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What to do with Unmarried Daughters? Modern Solutions to a Traditional Dilemma in a Polyandrous Tibetan Society

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Similar to other societies that lack formal social security systems, the elderly in rural Tibet¹ depend on adult children to care for them in old age. Any changes in the ties that bind adult children to their parents can therefore affect the health and welfare of the elderly. Tibet is currently undergoing major social and economic transformations that are affecting domestic

relationships, gender ideologies, and gender roles. In the last decade, China has dedicated enormous resources toward improving the standard of living in Tibet. Policies aimed at achieving modernization are increasing opportunities for secular education, non-farm employment, and rural to urban migration (Goldstein, Childs, and Wangdui 2008, 2010). According to the seminal theory on aging and modernization (Cowgill 1974; Cowgill and Holmes 1972), the very forces of modernization that are now transforming Tibet can negatively impact the elderly by producing intergenerational competition, residential segregation, social distance, and an inversion of

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status.² The social, economic, and spatial mobility of children engendered by modernization is seen as a threat to the ability of families to provide care for aging members.

In this chapter, we use data collected in three Tibetan villages to demonstrate ways that externally-resident daughters can positively impact the lives of their aging parents. Deciding which children to keep as caretakers, and which to send out of the household, has always been an important decision for parents. In traditional Tibetan societies, daughters who moved out through arranged marriages were considered a net loss to the household, as epitomized by the proverb, "The hen eats at home and lays its eggs outside" (Pemba 1996: 81). Fraternal polyandry, a type of marriage in which two or more brothers share a wife, complicated matters by generated a surplus of potential brides. Simply put, there were more women than households into which they could marry. Retaining an unmarried daughter within the household was considered problematic due to potential conflicts that could erupt between her and her brothers' in-marrying bride, yet options for removing her from the household were limited and often left her vulnerable and impoverished. Nowadays, however, social and economic changes associated with modernization are creating new opportunities for parents to send daughters out in ways whereby they can gain financial independence and continue to provide support for their parents in old age.

To explore the evolving nature of relationships between parents and externally-resident daughters, we deploy the concept of social capital. Social capital refers to connections within and between social networks that facilitate action and promote cooperation between individuals. It is rooted in interpersonal relations that involve reciprocity over the life course, and functions as a resource that people can draw upon to solve problems or achieve objectives (Bourdieu 2001; Coleman 1988; Putnam 2000). Research in social gerontology has focused on filial norms as a dimension of social capital. Silverstein and colleagues (2006) argue that the resources parents invest in their children from birth to adulthood generate a reserve of social capital, and hypothesize that the social capital imbued in the relationship with adult children may lie dormant for many years, but can be activated during a time of need such as a health crisis. The key is to determine when certain members of a latent kinship matrix (the sum of family members who vary from potential to actual providers of support) become active in providing support for the elderly, and why.

In this chapter, we view some externally-resident daughters of Tibet's rural households—namely, beneficiaries of parental investments that facilitated financial

independence and urban residence—as a novel form of social capital from which the elderly can solicit social support. Social support refers to various types of assistance a person can receive from others, and herein is divided into three categories: emotional support, caretaking assistance, and financial assistance. A fundamental point of this paper is that, compared with daughters who were sent as brides to other rural households, daughters who move out of their households through education or employment represent an important form of social capital because they possess a unique combination of income, urban residence, and greater freedom to assist aging parents. This combination enhances their ability to positively impact the lives of elderly parents by providing (1) leverage against coresident children who do not treat them well, (2) temporary places of refuge from ill-treatment at home, (3) caretaking services and financial support when they require hospitalization, and (4) financial resources which they can use whenever they want, for example, to pursue age-appropriate activities like pilgrimage.

Data presented in this chapter come from surveys and interviews conducted in three Tibetan villages between 2006 and 2009. The three villages, while not representing all of Tibet, were selected to meet a research design comparing a continuum of villages from relatively wealthy to relatively poor in a study of the impacts that modernization has on rural families. Sogang, the least affected by development, is in the upper part of a tributary river valley. Norgyong, the intermediate site, is situated below Sogang on the main river and is located immediately beside the rapidly growing town of Panam. Betsag, the third site, is located 10 kilometers from Shigatse, Tibet's second largest city, and represents a wealthy farming village that is heavily affected by modernization. Despite economic differences, the three villages are geographically close and are part of the same Tibetan sub-ethnic cultural and linguistic zone.

