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Of Horses and Motorbikes: Negotiating Modernities in Pastoral A mdo, Sichuan Province

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Abstract: *This paper is a preliminary study examining the shifting roles of horses and motorbikes and how these modes of transportation make visible changes in nomad spatiality. Since the 1980s change has accelerated in Tibetan pastoralist areas of A mdo in the People's Republic of China. Winter houses, fenced pastures, electricity supplies, modern means of transportation, education for all and so forth. are in the pastoralist context equated with modernization and development. Participation in such processes not only changes the pastoralists' way of life outwardly, but also has an effect on pastoralists' spatial contexts. The emergence of a new means of movement – the motorbike – has become the vehicle with which this newly emerging space is negotiated and engaged with.*

Introduction

Dusk is falling over the plains at the upper knee of the Yellow River (*rma chu*, Huang he, 黄河). A herd of yak is driven homewards – by a rider on a motorbike, his head wrapped in a long scarf leaving only his eyes visible. Driving slowly and carefully he finds a way over the pasture – the headlight and an occasional honking of the horn gently move the herd towards the corrals of its winter quarters.

The grasslands of northwestern Sichuan in the People's Republic of China (Zhonghua Renmin Gongheguo, 中华人民共和国) are the home of Tibetan nomadic pastoralists who, although neither untouched nor unchanged by history, continue to live according to patterns shaped by the ecological and climatic cycle of the seasons and embedded in the cultural and social knowledge of the pastoralists (*'brog pa*, *mumin*, 牧民).¹ Concepts such as “modernity” or “globalization” coined

¹ *'Brog pa* is the term Tibetans use for pastoralists – people whose economy and culture is based on animal husbandry as opposed to agriculturalists who work the land.

with specific meanings in social and anthropological studies may not hold much meaning for and are not referred to by the pastoralists. However, they have come face to face with various aspects of these transformative forces and have responded in their own ways. This paper examines the shift from horse to motorbike. It focuses on disjunctures created by changes and transformations brought about by economic, political, and historical processes of development and modernization, and how these disjunctures have opened up new spaces. I will examine spatiality and processes of place making in the Tibetan pastoralist context and the role that horses – and in recent times motorbikes – play in these processes. I will argue that movement has played an integral part in the cultural process of how pastoralists relate to the land, appropriate it and engage with it, thus making space into place. I will further maintain that the use of motorbikes has come to play a role in accessing space created by shifts and disjunctures due to processes of modernization and development as played out in the pastoral context.

The following is based on field work conducted in Thang skor (Tang ke, 唐克)² located in the northwestern corner of Sichuan in the Aba Tibetan and Qiang Autonomous Prefecture (*rnga ba bod rigs dang ch'ang rigs rang skyong khul*, Aba Zangzu Qiangzu Zizhizhou, 阿坝藏族羌族自治州). Thang skor is a township (*xiang*, 乡)³ of approximately six thousand inhabitants who are predominantly pastoralists. The territory encompasses about 1450 square kilometers and is divided into seven settlements (*bde ba*) corresponding to the former division of the township in work units (*ru khags*, *da dui*, 大队).⁴ The administrative center (location of government offices, schools, health facilities, teahouses, shops and increasingly residential quarters predominantly inhabited by the older population) is located near the confluence of the Rka chu and Yellow Rivers, at a distance of five kilometers from the local monastery and three kilometers off the main road which connects the two neighboring provinces of Sichuan and Gansu and runs through Thang skor lands.

The territory of Thang skor is located in an ecological zone traditionally and ideally suited for animal husbandry, which is the economic base for the pastoralists.⁵

² I have lived in Sichuan since January 1999 and have visited Thang skor many times informally from 1999 until now (2007), making observations, talking to friends and people of Thang skor. Additionally, I spent several two- to three-week periods in the area, using the classic anthropological tools of participatory observation, as well as semi-structured and unstructured interviewing.

³ A township is the smallest administrative unit in the People's Republic of China. It generally shares a government, schools, clinics and other infrastructure and comprises between two and six thousand people.

⁴ "Work units" were formed during collectivization and numbered. Generally they comprised the former sub-groups of the tribal structure of Thang skor, with the exception of the work units number one and seven, both of which were formerly part of one tribe – Sog tshang – which during collectivization was integrated into the township of Thang skor. The seventh settlement is not usually referred to according to the numeric system, but rather by its Chinese name, "Ma chang" (马场). It was set aside for horse rearing during the collectivization period and was under the administration of the province.

⁵ See Dmu dge bsam gtan rgya mtsho, *Gsung 'bum pod gsum po bzhuqs so* [Collected Works: Volume Three] (Xining: Qinghai Minzu Chubanshi, 1997), 377-81.

It is said to be one of the wealthier areas of pastoralist A mdo (Anduo, 安多). This probably accounts for an early proliferation of motorbikes, even at a time when they first started to make an appearance in the pastoralist context of A mdo in the 1980s. The people of Thang skor may have been quicker and economically better able to acquire motorbikes than pastoralists from other regions. However, the trend can be observed in other areas of the Tibetan plateau as well. The analysis that I am presenting here might not be equally applicable to other pastoralist regions, but will provide an example of the shift from horse to modern means of transportation and possible implications.⁶

I will start with a discussion on pastoral spatiality and processes of place-making. I will seek to provide a basis from which we can understand the uses of the horse in the Tibetan pastoral context and why, I argue, it holds an important place in the way pastoralists engage with their land. This will be followed by a presentation of some ethnographic material discussing the uses of horses and motorbikes. After the presentation of a historical trajectory, which will build the frame for understanding changes in the pastoral landscape, shifts in pastoralist spatiality and increased fragmentation of space, I will provide a preliminary analysis of the way pastoralists engage with such shifts and disjunctures.

