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Chapter 13 'Everybody Likes Houses. Even Birds Are Coming!'

Housing Tibetan Pastoralists in Golok: Policies and Everyday Realities

Emilia Róža Sułek

Abstract This chapter discusses the trend visible amongst Tibetan pastoralists of Golok Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture in Qinghai Province, China, to invest increasing amounts of money in building houses upon their winter grazing lands. It reveals the beginnings of this phenomenon and brings data on the newest state policies aimed at encouraging the pastoralist population to construct houses. Analysis of successive waves of house construction is accompanied by a discussion of the reasons pastoralists themselves give for building new houses. The chapter analyses the roles which the houses play in the lives of their owners and discusses whether or not the pastoralists perceive the living in houses as conflicting with their self-image.

Keywords Pastoralists • Sedentarization • Resettlement • Tibet

13.1 Introduction

On my first visit to the Golok highlands during 2007, my hosts invited me: 'Come to stay with us in summer! We'll be staying in black tents, that's how the pastoralists do it!' When I returned and visited the same friends' summer camp and lived in their black tent, they said: 'Come to stay with us in winter! We'll be back in the house. It'll be warmer and more comfortable'. It was a rainy summer and tents did not seem to be the most admired form of dwelling under the constant showers and upon soil soaked with rainwater. But was that only about the bad weather?

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13.1.1 Aims of the Study

Visitors to the pastoral region of Golok (*mGo log*)¹ Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture (hereafter TAP) in Qinghai Province, China, can observe rows of houses sitting next to each other in the pastoralists' winter quarters. Garages for vehicles are often part of the architecture, and block walls enclose the yards. Such images immediately beg various questions for the uninformed observer. Are these houses built due to state intervention? Are all Tibetan pastoralists participating in state-run house construction projects? This study deals with the voluntary settlement by Tibetan pastoralists. It asks what functions do the houses play in the contemporary pastoral society and whether or not the pastoralists, who spend much of the year living in a house, perceive this fact as a danger to their self-image. The study argues that in spite of the Chinese state's involvement in changing the housing realities on the Tibetan plateau, Tibetan pastoralists may be and are interested in constructing houses for themselves and that growing number of houses on the high Tibetan grasslands is not only a result of the state pressure on sedentarization but a function of growing affluence of the pastoral society.

This study is based on long-term anthropological research conducted in Golok TAP between 2007 and 2010. The research focused on social and economic consequences of the emergence of the trade in caterpillar fungus (*Ophiocordyceps sinensis*) for pastoralists living in Domkhok (*sDom khog*) Township of Machen (*rMa chen*) County in Golok. Domkhok² remains the study's main focus, although additional information from other townships is added to gain a comparative perspective. Focused on a pastoral community inhabiting one township, this study will not be representative of the whole of pastoral Tibet. However, neither the area studied nor Golok as a whole exists in a space niche independent from others, and whilst details of administrative solutions describe this township only, broader tendencies observed are less locally specific and run across larger portions of the Tibetan plateau.

13.1.2 The Study Area of Domkhok

Domkhok is located within a short distance of the Amnye Machen (*A myes rma chen*) mountain range (the highest peak counts 6,282 m above sea level). The average altitude in Domkhok is 3,800 m, and mean annual temperatures oscillate around 0.6°C, with the strong diurnal variations and quick changes of weather characteristic of much of the Tibet highlands (MQ 2005: 90). Snowfalls are not uncommon even in summer, and on hot July days when the sun drops below the horizon, the air becomes chilly in an instant. Winters are cold and dry, summers short and humid. This humidity has additionally increased since the area became targeted by artificial rain-making programmes aimed at improving environmental conditions, albeit considered as a nuisance by local populations.

Domkhok is a pastoral area with extensive livestock production as the main source of subsistence for its residents, although this pattern has begun to change recently due to the caterpillar fungus trade. Pastoralists in Domkhok have mainly relied upon yak and sheep breeding. They keep small numbers of horses, and in the 'old society' (prior to 1958) they also kept yak-cow crossbreeds called *dzomo* (*mdzo mo*). This animal is rarely seen in Golok nowadays. Formerly, yaks played a more significant role due in part to their additional function as pack animals for seasonal movement to different grazing camps—a function now replaced by modern motorized vehicles. Sheep, on the other hand, are frequently referred to as a better 'cash provider'. This reflects attempts during the people's commune period (1960s–1980s) to strengthen the position of sheep within the local pastoral economy as a more productive unit than larger stock (Manderscheid 2002: 279). Pastoralists in Golok, however, are not 'sheep producers' in the same sense that pastoralists in the Tibet Autonomous Region (hereafter TAR) are—they do not milk their ewes, for example. Yaks have once again recently come to dominate local herd composition, especially during the last decade, when sheep populations underwent a dramatic decline (Sulek 2010a).

Domkhok is settled almost purely by Tibetans who officially constitute 99% of its residents (MSY 2009: 11–12). The pastoralists in Domkhok do not belong to the well-known 'Golok tribes' mentioned frequently in the literature on eastern Tibetan areas. They identify themselves instead as belonging to the Wranakh *tsowa* (*sBra nag isho ba*) in a subgrouping called Metsang *dewa* (*dMe tshang sde ba*).³ Wranakh is a name referring to a wider group of Tibetan pastoralists inhabiting an area stretching from the Amnye Machen range right up to the north of Qinghai Province (Sulek 2010b). This group is believed to form one of three main Tibetan linguistic units in northeast Tibet (Roerich 1958: 6). The Metsang pastoralists claim to have arrived in their present territories from Rebkong (*Reb gong*; Tongren County, Huangnan Prefecture, Qinghai) and became allied with the Golok tribes as their *philde* (*phyi sde*) or 'outer tribe'.⁴

