

# Change and Continuity in Nomadic Pastoralism on the Western Tibetan plateau

*Melvyn C Goldstein and Cynthia M Beall*

Nomadic pastoralism on the Tibet *changtang* flourishes. This paper gives an overview of the situation of Tibet's nomadic pastoralists and pays particular attention to ecology and traditional subsistence economy. Severe environmental conditions preclude farming. Livestock products earn substantial portions of the Tibetan foreign exchange. These are factors encouraging nomadic pastoralism. The impact of direct Chinese control in 1959 is also dealt with. Pastureland is not being expropriated from the pastoralists. In spite of ill thought-out development projects there has been no inducement for nomads to resettle. A net effect of the Chinese "reform" policies has been revitalization with increased economic independence since 1981 in spite of potential problems.

Pastoralism has been reported to be in danger of disappearing as a way of life in most of the world. This "pastoral crisis":

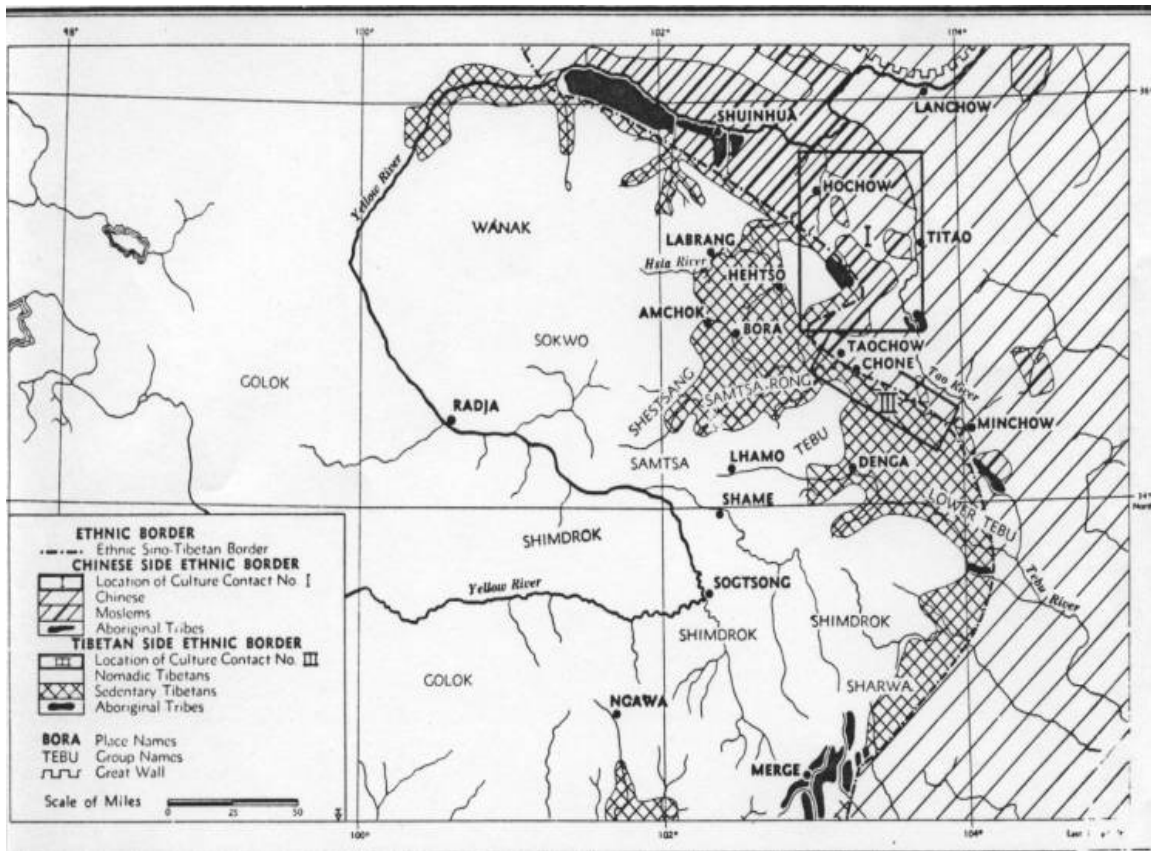
derives from the simultaneous increase of pressures to absorb pastoralists into the nonpastoral economy (through settlement programs, wage policies favouring migrant labour, forced commercialization, a relative drop of the value of pastoral products, and the like) and of measures that directly deprive pastoralists of their former share of economic and political life by the expansion of agriculture, military patrols, destocking programs, and the destruction of traditional systems of land tenure). The result of these powerful forces is that pastoralism is increasingly being relegated to people too old to change, too poor in alternative skills to leave, or too far away from centers of power for anyone to care yet. (Galaty et. al. (eds) 1981:17).

This pessimistic description does not fit conditions in the Tibet Autonomous Region (TAR) I of the People's Republic of China, an area about which little is known because research there has not been possible until recently. With 69% of its area pastureland and 24% (500,000) of its population nomadic pastoralists, it is one of the world's major pastoral regions. This paper presents an overview of the situation of Tibet's nomadic pastoralists by describing salient features of their ecology and traditional subsistence economy as well as their experience after the Chinese took direct control of Tibet in 1959.

The data derive from anthropological field research conducted in 1986, 1987, 1988 and 1990- A total of 20 months were spent in the TAR, 14 with the nomads, including observations during all four seasons. The research was carried out in conjunction with the Tibet Academy of Social Sciences, and was supported by grants from the National Academy of Sciences' Committee

on Scholarly Communication with the People's Republic of China (Program for Advanced Research and Study in China), the Committee on Research and Exploration of the National Geographic Society, and the National Science Foundation (BNS 87-04213). Standard social and physical anthropological methods were used including participant observation, key informant interviewing and systematic measurement of biological parameters. No restrictions on our movement within the research area or on interviewing were encountered. Ecological data were also collected in collaboration with Dr. Richard Cincotta, a rangeland ecologist who joined us in the field in the summer of 1987.

The study was conducted in a remote, traditional nomad area called Phala. Located on the *changtang* ("northern plateau") 3 about 300 miles northwest of Lhasa and 115 miles north of the TAR's main east-west road (see map 1), these pastoralists raise sheep, goats, *yak*<sup>4</sup> and horses and do not engage in any farming.



Indeed, the nearest farming communities are roughly 20-30 days' walk to the southeast; and areas to the west, south, northeast and north contain only nomadic pastoralists. With their main camps situated at altitudes between 16,000-17,800', the nomadic pastoralists of Phala are the highest dwelling traditional native population in the world. Such altitudes, moreover, are typical of the western *changtang*.