Pastoralist Space, Processes of Place-making, Movement, and Horsemanship

Pastoralists are nomadic. In the decades since the appropriation and integration of the pastoralist areas of A mdo into the Chinese state and their collectivization the nomadic system of the pastoralists have had to adapt to changed circumstances. There is markedly less flexibility in their patterns of movement than before.⁷ Scholars have described a revival of a traditional “nomadic lifestyle” after the introduction of the household responsibility system in the 1980s; they also state that nomads have adapted to changed conditions.⁸ Patterns of movement were resumed by individual households where they had been organized differently during

⁶ In other nomadic regions of cultural Tibet, I understand, trucks are acquired instead of or in preference to motorbikes. Some of the processes described in this paper would probably equally apply to the use of trucks, others are specific to regions where motorbikes are preferred. Reasons to give preference to one or the other can likely be found in the terrain, distances that need to be covered, availability and market trends. Comparative research in different pastoralist regions of cultural Tibet would be needed to give conclusive answers.

⁷ See for example Daniel Miller, “Tough Times for Tibetan Nomads in Western China: Snowstorms, Settling Down, Fences and the Demise of Traditional Nomadic Pastoralism,” *Nomadic Peoples* 4, no. 1 (2000): 95; Fernanda Pirie, “Feuding, Mediation and the Negotiation of Authority among the Nomads of Eastern Tibet,” *Halle: Max Planck Institute for Social Anthropology, Working Paper* 72 (2005): 9; Emily Yeh, “Tibetan Range Wars: Spatial Politics and Authority on the Grasslands of A mdo,” *Development and Change* 34, no. 3 (2003).

⁸ Melvyn C. Goldstein and Cynthia C. Beall, *Die Nomaden Westtibets*. (Nürnberg: DA Verlag Das Andere, 1991): 183; Angela Manderscheid, “The Revival of a Nomadic Lifestyle,” in *A mdo Tibetans in Transition: Society and Culture in the post-Mao Era* (Leiden: Brill, 2002), 280.

collectivization.⁹ In Thang skor, as elsewhere, the construction of winter houses promulgated by government policies, decreased frequency in the allocation of pasture lands to individual households or groups of households (*ru skor*), an increase in the number of households, and other such factors, contributed to a change towards an almost “semi-settled” lifestyle. According to information given by local headmen of some settlements of Thang skor and also by one of the township leaders,¹⁰ pastures used to be redistributed according to herd size every three to four years within settlements by their heads in consultation with households and groups of households. The frequency of redistribution is now much reduced. Summer pastures are commonly used in most settlements of Thang skor, but each household has its own more or less fixed place where they put up the tent and around which their herds will graze. This has resulted in a less flexible cycle of migration, though more research would be needed to substantiate this. Additionally, there is the perception that pasture, once plentiful, has become a resource that needs to be distributed with care, and around which there is potential for conflict.¹¹

However, even as such things have changed, pastoralists still move since their fields – located in their herds – are mobile, as Ekvall has so cogently stated.¹² A cycle of migration to different pasture grounds is maintained to ensure the wellbeing of the herds and gain maximum benefit for the herds as well as to take care of the pasture and maintain it for future use.¹³ Distance and frequency of moving the herds to new pasture ground depend, of course, on a variety of factors such as herd densities, availability of grass, climatic conditions and so forth. In Thang skor distances for migration may be shorter than elsewhere and movement to other pastures less frequent, but mobility is still maintained.

A typical pattern of movement, which has been related to me by a number of pastoralists from Thang skor showed the following features: In all areas of Thang skor winter pastures are now leased to households on a fifty-year contract and fenced.¹⁴ The majority of pastoralists have built winter houses, sometimes of mud, although increasingly brick and cement is used. According to some communications from the older people, the pastoralists of Thang skor have always had built winter structures. They did not live in tents while they were on their winter pastures.

⁹ Some structures of herding management remained during the collectivization period. However, the labor division was such, that different labor was divided among work groups (*da dui*) rather than among members of a household. See Graham E. Clarke, “China’s Reforms of Tibet, and their Effects on Pastoralism,” *Institute of Development Studies, Discussion Paper 237* (1987): 35.

¹⁰ Personal communications.

¹¹ I was frequently told that there are now more people, more households and more herd pressure than there used to be.

¹² Robert. B. Ekvall, *Fields on the Hoof: Nexus of Tibetan Nomadic Pastoralism* (New York: Holt, Rinehardt and Winston, 1968): 31-43.

¹³ Miller, “Tough Times,” 95-96; Camille Richard, “The Potential for Rangeland Management in Yak Rearing Areas of the Tibetan Plateau,” in *Yak Production in Central Asian Highlands, Proceedings of the 3rd International Congress on Yaks, Lhasa* (2002): 13.

¹⁴ The space allocated for winter pasture was, during division, increased in relation to summer pasture (personal communication).

However, those structures were much less stable, and some local informants maintained that they had to be rebuilt every time they returned to their winter place. In spring, usually May or June, the first move takes place. In many areas of Thang skor this is a temporary move to the summer pasture and is decided upon by the heads of the settlements.¹⁵ They may remain there for as long as a month and then return to their fenced winter pastures for another three weeks to one month to give the grass on the summer pasture time to grow. Pastoralists will, when they return to the winter place, put up their tents within the fenced winter pasture, oftentimes within walking distance to the winter house, but will continue to live in and function from the tent. The definite move to the summer pasture will happen sometime in July and the nomads will stay there until September or October, depending on grass growth and climatic conditions. For some there may be a move within the area allocated for summer pasturing, but that is not very common in Thang skor which is relatively lush during the growing season. In late autumn the pastoralists of Thang skor will return to their winter pasture and the cycle of movement will be concluded. Pirie described a similar pattern of movement for the pastoralists in Machu County (*rma chu rdzong*, Maqu xian, 玛曲县), an area adjacent to Thang skor that is climatically as well as ecologically comparable.¹⁶

Change resulting from fenced pastures and a shift in property rights have been discussed in a number of papers¹⁷ and are not the subject matter here. However much those patterns of movement have changed due to privatization of winter pasture and fencing, pastoral movement is deeply imbedded in the lived experiences of the pastoralists and pertains to more than the seasonal migration pattern. Movement within the landscape has shaped socio-cultural practices of a nomadic people. Williams, who wrote about Inner Mongolian pastoralists, states that “traditional Mongol spatiality is rooted in a landscape characterized by mobility and mutability”¹⁸ and I would argue that the same can be said about Tibetan pastoralists. As they move the landscape changes, or rather their perception of it changes. As pastoralists move from winter to spring, from spring to summer, from summer to autumn pasture, their perspective of the land changes. As they put up their tents within the winter pasture, but away from the house, they perceive a familiar landscape from a different angle. As they make decisions regarding when to move, they get to know the land more intimately. There is a vast knowledge about the land, where the grass grows best, where a swamp can be crossed or how

¹⁵ This corresponds to what Manderscheid has reported about pre-collectivization period in Dzamtang County (*'dzam thang rdzong*, Rangtang xian, 壤塘县). In that area pasture was later allocated by the bureau of agriculture, which indicates considerable regional variation in practices of pasture allocation. See Manderscheid, “The Revival,” 280.