13.1.3 Resettlement in Domkhok

Tibetan pastoralists in Golok have been subjected to various kinds of state resettlement programmes linked to environmental improvement policies. Some initial studies reveal the variation of such resettlement programmes (Ptackova 2010; Sodnamkyid 2008). Regarding their scope—the size of territories and numbers of people affected—officially published data can contribute some insight. Golok TAP's official website states that only one of the programmes, 'Turning Pastureland into Grassland' (Chin. *Tuimu huancao*), has been implemented in 26 of the 44 Golok townships (Chin. *xiang*) and towns (Chin. *zhen*) allowed nearly 20,920 km² of grassland to be retired from grazing (GTH 2010). Already this example reveals that resettlement projects, although large in scale, have not impacted every part of the prefecture with a similar intensity. Presently, a programme of state subsidies for

house building is being implemented in Golok, and this can be seen as another step in the series of state interventions into the living conditions of Tibetan pastoralists. This programme, however, does not require or imply removal of pastoralists from their original living place, and hence cannot be counted as a resettlement initiative. Details on the house-building subsidies programme are discussed below.

13.2 Houses on the Grasslands: First Encounters

During the collectivization period (at least post-1961), pastoralists in Domkhok lived in their own tents. The state project of modernizing livestock production in the people's communes included attempts to introduce new animal breeds and winter fodder production. Constructing animal shelters was another dimension of this programme. These animal shelters, as some persons recall today, gave them their first chance to experience the benefits of having something more than a tent roof over one's head. Some informants admitted that they moved into the abandoned shelter walls in the early period of de-collectivization. Others say that they used to do this even earlier. But, as a matter of record, at least in Domkhok, the picture of pastoralists living in their black tents next to the commune-built animal shelters prevailed, and the first houses intended for *people* were built only after the communes were disbanded. It was de-collectivization which set the sedentarization process in motion.

It is generally recognized that the state took an active role in directing Tibetan pastoralists towards house construction in the years following the closing down of the communes (Clarke 1988; Manderscheid 2002). Some pastoralists in Domkhok recalled that the 'government encouraged people to build houses', but anything like coercion to move into a house they could not confirm. Many persons did not even remember anything like a milder incentive programme on the part of local administration to increase people's interest in houses back in that period. It could, of course, be the case that more subtle measures were taken to introduce the idea of building houses into the local society, as had occurred in Xueshan (Tibetan name Gangri, Gangs ri)—a township neighbouring Domkhok. There, as a local leader reported, the process started with several 'pioneers' who paved the way for the houses. Later on, the less enthusiastic members of the community joined too:

There were families who refused to build a house, but some families started their own ones, and after having the experience of how much better it is to stay in a house, other families started too. So it began with two to three families, then people learned that houses are warmer, and others joined in. For example, with solar panels, it was the same. The government said that it would be good to buy them, but no family wanted to invest. People said: 'We only want butter lamps and candles'. So the party members were forced to buy them first. Later, people said: 'That's really good', and all of them bought [panels].

Whilst Xueshan Township pastoralists started building their houses in the beginning of 1990s (as the township leader recalled), the same process in Domkhok commenced already during the 1980s. However, an important difference between two

townships was state involvement in financing the house construction. Xueshan informants called the house building a 'government programme' in which township residents and local institutional bodies were said to have shared its costs as follows: 20% was paid from the state budget, 30% by the Herders Association or *Drok u khang* ('*brog u khang*'),⁵ and the remaining part was contributed by each household involved. If a household did not have enough of its own funds, it could easily get a state loan for house building—the informant stressed.⁶

In Domkhok, the situation looked different. The majority of informants whose first houses were built in the 1980s reported having financed them with their own funds. Persons who worked during that period in the township administration all confirmed that building houses and fencing pastures in Domkhok was paid from the pastoralists' own pockets.⁷ Some possibilities for receiving financial aid for house construction also existed in Domkhok, but none of the informants recalled anybody 'poor enough' to be given such aid. Only one person (out of fifty reported cases) confessed that his family's first house (built in 1987) was co-sponsored by the state. His costs for the building materials and hiring workers totalled 6,000 yuan, of which 20% was paid from the 'government' budget—the informant declared.

Receiving financial aid was not something my informants easily admitted during research interviews, and some caution might be needed to interpret their reports. Receipt of money from the state—in the form of state aid or as retirement funds which some ex-officials received—was repeatedly left undeclared or was revealed only after initial hesitation. Given this reluctance to disclose the state input into the family budgets, it may well be that state financial input into house construction could have been more significant than reported. But the informants' denials of the state's agency during the early phase of house building might also be an indication that they not only accepted this development but took it over as their own project and—by now—probably identified with it.

13.3 The Present Situation in Domkhok

During my field research, almost every household in Domkhok already had several houses located alongside each other at the family's winter quarters. Apart from newly married couples, no household in Domkhok was limited to owning *just one* house, with two, three or sometimes even four houses being the rule. Households with already established houses during the 1980s and early 1990s are essential for understanding of the dynamics of the house-building phenomenon: these households were *there* when the house building started and witnessed subsequent developments in the housing situation.

Houses in Domkhok were constructed in several construction periods or waves. The first construction period started in the mid-1980s (the first houses so far documented in my research were built in 1986) and lasted until the early 1990. During the mid-1990s, the second construction period began and lasted until the beginning of 2000s. The most recent construction phase commenced in 2009 and continues



Photo 13.1 View of a pastoral household's living quarters, Domkhok Township, Machen County, Golok TAP (Photograph © Emilia Sulek August 2009)

until the time of writing. All households studied built their houses in the following sequence: each had its first house built between 1986 and 1991, then a second house built between 1994 and 2001, and post-2009 they have each built or were building a third new house. All these households have in their domestic compounds all types of buildings built between the 1980s and the present day. Pastoralist families do not raze their old houses when constructing new ones on the same spot, they merely add it alongside. Lack of space for construction works is not an issue for inhabitants of the expansive Tibetan grasslands, neither is there any concept of reusing building materials from a previous house to build a new one.⁸ That makes the pastoralists' settlements appear like colonies of houses springing up next to each other, sometimes in a row, where the newer houses 'mushroom' off the older ones (see Photo 13.1).