### The *Changtang* Environment

A key to the stability and success of nomadic pastoralism in Tibet is the character of the *changtang*, the montane plateau that is home to the majority of its nomads. This *changtang* corresponds roughly to the Northern Tibet Plateau sub-area of the Qinghai-Tibet plateau as it is defined by Chinese scientists. The Northern Tibet Plateau includes most of the central-northern part of Tibet and

western Qinghai, and is bounded in the north by the Kunlun mountains and by the Gandise range in the south (see map 1). Within this, the Ngari Plateau Subregion corresponds to the area of our research in the western Tibetan *changtang*. It is the highest and coldest part of the Qinghai-Tibet plateau with ground altitudes ranging from about 15,000-18,000'. Annual precipitation is generally between 60-300 mm with aridity becoming more severe as one goes west. The Chinese classify its soil as mainly alpine desert soil and the vegetation as mainly steppe type with ground cover of less than 30% (Ren mei'e, Yang and Bao 1985:417, 450-451; China Handbook Editorial Committee 1983:44).<sup>5</sup>

Situated in the eastern part of the Ngari Plateau Subregion, Phala contains 57 tentholds and 265 persons dispersed among 10 camps in an approximately 250 square mile area. Reference to the area as a plateau, however, is somewhat misleading since rather than being flat, it actually consists of many small mountain chains interspersed between high altitude valleys and plains. In Phala, for example, several mountain passes of 17,500' or higher must be crossed in order to reach all 10 of its main campsites.<sup>6</sup>

Phala experiences one of the most severe climates in the world. Winter lows range from minus 20-50 degrees F, and mid-summer lows hover around freezing. Winds are fierce and intermittent throughout the year. Precipitation is monsoonal, falling mostly during June, July and August (often in the form of snow and hail storms). There is very little snow in winter, although late fall and spring snow storms occur and are greatly feared. Weather, moreover, is extremely localized with adjacent areas often experiencing different amounts of rainfall or snow in any given year. The *changtang's* single growing season begins in late April-early May and ceases in September.<sup>7</sup> But even during this period, snow, hail storms and evening frosts are common. Since no pasture areas in Tibet have a winter growing season (and because there is inadequate grass to cut as fodder to supplement winter grazing<sup>8</sup>), the nomads' animals subsist for about 8 months on the senescent vegetation remaining at the end of the growing season. These factors- the short growing season, the intense cold, and the frequent and fierce summer hail storms and frosts-combine to make farming an unviable alternative to pastoralism and to preclude competition from farmers for an alternative use of the grasslands. The nomadic pastoralists in Phala and the surrounding areas, therefore are exploiting precisely the same territory as they did during the traditional era. In fact, if there were no nomadic pastoralists, the *changtang* would revert to the wild animals with whom the nomads share the area, not to humans utilizing another subsistence technology.

### **The Phala Nomads In the Traditional Era**

Traditional Tibetan society ended in 1959 when the Dalai Lama fled into exile in India and the Chinese government assumed direct control of Tibet. Before that, for at least several hundred years, the nomadic pastoralists of Phala and the other parts of northern and western Tibet were directly integrated into the semi-feudal "tribute" system that characterized the traditional Tibetan state. Land and people in Tibet were organized not as tribes but rather as manorial nomadic estates (fiefs) controlled by religious and aristocratic lords, or by the government itself.

The Phala pastoralists were one of 10 named nomad groups (*tso*) comprising *Lagyab lhojang*, a vast nomad estate that belonged to the Panchen Lama, Tibet's second greatest incarnate lama whose base was located in Shigatse, several hundred miles to the southeast. Like peasants (serfs) on agricultural estates, these nomads were hereditarily tied to their estate and did not have the right to take their herds and move to an estate of another lord, although each pastoral household

owned and managed its own animals' The Phala nomads' economic obligation to their lord consisted mainly of providing butter for the tea and votive lamps of Tashilhunpo, the Panchen Lama's huge monastery in Shigatse, but also included providing items such as skins, ropes, wool, animals and salt. Goods left after paying taxes and fulfilling work obligations belonged to the nomad household and were consumed or disposed of as that household chose.<sup>10</sup>

The most important aspects of the Panchen Lama's administration of this nomad area (estate) included allocation and reallocation of pasture, appointment of local nomads as leaders, collection of taxes, and adjudication of disputes.

The entire area of *Lagyab Lhojang* was divided into named pastures of varying sizes, often small, each with delimited borders that were recorded in a locally maintained register book. Although there were no fences around these pastures, boundaries were enforced by art the lord, and without explicit permission, nomads could only use the pastures he allocated to them, even if their own pastures experienced untimely drought or snow.

Each named pasture was considered suitable to support a fixed number of animals, the lord in Phala calculating this by means of a unit termed "*marke*." In the 1950's, one *marke* of pasture was equal to 13 yak, and since 7 goats or 6 sheep were calculated as equivalent to one yak, 78 sheep or 91 goats also equaled 1 *marke*.

The Panchen Lama's officials conducted a triennial household census of all adult animals excluding horses and stud animals to determine the distribution of animals in Lagyab. They allocated pastureland to households on the basis of this, each household having complete usufruct rights over their allocation of pasture until the next census. Taxes were calculated in accordance with a fixed schedule linked to the number of *marke*. Whether a family's herds increased or decreased during that 3 year interval, the tax obligation remained the same. However, when the next census was taken 3 years later, households whose herds had increased were allocated additional pastures and those whose herds had decreased lost one or more pastures. Taxes were also adjusted at this time. Households normally received multiple pastures appropriate for use in different seasons.

Animals during the traditional period, therefore, were privately owned by the nomadic pastoralists but all pastureland in Phala and Lagyab Lhojang was owned by a lord who was not part of the nomad community. Both the nomads and the lord were bound to a relationship marked by delimited rights and obligations. The nomads were hereditarily bound to their estate and legally could not unilaterally take their animals and leave, but neither could the lord unilaterally replace them with other nomads.

Since there was no fresh vegetation anywhere in Western and Central Tibet from mid September to May, there was no advantage to driving one's herds hundreds of miles to new pastures. So long as the pastures nearby were sufficient for one's livestock, long distance migrations would serve only to weaken the animals, not improve them. Thus, the pasture areas that any nomadic pastoralist household could utilize were generally nearby. In Phala, for example, the nomads' furthest move for pasture was only about 25-30 miles, and most households moved less than this. Long distance travel, however, occurred for activities such as trade and the collection of salt from distant salt flats.

Socio-economic stratification within nomadic pastoral society was also a salient feature of the traditional era. Although all the Phala nomads belonging to the Panchen Lama had rights to pasture land, many nomads had no (or very few) livestock and subsisted by working as servants or workers for wealthy households. This stratification system tended to be hereditary.

Phala's nomadic pastoralists, therefore, were organized into estates within a well developed and stable state, structurally the same as Tibet's agricultural peasants.