¹⁶ Fernanda Pirie, “Segmentation within the State: The Reconfiguration of Tibetan Tribes in China’s Reform Period,” in *Nomadic Peoples* 9, nos. 1 and 2 (2005): 85.

¹⁷ See Melvyn C. Goldstein, “Nomads of Golok: A Report,” <http://www.case.edu/affil/tibet/tibetanNomads/documents/RDP-WebsiteReport.DOC>, 1996; Pirie, “Segmentation”; Yeh, “Tibetan Range Wars.”

¹⁸ Dee Mack Williams, *Beyond Great Walls: Environment, Identity, and Development on the Chinese Grasslands of Inner Mongolia* (California: Stanford University Press, 2002), 67.

it can be circumvented.¹⁹ Movement allows them to know the land more intimately, to embrace its spaciousness and vastness and to make place within it, or in other words “to in-habit” the land, to use Humphrey’s phrase.²⁰ The migration pattern provides a frame within which fine-grained movement of pastoralists – as they pursue their daily activities and live their lives – transforms space into lived place, as de Certau has argued, although for processes of appropriation of space in an urban setting.²¹ Within the context of the pastoralists, such movement is located in everyday activities of herding. In the morning, the women of a household will go out and start the milking of the yak cows.²² After the milking the herd will be driven out to pasture, or left to wander on their own. During the day the herdsmen – or women – may check on them, direct them to a different area, or move them closer towards the tent, where the noon milking may happen. Male (and occasionally female) members of the tent may take a horse and ride off to visit some friends. The woman of the tent may walk over to the neighbors to get some starter for the yoghurt she is planning to make, to help with the sewing of the tent, or for any reason requiring neighborly assistance or simply company. This is a very precursory glimpse of some of the everyday activities happening around a nomad’s tent as experienced by the author. Pastoral activities require movement. There are comings and goings around the tent of nomads, of herds as well as of people. The latter, as they pursue activities required by nomadic animal husbandry, are going out from the tent, wandering into different directions, and may decide on a trip to a market place, to a monastery, to a meeting of social, religious, or political nature, and so on. And while such everyday practices happen, the tent, the focal point of pastoralist daily activities, itself is moved periodically and makes movement patterns even more fluid and mutable.

Migrational movement and the more fine-grained movements required by the daily activities and by the socio-cultural practices of everyday life, are – not exclusively, but to a large part – processes in which the horse and horsemanship play an important role. Horses give humans speed and flexibility as well as – from the vantage point of the horseback – improved vision. Many of the everyday practices of the pastoralists require movement. Scouting out land, watching herds, driving them out to pasture, looking for stray animals and so on are facilitated, and in fact – in vast areas such as the grasslands of southern Amdo – made possible by the horse. Horsemanship provides the pastoralists with an effective means to

¹⁹ See for example Daniel Miller, “Looking Back to Move Ahead: Integrating Indigenous Nomadic Knowledge into the Modern Range Profession in China,” *Society for Range Management’s Annual Meeting, Special Session: Rangeland Professionals and Society: Future Directions* (2001). <http://www.cwru.edu/affil/tibet/booksAndPapers/miller.looking.back.to.move.ahead.pdf> (accessed February 2006).

²⁰ Caroline Humphrey, “Chiefly and Shamanist Landscapes in Mongolia,” in *The Anthropology of Landscape: Perspectives on Place and Space* (Oxford: OUP, 1995): 135.

²¹ Michel de Certau, *The Practice of Everyday Life* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1984): 91-110.

²² The yak cows are brought in the night before and tethered outside the tent or the house. In some place, however, I have observed that yaks are left to graze during the night and brought in for the milking in the morning.

pursue animal husbandry in areas where range and speed would be limited if not for the horse. According to sources documenting the pastoralists of A mdo in pre-modern times,²³ pastoralism was a highly precarious undertaking. People lived dispersed over wide areas and then as now had to reckon with cattle thieves, wild animals attacking the herds, unpredictable weather and so on. Ekvall argues that the exigencies of the pastoral life required independence of action, quick reactions, valiant behavior, and above all, the ability for speed; qualities that are fostered by horsemanship.²⁴ In the context of the pastoral way of life horsemanship, which facilitates movement and provides speed and flexibility in action, has taken on meanings that exceed the solely practical. It finds expression in a number of performative and discursive practices: the way people talk about horses, recognition given to good horsemanship, horse races as an important part of their summer activities, and the role horses play in their rituals connected to the local territorial gods are a few examples.

Pastoral space in Thang skor stretches over a wide area. Movement, even within the daily round of activities, may cover distances that are not, or only barley manageable on foot. The landscape of Thang skor is dominated by wide open grassy plains, rolling hills and broad, flat-bottomed valleys interspersed with wetland areas and low mountain ranges. The lay of the land gives, to the casual observer, an impression of unlimited space, open land, vastness, and spaciousness.²⁵ Visibility, in a land such as that of the pastoralists, although seemingly easily achieved, is limited. The space pastoralists inhabit is vast, and moving through it becomes a more reliable way of seeing, knowing and relating to the land than does mere employment of the visual senses. Migrational movement, movement within the pastoral economy to and from pastures, movement to the sacred places of pastoralists, such as monasteries, holy mountains and lakes, movement to market places is, or used to be, negotiated mainly by horse, although sometimes on foot or by yak. A study of those movements, setting them out as a drawn line on a map, differentiating them by the means of movement, may give some interesting insights. However, I would like to suggest that movement itself, the myriad steps of riders on their horses, of herdsmen and women walking in and around the tent, out to pasture and back, make pastoral space into inhabited place.