The houses built in these three construction waves differ in certain respects. The paramount difference can be observed in the construction materials themselves. The walls have changed from being built of earth in the earliest houses to concrete blocks during the 1990s and early 2000s and now to bricks during the most recent construction period. The size of houses also changed—whilst older houses were only approximately 50 m², newer ones average around 80 m². Another change is window size and number, which in early houses were small and few, whilst in later ones the larger window panels can cover a large part of the entire front wall. Gabled roofs have taken the place of older shed or flat roofs, and ceramic tiles have replaced corrugated metal and pounded earth roofs—in the oldest houses, the roofs rested on

wooden poles and were isolated with layers of dry bushes, straw, rubber and plastic. Rammed earthen floors have been exchanged for cement floors covered with PVC. Finally, newer houses have been aesthetically transformed due to their new façade decoration. Whilst the rammed earth walls of the earliest houses were left in their 'pure' state, later walls received a coating of ceramic tiles, and Buddhist symbolic motifs on them give the house a specific 'Tibetan' character.

What has not changed significantly is the shape of houses nor the organization of the space inside. The pastoralists' houses in Golok remain rectangular in their ground plan and are never higher than a single storey. Organization of the house's inner space has remained determined by the fact that the windows face only one direction, whilst the back of the house sits against a hillside or mountain slope. In these respects, pastoralists' houses replicate the manner in which their tents are erected, with their entrance facing the bottom of the valley, often to the south, and their rear walls facing the rising slopes behind them. Thus, such houses cannot be expanded in their depth, and all rooms have to be arranged in one long row. The actual size of the fully habitable space in the house is not calculated by the number of rooms, but by the number of stoves a house contains. As houses have become larger, additional stoves have been added into the new rooms.

How the houses relate to the household's biography two examples show. Mr. Churtod, from the first household, is 44 years old (born 1967). He lives together with his wife Yibo (same age) and their two elder children aged between 20 and 22 (b. 1989 and 1990). The youngest daughter (b. 1992) studies (since 2001) in a boarding school in Dawu. Churtod's mother (b. 1947) lives together year-round with his family, whilst his father (b. 1944) moved (in 2004) to town to look after the youngest daughter. Before moving into their first house, Churtod and Yibo lived in a black tent in the same spot where their house stands today. Their first earth house was built in 1991 by workers from Rebkong. Churtod recalled that building it involved an expense of some 6,000 yuan, of which all was paid by his parents. Their second concrete house was constructed in 2001 for approximately 60,000 yuan. Their newest brick house was built in 2009, and the family spent 110,000 yuan for its construction (of which 39,000 yuan was reimbursed—more on that below). In terms of living spaces which the three houses offered, the oldest one had just one room and one stove, the second and third each have three rooms and two stoves. Churtod owns a small house located on the family's autumn grazing land, too. The proportion between the number of household members in Churtod's family and the houses owned is shown in Fig. 13.1.

That the number of houses owned does not have to correspond with the growing number of people inhabiting them is revealed in the second example. Mr. Dudu is 44 years old (born 1967) and his wife Tseko is 43 (born 1968). They have three children aged between 12 and 20 (born 1999, 1995 and 1991). Their first house, which Dudu and Tseko moved to, was built in 1987. It was paid for by Tseko's parents and constructed by Hui builders from Hualong Hui Autonomous County (Haidong Prefecture, Qinghai). The second house, of concrete blocks, was built in 1998. Dudu and Tseko recall that it had cost approximately 50,000 yuan and was built by Han workers from Huangzhong County (under jurisdiction of Xining City, Qinghai). Their most recent house was built in 2009 by Tibetans from Xunhua Salar

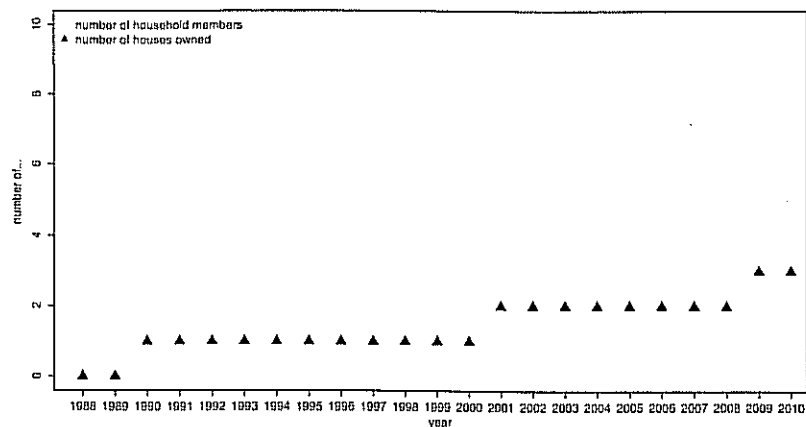


Fig. 13.1 Houses and the development of the household, Mr. Churton and Mrs. Yibo, Domkhok Township, Machen County, Golok TAP, 2010 (Source: Fieldwork by the author)