### **Phala During the Early Chinese Period: 1959-81**

Without delving into the complex history of Sino-Tibetan relations in the 20th century, it will suffice to indicate that after an eight year uneasy relationship between the traditional Tibetan government and the Chinese officials who entered Tibet in 1951 as a result of the Seventeen Point Agreement<sup>1</sup> relations completely broke down in March of 1959 when many Tibetans revolted and the Dalai Lama fled into exile. From that point on, the Phala nomads came under the direct administration of the People's Republic of China.

Although extreme measures were used to suppress the revolt in Lhasa and implement communist reforms in Lhasa and the surrounding areas, at first, little changed in Phala with regard to hording and subsistence. Monasteries were closed, monks sent home,<sup>12</sup> and new local officials were appointed by the government, and the three year animal census scheduled for 1959 never occurred. Everyone, therefore, kept the pastures they then held, managing their herds as they had in the past. In 1960, one of the former nomad leaders who had actively supported the Dalai Lama was arrested and committed suicide—his property and animals being redistributed among poor nomads.<sup>13</sup> Debts dating from before 1958 were rescinded and those contracted in 1959 were recalculated with reduced interest. A new nomad "class" structure was begun, but households classified as "wealthy" (*drongda*) were not expropriated so the economic situation of the poor did not change much at first under communist rule.

In early 1961, the relatively benign policy called "mutual aid" (*rogre*) was implemented in Phala. In this system (as it operated in nomad country) several households from the "middle" and "poor" classes were formed into mutual aid groups that cooperated in tasks such as herding. Each small "mutual aid group" was given exclusive usufruct rights over specific pastures based on the size of their herds. But no provision for reallocating pasture with respect to changes in herd size was made. Changes were now made on an ad hoc basis by local officials.

During this period, economic decisions remained located at the household level, and income was not pooled by members of each "mutual aid" group,—each household in it received the income from its own herd.

This era also brought the first serious persecution of the members of the former nomad "wealthy" class. These people had already lost all their authority and status. Now they were not permitted to "join" the mutual aid system and were forced to pay higher taxes. Significantly, however, they were still allowed to operate independently— their animals were not confiscated and

they were permitted to continue hiring other poor nomads as servants and shepherds, albeit at higher wages than what other nomads paid. They also could still sell their products as they wished after they fulfilled tax and other state obligations. Discussions with nomads in two areas adjacent to Phala suggest that this system was implemented similarly throughout the western *changtang*. Thus, the household system of pastoral production did not end when the Chinese Communists took direct control over Tibet.

The emergence of the "Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution" in eastern China in late 1966 eventually introduced a new phase of more radical political intrusions into daily life in urban and village Tibet, and finally the *changtang*. Political "struggle sessions" and active class conflict was begun in Phala. In early 1969, after word arrived that the nomad areas were going to be reconstituted into communes later that year, the overwhelming majority of the Phala nomads, led by their traditional leaders, rose up in rebellion and took physical control of their area, killing several (pro-communist) Tibetan officials in the process. They set up a government of sorts and declared religious and economic freedom as the basic tenets of their administration. Armed only with matchlock rifles and swords, they were quickly subdued by the Chinese army that marched in from bases to the south led by the remaining pro-communist Tibetan officials. After the arrest and execution of some leaders and imprisonment and "reeducation" of others, full fledged nomad communes and revolutionary committees were instituted. At this time the animals and property of the "wealthy" classes were confiscated. Overnight, Phala became two communal brigades. The nomads became "owners" of shares of the commune, but in reality were simply laborers who worked in accordance with the commune leaders' orders. The pastoral technology remained basically the same, but social and political organization were dramatically transformed, and both the ownership of the means of production and all marketing and production decisions were shifted from the household to the commune. As in agricultural communes in the rest of China, the nomads received "work points" for the work they did, earning food and goods on the basis of the "work points" accumulated throughout the year. The situation in Phala remained communal until late 1981.

During the commune period (1969-1981), there was no attempt to diminish the geographic scope of pastoralism by expropriating nomad pastureland or resettling nomads in agricultural areas. Nor was there any attempt to settle Tibetan or Chinese (Han) farmers in the nomad areas as occurred in other areas such as Inner Mongolia. Several programs to increase yields by irrigating and fencing pastures were tried in Phala, and an agricultural test plot was also set up in one small area, but these all failed. Thus, these changes did not alter the basic relationship of the livestock and pastureland.

Trade continued to be critical to the local subsistence economy, and pastoral products such as live animals and excess wool were transported by the commune's carrying animals to village areas 20-30 days to the southeast and there bartered for grain with farming communes and government offices. Here again, there was no fundamental change in trading patterns except that now it was communes trading with communes and government offices rather than individual

families trading with each other. In particular, there was no attempt to specialize production in wool or meat and thus alter the general composition of the area's herds.

While full-scale pastoralism continued during the Cultural Revolution, expression of much of the pastoralists' traditional culture was prohibited. The policy known as "destroying the 4 olds"<sup>4</sup> was energetically implemented with the aim of destroying the traditional culture and creating a new atheistic communist culture. Religion activities were totally forbidden, religious structures including monasteries and prayer-walls<sup>15</sup> were destroyed, and the nomads were forced to cut their braids and even abandon deeply held traditional values such as the taboo against women slaughtering animals. This was a difficult period since food was inadequate and their values and norms deliberately turned topsy turvy. Chinese policy during this period, therefore, sought to maintain pastoral production but destroy the social and cultural fabric of the nomads' traditional way of life.

### **The Current Period: 1981-88**

The death of Mao Zedong in 1976 and the destruction of the "Gang of Four" shortly after that, ushered in a new era in China. Headed by Deng Xiaoping, the new leaders opted for liberalizing China's economy by ending communes and returning to a household based system of production in rural areas. In Tibet, these reforms are known as the system of "complete responsibility" (*gendzang*). It began in Phala in the Fall of 1981 when the commune was dissolved and all the commune's animals were divided equally among the nomads—infants and senior citizen nomads receiving the same share.<sup>16</sup> Overnight, each household, was again, as in the pre-1959 era, responsible for its own production and marketing.

Each nomad in 1981 received as an equal share of the commune's livestock: 39 animals (4.5 yak, 27 sheep and 7.5 goats).<sup>17</sup> In addition to this, households were allowed to retain the "private" animals they had held during the commune era.<sup>18</sup> This raised the average to 42.4 animals per person (4.7 yak, 27 sheep and 10.7 goats).<sup>19</sup> This number of animals, in conjunction with another post-1980 reform exempting all nomads and farmers in Tibet from taxes until at least 1990, was adequate for a decent, but lower middle-class subsistence. In other words, bare subsistence was no problem, but surpluses from this number of animals would generally not be sufficient to permit purchase of luxury goods such as horses and jewelry.