If, as I have elaborated above, pastoral space is made into place by movement around the tent and the pastoral economy, which is in itself mobile and mutable,

²³ There are a number of travelers, explorers and missionaries who have written about nomadic life in A mdo or other pastoralist areas of the Tibetan plateau. Among them the most noted are R. B. Ekvall, M. Hermann, J. F. Ford, Alexandra David-Neel, and others.

²⁴ Ekvall, *Fields on the Hoof*, 39-41, 75.

²⁵ Some interlocutors from Thang skor interestingly expressed these kinds of feelings in reverse, when comparing it to the experience of space in places other than the grasslands. One interlocutor explained to me the – according to him – unpleasant feelings of being in Hong Kong, describing it as the absence of space. Others, students who attended a Tibetan Middle School located in the deep valleys of the neighboring farming area, at times expressed homesickness and bemoaned the closeness of the mountains. “I can’t see the sky” or similar statements were not uncommon. Seemingly, pastoral space of Thang skor is taken for granted until it is challenged by alternative perceptions.

and if these movements are maintained to a substantial degree by horsemanship, then what does this mean in terms of the new vehicle of movement adopted by a significant number of herders in recent times? Does the employment of motorbikes enforce these processes of place-making or does it contradict them? Does it simply replace one means of transport for another? I am going to argue that the motorbike is used to negotiate disjunctures and shifts that have occurred through historical, economic, and political developments of the last four decades since pastoral society went through massive transformation after its integration into the People's Republic of China. Patterns of movement have changed due to the above-mentioned factors. In Thang skor and quite possibly in other parts of pastoralist Amdo too, the most visible change has come to be located in an "urban center," which constitutes a modernity with which the pastoralists engage.²⁶ Tibetan pastoralists of Thang skor have adopted a new vehicle for movement linked to this modernity – the motorbike. The Tibetan term applied is "*phrul rta*" and means "motorized horse." This "motorized horse" is the one vehicle which is used to access this modernity and integrate it into pastoralist spatiality. The following section presents some ethnographic material to elucidate shifts in the social practices of pastoralists and how they are negotiated by the motorbike.

Of Horses and Motorbikes: Fragmented Space and New Places

At a superficial glance pastoral space, the landscape of the pastoralists as described earlier, seems unaltered and unchanged. The pastoral lands still stretch over vast areas, wide plains, rolling hills and an open sky that arches over the landscape. However, in that very landscape, marks such as fenced pastures, brick buildings, paved roads, electric wires, telephone towers and other inventions have appeared over the last forty years, and increasingly so since the late nineties and in the wake of the government policy of "Opening up the Western Regions" (*Xibu da kaifa*, 西部大开发). These marks are part of a new reality and of processes linked to concepts of "modernity" and "progress" as promulgated by the state and its discourse of development. Pastoralists are not mere recipients of these processes. They engage with the changes and transformations in the landscape and the notions of "modernity" those changes introduce, and – as I will show – use the motorbike as a meaningful vehicle to conceptualize these processes within their socio-cultural context.

In Thang skor an estimated 70 percent of households own a motorbike according to one interlocutor. In summer 2006 another informs me that there are one-thousand households and a thousand-five-hundred motorbikes in Thang skor.²⁷ Although pastoralists may decide to purchase a motorbike for pragmatic reasons, the shift from horse to motorbike has implications on a variety of levels. The following ethnographic material will, I hope, bring to the fore some of the attitudes and practices connected to the motorbike and how the shift from horse to motorbike

²⁶ See for example Pirie, "Segmentation," 88.

²⁷ Personal communication.

might be significant in terms of a new direction of movement that has emerged within the pastoral landscape. I will describe a number of events as noted in my field notes²⁸ followed by a discussion on the shift from horse to motorbike, the meanings accorded to both and how to understand the changes in terms of pastoral spatiality.

Herding Practices and Motorbikes

When discussing the purchase of a motorbike and its employment, local interlocutors stressed the fact that motorbikes are convenient and fast, saving time and the physical efforts of riding horses. Implicit in such statements is the role of the motorbike as a means of transport to facilitate getting into town. The weekly to monthly arduous ride from the pasturage to the administrative center of Thang skor to buy provisions, to put possessions into storage and for other needs such as bringing children to school, medical treatment, political meetings, and more, is made considerably shorter and less exhausting by the use of a motorbike. Some of these, as needs to be noted, have increased in frequency or have come into being because of the changes Thang skor has undergone in the last few decades. Some of these new practices or the frequencies with which they are accessed and made use of are brought up as examples by pastoralists from Thang skor when discussing changes and “modern life” (*deng sang gi 'tsho ba*). They seem to represent a modernity that has come into being in the pastoral place but more will be said about this later.

Quite apart from the motorbike as a means of transportation between the pasturage and the town, it did not take long for motorbike owners, especially the younger generation, to discover that it could also be usefully employed in everyday herding practices.

(February 2006) I am staying with a nomad family in their winter house for a few days. The woman – head of the household of which I am a guest – has set up the loom outside the house and is weaving. Neighbors are visiting and we are all sitting around the loom chatting when attention is suddenly drawn to a herd of yaks on the opposite side of the valley. The herd is grazing within the fence of the winter pasture of our neighbors. But instead of being spread out as they usually are when grazing, they have bunched together. The bunching indicates trouble of some sort. Wolves are suspected and the owner of the herd, who is one of the visitors of today, decides to investigate. Although he lives less than ten minutes walk from us, he has come on his bike. He and the youngster of “our” household get onto the motorbike and ride off. We watch them as they cross the flat-bottomed valley and ride to the summer pasture about three kilometers away following the road that was constructed a couple of years ago. From the summer pasture – out of our field of vision – the herdsman rides his motorbike up the side of the mountain to its ridge and to where the yaks are. In less than ten minutes we see the motorbike come up onto the ridge and observe the herd moving lower down into the winter pasture, presumably prompted by the whistling and possibly

²⁸ The notes have been edited for the purpose of this paper.

honking of the horn by the two young men up on the ridge. Less than half an hour later they are back to report that they have sighted a pack of seven wolves.