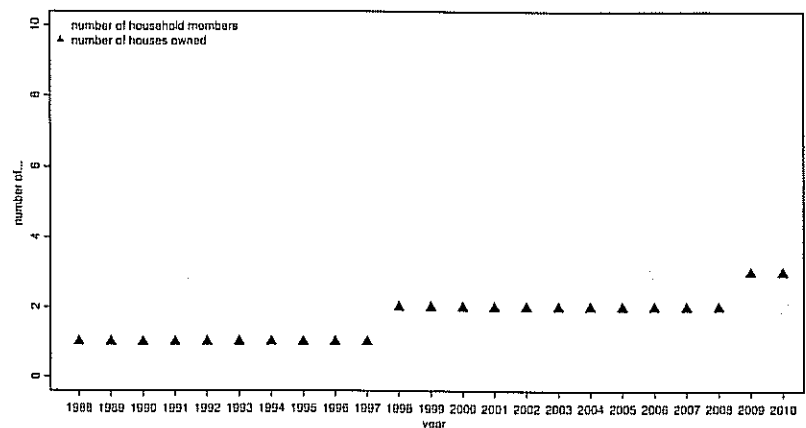


Fig. 13.2 Houses and the development of the household, Mr. Dudu and Mrs. Tseko, Domkhok Township, Machen County, Golok TAP, 2010 (Source: Fieldwork by the author)

Autonomous County (Haidong Prefecture, Qinghai) at an expense of 110,000 yuan (of which 40,000 yuan was reimbursed by a state programme). Dudu thought about buying a house in Dawu town, but this required a further 140,000–150,000 yuan investment. In Dudu's household, all children attend (since 2002, 2005 and 2008) schools in town. Thus, the three houses Dudu has serve only two persons at the moment. The changes in Dudu and Tseko's household size and houses owned are shown in Fig. 13.2.

Of all the houses owned by the households in these examples, only those raised in 2009 and after were said to have been subsidized by the state. This was done within the framework of a programme called *You mumin dingju* or Nomadic Settlement.

13.3.1 Nomadic Settlement Programme

My research coincided with the first implementation of the Nomadic Settlement programme in Tibetan populated areas of Qinghai. This programme implies that pastoral households could receive a subsidy to build a new house.

Formally speaking, the Nomadic Settlement programme is aimed at households that either do not have a permanent house or who have a house which is 'unsteady' and 'in a danger of collapse'—originally defined as a house made of earth and wood or one that 'has not been repaired for a long time' (Ptackova 2011: 4). If this aspect of the programme was followed as a guiding principle, then in Domkhok there could only ever be very limited implementation possible. 'Unsteady' houses exist in Domkhok, too, but they are usually only one amongst several different houses which a family owns. Moreover, it is impossible to find anyone in Domkhok who lacks a house. Whilst in present-day Golok newly married couples are the only ones who might live all year round in a tent for the first 2 or 3 years of establishing a household, such cases were never encountered in Domkhok. Thus, in the Domkhok study area, the housing transitions supported by Nomadic Settlement actually took place between existing houses and newer ones. What then is the qualitative difference between these newer houses subsidized by the state and those which the pastoralists built by and for themselves in the years preceding the Nomadic Settlement programme?

In order to receive subsidies, any planned new dwellings must fit the criteria of the Nomadic Settlement programme. First, a subsidized house has to be built of bricks and never of concrete block (it can theoretically be built of stones, too, but this is not practised). Following the 2010 earthquake in Jyekundo (*sKye dgu mdo*), Yushu (*Yul shul*) Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture Qinghai, concrete has been labelled as a potentially dangerous construction material. Although the Nomadic Settlement programme started in Golok 1 year earlier, statements about the need to increase building security in case of seismic movements were used by my informants in 2010 to justify why the programme is being implemented. Moreover, a new house needs to be at least 80 m²—whilst larger houses are accepted.⁹ New houses must thus offer a certain size of comfortable living space for the inhabitants. In addition, the house itself should be enclosed within a high concrete wall, with an iron gate leading to the yard. This is a novelty since older houses merely sat on the family's land and the land itself was fenced, but the house usually was not. If houses were fenced—because a family lived close to the road or had a preference for extra security—the fence was nothing more than a *cagra* (*lcags ra*) or metal wire used to fence pastures.¹⁰ Another novelty is the toilet: after 2009, characteristic toilet buildings sprang from the ground at some distance from new houses. Finally, animal sheds (roofed buildings and not just corrals) are mentioned in the programme outlines (Ptackova 2011: 4) and are indeed appearing in Domkhok, but these are conceived of as a separate enterprise and are not built together with the house.

To build a brick house of the minimum size required by the programme is not cheap. The cost of such a house—based upon the investment of persons who had

built or were building them in 2009–2010—ranged from 110,000 to 150,000 yuan. The household initially needs to raise this sum by itself and pay for both the materials and labour from its own budget. Only when the house is complete and passes a quality control check will a percentage of the total cost be reimbursed. In Domkhok, this reimbursement has been paid up to 40,000 yuan, of which 36,000 yuan comes from the Qinghai Provincial budget, with the remainder covered by prefectural funds.¹¹ Whether or not the house follows the building guidelines and is eligible for a subsidy is decided during inspection tours by a group of officials from both the Grassland and the Financial Bureaus, plus members of other administrative bodies at the prefecture and township level. Each October, when construction works stop before the winter sets on, the 14-member team tours the township to evaluate the quality of the newly erected buildings.

In 2010, a township official showed me a series of photographs on his laptop taken during such an inspection tour from 2009—a comprehensive series of images picturing houses, some of them still empty and some filled with the first pieces of furniture. It appeared that the programme had been overwhelmingly embraced by the local population. My visits to Domkhok in 2007–2008 before the programme was commenced and after that also suggested wide participation in the programme.¹² During the first year of implementation, 40 families in Domkhok built new houses. A year later, 125 families were in the process of house construction. In 2011, 61 households were expected to start new construction work on their land. By 2012, as a township official informed me, every family in Domkhok was expected to have a new house: 'That's a government plan', he said.

If every household receives 40,000 yuan of subsidy, it is easy to calculate how much—in only one township—the programme will cost the state. Summing up all households that already took part in the programme, or are taking part in 2011, a total of 9,040,000 yuan is reached. This money does not reach the hands of the rural residents before the house is accepted as qualifying. Thus, it is still the local people who cover the major part of the programme's costs. How do they manage to raise such money?

