. These were not collectives, however, since each household retained ownership over its own animals as well as ownership over all the products its own animals produced. This was seen by the state as a modest first step towards the CCP's ultimate goal of replacing household production with communal production.

A decade later, in 1969, the government initiated real socialist reforms in Phala by reorganizing the nomads into full communes. At this point, every household had to transfer its livestock and implements (e.g. churns, saddles) to the new commune

entity which also assumed control over all pastureland. All aspects of pastoral production, for example, when to milk and where to herd, were now decided by the commune leadership, not by nomad households. Each nomad, therefore, became in essence a worker for the commune (or in its own representation, an owner-worker in the commune). A complex system of 'work points' was utilized in which each task was rated from 1 to 10 points, and each worker earned points based on the type and duration of work done. Payments of food and other needed goods were provided by the commune based mainly on these work points and a basic ration amount.<sup>6</sup>

Consequently, with the exception of a few goats that each household was allowed to keep privately for its own food needs (the equivalent of the private vegetable garden in farming communes), nomad households now functioned only as units of consumption. They owned no animals and made no decisions about production tasks or the movement of livestock to different pastures. Each household member worked separately at tasks and locations determined by the commune's leaders. Nevertheless, the basic pastoral work tasks such as herding, milking, churning and shearing were done the same as before, as was the pattern of moving herds, but now its organization was managed by the commune leadership not the household.

The pastoral commune in Phala (and others throughout the TAR) remained in operation for roughly 11 years (1969–1980). During that time, no attempt was made to diminish the geographic scope of pastoralism, for example, by converting large pasture areas into farmland, although in Phala, an experiment with growing barley in one small area was tried without success.

### 14.3.2 Phase Two: De-collectivization and Market Economics

Despite the government's belief that nomadic and agricultural collectives were a more efficient and modern form of production, they in fact were an economic disaster that caused a sharp decline in the standard of living throughout the TAR (and the rest of China). Consequently, with the rise to power of Deng Xiaoping in 1979–1980, the Chinese Communist Party reversed its economic ideology/policy and ended communes. China now embraced a programme of major modernization by adopting the essence of the capitalist market economic system where working for profit was an accepted goal. Modern scientific and business methods became the valued means not just for industries and enterprises but also for individual farming and herding households. Deng Xiaoping's call to all in China to strive to modernize production, increase productivity and 'get rich' was enthusiastically conveyed even in remote areas like Phala where nomadic pastoralist households were urged to produce more effectively for China's new market economic system. At the same time, communes were dissolved and replaced by what was called the household 'responsibility' system in which households again became the basic unit of production. In Phala, this was accomplished by dividing the commune's animals equally in 1981 on a per capita basis—every nomad alive on the day of division regardless of

Table 14.3 Economic differentiation by household, 1981–1986

	1981	1986
Number of households with <30 animals	0%	19%
Number of households with 30–60 animals	100%	62%
Number of households with >70 animals	0%	19%

Source: Data collected by author

age received an equal share of 39 animals (4.5 yaks, 27 sheep and 7.5 goats).<sup>7</sup> Individuals and households now again owned their own animals and were *responsible* for all aspects of production and marketing, just as they had been in the traditional, pre-socialist society.

How to allocate pastures in the post-commune era, however, was problematic. Some Phala herders wanted the government to reinstate the traditional triennial reallocation system, whilst others wanted to continue the collective's common-pasture system in which all households in Phala would be free to use any of Phala's pastures. Government officials generally thought the market system was too difficult for them to administer, and so decided to implement a middle course by dividing Phala's pastures into ten mutually exclusive pasture-sharing units called *dzashog* (tib. *rtswa shog*). Each of these pasture-sharing groups was comprised of between 5 and 15 households who shared a delimited set of pastures which they used exclusively in accordance with local rules of use. Despite this sharing of pastures, each household in the pasture-sharing group remained economically autonomous, and there was no requirement that these households cooperate in herding or marketing. Each household made its own milking, shearing and marketing decisions. However, the state continued to exercise ownership over all pastureland, so the nomads only received *usufruct* rights to these pastures.<sup>8</sup>

Under this new system, households initially were free to increase their initial herd size and most worked energetically to do so. As shown in Table 14.3, within 5 years, significant disparities in wealth had emerged. It should be noted that Phala had excess pastureland at this time, that is, they had pastures that they did not use.<sup>9</sup>

### 14.3.3 Phase Three: Stocking Limits and Privatization

Beijing's overall concerns with overgrazing and pasture degradation reached Phala in 1987 when a 20% reduction in livestock was imposed, followed in 1988 by formal stocking limits setting the final 1987 livestock total as the stocking limit. After this, the county annually gave each of its nomad townships (ch. *xiang*) a document stating the number of livestock it had to eliminate ('kill/eat or sell' (tib. *söj* [gsod spyod]). The *xiang* then passed this down to each nomad community (tib. *trongtso* [grong tsho]) and household. Generally, the annual *söj* figure (the% reduction) was based on the number of newborns that survived that year; that is, however many newborns survived, that percent would be reduced. In normal years, this was about 30% of the number of animals present in the fall.<sup>10</sup> When I asked officials why they

were imposing limits when there was still excess pastureland in Phala, a county-level Tibetan official explained, 'The nomads have to be educated to understand that just rearing more and more animals is not the answer'.