Winter pastures were divided and leased to individual households in Thang skor in 1999. Over the following couple of years all winter pastures were fenced. This has reduced the need for round the clock supervision of herds. Herds are driven out to pasture in the morning and left to wander. They cannot stray far and during the months when the households stay in their winter camps herders do not need to stay out with the herds. It is enough to check on them occasionally during the day, to make sure, for instance, that the herd has not come upon the open gate to the neighbor's fenced area. However, there may be occasions when the herders need to address some incident that requires speed – such as threats from predators or thieves. In such instances the motorbike has become the preferred means of transport for households who do have the choice and where terrain allows for its use. Ekvall noted that pastoralists always kept horses at the ready to meet exigencies such as mentioned above.²⁹ However, these days cattle thieves use phones and trucks and the horse may not be a suitable means anymore to meet their threats. To make them ready for use requires time and energy, while the motorbike parked outside the house or tent is ready to go. It makes for convenience and speed. The motorbike has, within the grid of pastoral movement, found its use. However, its usefulness is contingent on a number of factors. Terrain varies and some areas are easily negotiated by bikes, others less so. After a heavy snowfall or during rainy summer months the motorbikes often become useless for pastoral activities even in normally accessible terrain. Also, it has to be noted that many of the summer pastures are out of reach for motorbikes or located in terrain that limit their use considerably. It is during these months that the horse, as the main means for herding practices, is most visible in Thang skor.

The above example is significant not so much for the fact that the motorbike can be and is at times used instead of the horse to negotiate pastoral space, but rather for attitudes exhibited by young men who show a clear preference for the bike. Its use creates a link to the new and the modern. “It’s cool to ride a motorbike,” I was repeatedly told by young men from Thang skor who spoke English and translated not just statements, but also behaviors of their peer group to me. Others would express similar attitudes by stating that a young man needs to have a bike or that “it’s comfortable” (*bde gi*) to ride a bike. Such expressions are supported by the behavior of young men in town as well as out in the pastoral place.³⁰ The very fact that the above mentioned herder came visiting riding his bike instead of walking like the other members of his household, is giving form to attitudes connected with space negotiated by the bike. The young men who were part of the party gathering around the weaving loom, did not – at least not for a long time – sit down like the rest of us, but were lounging about the motorbike. Part of this

²⁹ Ekvall, *Fields on the Hoof*; 29, 40-41.

³⁰ Gendered behavior and youth culture in relation to motorbikes in a pastoral place would itself be worth a study. However, it exceeds the scope of this paper.

can be explained by gendered behavior. However, it also reveals another layer. When the herder decided to check on his herd by riding the bike over to the other side of the mountain, one of the sons who is too young yet to own or ride a motorbike, immediately volunteered to accompany him. Such behaviors are performative of the way motorbikes are viewed and the values attached to being seen using one. I suggest that motorbikes confer meaning in terms of accessing modernity. The pastoral life reaches back into a past that creates ambiguous responses among the young. Government and development discourse of the last few decades, which propagates ideas of progress and modernization, relegates the traditional pastoral way of life to the backward. Pastoralists do not embrace this discourse unquestioningly, but construct their own modernities within the pastoral context. The use of motorbikes does not only alter pastoral spatiality; it may also be viewed as a vehicle that creates a link to modernity as perceived by pastoralists.

Horse Trails and Motorable Tracks

The horse maintains an important role within pastoral production and especially during the summer months when pastoralists dwell in areas less easily or not at all accessible by motorbikes, the horse is again more visible. However, there is a definite trend to accommodate the needs of motorbike owners. This has led over the last few years to the construction of motorable tracks connecting summer and winter pastures, and more so to make those places accessible to movement from and to town.

Construction of roads is part of modern, state-sponsored development.³¹ At the onset of the state-run development program “Opening Up the Western Regions,” the main road connecting Chengdu, the capital of Sichuan Province, with Lanzhou, the capital of Gansu Province – which runs right through Thang skor lands and was formerly a dirt track with plenty of potholes – was paved and made into a veritable “highway.” Only a couple of years ago the road leading from that main road into the administrative center of Thang skor and to the bank of the Yellow River, was paved to make the area more accessible for tourism. While such developments have facilitated the use of motorbikes in Thang skor, it is disputable to what degree pastoralists buy into state-promoted notions of development. I would suggest that they have their own agenda for the construction of roads. Apart from main roads, which give only limited access to pastoral areas, pastoralists themselves started to invest into the building of tracks of a more definite character than the horse trails that have been in use since earlier times. Interestingly it seems that the need for good tracks overrides taboos such as not to break the ground near ritual cairn (*la btas*), areas marked as the territories of local gods:

(April 2005) A couple of years ago – I was told by a friend, a young man from Thang skor – his village decided that they needed a track to connect the areas of the winter pastures with the summer pastures. Each household had to provide one

³¹ Hongyi Harry Lai, “China’s Western Development Program: Its Rationale, Implementation, and Prospects,” *Modern China* 28, no. 432 (2002): 451-53.

able-bodied male person to perform the labor. There were already horse trails in place as well as tracks made by the movement of herds – some of them extended and deepened by the use of motorbikes. The requirement, however, was to have a track that would make riding the motorbikes to the summer pastures easier. The road was to lead through the territory of the local mountain god right past the ritual cairn – an area in which people are normally forbidden to dig the ground. I lack the information as to whether religious specialists were consulted or rituals performed to make it proper. My informant, who made it very clear that normally nobody would interfere with the ground in such a location, said “Nothing happened.” And tongue in cheek: “Maybe the mountain god likes the sound of motorbikes.”

When pastoralists started to buy motorbikes the grasslands were negotiated by following horse trails. New tracks were developed at need, leaving deep ruts in the landscape that crisscrossed the grasslands connecting settlements, following the course of valleys, circumscribing bogs, and generally following the direction of pastoral movements.

However, riding motorbikes over grasslands through terrain that is not just flat expanse, requires skill and additionally it does not allow for speed. In 2001, when I attended the local summer festival that traditionally holds horse races, there was a new kind of competition, which was to ride a motorbike along an approximately twenty meter long straight line, as slowly as possible and without putting one’s feet down on the ground. This, I maintain, is an expression of just that skill that is and was required when crossing the grasslands in the absence of some motorable track. The construction of tracks that are accessible for motorbikes and other motorized vehicles, I argue, is indicative as well as performative of some underlying assumptions about motorbikes and the function they are to have. They are made for speed. The above interlocutor stated that motorbikes are preferred because they are fast and convenient. Where there are proper tracks or roads, motorbikes can go fast and going to places at some distance becomes less arduous. Distances are cut short in terms of time and effort. The administrative center that used to be a long horse ride away has become much more accessible – not only by the use of motorbikes but by tracks that have been constructed to allow for speed.