MOVING CHILDREN OUT OF THE HOUSEHOLD

From the 1960s until the early 1980s, rural Tibet was organized into collectives. When that system was dismantled, the commune's land was divided equally, and the household resumed its role as the primary unit of landholding and farm production. This occurred in the context of an economic paradigm shift in China from an emphasis on common property and wealth equality during the Cultural Revolution, to an emphasis on individual initiative in Deng Xiaoping's market economy with socialist characteristics.

People in our fieldwork area responded by renewing the traditional corporate family system and reviving one of most salient strategies for advancing a family's economic interests—the practice of fraternal polyandry. This type of marriage creates a kind of stem family that is the functional equivalent of primogeniture in the sense that, with only one wife per generation, only one set of offspring (heirs) was produced thereby facilitating family land being passed along intact to the next generation. Also, fraternal polyandry concentrated male labor within the family, enabling it to pursue a broad range of economic activities. For example, one brother could herd the sheep in a mountain pasture, a second could manage the farm, and a third could concentrate on trading (Goldstein 1987). Consequently, after decollectivization, there was a major revival of fraternal polyandrous marriages throughout our study area (Goldstein et al. 2002, 2003; Jiao 2001).³

Filial piety is a deeply held value in Tibetan society: children are expected to express gratitude to their parents and provide care for them in old age. The question is who is best suited to care for aging parents? Because the Tibetan marriage system is patrilocal, a bride moves to her husband's home at marriage. A daughter who marries out is in no position to provide support for her own parents, and in fact, a married woman who diverts resources to her natal household breaches a protocol that can compromise her status with in-laws. One household in our research area split apart after the daughter-in-law was accused of secretly sending butter and other items to her parents. The ensuing arguments prompted the family to build a wall through the center of their house; the elderly parents now live on one side of the wall, while their son, daughter-in-law, and grandchildren live on the other side.

The majority of the elderly in our study live in a family with adult sons and a daughter-in-law. They are the ones ideally tasked with providing care for elderly household members. Yet despite the cultural norms of patrilocal marriage and coresidence with sons, we found a widespread sentiment among the elderly that their own daughters are the people best suited to be primary caretakers, as elegantly expressed in a proverb one man recited when discussing the topic of elderly care: "On the morning of birth, [one prefers to have] a son. On the morning of death, [one prefers to have] a daughter," and explained,

It means we are happy when a son is born, but when we die we are happy to have a daughter present. Parents try to keep sons in the home, but the sons have to work outside so they cannot provide nursing care. When parents become invalids or are dying, then daughters

are important because they can care for the elderly. Parents are happier if a daughter is nearby during their dying days.

Typically, old folks phrase their preference in terms of receiving "food from the hands of my own daughter." For example, one woman said,

Our family decided to keep two sons at home and get a bride for them. That is the custom of the area. We sent our daughters out. Now I regret that decision. If I chose to keep a daughter and get her an in-marrying husband, then I would get food from the hands of my own daughter and life would be easier right now.

Although sending daughters out as brides to other families remains the norm, the widespread practice of fraternal polyandry leaves many women unable to marry. In fact, a salient feature of fraternal polyandry is that it produces an abundance of unmarried females—27 percent of women aged twenty-five to thirty-nine in our fieldwork villages. What to do with them becomes a major issue.

Given the preference for having one's own daughter as the primary caregiver in old age, an obvious answer for parents would be to keep one or more unmarried daughters at home. However, many feel strongly that this should not happen because the overriding goal is to maintain the family and its land intact across generations by having brothers jointly take one wife. Tibetans consider allowing an unmarried daughter to remain in the household after her brother(s)' bride has arrived almost as detrimental as allowing two brothers to each have their own wife under the same roof—the two women are likely to have conflicts over authority and control. Moving unmarried daughters out of the family, therefore, is considered an important strategy for safeguarding the integrity of the family.