Phala, administratively, was now called a *xiang*, the traditional Chinese term for township. This *xiang* is divided into two administrative units (*drogtso*) corresponding exactly to Phala's two "brigades" during the commune era. These, in turn, were sub-divided into 10 *dzug* each containing 2 to 9 households, and each having exclusive usufruct rights over pastures. Families can change *dzug* only with the permission of the members of the receiving *drug* and the local *xiang* government. The latter functions primarily to collect local data, implement decisions handed down from above, and is the initial legal-judicial body that deals with divorces, disputes and so forth. Phala *xiang* is headed

by two local nomads elected by secret ballot from a list of candidates compiled by the level of government immediately above the *xiang*, the *qu*.

The *qu*, or district, is located on the *changtang* about three days' walk south of Phala. Its officials are all Tibetans and it functions as the intermediary with the more distant county government (*xian* or *dzong*) located at Ngamring about 20 days' walk to the southeast of the Phala (but one day by car). Above the *xian* is the prefecture of Shigatse, and above it the government of the TAR.<sup>20</sup> The language used in administration at the district and *xiang* levels is Tibetan, and the district school teaches only Tibetan.

Phala's 57 households in 1988 averaged 4.7 members. 67% of the households contained an adult (a married couple, a widow/widower, a divorcee, or a single mother) together with either childless offspring or sometimes other unmarried siblings or friends. Another 16% consist of unmarried or divorced adults living alone, while only 9% of the households consist of three generational families.

There is no policy of population limitation on the *changtang* and the nomads have relatively large families. Table I presents the average number of births and offspring deaths to all Phala females age 20-59 regardless of marital status. It reveals that women in each age category from 30 upward produce more than the two surviving children necessary to replace the two parents. Women 40-49, for example, experienced on the average 5.4 births, with 4.9 surviving.

Despite the excess of births over deaths, Phala has not experienced rapid population growth. Over the 7 years from 1981-88, the population grew by only 2.7%, this a miniscule 0.4% annual growth rate (implying a 175 year doubling time). The reason for this net population stability is primarily out-migration to contiguous nomadic pastoral groups, these shifts being for non-economic reasons such as marriage or moving closer to relatives. The high number of surviving offspring however, represents a latent potential for growth, and Phala in the near future could experience much higher rates of growth and increased population density.<sup>21</sup>

Table 1. *Births and Offspring Mortality Experienced by Phala women as of 1988*



| Age category | $\bar{X}$ births per female | N females | $\bar{X}$ live offspring to parous women | $\bar{X}$ % mortality to offspring | N parous women |
|--------------|-----------------------------|-----------|--|------------------------------------|----------------|
| 20-29        | 1.3                         | 20        | 2.3                                      | 10%                                | 11             |
| 30-39        | 3.3                         | 18        | 3.8                                      | 23%                                | 16             |
| 40-49        | 5.4                         | 11        | 5.9                                      | 29%                                | 10             |
| 50-59        | 5.4                         | 10        | 6.8                                      | 36%                                | 8              |

### Culture and Religion Under the New Policy

The post-1980 Tibet policy of the Chinese government parallels that implemented throughout other parts of China. It rejects the earlier Maoist "assimilation" ideology for national minorities, substituting in its place a policy that accepts the validity of traditional minority culture and religion within the communist state. It also eliminates the use of class distinctions and class struggle. An incident that occurred during our fieldwork in Phala illustrates the extent to which the latter has been implemented. A former "poor" class (*Upung*) nomad who had been an official during the commune period sold a sheep to a trader before milking it, therein breaking a traditional nomad taboo. Nomads believe that this could affect negatively the milk production of the entire camp, and another man in the same camp, a former "class enemy" who had been persecuted throughout the Cultural Revolution period, became incensed. He started berating the seller and words soon changed to pushing and fighting. They took the case before the *xiang* officials, the "poor" class nomad arguing that the "wealthy" class nomad was looking down on him because of his class background and was trying to impose old superstitions on him. The local and district level officials were not impressed with his anachronistic perspective and did not side with him, but instead fined both men. It is noteworthy that one of those deciding this case, the senior (elected) *xiang* leader, is a very well-liked former monk of "wealthy" class background. A great deal has changed in Phala since decollectivization.

This is nowhere more evident than with regard to the practice of religion. During the period of our fieldwork in Phala the nomads were free to practice their religion as they saw fit, and religion had again become an important part of their lives. Each nomad home-base camp has hired villagers to rebuild its prayer wall or walls, and nomads are again pursuing the cycle of religious rites that typified the traditional society. Most households have small altars in their tents and prayer flags fly from their tent poles and guylines. Nomads make pilgrimages to monasteries and holy sites and travel to visit Lamas without asking anyone's permission. Some are also actively supporting the

reemergence of monasticism by donating animals and food to help rebuild small local monasteries, and by hiring monks to conduct prayers for them.<sup>22</sup> In summer, wandering monks and villagers come to the *changtang* to do prayers, carve prayer stones, build walls and mold clay figurines of deities. Nomad practitioners of traditional Tibetan medicine are also active in the area.

These traditional practices did not reappear all at once or in an orderly fashion. The nomads at first actually feared that the new policy was a devious trick launched to expose pockets of "rightist" thinking, and were reluctant to take the lead and risk being singled out. Change, therefore, occurred only gradually as individual nomads took single actions that in effect tested the general policy. When no protest or punishment came from the district officials above them, the practice in question spread rapidly.

### **Herding and Pastures Under the New Policy**

Phala's pastures have the same names and roughly the same formally delimited boundaries as in the old society, but, as in the "mutual aid" period, are allocated to small groups of household—now to each of the 10 *dzug*'s. The households that comprise these *dzug* have exclusive usufruct rights to these. However, there is no system of pasture reallocation that adjusts pasture to increases or decreases in the number of animals. Consequently, if *dzug* B's animals decrease by 50%, their allocation is not reduced even if it has unused pastures needed by a neighboring *dzug* whose herd size has doubled. This represents one of the most serious deficiencies of Tibet's post-commune pastoral policy.

This, moreover, is not just a hypothetical issue—it has become a real problem. By 1989 several *dzug* were experiencing serious shortages of pasture and were looking for more pasture from other surrounding groups who are perceived to have excess pasture. There are, however, no clear set of regulations regarding what is legal regarding pastureland, and this has created confusion and frustration. One *dzug* we know of, for example, allowed a group living in another district in Nagchuka Prefecture to rent some of their winter pasture for several hundred yak. The *xiang* officials objected to this and ended the practice after one season, decreeing that land in this *xiang* can be leased only to members—not to outsiders.