Motorable tracks facilitate the use of motorbikes and lend them speed. This has decreased pastoral distances. Formerly long and arduous rides on horseback become more manageable by the employment of motorbikes. Those tracks are exploited for movements required within the context of pastoral activities, such as looking for stray animals, moving things from the winter storage place to summer pastures and so forth. They do nevertheless underline a new direction of movement leading out of the pastoral. New spaces have opened up because speed makes formerly remote areas move closer. Pastoralists who own a bike have access to a wider radius of action within the same time constraints given by the requirements of pastoral life.

Fragmented Space

(June 2006) One household I became acquainted with consists of five people: the parents, two sons and one daughter. The eldest son was meant to take over the herding with his young wife. However, the wife has recently left him to return to her own home. The daughter, the only one who got sent to school, is studying in Lha sa (Lasa, 拉萨市). The younger son has taken up with bad company and the parents have told him not to bother to come home. He now lives in the administrative center of Thang skor and relies on support from others (one of them his brother) and whatever other means is available to him. This family owns one motorbike and sold their one remaining horse the year before. Now that the daughter-in-law has left, the milking and all work around the tent is again the mother's responsibility. The herding and other male tasks are divided between father and son, depending on which of them happens to be home. Herding is done on foot or with the help of the motorbike, the latter seemingly preferred by the son. According to the required task, the herdsmen walk – or ride the motorbike – to the pasture, driving herds with the use of the slingshot, whistling and other such means employed by herders. The motorbike can be used to some degree as their pastures run along the track that was constructed a couple of years ago.

Space is fragmented in more tangible ways than in the past.³² In this instance, apart from the pastoral home there is the administrative center of Thang skor where one of the brothers – alongside a number of other young males – has made a permanent home by choice as much as by parental order. The elder son also exhibits a preference to spend time there. The daughter who studies in Lha sa is accessing yet another spatiality by being physically remote and by acquiring an education which will more likely than not take her out of the pastoral economy and preparing her for a life in an urban setting.

This family has adjusted to fenced pastures and reduced migratory patterns by selling the horse and relying solely on a motorbike for movement. In my conversations with pastoralists of Thang skor and other places, it was regularly stated that to be a herder the horse is a necessity. This family agreed in principle, but since their herds are small, the summer pasture close by and, there is a motorable road to the summer pasture, they can do without the horse.

Movement for this family unit has taken very distinctive directions. Pastoral movement can be negotiated without the horse or the motorbike. The latter may be used, however, if it happens to be out in the pasturage and makes for convenience and speed. A second direction of movement runs between winter and summer pasture. In their case they are adjoining and at a distance of three kilometers at the most, a distance which is manageable on foot and also connected by a well-maintained motorable track. The third direction of movement, between the pasturage and the administrative center has increased in importance to the degree

³² I do not want to fall into the trap of assuming an idyllic past in which families were not fragmented spatially and / or temporally. Indeed, pastoralist culture seems to make allowance for fragmentation to a much higher degree as a farming society. This may be due to movable wealth and ingrained attitudes of fierce independence. See Ekvall, *Fields on the Hoof*, 75-78.

that the horse was replaced by the motorbike. To be able to move at convenience between the pasturage and the administrative center the motorbike is necessary. The father, who is in village leadership, has to attend meetings on a regular basis. As the head of the household he has privileged access to the motorbike. But in actual fact the oldest son is making the most use of the bike, frequently going into town and staying there until word is sent from home that either he or the motorbike is required.

For this family pastoral movement has shrunk to dimensions that made the horse obsolete. Fragmentation of space, not only through fencing and semi-settledness, but much more by members of the household living dispersed and occupying diverse spaces has reduced the need for pastoral movement and increased the need to negotiate a differently defined space. The very same fragmentation that reduces pastoral movement has opened up disjunctures and shifts which emphasize a new direction connecting to a space linked to perceptions of modernity as located in town as well as in modern education.

The “Urban Center”

(November 2005) I was visiting shops in Thang skor, talking to their owners. Many, it turns out had set up only the previous year. However, there is a small number that were established well over twenty years ago. One man tells me that he took over from his father who was placed in Thang skor in the fifties to run the local goods store at a time when people still paid with work points.³³ As our conversation turns to recent changes and I bring up the topic of motorbikes, he says that less than ten years ago people would ride their horses into town to supply their provisions. The horses would be tied outside shops such as his. At that time there were fewer people in town and the pastoralists came less frequently. As we are talking a woman comes in to do her shopping. She listens to us talking and I ask her how she came into town that day. Her son took her on the back of the motorbike. She had to see a doctor. Her son is probably now in one of the teahouses. Later, she and I sit outside in the sun talking, since she has to wait for her son who, she says, will not want to go back just yet. Traffic on the road is constant. Motorbikes are going up and down the main street, mostly young men – sometimes just one, sometimes in pairs. From where we sit I can easily count over fifty bikes parked outside shops, teahouses and repair stations. My guess (based on earlier surveys) is that this is not even a third of all the motorbikes in town that day. My companion tells me that her husband bought their bike only last year. It is convenient to get into town with. I ask her how frequently he comes into town. He comes often, she tells me, and with fuel and all, it is an expense to be reckoned with. But women do not have much to say in matters such as this.

The administrative center of Thang skor has mutated into one of economic opportunity. At the same time it is providing pastoralists with a public space of new dimensions within which different dynamics are at work. Through the

³³ At the time of collectivization (1962-1977) work points largely replaced monetary units. Household items, grain, oil and other necessities were available in exchange for work points in government stores.

motorbike this space has become accessible in new ways. The economic development of the town with more shops, more teahouses, more restaurants, and more suitable places to meet has made it a place of attraction for people who otherwise live dispersed over wide areas. The town has become a center of gravity where people can meet people, where gossip is exchanged, deals made, fights erupt and are resolved and much more.