What happens with a woman who is unable to marry into another rural household? Traditionally, parents could ordain her as a nun, or help her build a small house in the village where she would live separately. Unmarried daughters living separately could not only contribute labor to their natal households, but often provided caretaking services as well as places of refuge for parents when relationships within the main household broke down. As for nuns, the combined forces of a gender ideology that devalues female celibacy and the underfunding of convents (Havnevik 1989; Klein 1995) meant that they were often expected to help care for aging parents and contribute to the welfare of their natal households (Gutschow 2004). A Tibetan proverb encapsulates the value of a nun to her parents: "If you want to be a servant, make your son a

monk. If you want a servant, make your daughter a nun" (Lopez 1998: 211).

Today, many women still leave their natal households through arranged marriage, or are split into independent residences once their brothers bring home a bride. The monastic option, on the other hand, is limited. During the 1980s, Sogang's residents petitioned the government to reestablish a local nunnery that had been destroyed during China's Cultural Revolution. The government granted permission but—similar to Tibetan areas throughout China—imposed a strict limit on the number of residents. The eight designated slots for Sogang's nunnery were filled immediately. Since then no other woman has been able to gain admission.

Meanwhile, new options have emerged for sending a daughter outside the natal household in ways that allow her to achieve financial independence. These include establishing a small business in a city or town, finding her a low-level salaried job, or investing in her education in the hope that she attains a higher-level salaried position. However, we found that the strategies vary by village. Close to half of the women born to households in Betsag and Norgyong currently reside in a city or town, indicating an urban-oriented strategy. In contrast, almost three out of four women who left Sogang did so through the traditional means of arranged marriage.

Norgyong's residents are taking advantage of new economic opportunities in Panam, a rapidly growing town situated a short walking distance from the village. Many parents raise capital to establish a small business for a daughter, such as a small restaurant or shop. We asked one of them to describe the process of splitting out from her natal household. She received monetary assistance from two brothers, and recalled,

I was the eldest child of my parents, I helped raise my siblings and manage the household. All of my brothers' kids call me "*ani*" (aunt), we have good relations. I stayed in the home for 13 years with the nama (bride). After she had more kids her power increased. She started to complain that I was not doing well. Our relationship became bad, we argued. I said to her, "In this village the custom is that sons stay in the household and daughters move out. So if you take good care of my parents I will split out." The nama and I did not have open arguments, but our relationship caused unhappy feelings within the family.

The restaurant/shop strategy not only gives a woman the chance to achieve economic independence, but also to marry a partner of her choice and establish a neolocal household. Importantly, town-dwelling women are not beholden to in-laws and therefore remain in a position to assist their elderly parents. One elderly man in Norgyong helped his daughter

establish a business in Panam with this purpose in mind. He said,

I planned and took action to keep my daughter near. At the time my wife was already old and really needed a caretaker. We kept our daughter at home to do that. Then she fell in love with an electrician. They married, so we opened a restaurant for her [in Panam]. Last year her husband got a job offer in Shigatse. It's in a bigger city and a higher salary. He wanted my daughter to move with him to Shigatse. I said to him, "Please don't go, I really need my daughter. After I die you can take her as far away as you want. But while I'm alive, please stay nearby." Shigatse is not far away, but I still wanted her in the town. Therefore, he didn't change jobs.

Although some parents in Betsag have tried to help a daughter open a shop in the village or Shigatse, their preferred strategy is to invest in her education so she can secure employment with a regular salary. Our survey data reveals a connection between education and mobility. Women who have moved out of a Betsag household have attained an average of 7.4 years of education—nearly five years more than women of similar age living in a village household. They even have an average of 3.3 more years of education than their male siblings who still reside within natal households.

These days many parents in Betsag devalue the traditional option of sending a daughter as a bride to another household. One elderly woman explained,

Parents are more likely to send girls to school in the hope that they get a life through education. For one, you can't keep daughters in the home; you must send them out as brides which is costly [the household must provide her with sets of clothing, grain, and gifts for her marital household]. Secondly, if you send a daughter as a bride to another household then she must serve people of another family. Most parents don't want their daughters living under such circumstances. They try to make a better life for them. Education is the best way, so parents try to send their daughters to school.

When we asked another elderly person in Betsag whether parents hope to gain benefits from an educated daughter, she responded,

Yes, that is one reason to send daughters to school. Elders here are getting money from children who get jobs. Some parents are getting money, while others are hoping to receive it in the future.