This issue is being faced in each of the surrounding *xiang*, and it is interesting to see that in the absence of a higher government policy, each *xiang* is developing ad hoc policies. For example, one *xiang*, in this area made a rule that during late Spring (when the vegetation is poorest), the exclusivity of each *dzug*'s pastures was held in abeyance and any *xiang* household could move his animals where he liked. During the rest of the year, a household who wanted to utilize another *dzug*'s pastures had to make a case and secure permission from the *xiang* officials. Another *xiang* was in the process of reestablishing the traditional 3 year rotation system, and several other *xiang* in the area were waiting to see how that turned out before they decided whether to follow suit.

Consequently, the failure of decollectivization to address the reallocation of pastureland issue is producing problems that the local nomads and their leaders are being forced to address

locally since the government is still unwilling to get involved (or entangled) in this potentially divisive issue. There was, however, universal agreement among the herders that something akin to the traditional system of reallocation is absolutely necessary, but there was also anxiety that this might be implemented unfairly based on favoritism.

Hording strategies during the traditional, communal and contemporary eras have remained virtually identical, the realities of the harsh *changtang* environment appearing to have overridden divergent political ideologies and economic systems.

The basic migration pattern in Phala involves two main moves, and a number of secondary ones. A major move is made in late September when each *dzug* shifts to a new pasture area which has been left fallow since the growing season began in May. Depending on the quantity and quality of the vegetation, several moves within this area can occur, but in general, they remain at the Fall sites until late December when this area's forage is usually exhausted, returning with the sheep and goats to their homebase encampment where they reside during winter, spring and summer. The yak herd, however, moves higher in the mountains in December where it grazes on a sedge (*Kobresia* sp.) which comprises most of the sod covering the mountain slopes. A satellite camp is maintained therefore about 4 months, these herders generally making several moves within the area in accordance with the vegetation conditions. The main herd remains at the homebase site utilizing the remaining grass until the new growing season begins in late April-early May.<sup>23</sup>

Within the winter-spring-summer pasture area, the nomads occasional shift parts of their herd depending on conditions. For example, in late winter-early spring when the goats and sheep give birth, the pregnant animals are normally moved to a special site which has been left ungrazed all year. These are usually close to the summer-winter site but require establishment of a satellite camp with tents and workers separate from the main tent.

Throughout the year other satellite camps may be set up as needed. For example, the male and non-lactating female sheep and goats are herded separately from the lactating females in summer, and satellite camps are sometimes established for them if there is sufficient labor. Consequently, beyond the universality of a main fall move, the precise movement patterns may differ for each of Phala's 10 *dzug* because of micro-ecological variations in forage and labor constraints.

Intrinsic to the pastoral hording cycle is the nomads' traditional notion of a "home-base" campsite—the main location where they pitch their woven yak-hair tent.<sup>24</sup> The "home-base" is almost always both their summer and winter-spring camp. It is the location where 3'-4' deep pits are maintained as tent sites and where substantial stone or sod walls (windbreaks) are constructed surrounding these tent sites. It is also the site where wealthy households traditionally constructed storehouses, or increasingly nowadays, even small winter dwellings. The Phala nomads' ideal is for the household heads (or the grandparents) to keep the main tent at the home-base site year round, while children or hired shepherds take livestock to new pastures where they set up satellite camps. Although this is often unattainable because of insufficient labor, it is the ideal, and these nomadic pastoralists have no interest in moving for the sake of movement. Their self image, in fact, focuses

primarily on being complete **pastoralists** (i.e. practicing no farming), not on moving their herds (nomadism) or even living in tents. The short distances between home-base and satellite campsites (no more than 2 days' walk) makes this pattern relatively easy to manage, although it results sometimes in situations where a single household may have as many as three separate camps with herds operating at the same time—for example, a yak camp, a sheep-goat satellite camp and a home-base camp. If other household members are away on trading or salt collecting trips, even more camps are possible.

### **Pastoral Production and Trade Under the New Policy**

The Phala pastoral production system traditionally involved rearing yak, sheep and goats, harvesting their products, consuming part of the yield, and then bartering another portion together with non-livestock products such as salt to secure items and commodities not directly obtainable from the animals. Since roughly 50% of these pastoralists' annual calories derive from grains, particularly barley<sup>25</sup> trade for these grains is (and always has been) an integral component of their subsistence economy. Traditionally, these nomads made a winter trading trip to villages and towns 20-30 days' march to the southeast, bartering livestock products and salt for grains. Most of these products were bartered directly with farmers, but wool was often bartered with agents of large Tibetan traders who exported it to India and the U.S.. Some villagers reversed this flow by coming to the *changtang* during the summer to barter with the nomads.

Eight types of livestock products are particularly important to the pastoralists' economy: wool, yak *kulu*,<sup>26</sup> skins, yak hair (*dziba*), goat hair, meat, live animals, and dairy products, especially butter. Of these, wool has traditionally been the most important (and lucrative) product. The yields for wool per animal in Phala range from a little more than 1 kg from an adult male to only 0.3 kg from 6 month old lambs, each animal in the Phala herds yielding on the average about 0.75 kg of wool. To put this in perspective, the average Phala household in 1988 had about 86 sheep from which they obtained about 65 kg of wool annually.

Since decollectivization, a ninth product, goat cashmere has become a lucrative trade item although traditionally, there was no market for this and it was of little importance to the nomad economy. Today, however, it is worth roughly 6 times more per kg than wool. Consequently, despite its low yield (on the average less than 0.2 kg. per goat), it is as valuable to the nomad's income as wool.

In addition to these products, sheep and goats skins (with their fleece) are used to make the heavy robe-like garment essential for survival on the *changtang* in winter.<sup>27</sup> These are obtained as a by-product of the annual early winter animal slaughter when about 4-7% of the herds are harvested for meat. Yak *kulu* is used primarily in making ropes and woven cloth. The coarse lower hair of yak (known as *dziba*) is the material from which the best tent cloth and rope is made.

All three species of domestic animals produce milk which the nomads convert into yogurt, butter and cheese, some of which is used for immediate domestic consumption and some, in the

case of butter and cheese, sewn in skins or sun dried to store for winter when milk output drops. The quantity of *dri* (female yak), goat and sheep milk is low by international standards, but milk nevertheless, provides a core element in the subsistence economy of the nomads.

Table 2 presents the estimated amount of milk produced per year by *dri*, sheep and goats, and the number of months milk is produced. If all milk were converted into butter, each lactating *dri* would yield from 9-18 kg. per year, goats 1-2 kg. per year, and sheep 0.5-1 kg. per year.

However, considerable yogurt is eaten so the actual amount of butter obtained is less than these maximum estimates. The two-fold range of variation in milk yields reflects differences among camps measured at the same time of the year.