This system continued for the next decade at which time the government introduced further changes regarding privatization of pastures.

In 1996, the government sought to implement the more radical Qinghai programme of changes in Phala and the TAR. As mentioned earlier, the new programme called for the replacement of the system of shared pastures with a system of privatized pastures (especially winter pastures) on a household basis. The goal was for each household to control and fence off its own pastures so that each household could pursue modern and scientific animal husbandry practices, for example, raising fewer, higher quality animals. The government's rationale was that if each nomad household controlled its own pastureland, it would be motivated to invest time and resources to improve the quality of the vegetation and animals. Nomads, therefore, would in the end become transformed into something akin to autonomous family ranchers.

Although these changes had been implemented in many areas in Qinghai, in Phala and most areas in the TAR, privatization and fencing of individual pastures was strongly opposed by herders as well as their local officials who believed this would cause serious problems and be difficult to administer. They argued that the more flexible system of pasture-use groups should be continued and were successful in persuading the government to allow this. Nevertheless, a kind of privatization was implemented that we can think of as *Virtual Privatization*.

#### 14.3.3.1 Virtual Privatization

The pasture privatization implemented in Phala differed fundamentally from *real* privatization experienced in Qinghai Province. In both systems, each nomad household was allocated its own share of the pastureland, but with virtual privatization, this share was *never specified at ground level*. Nomad household knew that they had a certain number of shares of pastureland, but not where those pastures were located so they could not exercise exclusive usufruct rights over them. This system of virtual privatization had two main steps.

First, the carrying capacity of Phala was determined by the number of livestock present at the end of 1996. For example, if Phala hypothetically had 4,000 sheep at the end of 1996, that was established *a priori* as the carrying capacity of Phala. At this time, Phala was still using the old *marke* unit, so if hypothetically there were 100 *marke* of pastureland in Phala in 1996, the carrying capacity of each *marke* would be 40 sheep (4,000/100).

The second step was to allocate pastures to each household. Although animals consume grass, pastures were not allocated to households on the basis of the number of the animals they had at the end of 1996. Instead, shares of the pastureland were allocated to each household based on both *the number of people in the household as well as the number of animals each household had*.

Initially, the government recommended dividing pastures using a ratio of 70% based on the number of people and 30% based on the number of livestock. One half of Phala decided instead to use a 65/35% ratio and the other half, a 60/40% ratio. In the latter arrangement, 60% of the pastures were divided on the basis of the number of people in the area and only 40% based on the number of livestock. This worked as follows:

Given the hypothetical size of 100 *marke* of pastureland, 60% of this pastureland (60 *marke*) was divided based on the number of people. If the total hypothetical population was 60 nomads, each nomad therefore would have received 1 *marke* of pasture as his/her share of the overall pasture (based on people). The remaining 40% of the pastureland (40 *marke*) was divided on the basis of the number of livestock. As there were 4,000 sheep in the hypothetical example, each sheep would have received a share of 0.01 *marke* (40/4000) for the animal share. These two together determined the final share of each household.

Consequently, if we take a hypothetical household called 'A' that had 5 people and 400 sheep, it would have received five *marke* based on the number of people in the household (each person was entitled to a one share) and four *marke* of pastureland based on the number of animals it possessed since each animal was entitled to 0.01 *marke* of pastureland, that is, four *marke* (400×0.01). Household A's share of the pastureland, therefore, was a total of nine *marke* of pastureland. Since each *marke* could hold 40 sheep, that meant that household A's share of Phala's pastures would allow them to keep 360 animals. However, because they actually owned 400 animals, their pasture allocation was *less* than the number of animals they then actually had.

If we take another household, 'B', and say hypothetically that it had no livestock but four members, it would have received a share of pastureland based on the number of people in the household, that is, four *marke* of pastures, one for each member. Since each *marke's* carrying capacity would have been 40 sheep, it was entitled to graze 160 sheep, even though the household actually had none.

This system of *virtual* privatization of pastures, therefore, gave each household a fixed share of the overall pastureland without ever specifying where each household's pastures were located. Households only knew the number of pasture units they held, not where these pastures actually were located. The nomads, therefore, continued to herd and share pastures through pasture-use sharing groups as before.