In summary, parents in the three villages are using different strategies to move daughters out of the household. Sogang, the relatively poor and remote village, exhibits the most traditional pattern: most

daughters continue to move out through arranged marriages. Meanwhile many parents in Norgyong are taking advantage of opportunities provided by the burgeoning town of Panam to establish commercial enterprises for daughters. The fact that they are not beholden to in-laws in a marital household leaves these women in a position to provide continuing assistance to their parents. Finally, parents in the wealthier village Betsag are using education as an opportunity to provide daughters with the means to attain financial independence. Similar to daughters in Norgyong, many of these women live neolocally and are not constrained by the obligations of living in a husband's natal household with elderly in-laws, and are thereby free to assist their own aging parents.

SUPPORT FROM EXTERNALLY-RESIDENT DAUGHTERS

The way a daughter is moved out of her household affects the potential social support she can provide for aging parents. Although there is much variation in the support that individuals can give, in general we find that daughters who were sent as brides to other rural households have the least potential to assist elderly parents because they are beholden to their marital families whereas daughters who are educated and have secured salaried employment can provide the most support.

Emotional Support

Parents sometimes seek solace from an externally-resident daughter after receiving bad treatment from household members. For example, Kyipa¹ complains that the nama of her household serves her black tea rather than butter tea and locks food away, both of which are serious affronts in this village. When the situation becomes intolerable—a frequent occurrence—Kyipa makes the short walk to her daughter's restaurant in Panam. Often she stays all day and only returns in the evening after eating dinner. Kyipa's daughter thereby mitigates the situation, but beyond food and emotional support there is not much she can do to improve her mother's plight.

In contrast, Butri has two educated daughters who now live in cities. Often Butri is treated disrespectfully at home by her son and daughter-in-law. When we asked how she felt about this, she responded, "Even if I can't get kindness from my son I still have my daughters in Shigatse and Lhasa. I can receive much love from them." She then told us, "My son and daughter-in-law listen to my daughters because they are more powerful. My daughters come home to scold them

about once a year." More important, Butri's daughters exert leverage by threatening to cut off financial aid to the household if their mother is not treated kindly.

Nursing Care

Sending a daughter to another family as a bride practically guarantees the loss of her support as a caretaker. Externally-resident daughters who can potentially provide assistance include those who live independently or in urban, neolocal households. For example, Dorje from Norgyong intentionally kept his only daughter nearby by opening a restaurant for her in Panam. He explained,

If I get sick I can stay with my daughter. At the end of life, when I'm about to die, I'll have them send me home and my daughter can stay a short time to provide nursing care with my son. I always openly say to my daughter that, because of the [bad] family relationships, I'll face difficulties at the end of life. My daughter says, "There is no need to worry. I'm nearby. When you are sick I won't let you stay with others who argue with you. I will take care of you." . . . Everybody in my household has to farm. If they were busy I'd be home alone. I don't want that. If I am with my daughter she can stay home all day. It is a better choice.

The improved transportation system in Tibet reduces the importance of close proximity as a precondition for children to provide nursing care. When we asked Migmar who would care for him if he becomes incapacitated, he responded,

It should mainly be done by my daughter-in-law. She is in a position to serve food and provide nursing care. But of course if I'm incapacitated then my family will ask my daughter to help. It would be difficult for my other daughters to provide care because they married out. But my youngest daughter is in Lhasa. She doesn't have a regular job. Her husband also doesn't have a secure job. For both of them it is easy to ask for a 15-day leave, so she could come here to care for me.

We then asked whether it is better to receive care from one's own daughter or a daughter-in-law. He said, "Of course from your own daughter, if possible. There is more trust with her. We two love each other very much, that is the reason."