Reports from other Tibetan areas where this and other housing programmes have been implemented revealed that households took out bank loans to pay for house construction—loans which not everybody was likely to pay back in due time (Yeh 2011: 312). The state's ambition to provide Tibetan populations with new houses was thus viewed as damaging fragile household budgets. In Domkhok—according to the information from one of the banks in Dawu—local residents apply for loans for house construction, although not on a large scale. According to the bank employee, the pastoralists tend to use banks to store their savings rather than to take out loans. The loans, if taken, oscillate between 50,000 and 60,000 yuan at 10–11% interest rates and are taken out over a 6-month to 2-year period. Loans for house construction constitute around a half of all loans issued—the remainder are issued for the purpose of buying cars and fencing the pasturelands.

The second source of income used to finance house construction is trade in caterpillar fungus. Money from gathering the fungus and from leasing pasturelands to other persons for gathering has become the basis of the pastoral household economy

in present-day Golok (Sulek 2009). Caterpillar fungus income allows smooth and unbroken functioning of household economies but also allows for considerable savings, which can later be used as capital for large investments. In 2010, half a kilogram of dry fungus sold for between 30,000 and 70,000 yuan, and one household easily managed to collect more than this amount per annum. Fees which the gatherers paid for using the pastureland started (in 2010) at 5,000 and reached up to 20,000 yuan per person per season—they are decided according to current fungus prices and quality of the grassland leased. A single household can lease the land to at least several gatherers. In extreme cases, these numbers may reach into the hundreds. Knowing the scale of caterpillar fungus-related income, estimations of the savings one household can make after 4–5 weeks of the gathering season do not surprise. My informants, when asked about their savings from one season, declared 30,000–50,000 yuan for their own households and up to 500,000–600,000 yuan for other households they know. Whilst the latter sum might be overstated, the former sum seems too modest. In any case, the caterpillar fungus money was singled out by both the pastoralists and the township officials as the main financial 'fuel' for house-building investments. It fuels the house building in two ways: first, by paying for building materials and construction workers, and second, by repaying bank loans taken out for house building. The relation between caterpillar fungus income and investment made in house building is visible in the timing of the pastoralists' repayments of their loans. As the bank employee reported, about 80% of Domkhok pastoralists repay loans in July and August, that is, soon after the fungus-gathering season is over.

13.3.2 *If Not Nomadic Settlement Then What?*

The case study data presented above demonstrates that Domkhok residents readily embraced housing when they had the opportunity to do so. Yet, commonsense or entrenched understandings of what 'pastoralism' means might cause outside observers to view houses and pastoralists as somehow antithetical. This issue refers directly to the Tibetan concept of *drokpa* ('*brog pa*)—a term which pastoralists on the Tibetan plateau use to describe themselves.

Drokpa refers to inhabitants of highland grassland zones beyond the upper reaches of farming areas and where herding and animal husbandry are of necessity the only sustainable and primary means of subsistence. Being a *drokpa*, in the Domkhok informants' understanding, indicates not only sharing a place and a way of life (in terms of economy), but entails participating in a certain 'pastoral culture' or *droksul* ('*brog srol*) and speaking the 'pastoral language' or *drokked* ('*brog skad*). What is not an immediate constituent of this category is mobility and—connected with it—dwelling style (Gruschke 2008: 14). None of the informants indicated tents (at least as a year-round basis for dwelling) as an important criterion for being a *drokpa*. Had there ever been a latent assertion that life in tents is an essential part of the cultural 'luggage' the term *drokpa* carries, this assertion must have been reformed

when houses and not tents belong to the pastoralists' everyday experience. Houses, on the other hand, did not have to be totally alien to Tibetan *drokpas*. This was pointed out by Cynthia Beall and Melvyn Goldstein, who observed that for their Western Tibetan informants 'living in a house instead of a tent was a matter of comfort, not basic identity', and that already in the 'old society' having a house was perceived by pastoralists as a status symbol (1990: 64).

When asked how they view their own tent dwelling of the past, Golok informants showed no willingness to think, even hypothetically, about staying in a tent for the entire year. Many called houses an improvement in their lives, and one that could even be extended, if possible, to life in their distant and higher summer pastures as well. In answer to the question 'Do you enjoy the tent?', a man of 60+ years replied, 'No. In the house it is better. But I can't build a house here [in the summer pasture]. In the house it is warmer and everybody has his/her own bed'. A man in his 40s responded, 'We have to live here in tents, because the roads are so bad. If we always stayed here in summer we could also build a house here'. A woman in her 40s replied, 'Everybody likes houses. Even birds are coming!' and pointed at a sparrow hopping through her room, and the comment of a 32-year-old man was simply 'I don't miss anything about the tent when I'm in the house'.

Not all pastoralists who were interviewed were unanimous in their view of houses as neutral for the *drokpa* identity. But *all* of them nevertheless live in houses. Even if harbouring nostalgic sentiments about their parents' or grandparents' tent-dwelling past, my informants saw houses as a cherished opportunity offered by life in the present times and a function of increased security and levels of affluence.¹³ It can be questioned how is this view influenced by the state promoted vision of modernity and of the Tibetan society in the past as simple reverse of what the Chinese state strives for in terms of material development. There is however little doubt that the battle between sentiment and practicality has been won by practicality.

A question may arise as to what would be happening in Domkhok in the housing situation had not the programme of Nomadic Settlement been announced. Pastoralists interviewed believed that—whether the state provided money for house building or not—people would build new houses anyway. It was simply because 'the pastoralists were crazy about houses', as many persons stated. The programme of house construction subsidies offered what informants perceived as 'free money' to fulfil aims they would normally desire. Next to gold, local pastoralists considered houses the best way of investing one's savings. When asked what steps they were planning in their lives for the near future, informants indicated 'building' or 'repairing' the house as one of the first responses.