Decollectivization, however, has altered the nature of exchange. The collective's animals were divided among the nomad members, but a market system of exchange based on supply and demand was not permitted to develop. The government has decided to continue to monopolize the nomads' products via a system of compulsory quota sales.

At present, there are five types of trade, one of which is primary and the other four secondary. The main axis of trade is: with the government at the district (*qu*) and county (*xian*) levels. The four secondary forms of trade are: (1) trade with farmers located along the fringe of the *changtang*— this is the traditional barter trade described above; (2) trade with farmers and traders who come to the *changtang* in summer to exchange products and labor (for example building the prayer walls described above or tanning skins) for animals or other livestock products; (3) trade with other nomads, for example horses and livestock and; (4) truck trade with Shigatse, the large Tibetan town 2-3 days distant by truck. This newly emerging type of trade is in its infancy.

The bulk of the nomads' trade today is conducted with the district's trade office through a system of contract or quota sales. This trade almost exclusively concerns wool, goat cashmere and yak *kulu*. Its operation is organized from the top down. The Lhasa or Shigatse prefecture's trade office negotiates

Table 2. *Estimated annual milk yields for Phala dri, sheep and goats\* in 1987*

|       | annual milk yield per lactating animal (kg) | months per year that animals are milked |
|-------|---|---|
| dri   | 134-268                                     | 12                                      |
| sheep | 8-16  | 3 (June-August)                         |
| goats | 16-36                                       | 4 (June-September)                      |

\* Based on daily weighings in several camps, in each season

Table 3. *1987 trade between Ngamring county and 3 nomad districts*

| Bought from  | wool (in gyama) | cashmere (in gyama) |
|--------------|-----------------|---------------------|
| tsatsey qu** | 63,650          | 4,376               |
| tshome qu    | 57,206          | 2,979               |
| sangsang qu  | 25,139          | 2,350               |
| TOTAL        | 145,895         | 9,704               |

\* One gyama equals one half-kilogram

\*\* Phala is a part of this qu

orders with factories and offices in eastern China and then decides how much wool, etc. it needs that year. Then it makes contracts with several county (*xian*) trade office to buy that quantity of livestock products. These counties then calculate the amount needed to fulfill the contract and allocates it among its nomad districts proportionate to the number of animals each *xiang* contains. Finally, the *xiang* apportions out its contracted amount of wool and cashmere on the basis of the number of animals each nomad household possesses, informing each household of the amount of wool and cashmere per animal that it has to provide. Each nomad household is actually given a slip of paper listing its quotas of wool, cashmere and so forth for that year.

This trade is profitable throughout the marketing chain. In 1988 the county t office paid the nomads 3 yuan<sup>28</sup> (or 6 jin of grain) per jin of wool and sold it to the prefecture for 3.9 yuan (or 26 jin of grain) for cashmere, receiving 20 yuan from the prefecture for a 54% profit. Their profit on the wool was 131,305 yuan and on the cashmere was 67,927 yuan, making a gross profit 199,232 yuan.<sup>29</sup> The gross profit is actually somewhat larger than this because most nomads take grain rather than money and the county obtains the grain for less than the 0.5 yuan it charges the nomads. From these gross profits the county has to pay the trade office workers' salaries, a 10% tax to the TAR government, and freight charges, but the profit clearly is still enormous given that the annual salary of a top official in the county is only about 2,500-3,000 yuan per year.<sup>30</sup>

Since trade figures are treated as a secret in China, we were unable to obtain official figures on wool and cashmere prices from the trade offices above the county, and the following section, therefore, must be taken as suggestive rather than definitive.<sup>31</sup> One *jin* (1.1 lbs.) of (non-dehaired) goat cashmere sold in 1987 for about \$12.50 (46.5 yuan) per *jin* in Guangzhou. This was 2.3 times more per jin than was paid to the county and 3.6 times more than the nomads of Phala received. The only value added to this item as it went up the ladder was sorting it into grades based primarily on color. If the cashmere was dehaired before sale, it brought twice the price—approximately \$25.00 (93 yuan) per Jin.

In 1987, wool sold to Shanghai and Guangzhou is said to have brought 4.6 yuan *per jin*, 18% higher than the price the county received and 53% higher than what the nomads received. The wool price for export sales to Nepal in 1987 was said to be 6.5 yuan per *jin* delivered to the

Nepalese border. Comparing the value of the 145,895 *jin* sold by the nomads in 1987 reveals the extent of the profit— whereas the nomads received 437,685 yuan, the county received 568,991 yuan and the prefecture (at the Nepal price) 948,318 yuan. The county therefore made a profit of about 131,306 yuan and the prefecture a profit of 379,327 yuan, their joint profit being about 510,633 yuan, an amount greater than that paid to the nomads.

Wool and cashmere also bring high prices on the Tibetan open market. In Lhasa, for example, one *jin* of wool fetches about 5 yuan (versus the 3 yuan paid the nomads), and the three Phala nomad households who went to trade with fanners during the winter of 1987 bartered their excess wool (that left after fulfilling their contract-quota) with these farmers for 9.8 *jin* of barley per *jin* of wool(=4.9 yuan), 63% more than the district price. Similarly, private traders coming to Phala in 1987 were offering 25-35 yuan per *jin* of cashmere, over twice as much as that offered by the district.

In theory the new economic policy in the TAR gives nomads and farmers the right to sell their products to whomever they want until 1990, but while this right is exercised by farmers in Tibet, the nomads in fact have had to sell a quota to the government at less than market price.

This trade is generally represented as a "voluntary contract" system, but clearly is mandatory. A variety of threats and sanctions are levied to force nomads to sell their quota to the government before selling the excess to private persons. The wool and cashmere trade appears to be too profitable for the officials of the trade offices to give up an assured supply. A comment made by the head of the TAR's Foreign Trade Bureau reveals somewhat the underlying pressure on county officials:

With five million goats, Tibet should harvest  
500 tons of goat's wool [cashmere] each year,  
but at present only 150 tons can be purchased.  
Apart from increasing the amount purchased  
each year, processing should also be expanded.  
(Ton chub 1988:114.)