This place, grown into an “urban center” of some substance, displays multiple dynamics and affects the lives of pastoralists in unprecedented ways. There seems to be a pull away from the remote pasturage to a rallying point where one can meet friends and join in consuming “modernity.” Fragmentation of space is reinforced by a locality that offers new opportunities, behaviors and attitudes, which is taken advantage of especially, but not exclusively, by young men.

The material above gives us a glimpse of the shift that is happening from horse to motorbike. It clearly shows that one is not replacing the other, but that they are used in different contexts and for different purposes. Within the pastoral setting the use of the motorbike is marginal in a real sense and has minor effects on the way the pastoral land is inhabited. Pastoralists have maintained nomadic movement throughout the year, even though they have to deal with new realities of fences, privatized land, roads, and more clearly defined pastoral grounds. Parallel to such processes new space beyond the pastoral has opened up. There is now a new focal point for pastoralists – the administrative center of Thang skor, where modern goods, modern education, modern health services and more are available. This “urban center,” as much as a real locality as a place that connects to that which is perceived as part of modern life, opens up new space. While in the pastoral context the use of motorbikes is limited, it has taken on an important role as the vehicle with which this new space is negotiated and conceptualized.

Pastoralist Modernities

The ethnographic material presented above reveals that the use of the motorbike over the horse is a pragmatic decision. Motorbikes are fast, convenient and useful in a number of activities pastoralists engage in. It also exemplifies that, at a different level, the proliferation of motorbikes and their use have deeper implications. Movement, deeply embedded in the practices of pastoralists is central to the making of place. The use of the motorbike is creating a different dimension in the process of place making. Although at the practical level it is simply replacing one means of transport for another, it has become the vehicle – literally and imagined – of accessing modernity.

“Modernity,” of course, is not an unambiguous term, and instead of theorizing the concept, I suggest to consider it contingent on historical, political, and economic processes that have occurred in the pastoral setting of Thang skor as well as on predominant, state-sponsored discourses of development, progress and modernity.

The last four decades have transformed Thang skor and the lives of pastoralists in significant ways. The collectivization period (in the 1960s and 1970s) marked

the beginning of the setting up of an infrastructure that was going to have a lasting impact on conceptualizations of space and place. For the first time in the history of Thang skor, brick and concrete were used to construct buildings of a more permanent nature than the mud houses the nomads had used (and to some degree are still using) for their winter quarters. Roads were built, a hydro power station, a factory, a bridge, a grain station, and other administrative buildings. The administrative center of Thang skor came into being and was soon to be the main point of reference outside the pastoral production station (*phyug las*) during the collectivization period and beyond.³⁴ State-imposed policies brought a shift from subsistence economy to planned production, and later – since the reforms introduced by Deng Xiaoping – to a market economy. They were paralleled by a discourse introducing notions of modernization and progress, which relegated traditional nomadic pastoralism to the backward.³⁵ Horses at that time were used in the daily practices of the pastoral economy. Movement, although still at the center of pastoral production and the way of life of nomads, had become restricted and regulated.

The late seventies and early eighties brought more liberal policies and led to the restoration of many practices that existed before pastoral A mdo was integrated into the People's Republic of China.³⁶ Although this was a pivotal point in history, the pastoralists nevertheless had to accommodate new realities such as higher population numbers, administrative rule and policy implementations – most of which are imbued with state-propagated notions of modernization and progress. Winter pastures were divided in the late nineties, leased to family units on a fifty-year contract, and fenced resulting in the loss of spatial movement and flexibility in addressing contingencies such as bad winter, drought, and so forth.³⁷ Pastoral practices had to change, too. Policies and measures as mentioned above led to more settled-ness of the pastoralists, less flexibility in movement with more defined directions of movement from a fixed winter pasture, to summer pastures that are now less frequently reassigned compared to pre-1950 practices, resulting in a decreased need for movement related to herding.

However, although individual households were reinstated as the anchor point for pastoralist movement the pastoralists had to take into account space opened up by the historical, political, and economic developments of the last few decades. The reality of an administrative and trading center with shops, teahouses, clinics, schools and so forth has created a different point of gravity amidst a pastoral landscape. The implementation of the household responsibility system and the possibility to engage in private business allowed some pastoralists to start small business ventures in the administrative center, further creating an urban center of

³⁴ Some services and goods now available in the administrative town were before located in monasteries or trading posts, the latter often at the fringes of pastoral territories.

³⁵ Miller, "Tough Times," 84; Janet Upton, "The Development of Modern School-Based Tibetan Language Education in the PRC," in *China's National Minority Education: Culture, Schooling and Development* (London, Falmer Press, 1999), 294.

³⁶ See Goldstein and Beall, *Nomaden Westtibets*, 146-55, 183; Manderscheid, "The Revival."

³⁷ Yeh, "Tibetan Range Wars," 507; Miller, "Tough Times," 104.

some substance. Schooling, medical services and manufactured goods have created a pull towards the administrative center at which such commodities – often associated with a perceived “modernity” – are available.

Pastoralists have, at least to some degree, made the switch from a subsistence economy to a market and cash economy.³⁸ Markets which were formerly located outside the pastoral space (and as needed were accessed by yak caravans and horses), are now located right in their midst. The “urban center” as a real place, opens up opportunities for pastoralists to engage with and access that market. This is mostly done by use of the motorbike. On the one hand motorbikes have become the means through which pastoralists, who live dispersed and remote from markets, can conveniently access such localities to sell their products and gain cash income, which gives them access to modern consumer goods and modern services such as medical and veterinary care and schooling. On the other hand, the use of motorbikes themselves requires cash, not just for the initial purchase but for maintenance and fuel. This reinforces the cash economy and ties the pastoralists firmly into developments towards a modern market economy.