13.3.3 Houses as Good to Have. Not Necessarily to Live in

A house is a material object of a particular kind. Being exposed, on a lasting basis, to the general public gaze, the house constitutes a form of property which 'expresses or betrays, in a more decisive way than many other goods, the social being of its

owners, [or] the extent of their "means"' (Bourdieu 2005: 19). It is the owners' business card, a testimony of their pecuniary repute (Veblen 1987[1899]: 54) But not only that: the house reveals its owners' 'taste, the classification system they deploy in their acts of appropriation and which, in assuming objective form in visible goods, provides a purchase for the symbolic appropriations of others, who are thereby enabled to situate the owners in social space by situating them within the space of tastes' (Bourdieu 2005: 19). The house counts not only within the space of material or economic differences but within the space of tastes and cultural loyalties and can inform observers of the owners' advancement on the path towards 'being modern'. By having a house of this or that kind, one not only satisfies his/her immediate survival needs and even more emotional needs but also communicates to the neighbours: we are like this, we can afford that, we are advanced to such-and-such a degree in terms of adhering to the trends of the day.

Tibetan houses in the pastoral regions, specifically those located in the grazing areas rather than township villages or county towns, lack certain traits which a house as an object on the housing market has. Pastoral houses are not objects of buying, selling or renting, for example. When pastoralists move to town—voluntarily and not within any resettlement programme—they keep their grasslands and houses and hire workers from lower altitude areas who manage their livestock at the family's outpost on the grazing lands. Thus, pastoral houses do not have the same trajectory which other enduring commodities can have: they are not subject of trade transactions.¹⁴ Transferred between generations, they remain within their owners' family. If 'commodity status' occurred episodically in an object's life history, then Tibetan pastoral houses would be commodities in their dormant phase; one day they may be commodified and their value converted into cash upon sale, but so far their economic biography (Kopytoff 2003: 68)—of sales, resales, growing and falling values—is only rather brief.

As already observed, pastoralists do not dismantle their old house to replace them with new ones. On the contrary, old houses are gradually renovated, with new roofs or tile-coating façades being added. The fact that all houses—whether 20 years old or new—sit together on a single living space strengthens the impression of pastoralists' now having collections of houses. Not all of these houses are in actual use. It was common in the households I visited that they lived in their older houses, whilst the new houses were kept for special occasions. Nicely furnished and richly equipped, they were opened up and heated only when any special guests were expected. But on a normal day the door might stay closed, and the owners might follow the old habits of staying where they used to stay before.

This specialness of the newest house—which one has, but does not really use—is apparent from the pastoralists' own statements about use patterns. Mrs. Tsedron (she has three houses: the first one was built '20–30 years ago', the second in 2003 and the third in 2010) admitted spending most of her time in the first and second house, and about the newest one she exclaimed: 'We don't even go inside!' Mr. Tsela (he has four houses: the first one built in 1985, the second from the mid-1990s and two newer ones: from 2007 and 2010) declared spending most of his time in the third house. The most recent, fourth house, he used only for the New Year and similar

important religious and community events. Mr. Dudu (his household was discussed above) admitted that in the oldest house his family used to 'keep things', in the second one they cooked and watched television and in the newest one they sometimes slept (cooking, watching television and sleeping were used in the survey as three activities which define use of domestic space by the informants). Although the house use patterns cannot be too easily subsumed under one heading, the impression remains that some of the houses the pastoralists own are redundant from the point of view of their everyday needs.

Houses, in a certain sense, resemble the position of livestock in the pastoralists' lives. Tibetan pastoralists were noted as being reluctant to specialize in commercialized meat production (Levine 1999). This lack of enthusiasm for producing animals for the market has its reasons not in 'irrational and non-economic love of their livestock' but in values ascribed to livestock: more than a mere means of subsistence, livestock is 'a form of wealth, social capital and source of prestige or esteem connected with specific cultural values' (Khazanov 1998: 14) and functions as an 'investment commodity' (Salzman and Galaty 1990: 26). Houses now hold a similar position: they provide their owners with much more than the space under their roofs. But it is not only the house itself, or the number of houses which are owned as a token of one's pecuniary status, but also what is contained within the house.

13.3.4 House as Container

The housing market in Golok is probably as alive as never before, but it is not particularly diversified in terms of the possibilities it offers. This is especially visible in the example of houses built within the Nomadic Settlement programme: differing in minor details, these houses have to adhere to the prescribed blueprint. If houses are to fulfil the function of demonstrating one's financial standing, the house's outer shell cannot serve this goal due its uniformity. This goal has to be accomplished by furnishing the house's inside, and so the family's standing is shown by what the house-shell contains.

The function of the house as a 'container' is highlighted by the pastoralists' own reflections on the costs of building and of furnishing the house. Providing furniture and all equipment considered indispensable for a comfortable living turns out to be another financial challenge. 'Compared to a house, what is inside is sometimes even more expensive', one pastoralist remarked. Other explanations made this point even more explicit: the pastoralists need houses to 'put things inside', as another informant stated. What then do the pastoralists keep in their homes?

The newer, brick or concrete houses are divided in two rooms. The bigger room is the more representative, arranged with piety and without regard to cost. The smaller room provides a more informal space. In the main room, there is everything one could wish to have at home: a stove, elegant furniture sets and consumer electronic equipment. Along the front and side wall, low wooden seats or sofas run covered with Tibetan-style carpets. A row of long tables stands in front of them.