Virtual privatization clearly did not fulfil the government's aim of giving individual households control over their own pastures in order to motivate them to fence off their pastures and modernize animal husbandry, but it had other functions.

First, it allowed officials in localities like Phala to report to higher ups that they had privatized their pastures as the state had called for—without actually having to force the unwilling nomads to do so.

Second, it created a system of poverty alleviation. By implementing virtual privatization on the basis of people as well as animals, poor households with few or no animals received a significant share of the pastureland which they could then lease to richer households who had more animals than their pasture share warranted. To return to the hypothetical example cited above, household A had 40 too many animals, so it could lease pastures from household B for a fee and thus be able to keep these 'excess' animals. Consequently, in Phala and most of the TAR, the 1997 privatization was

actually a mechanism for poverty alleviation rather than a means for transforming pastoral production and management.

#### 14.3.3.2 The 2005–2006 Re-privatization Initiative

Although the 1997 pasture division was announced as permanent, a decade later in 2005/2006, the government revisited the pasture privatization law allowing each area to adjust the previous pasture allocations to accommodate herd increases and decreases based on the number of animals at the end of 2005. This time, the government again advocated real privatization of individual pastures and again proposed that the ratio of people to animals to be increased in favour of people to 70/30 to further help the poor. At the same time, use of the old society term '*marke*' was replaced with the standard Chinese areal measure of called mu. However, this was done by simply creating a conversion rate—there was still no empirical research on the real carrying capacity of Phala, which continued to have no pasture degradation and excess pastures.

As was the case in 1996, the nomads and their officials oppose real privatization and were able again to prevail, the government allowing them to continue the pasture-sharing system and the system of virtual privatization, although the people-to-animal ratio was increased from 60/40% to 65/35%.

Since 2006, the government has continued to intervene in Phala. In 2009–2010, for example, a new township official agreed that the area had excess pastures, and so removed the stocking limits for 2 years to allow the area's total number of live-stock to better fit its real carrying capacity.

However, in 2011, a new government initiative was again in the works to implement the basic Qinghai approach. Discussion are now going on about real privatization, and now for the first time, there were also serious discussion about starting a programme to set aside a significant portion of Phala's pastures for 5 years to allow 'regeneration'. This reduction in pastures would be balanced by drastically reducing overall herd size, with the government paying compensation to each nomad household for the number of livestock it eliminated. Since there are excess pastures in Phala, it is unclear whether it will actually be implemented or whether the nomads will again be permitted to use all of their pastures by pasture-sharing groups.

Despite these repeated interventions by the government and the imposition of stocking rules that precluded the nomads from keeping livestock numbers that reflected the real carrying capacity of the area's pastureland, the Phala nomads have done well economically. By 2009, almost 50% of the households had motorcycles, many had cell phones and five had trucks or tractor-pulled carts. Roads to this remote area have been improved markedly, and in 2009 the government paid for 224 new houses (at a cost of 5.5 million RMB) in the township that Phala is part of along with community centres for each nomad village. Most households already had houses, so the additional houses made it possible for the rest of the nomads to acquire houses at their main campsites. However, having houses did not mean sedentarization or that nomadic pastoralism has ended. The nomads in Phala like houses which they consider more comfortable in winter than tents, but all Phala households



Photo 14.1 The camp of a wealthy Phala household that is balancing modernization, in the sense of owning a motorcycle, tractor and truck, and traditional nomad culture, in the sense of continuing to live in a tent in summer and fall despite having a nice house (Photograph © Melvyn Goldstein 2005)

Table 14.4 Changes in price of nomad products in Phala, 1986–2005

Product	Percent change in price from 1986 to 2005 (%)
Sheep	+650
Yak	+655
Goat cashmere	+669
Yak skins	+1,200
Sheep skins	+208
Goat skins	+246
Sheep wool	+132
Yak wool	+100

Source: Fieldwork by author

still move with their animals to fall pasture sites in September where they remain living in tents for 4 months (Photo 14.1). They also moved sub-sets of animals to more distant pastures at different times throughout the year, setting up satellite camps with tents.

The economic gains experienced in Phala were not the result of nomads going out of their area as migrant labourers to earn cash income, nor was it the result of significant increases in the number of livestock—the number of animals per capita was virtually the same in 2005 as in 1986. Rather, it was the result of major increases in the value of the nomad's animal products, as can be seen in the following table (Table 14.4).<sup>11</sup>

## 14.4 Conclusions

The Phala data raise serious questions about the validity of the Chinese government's view that a radical restructuring of Tibetan pastoralism is necessary to preserve the integrity of the QTP's grasslands due to serious overstocking and pasture degradation. Clearly this was not the case in Phala where there are excess pastures. This is not to say that pasture degradation is not a problem in other parts of the TAR, but that is something that must be determined empirically not simply asserted. Just as it would be incorrect to generalize from Phala to the entire TAR or the whole QTP, it is also incorrect to generalize from some areas in Qinghai to the entire TAR. Policies for pastoral development and change must be grounded in careful scientific investigation of local conditions and local requirements.