On the other hand, because these officials try to give the appearance that these "contracts" are voluntarily entered into, they cannot pay the nomads too little and thus provoke them to protest to Lhasa.<sup>32</sup> Thus, the price of cashmere has increased from 8 yuan per *jin* in 1986 to 11 yuan per *jin* in 1986, to 13 yuan per *jin* in 1987, and to approximately 18 yuan per *jin* in 1988. The price of wool has also increased from 2 yuan per *jin* in 1985 to 2.4 yuan per *jin* in 1986 to 3 yuan per *jin* in 1987 and 1988. These increases have more than offset the increases in the price of grains and other imported staples such as tea.<sup>33</sup> These officials also work energetically to keep the district store well stocked, frequently trucking in grain and other products such as tea. Because they offer the nomads a reasonable, albeit slightly lower, price than that available on the open market, and because they offer either cash or goods as well as the convenience of having to travel only 3 days to the district headquarters (rather than a month to trade with more distant farmers), most nomads would probably trade with the government's trade office even if they had free choice. However, they do not have

that option. This appears to be a case where thoughtful and sympathetic national level policies with regards to Tibet are being contravened at lower levels. Our discussion with nomads in adjacent counties indicate that this is not an isolated problem, and that the same practices are being employed in these regions.<sup>34</sup>

Notwithstanding the controversial use of contract-quota purchases, it is clear that the nomads' main livestock products are increasing in value and that the nomads are receiving increasingly higher prices for their goods. Thus, despite an overall 8% decrease in herd size since decollectivization, Phala is much better off economically than it was in 1981. For example, these nomads once again have the wherewithal to hire villagers to tan sheep and goat skins for them, paying 1 sheep for every 10 skins tanned.

Space does not permit discussion of the other types of trade, but mention should be made about the impact of roads. The completion of a truck road from the county to the district in the mid 1970s signaled the beginning of a new era when the government (and eventually private traders) could easily bring grains and other commodities to the district headquarters, and thus to within 3-4 days' walk of virtually all Phala nomads. The subsequent completion in about 1980 of a feeder road from the district to segments of most *xiang* (including Phala) made truck transport even more convenient. The limiting factor precluding utilization of trucks for most district-*xiang* transportation is now the high cost of operating and thus renting such trucks. Nevertheless, the roads are changing the pattern of Phala trade. Last year only 3 Phala households took the traditional winter trading trip with their animals, the rest either conducting all their business with the district trade office and store, or most of it there and the remainder with traders who came to the *changtang* or by taking some of their goods by truck to Shigatse. Although these roads are still more a convenience for officials than a means for increasing the profitability of livestock products, their potential importance for expanding trade is seen by many, and in 1986 two of the nomad *xiang* in this district (but not Phala) took government loans to buy old trucks that sometimes bring grain and other products right into the *xiang* areas. To facilitate utilization and expansion of this new dimension, the government over the past two years has initiated a substantial loan program for nomads desiring to do business as part-time traders. Most commonly this involves taking livestock products (and even live sheep) to Shigatse and then using the profits from this to purchase manufactured goods which are resold to other nomads on the *changtang*. This has not yet proved to be highly profitable, but the development of roads and the greater entanglement in the Chinese and world market systems is altering the nature of trade in Phala and will likely produce a more lasting and significant change in the nomads' way of life than did the more direct assault of the "cultural revolution". At present, however, there is no reason to assume that this will be anything but profitable to the overall nomad economy, and, to be sure, no coercion is being applied to the nomads to utilize this development.

### **The New Policy and Economic Differentiation**

One of the striking features of the current "complete responsibility" system in Phala is the rapid rate at which economic differentiation has occurred at the household level.<sup>35</sup> Although all the nomads started approximately equal when commune property was divided in 1981, there are now both wealthy and poor nomads, and several nomads today subsist primarily by working for other



nomads. The number of per capita animals per household in 1988 ranged from 0 to 154 animal, with the richer 16% of the population in 1988 owning 33% of the animals while the poorer 33% of the population owned only 17% of Phala's animals. 10 households (18%) received supplementary welfare from the district in 1987 amounting to 900 kg of barley, and one is a recipient of complete government support in the form of the "5 guarantees".

The pattern of poor nomads working for rich nomads is increasing and several nomad households employ one or more full-time herders or milkers for most of the year. Similarly, rich nomads no longer do their own slaughtering, ear-brand cutting or castrating since these are considered polluting, anti-Buddhist tasks. As in the past, it is again the poor (and the traditionally "unclean") nomads who do these tasks. But despite this, the poor nomads are still favorably inclined toward the new system since there is always work to be had, and wages are high—normally, room and board and 1 live sheep per month.<sup>36</sup>

Relative to the nightmare of the cultural revolution era when people often went hungry, the nomads perceive a marked improvement in the overall standard of living since 1981. However, many are still very poor. Their tents rarely have carpets and many often wear ragged clothes. Similarly, many can only afford to eat meat for just 5-6 months a year and live in small tattered cloth tents. Health care is virtually non-existent at the local level and veterinary care, though somewhat better than that available for humans, is still minimal.

## **Conclusion**

In contrast to the bleak future facing nomads in most other parts of the world, nomadic pastoralism on the Tibetan *changtang* is flourishing. Because the *changtang*'s severe environmental conditions preclude agriculture and because the nomad's livestock products earn the TAR a substantial proportion of its foreign currency, no attempt has (or is) being made to end or diminish this ancient way of life. Changes have occurred, but pastureland is not being expropriated from the pastoralists, and they are not being forced or induced to resettle. Nor are Tibetan or Chinese farmers being settled in nomad areas. The traditional subsistence technology, moreover, is intact and herds are managed much as in the traditional period. With no better way to utilize the TAR's vast highland pastures and with livestock products such as wool and cashmere having high value, the current leadership of the TAR and China is committed to a policy of developing animal husbandry in these areas. And while this raises important issues regarding how development should be implemented on the *changtang*, if at all, for example, there is disagreement over whether the nomads' traditional pastoral subsistence technology is destroying the *changtang*'s pasturelands,<sup>37</sup> it is clear that nomadic pastoralism is currently doing well. Under the new Chinese "reform" policies, not only has the economy reverted to the traditional system of household production and management, but the traditional religico-cultural system of these nomads has been allowed to reassert itself. Economically and culturally, therefore, the nomads of Phala have experienced a revitalization since 1981 that promises to continue in the future, although potential problems such as increasing

economic differentiation, ill thought-out development projects and vulnerability to larger market fluctuations exist. The nomadic pastoralists of Phala are far from being economically well-off, but are once again in control of their daily lives, and are likely to gradually increase their standard of living if they are allowed to secure the full value of their livestock products in accordance with market demand.