Financial Assistance for Health Care

Externally-resident children often provide money to help parents access health care. For example, Purbu, an elderly man in Betsag, depends more on his government-employed daughter than any other family member when he is ill. When we inquired why he depends so heavily on this particular child, he responded, "Tsamchö has an office job. The others are

farmers, so even if they wanted to help they couldn't." Purbu credits Tsamchō's assistance with saving his life during a recent illness. He explained,

Last summer I had a serious illness. My son told me to go to the county clinic. I said, "We don't have the money, so we'd have to borrow it. How would we repay it?" I refused to go. Tsamchō came later to see me and we discussed the situation. She asked if I was getting better, and I replied that I wasn't. She asked, "Should we go to the hospital in Shigatse?" I replied, "That is not possible. I understand it is very costly, and the household doesn't have the money to cover the expense." She said, "We should go to the doctor immediately. I'll pay." She then took me to the hospital. . . . I stayed for one month in the hospital. I worried about not having money for the hospital. My grandchildren are in school, which is very expensive. . . . If Tsamchō had not paid my hospital expenses, I may have died. Our household doesn't have much money for health care.

Although the health care and insurance systems in rural Tibet are rapidly improving, the cost of health-care remains a serious concern for many elderly people who fear the financial burdens they may impose on their families due to illness. In general, we find that the elderly who have externally-resident children with reliable salaries feel more confident that they can obtain health care services when needed.

Pocket Money, Pilgrimage, and Non-kin Social Networks

Going on pilgrimage and visiting temples are important age-appropriate activities that have both spiritual and social benefits. Similarly, having one's own pocket money for buying sweets and other treats for themselves and their grandchildren is also an important component of a satisfying old age.

From a religious perspective, pilgrimage allows a person to positively influence future lives by cleaning negative karma accrued over a lifetime. During the pilgrimage the elderly accomplish this goal through prayer, ritual actions like prostration and circumambulation, making offerings of butter and cash to deities, and giving alms to beggars.

The ability to go on a pilgrimage is contingent on access to cash. In the rural Tibetan corporate household, all income generated by family members should be handed over to the household head. Typically, when a man reaches his sixties, he relinquishes the household head position to a son including control of the household's cash, after which he is expected to withdraw from economic activities and concentrate on endeavors such as prayers and pilgrimages to monasteries that prepare one for death and rebirth. Thus, most elderly people who have given up the role of household

head, depend on others to provide spending money. Some coresident sons who are the head of the household readily give cash to parents. Others are more reluctant to do so, necessitating that the elderly obtain money from sources outside the household, namely their externally-resident sons and daughters. In Betsag, the richer village where educating "excess" daughters is common so that they can live and work in the city, our research revealed that more than half of the elderly who received funds from outside the household got money from a daughter.

Pilgrimage and temple visits are some of the most important social activities for the elderly in rural Tibet; they are typically undertaken with a group consisting of friends and neighbors. The elderly commented that socializing during pilgrimage gives them pleasure, makes them more relaxed, and helps them forget about anxieties at home. Between visiting temples, making offerings, and performing circumambulations, they gather in parks or restaurants to share food and drink. One man explained,

We do a large circumambulation [around the temple complex], then sit together and eat and drink, then go do another large circumambulation, then sit together again and eat and drink. If we have more chang [fermented barley beverage], or are having a good time, then we sit together longer after lunch and forget to do the third circumambulation in the afternoon.

Three circumambulations of a sacred site are considered the most auspicious performance of a pilgrimage ritual. Admitting that he sometimes neglects the third circumambulation therefore highlights the relative importance of the social dimension of pilgrimage.

To further highlight the social and emotional benefits of pilgrimage, consider the situation of those elderly whose lack of cash hinders their ability to participate in group activities. For example, one elderly woman told us,

My whole life has been difficult. I've been poor, so I don't have a friendship group. If you have such a group, then you must gather together and buy food [while visiting a monastery]. I don't have money for the expenses. Women say, "You should join us when we go there," or, "Come sit and join us." I say I will, but usually I don't.

Another impoverished woman stated,

Even though I could hitch a ride and therefore not have to pay [for transportation], it would still be embarrassing because, after visiting the temples the elderly like to have food in a restaurant. If I went together with others, I would have no money to pay for it. If I remained alone, without a partner, that would be shameful. So I tell my adoptive daughter, "Nowadays it is better for me to stay

in the village, drink tea, and do circumambulations." It is better for me.

The importance of group pilgrimage activities should not be underestimated given the consistent finding that there exists a positive relationship between engagement with non-kin social networks and well-being.⁵ For example, Litwin (2001) finds that the morale of the elderly is highest among those who engage in social networks that extend beyond close kin, while Giles and colleagues (2005) find that discretionary relationships (those one can choose) have a more positive effect on morale in old age and longevity than relationships over which the individual exerts little choice (i.e., one's own children).