Similarly, the Phala data also raise serious questions about the government's assertion that traditional Tibetan pastoral management systems are irrational and destructive. Traditionally, Phala and other nomads in Tibet clearly had a sophisticated system of pasture reallocation based on carrying capacities. The decisions not to use this in 1959 and 1981 were made by the government, not by the nomads.

The Phala data also show that whilst the government's pastoral policy seeks to privatize the grasslands on an individual household basis, it has allowed nomads such as those in Phala to continue their system of shared pastures. Consequently, 30 years after de-collectivization in 1981, nomadic pastoralism is continuing in Phala. Motorcycles may be replacing horses and tractors and trucks replacing yaks for transportation, but the traditional activities of raising livestock, harvesting their products and trading these for items made elsewhere is ongoing.

However, government pressure to implement real privatization and fencing is continuing, so it is unclear whether Phala will be able to withstand this pressure in the coming years. Consequently, whilst protecting China's unique QTP is a matter of national and world concern, the Phala data suggest that the government needs to adopt a more nuanced pastoral policy that takes into consideration real local conditions and supports more traditional forms of nomadic pastoralism in areas like Phala where there is no grassland degradation and where the nomads oppose privatization. It would indeed be ironic—and tragic—if, after surviving the destructive madness of the Cultural Revolution and successfully revitalizing their society after de-collectivization, the way of life of nomads like Phala is undermined by inappropriate notions of conservation and development that are based on faulty evidence, negative stereotypes and untested assumptions.

## Notes

1. Many nomad groups also harvested small amounts of wild vegetation (hay) from set-aside pastures, which they fed as supplements to weak pregnant and lactating animals at birthing time in Spring.

2. The Panchen Lama appears to have obtained this area in the eighteenth century.
3. The ninth in this lineage died in 1933 and the tenth in 1989.
4. This triennial re-allocation system appears to be widespread in at least Western Tibet, for example, nomads in Sangsang, Saga, Drongpa and Porong also utilized it, and there is some evidence that it was also in operation in Nagtsang in the western part of today's Nagchuka Prefecture and in Tshochen in Ngari Prefecture.
5. For the history of this period, see Goldstein (1989, 2007).
6. The actual method of classification and payment in the communal era is too complex to be discussed here.
7. A household of five therefore received five shares of the commune's livestock or 185 animals (25 yaks, 125 sheep and 35 goats).
8. There was a great deal of ambiguity over exactly how many years the pastures were allocated for, some saying 30 years and some saying 50 years, but all believed that it was for a long time.
9. Excess pastureland refers to the presence of pasture areas that the nomads did not use for grazing during the year. See Cincotta et al. (1991) for a discussion of our data on grazing intensity that were collected from exclosures in Phala. Also see Goldstein et al. (1990); Goldstein and Beall (1989, 1990); Goldstein (1994).
10. There was, however, some flexibility since increases in the herd size of households within a pasture-use group were tacitly permitted so long as this was balanced by losses in other households, in other words, so long as the overall total size of the pasture-use group stayed the same.
11. Since 1986, only one nomad has left the area to work as a migrant labourer. Farmers in the TAR, however, face very different problems since the value of barley and wheat has hardly increased since 1981. They have responded by sending household members out as migrant labourers to earn cash income. For a discussion of this, see Goldstein et al. (2008).

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## Chapter 15

# Tibetan Pastoralists in Transition. Political Change and State Interventions in Nomad Societies

Andreas Gruschke

**Abstract** Past and present Chinese policies towards Tibetan pastoralists developed in the context of the Communist Party's ideological agenda from which implemented project measures can be deduced. This context needs to be understood in order to assess what kind of practical implications of pastoral policies were and are aimed at. Examples from case studies in Yushu, southern Qinghai, will demonstrate what kind of transformational processes underlie changes both in the pastoralist society and in the policies. This paper will argue that policies are imposed with regard to both the difficult livelihood situation of the people and new efforts for ecological conservation. However, the policy's objectives and the results of its implementation often diverge very strongly. A preliminary analysis will seek to explain this.

**Keywords** Tibetan pastoralism • Political change • State interventions • Settlement and migration • Rangeland availability • Declining significance of animal husbandry

### 15.1 Introduction

When collectivisation started in the People's Republic of China (PRC), mobile pastoralism in Tibet was thought to perish. The economic liberalisation starting in 1980, however, apparently brought about a 're-nomadisation' (Gruschke 2008, 3). Pastureland all over the Tibetan Plateau was 'reconquered' by the typical black tents of nomadic households and their herds, and prospects for the market orientation of the pastoral groups were supported by government policies. Obvious features of

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