Photo 13.2 Inside the house. Note the metal safe and double bed. Domkhok Township, Machen County, Golok TAP (Photograph © Emilia Sulek Tibetan New Year, February 2008)

The tables and seats are all made in 'Tibetan style', same as is the main piece of furniture on the back wall: a cabinet, with shelves and drawers and with an extra shelf to hold a television set (carpenters in Dawu claimed in 2010 that 'anything without a television shelf did not sell these days'). The cabinets, measuring up to 7 m in length and over 2 m in height, are all of carved wood painted with dragons, wind horses, other creatures of Tibetan and Chinese imagery and Buddhist religious symbols (Photo 13.2). A metal safe sits in the corner of the room securing valuables, documents and cash. Next to the door, a 'domestic corner' is arranged with cupboards for cooking pots and other kitchen utensils. Finally, a refrigerator and other home appliances are there, too—if the owners do not keep them in another house.

How much money does a household need in order to provide the house with this much in the way of chattels and furnishings? And what do pastoralists regard as necessary to have in the home? Table 13.1 shows a selection of important elements in every house's inventory, including only goods placed in the largest room.

This table does not provide a complete list of all that is necessary to furnish the house. This list is also changing and gets regularly upgraded; the 'emulation effect' requires that levels of consumption change together with the perceived standards of living well (Olson 1998: 191). But even this short list from one room gives a good indication of how strong momentum for consumption is in relation to house building. If the house is a container to fill, then those who supply the necessary 'filling' must enjoy a rise in their turnover. Additionally, since older houses continue to be used, there is little or no possible recycling or second use of chattels and furnishings; every new house constructed entails the purchase of further new chattels and furnishings.

Table 13.1 Selection of home chattels and furnishings. Domkhok Township, Machen County, Golok TAP

Item	Price in yuan (and size)
Tibetan-style cabinet	5,000 (2.3 m × 6 m) to 9,500 (2.3 m × 7 m)
Tibetan-style table (minimum three necessary)	500 (60 cm × 1.5 m)
Tibetan-style bench (minimum three necessary)	500 (2 m × 80 cm) to 2,000 (4 m × 1 m)
Metal stove	750–900 (60 × 80 cm)
Television set	2,000–8,990
VCD player	300
Total	11,050–27,190

Source: Field enquiries the author in 2010

Tibetan pastoral areas in China are nowadays an expanding market for furniture. This market is increasingly competitive, and shop owners interviewed during my research complained that compared to their earnings from a decade ago, now they are able to sell more products but earn less per item sold. The pastoralists used to buy less in the past, but also the supply was much smaller; 10 years ago, two shops in Dawu sold furniture, and today there are almost 20. The 'traffic' in the shops speeds up in summer or autumn, when new house builders complete their work. At the busiest point in the year—one trader reported—'some people come and buy just everything [they need at once] for the house, for nine or eleven thousand yuan at a time, so sometimes our entire furniture stock is sold out in one day'. Although the pastoralists 'sometimes don't know how to put the furniture together' (as another trader put it), they are ready to 'spend more money than officials do'. Whilst previously the pastoralists 'didn't care about fashion, just bought the cheapest things', today some customers even skip the prefecture markets and go shopping to centres such as Ngawa (*rNga ba*; town in Ngaba Tibetan and Qiang Autonomous Prefecture in Sichuan Province) or Xining City where the quality is said to be better, the prices lower and the choice broader.

The market both fuels fashion and satisfies tastes. From what local traders report, it seems that the main impetus for changes in furniture trends amongst pastoralist buyers comes from beyond Golok. The pastoralists copycat their neighbours, the traders said. The fashion for Tibetan-style furniture in Golok has, for example, only a short history. Whilst in the rest of Qinghai Province (as carpenters in Dawu reported) the market for Tibetan furniture opened some 20 years ago, in Golok, this trend for buying 'things Tibetan' developed only within the past decade. Beforehand, pastoralists purchased 'Chinese' furniture¹⁵; the fact that older houses are not demolished provides a good opportunity to observe the former trends and styles of pastoralist furnishing endeavours.

The majority of households covered in this study already had electricity connected to their houses. Power generators are a solution for those who still await electrification or during power cuts; during summer of 2009, when the power cuts lasted for weeks and towns sunk into darkness, in the pastoralists' houses people still watched television. Television sets feature in every house, independently of the

quality of its access to electricity. Although more conservative or poorer customers stick to 'traditional' old-fashioned models, large television sets with flat 32-in. screens sell too. For sales in just one appliance shop within one summer month, with an estimated 80–90% of customers being pastoralists, a shop owner reported sales of 30–40 television sets, 70–80 VCD players, 40–50 refrigerators and around 50 washing machines.

The need to furnish and equip new pastoralists' houses has created opportunities of the expansion of markets into areas of rural Tibet where relatively few consumer goods used to be sold in the past. Recently, pastoralists in Golok have acquired unprecedented economic power due to caterpillar fungus revenues. Some of this income is saved, and some spent—on consumer goods answering those more immediate and those more status-serving needs. Houses, in this context, can be viewed in two ways. First, they are a drain on the family budget: having a house to furnish makes pastoralists actively engage in the consumer culture. By directing the pastoralists onto the path of house building, the state creates large numbers of new consumers ready to participate in markets for goods that they previously could not buy, mainly due to a trivial lack of domestic storage space. Second, houses offer storage for growing numbers of family belongings. By so doing, they create a new opportunity to manifest a household's material standing—a house with all that it stores becomes like a trophy. When a society becomes more affluent, the need for new status manifestations becomes more imperative, and here houses now have an important role to play.

13.4 Final Considerations

Houses are a relatively recent, imported element into Tibetan pastoral regions such as Golok, but the last 20 years of developments reveal how rapid and evolving their local 'career' has been. The great success of the house in pastoral regions has been enabled by several factors. The Chinese state's pro-house and pro-permanent settlement policies are only one of them, albeit certainly a powerful one. A second factor which must not be overlooked is what can be referred to as the tangible realities of life on the Tibetan grasslands. The average altitudes and temperatures in Domkhok certainly also condition local debates and choices about tents versus houses as suitable domestic dwellings. The third factor is the rising affluence of the pastoral society, its intense relationship with the commodity market and a need for new means of manifesting one's economic standing.