## Notes

- 1 The TAR corresponds almost exactly to political Tibet, the area traditionally ruled by the Dalai Lama in the 1930s and 1940s. Other ethnic Tibetan nomadic pastoral areas can be found in Qinghai, Sichuan and Kansu provinces
- 2 This paper was written in 1988 so reflects primarily our data as of that point.
- 3 Pronounced: *chang-tang*.
- 4 Tibetan nomads use *yak* as the name for the male of the species (*Bos grunniens*), *dri* for the female and *nor* for the common name of the species. We shall henceforth use *yak* for the general species name since this is a convention in English. These nomads raise no cattle or hybrids. On the average, 13% of their herds are *yak* and 87% sheep and goats.
- 5 The figure of 18,000' is higher than those cited in these two sources and derives from our own observations.
- 6 For a visual look at Phala see Goldstein and Beall (1989B, and 1990B).
- 7 The first sprouts of the early foliage species are seen in late April but this new growth does not play a large role in (the animals' subsistence until late May-early June. For example, in late May, 1988, the animals were still subsisting primarily on the previous year's forage at two of Phala's three lower altitude camps (16,000'-16,500'). Moreover, some critical foliage species that are located on the mountain slopes do not usually appear until July, and if there is a late monsoon, even later. For example, *bang*, a mountain sedge preferred by *nor*, remained dormant in 1987 until the beginning of August.
- 8 Only one area has wild vegetation adequate for harvesting and storing as fodder. This area is harvested in September just before the grass dies, but yields only enough to supplement the winter diets of horses, or, occasionally, to assist lactating animals.
- 9 Tibetan nomads in other areas, especially those in the Western China borderlands, may well have been more tribal in organization, but the situation in these areas is not clear. Ekvall (1968) has written about one of these groups, but does not present enough information on political organization to assess this issue.
- 10 Lattimore (1962:66-73) alludes to a similar "feudal" system for herdsmen in Outer Mongolia, but did not provide elaboration on how that system operated. Salzman (1986:49ff.) describes another very different kind of "non-tribal" pastoral group in India. Similarly, Khazanov (1983) discusses the issue of pastoral society and the feudal mode of production in Russian Central Asia.
- 11 See Goldstein (1989) for an account of this Agreement and the events leading up to it.

- 12 In Lhasa, the large monasteries remained open but with only a token number of caretaker monks.
- 13 Of his approximately 1,000 sheep, 300 goats and 200 *nor*, 50 sheep were left with the household and the rest divided among 15 poor nomad households.
- 14 The "four olds" were: old ideas, culture, customs and habits.
- 15 These are walls about 10 feet long (or longer) and 4 feet high, on top of which are piled stones on which prayers have been carved. Nomads do religious prostrations before them as well as circumambulate them to gain merit
- 16 Losang Yexe (1988:12) a nomad living in Damshung, an area north of Lhasa, also reports that animals were given to families on the basis of family size. G. Clarke (1986:44), however, reports that at the time of decollectivization in Namtso, a pastoral area north of Lhasa, 70% of the livestock went on a per capita basis among those age 15-50 and the other 30% was "allocated to the younger people and also to others who could work hard." He also says that "children and old men received a little bit less."
- 17 There is actually some variation regarding these figures since one person sometimes received 7 more goats, but then had this balanced by getting one less yak, etc. We obtained these data from the original division list located in the *xiang*.
- 18 These "private" animals were the equivalent of household garden plots on agricultural communes.
- 19 Although figures are often presented in the literature as animals per household, we shall use the "per person" measure throughout this paper in order to take into account the large variation in household size in Tibet.
- 20 A new system was implemented in 1989 in which smaller *xiang* such as Phala were merged with contiguous larger ones. It has not had any significant effects since the adjacent nomads are all from Lagyab Lhojang and are well known to each other on a personal level.
- 21 See Goldstein and Beall (1991) for discussion of population policy in Tibet.
- 22 There are, however, varying government set limits on the number of monks that can be recruited in monasteries. This policy is disliked by Tibetans who see it as a continuing curtailment of their ability to practice their religion as they wish.
- 23 Winter grazing probably has little effect on pasture condition because carbohydrate reserves are stored below ground (e.g., in roots and rhizomes) and heavy use of dried foliage in the winter is generally not detrimental to plant survival and growth (Richard Cincotta, personal communication).
- 24 The Tibetan nomads' black tent is made from the coarse lower hair of yak which is spun and then woven into cloth by the nomads. Lighter cloth tents are also used by poor families and as satellite tents.
- 25 We weighed food intake directly during the course of the study, and this figure derives from our findings.
- 26 Goats produce a downlike undercoat called *kulu* in Tibetan and cashmere. In English, yak produce a similar downlike undercoat that the nomads also call *kulu*. However, since only goat

- down legally can be considered cashmere in the West, there is no large export market for yak *kulu*.
- 27 These are worn with their fleece on the inside and weigh 22 lb. or more for adults.
- 28 1 \$ = 3.71 yuan.
- 29 By "gross profit" we mean the profit after paying the nomads for the raw materials but before subtracting other costs such as transportation and salaries.
- 30 The district and county data derive from interviews with officials at the district and county levels, and with local nomads.
- 31 Some of the figures cited below derive from Ton Chub (1988:108-114) and others from anonymous persons.
- 32 The issue of a fair price for trade goods is complicated further by the inconsistency in prices between nomad counties, the nomads in Phala, for example, receive prices as much as 20-30% lower than neighboring nomads in Nagtsang district (a part of Nagchuka Prefecture). However, despite the fact that these districts are both "government," the Phala nomads are not allowed to sell their "quota" amount to the officials of counties and districts other than their own. The disliked system of quota sales also operates at the district level in the sense that nomads have to sell butter and mutton at below market rates to officials of the district for their consumption needs.
- 33 Grain increased from .15 per *jin* in 1984 to .5 in 1985, remaining the same after that. Tea increased from 151 to 1.88 yuan per brick in 1985.
- 34 A senior Han official in the TAR's Agriculture, Forest and Animal Husbandry Office repeatedly assured us that there was not even one *xiang* in the TAR where nomads were forced to sell to the government. It appears as if a convenient fiction is being maintained even in Lhasa that the nomads are voluntarily contracting for wool and cashmere with the trade offices.
- 35 See Goldstein and Beall (1989C) for a fuller discussion of this.
- 36 There is, therefore, no outmigration to seek work. It should be noted that the new cultural freedoms also play a major role in producing this opinion of the new reforms.
- 37 This is discussed in Goldstein and Beall 1990.
- 38 A Number of nomads explained that the wild-ass is considered part of the category "horse" because of its non-cloven hoof, and these nomads do not eat or milk horses. Nomad food taboos also include fish and fowl.

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**Melvyn C. Goldstein** is Professor of Anthropology, Case Western Reserve University and Director, Center for Research on Tibet. He received his PhD in 1968 from University of Washington. Prof. Goldstein has published extensively on Tibetan issues.

**Cynthia M. Beall** is Professor, Department of Anthropology, Case Western Reserve University. She received her PhD in 1976 from Pennsylvania State University. Beall's specialization is in Human Biology/Human Adaptability.

A recent (1990) joint publication on Tibet is *Nomads of Western Tibet: The survival of a Way of Life*. Berkeley: University of California Press.