Although our data do not allow us to test for relationships between engagement with non-kin social networks and health or well-being, at the very least we can observe that (1) pilgrimage is an important undertaking in the lives of these Buddhist villagers, (2) pilgrimage provides solace for those approaching the end of life because it allows people to feel as if they are proactively preparing for future lives, (3) the elderly derive pleasure from social activities with non-kin peers during pilgrimage, (4) those who cannot go on pilgrimage due to financial constraints feel sad or embarrassed about their inability to participate in non-kin social networks, and (5) Externally-residing children, sons and daughters, provided the elderly a highly valued resource—cash, and daughters—especially those from Betsag who are educated and earn steady incomes—have become important facilitators of their elderly parents' pilgrimage activities.

CONCLUSIONS

As Bourdieu (2001) points out, children living outside of a household remain connected to parents through durable kinship relationships that normatively entail exchanges at various levels. In rural Tibet, the practice of fraternal polyandry produces a large cohort of women who never marry and have difficult lives eking out a livelihood mainly by working for others. In recent years, parents in the richest two villages have sought to improve the situation of their unmarried daughters by investing in their education or business opportunities and at the same time thereby enhancing their own old age security and quality of life. In these villages, the nature of expectations and exchanges differs depending on the circumstances under which a daughter left the household. Simply put, the social capital vested in a daughter who was sent to another rural household as a bride pales in comparison with that of a daughter who was moved out through education or by establishing

a small business. Daughters living in neolocal households who have financial independence can, and often do, provide considerable social support for their elderly parents. Tangible benefits range from caretaking during a time of illness to gifts of cash that allow the elderly to engage in pilgrimage activities and interact more intensively with non-kin networks. Contrary to many predictions associated with aging and modernization theory, the effect of rapid socioeconomic changes on the well-being of the elderly are not invariably negative. Rather than being silent victims of changes, the elderly in rural Tibet are taking proactive measures that actually increase the capacity for externally-resident daughters to provide them with various forms of support. Parents are thereby creating novel forms of social capital that they can draw upon to improve the quality of their lives in culturally relevant ways, and to help sustain them during a health crisis or a breakdown of relationships within the household.

An important shift is underway in the composition of social support networks in rural Tibet. Most elderly still reside with a son (or multiple sons) and a daughter-in-law. Nevertheless, they are increasing their reliance for support on those nonresident daughters who have attained a degree of independence. Such women have more power, influence, and financial means to positively impact the lives of their parents compared with women who were sent as brides to other rural households. Based on the common sentiment that it is best to receive care from one's own daughter, externally-resident daughters' increasing capacity to provide support is seen by many elderly in rural Tibet as a positive social development.

NOTES

1. In this paper, Tibet refers exclusively to China's Tibet Autonomous Region.
2. Cowgill and Holmes theoretical framework, arguing that the status and material well-being of the elderly declines with the advent of modernization, engendered a lively debate due to conflicting research findings. Since the 1970s, a body of research has been produced by gerontologists, historians, anthropologists, and other social scientists who both support and contradict this theory. For example, see Aboderin (2004), Albert and Cattell (1994), Bengtson et al. (1995), Goldstein and Beall (1981), Rhoads (1984), and Sokolovsky (1997).
3. Not all households practice polyandry. Those that do not include (1) households with only one son, (2) households lacking male heirs so that a daughter and her husband coreside with her parents, (3) households where parents send sons out in marriage and keep a daughter home instead, and (4) households consisting of infertile couples or spinsters who live alone or with an adopted child.

4. All personal names used in this paper are pseudonyms.
5. Research across the globe shows that strong social networks have a positive correlation with longevity (Giles et al. 2005; Hanson et al. 1989; Penninx, van Tilburg, and Kriegsman 1997; Sugisawa, Liang, and Liu 1994), health among the elderly (House, Landis, and Umberson 1988; Seeman 1996), functional abilities (Michael et al. 1999), morale (Litwin 2001; Wilson, Calsyn, and Orlofsky 1994), ability to resist the onset of dementia (Fratiglioni et al. 2000), and access to health services (Logan and Spitze 1994).

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