Houses are 'new arrivals' into Golok's cultural space, but for a novelty like this the lack of academic interest can surprise. One reason why pastoral houses are academically neglected may be that, by their linking to the resettlement programmes, the houses are evivized as a topic. They are associated, by some outside observers, with the state exercised pressure, with the politics of de-culturation and cultural uprooting. The sedentarization policies are even called an 'ethnocide' or attack on the existence of an ethnographic group such as Tibetan pastoralists: the houses

become a symbol of a dead-end road the pastoralists are believed to go (Tenzin 2010). This maybe does not influence the scholars directly, but blinds them for certain themes which seem less appropriate than others. In this sense, the array of topics the scholars choose is in itself a topic worth investigation and an indicator of intellectual and political trends prevailing in the academic milieu.

Proper understanding of Chinese state projects which aim at or result in increased sedentarization in pastoral regions of Tibet is undeniably important. However, underscoring only the state's interventions into pastoral contexts can be distorting. It risks underestimating the agency of local actors and can generate a perception of pastoralists as mere recipients of state policies. Although certainly affected by them, the pastoralists are more than that. Concentrating solely on the state actions also carries a danger of taking from the people away the responsibility for the moves they make—an effect which can serve both the informants' and the scholars' agenda. On a more academic level, this bias makes one miss a chance to learn how innovations in pastoral contexts like this spread and how do local populations envision and proceed with changing their own society.

Domkhok Township is suitable to show the inhabitants' agency in shaping their new life because the state's interference into their living practices has been limited, compared to areas covered with the resettlement programmes. In these latter cases, studying the pastoralists' attitudes towards houses can be more difficult, as state policies, pastoralists' life preferences, expectations and sometimes brute realities form a body difficult to disentangle. The resettling of the highland populations of ecologically endangered zones has not always been carried out on a free-choice basis, and its consequences were certainly unclear to many. The resettled pastoralists, however, do not exhaust the pastoral population of the Tibetan plateau. Those who are not affected by the resettlement deserve attention, too, and their relationship with their houses, understandings and choices, can—in a bigger perspective—inform about how pastoralists would wish to shape their lives and neighbourhoods in the future.

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Notes

1. Tibetan words are given in approximate phonetic rendering, reflecting the dialect of the study area, and followed by their transliteration according to the Wylie system. Chinese words are preceded by 'Chin'.

13 'Everybody Likes Houses. Even Birds Are Coming!'

2. In 2008, Domkhok had 1812 residents dispersed over nearly 780 km² of rugged terrain; MSY (2009: 11).
3. *Tsowa* refers to groups inhabiting large territories and claiming origins from a distant common ancestor. *Tsowa* should, theoretically speaking, split into a number of *dewa*, due to historical and demographic developments. Both terms are translated as 'tribe'. For more, see Levine (n.d.).
4. For more information about 'outer' and 'inner' tribes, see Gelek (1998: 51).
5. The Herders Association (Chin. *mumin weiyuanhui*) is an administrative body in the township. It was created from the former production brigades and corresponds to 'village' (Chin. *cun*), albeit existing in the pastoral context. At the time which is being discussed here, the Herders Association drew its budget from one main source: caterpillar fungus-gathering fees, which collectors coming to the township had to pay.
6. For more information about Xueshan in the mid 1990s, cf. Goldstein (1996).
7. *Dadui* and *xiaodui* are Chinese translations for Tibetan *richen* (*ru chen*) and *richung* (*ru chung*), being administrative divisions under the township level. The terms translated as 'production brigade' and 'production team' come from the people's commune period and are still used by local inhabitants.
8. This is different from what Diana Altner observed in the TAR, where villagers at Yamdrok Lake (*Yar 'brog mtsho*) razed their old houses to build new ones on the same sites (Altner 2009).
9. The same was reported from Yushu TAP (Dzartod County/*rDza stod*); Daniel Winkler, email communication, 30 May 2011.
10. Fencing can certainly be seen as an intervention of a political nature, although my informants expressed enthusiasm about it. For a discussion of different opinions about fencing, cf. Bauer 2005. One may wonder if fencing houses with concrete walls will stir similar debates and how the new walls might impact the shape of community life. Since they are only presently appearing in Golok, one has a unique chance to compare attitudes towards them today with those in several years time.
11. This is more that what is paid in similar programmes in the TAR, where values between 15,000 yuan and a little over 24,000 yuan were noted (Yeh 2011: 305; Goldstein et al. 2010: 67). Pastoralists in Kakhok (*rKa khog*) County, Sichuan Province, received grants of 20,000 yuan (Ptackova 2011: 7). In Cidril (*gCig sgril*) County, Golok TAP, these grants amounted to only 6,000 yuan in the beginning of the programme's implementation and were raised subsequently.
12. It was reported from other parts of Golok and from the TAR that more households wanted to receive subsidies than the existing funds allowed (Goldstein et al. 2010: 63). The programme could thus be limited to newly wed couples, or the households were chosen by drawing lots.
13. This connection between higher security levels and voluntary sedentarization has been made for the Bedouin of Israel; Medzini (1998: 60).
14. In contrast to houses sitting in the pastoralists' winter quarters, those in county towns, townships, or resettlement villages are subject to complicated trade exchanges.
15. 'Chinese (*rgya*) furniture', similar to 'Chinese clothes', refers to mass-produced goods of rather 'Western' style and in fact lacking any 'Chineseness' which one might anticipate from a product carrying such a name. Any modern clothing or furniture, lacking Tibetan features, is thus 'Chinese' in the local context.

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