The “urban center,” however, has to be understood not just as a place with shops, schools, and clinics that offers modern services, but as a multi-locality in that it has various meanings in different contexts.³⁹ The “urban center” as a market place, as well as a place representing modernity, opens up new space. It ties in with national and global flows of different kinds: through the market; through modern education and the opportunities these open up; through tourism; and through modern media of communication in the sense Appadurai has suggested.⁴⁰ The space of the pastoralists has increasingly been fragmented and reduced through fencing, increased settled-ness, roads, electric wiring, buildings and not least the administrative center. This fragmentation, however, is not solely located in the outward signs of a propagated and perceived modernity, but also in the ways in which it has transformed place-making as located in the practices of the pastoralists. Within the pastoral landscape there has emerged a point of gravity which links them with a modernity that has created new opportunities, imposed new images and values and created new needs. The motorbike has reduced distances in tangible ways and has brought formerly dispersed-living people closer together. It acts as a means through which to bridge increasingly fragmented space. The motorbike and the movement it allows between the pasturage and the “urban center” have become part of the place-making of the nomads and the way they engage with “modernity” as represented in the locality of the town.

³⁸ Within the “modernity” they find themselves in, this has become necessary. Schooling (now actually being enforced), medical bills, and the acquiring of necessary commodities, not least of them fuel for their motorbikes, require cash.

³⁹ Margaret C. Rodman, “Empowering Place: Multilocality and Multivocality,” in *The Anthropology of Space and Place: Locating Culture* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2003), 204-23.

⁴⁰ Arjun Appadurai, “Disjuncture and Difference in the Global Culture Economy,” in *Global Culture: Nationalism, Globalization and Modernity* (London: Sage Publications, 1990), 295-310.

Conclusion: The Horse and the Local, the Motorbike and the Global

Pastoral spatiality is made into place by movement, by riding the land, getting to know it from the back of the horse. It has impacted the sense of being of the pastoralists and has made horsemanship an integral part of their culture and way of life. Is this now being contested by the motorbike? Will movement and the making of place in the pastoral context in the future be achieved by motorized vehicles? This paper cannot give a conclusive answer to such questions and it is not its intent. However, as this preliminary study has attempted to show, pastoral spatiality has been overlaid with new and different sets of meanings in the context of a modernity located in an “urban center” and that which it has come to represent. This “urban center” has opened alternative dimensions of space. It has no ties to the past, but is rather to be understood as reaching forward, representing modernity and progress. The “urban center” offers a spatiality that goes beyond the traditional. It ties into notions of globalization and modernity. Pastoralists have not just been passive recipients of developments linked to this modernity. Instead they are appropriating it and, by employing the motorbike, creating means and ways to actively engage with it. Processes of place-making have thus become more complex as new layers of meaning have been added. Movement has taken on new directions and for the direction opened up by a perceived modernity, a modern means – the “motorized horse” – is employed.

Glossary

Note: The glossary is organized into sections according to the main language of each entry. The first section contains Tibetan words organized in Tibetan alphabetical order. Columns of information for all entries are listed in this order: THL Extended Wylie transliteration of the term, THL Phonetic rendering of the term, the English translation, the Sanskrit equivalent, the Chinese equivalent, other equivalents such as Mongolian or Latin, associated dates, and the type of term.

Ka					
Wylie	Phonetics	English	Other	Dates	Type
<i>rka chu</i>	Kachu				River
Nga					
Wylie	Phonetics	English	Other	Dates	Type
<i>rnga ba bod rigs dang</i> <i>ch'ang rigs rang</i> <i>skyong khul</i>	Ngawa Bōrik dang Changrik Rongkyong Khül	Aba Tibetan and Qiang Autonomous Prefecture	Chi. <i>Aba Zangzu</i> <i>Qiangzu Zizhizhou</i>		Place
Tha					
Wylie	Phonetics	English	Other	Dates	Type
<i>thang skor</i>	Tangkor		Chi. <i>Tang ke</i>		Place
Da					
Wylie	Phonetics	English	Other	Dates	Type
<i>deng sang gi 'tsho ba</i>	dengsanggi tsowa	modern life			Term
<i>bde gi</i>	degi	comfortable			Term
<i>bde ba</i>	dewa	settlement			Term
Pha					
Wylie	Phonetics	English	Other	Dates	Type
<i>phyug las</i>	chuklé	pastoral production station			Term
<i>phrul rta</i>	trülta	motorbike			Term
Ba					
Wylie	Phonetics	English	Other	Dates	Type
<i>'brog pa</i>	drokpa	pastoralist	Chi. <i>mumin</i>		Term
Ma					
Wylie	Phonetics	English	Other	Dates	Type
<i>dmu dge bsam gtan</i> <i>rgya mtsho</i>	Mugé Samten Gyantso				Author
<i>rma chu</i>	Machu	Yellow River	Chi. <i>Huang he</i>		River
<i>rma chu rdzong</i>	Machu Dzong	Machu County	Chi. <i>Maqu xian</i>		Place
Dza					
Wylie	Phonetics	English	Other	Dates	Type
<i>'dzam thang rdzong</i>	Dzamtang Dzong	Dzamtang County	Chi. <i>Rangtang xian</i>		Place

Ra					
Wylie	Phonetics	English	Other	Dates	Type
<i>ru skor</i>	rukor	groups of households			Term
<i>ru khags</i>	rukhak	work unit	Chi. <i>da dui</i>		Term
La					
Wylie	Phonetics	English	Other	Dates	Type
<i>la btas</i>	laptsé	ritual cairn, often on mountain top			Term
Sa					
Wylie	Phonetics	English	Other	Dates	Type
<i>sog tshang</i>	Soktsang				Place
<i>gsung 'bum pod gsum po bzhugs so</i>	<i>Sungbum Pösumpo Zhukso</i>	<i>Collected Works: Volume Three</i>			Text
Ha					
Wylie	Phonetics	English	Other	Dates	Type
<i>lha sa</i>	Lhasa		Chi. <i>Lasa</i>		Place
A					
Wylie	Phonetics	English	Other	Dates	Type
<i>a mdo</i>	Amdo		Chi. <i>Anduo</i>		Place
Chinese					
Wylie	Phonetics	English	Chinese	Dates	Type
			<i>Chengdu</i>		Place
			<i>Deng Xiaoping</i>		Person
			<i>Gansu</i>		Place
			<i>Lanzhou</i>		Place
		horse pasturage, settlement number seven	<i>ma chang</i>		Place
			<i>Sichuan</i>		Place
		township	<i>xiang</i>		Term
		Opening up the Western Regions	<i>Xibu da kaifa</i>		Term
		People's Republic of China	<i>Zhonghua Renmin Gongheguo</i>		Place

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