

# TRANSFORMING INEQUALITY: EASTERN TIBETAN PASTORALISTS FROM 1955 TO THE PRESENT

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## Abstract

This paper traces the recent history and major political and economic transformations that eastern Tibetan pastoralists have experienced from traditional times to the present and examines how changing rights over land and domestic animals have affected patterns of economic and social inequality in this population. Ethnographic data and responses to household surveys conducted in Sichuan and Gansu Provinces in China support the finding that the division of the grasslands to individual households through long-term contracts to state-owned land and government policies supporting sedentarisation are contributing to asset inequality and creating the foundation for class-based social differentiation in this population.

**KEYWORDS:** Tibet, sedentarisation, pastoralist inequality, modernisation, anthropology.

Over the past sixty years, eastern Tibetan pastoralists have experienced unparalleled changes in their lives and livelihoods. One of the most fundamental changes concerns rights over grazing land: traditionally land was held as common property; subsequently it was managed by state-instituted collectives; most recently, the collective's lands were distributed among its former members in long-term land contracts. Equally transformational have been changes in rights over livestock, the establishment of powerful state institutions that have regulated and incentivised different forms of pastoralist production, and the expansion of national and global economies that have affected the value of pastoralist products and introduced new commodities and new standards for living. The most recent, and, arguably, the most far-reaching, transformation has involved sedentarisation. Over the last decade, under government sponsorship, large numbers of households have abandoned animal herding and moved to modern houses in newly-built towns and settlement areas. This paper will describe the succession of key events over this sixty-year period, how they have affected eastern Tibetan pastoralist culture, society and economy, and the cumulative impacts of these changes for socio-economic inequality. The closing sections of the paper will consider what the future may bring to those households whose members are settling, an increasingly prevalent situation for pastoralists worldwide.

To briefly review the history of this region: many eastern Tibetan pastoralists successfully fought to maintain their political autonomy through the first half of the twentieth century, although some groups earlier had acquiesced to the power of provincial warlords, and still others had come under the jurisdiction of major monastic institutions. The 1950s marked the end of *de facto* political independence, the defeat of these warlords, the dismantling of the power of religious institutions, and the incorporation of all these populations into the Chinese state. These events also marked an end to the cultural isolation and economic self-reliance that prevailed in traditional times and an end as well to the traditional system of extensive pastoralism, based primarily on the raising of yak, together with herds of sheep, goats and horses, on communally-held grazing lands. The economic and social reforms that followed were so far-reaching that they transformed nearly every aspect of life, from the organisation of work and systems of economic production, to language use, features of material culture, expressions of religious faith, and the bases for and expressions of social hierarchies.

In introducing the topic of socio-economic inequality and to summarise discussions to follow, it is important to note that eastern Tibetan pastoralists were not egalitarian in former times, and that this observation applies equally to effectively independent populations as to those under the control of government and monastic institutions. Precedence was based first on inherited rank and second on wealth, which rested on the ownership of large numbers of domestic animals, the asset of greatest significance to pastoralists. Attaining a sizeable household herd depended on access to good grazing, hard work, skill, and, to some degree, good fortune. All these inequalities were levelled by government-led reforms and the collective production systems implemented during the 1960s and 1970s. In the 1980s, these reforms were put to an end, and inequality in terms of household herd sizes rapidly re-emerged. A number of factors appear to have contributed to early economic differentiation, including the size and composition of the household workforce, their skills at herd management, and the quality of available grazing. Inequalities grew after community grazing lands were divided and contracted out to individual households: households with numerous children, for example, found it difficult to provide enough land on their fixed allotments. Today, the location of allotted grazing land is exacerbating inequality, with those groups whose territories adjoin the larger towns having rights over valuable town land. While the government rationales for providing long-term contracts to land and modern houses in town are to encourage better land management and to improve pastoralists' standards of living, fixed land contracts have created problems in their mismatch to changing family needs. Many of the households that have abandoned pastoralism and relocated to towns face even greater challenges due to

the mismatch between their skills and the available jobs. The greatest concern is that these moves will transform members of once economically self-sufficient, close-knit communities into socially isolated households relying on their members' labour power and the vagaries of government assistance programs.

This paper draws on observational, interview and archival data collected between 1994 and 2013 in Serthar County, northern Sichuan Province; household interviews conducted in Maqu County, southwestern Gansu Province, in the summers of 2013 and 2014; and published accounts of changes and continuities in these regions over the last half century.

Serthar County lies in northern Sichuan, southwest of Maqu County in Gansu Province.<sup>1</sup> The two are separated by Golok Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture in Qinghai Province and by approximately two hundred and forty kilometers of exceedingly rough terrain. For centuries, Serthar was an inaccessible refuge for politically independent pastoralists who successfully resisted hostile incursions and had a reputation for fearlessness in battle and for cultural conservatism. Serthar's autonomy was aided by geography: the land is divided by rivers and encircled by mountains, with just a few barely passable routes to neighbouring regions. Serthar was reorganised as a county under Chinese governmental control in the 1950s, and was joined to a culturally distinctive farming region to the south. Today the population numbers approximately forty thousand individuals, of whom three quarters are pastoralists. The county recently embarked on a programme of constructing modern housing, but few people have taken up sedentary living. In the past, Maqu County stood under the political jurisdiction of, and paid taxes to, Labrang Monastery, then the leading religious institution in eastern Tibet; local political affairs were managed by representatives of the monastery (see Nietupski, 2011). Today, the region includes an estimated 54,700 people, almost all of whom are actively engaged in pastoralism or were born into pastoralist families. Government estimates for 2012 placed twenty per cent of the population in settled housing, with nearly as many individuals classified as semi-settled, i.e. maintaining residences both on the grasslands and in the newly constructed towns.

The first three sections of this paper focus on changing economic conditions in Serthar, beginning with the era local people now describe as the 'old world', or what writers on Tibet commonly describe as the traditional society. At that time, an individual's economic welfare rested on his or her household's

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1. *Serthar rDzong*, one of eighteen counties in Kardze Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture, is also spelled Sertar in Tibetan language government documents; in Chinese it is written as *Seda Xian*. It is the home nowadays of the famed Larung Gar, a large and vibrant educational and religious institution. *rMa Chu rDzong*, or *Maqu Xian*, is one of eight administrative divisions in Gannan Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture.

ownership of animals and his or her community's ability to maintain control over valuable grazing lands. Local groups were joined in what essentially was a segmentary political system, in which lineages were ranked and in which a person's ranking and political precedence affected access to good pastures and control over labour. This combination of factors created a distinct matrix of social and economic inequality. Beginning in the 1960s, local groups were transformed, first organised into mutual aid cooperatives, followed by collectives, and then communes. The communes were disbanded in the early 1980s, when the so-called household responsibility system began. This period involved a return to many of the traditional ways of life and animal-management practices. But it was no more than a prelude to the introduction of additional economic reforms, the most noteworthy of which was the division of pasturelands and their allocation to individual households, as the following sections will describe.

### Inequality in traditional times

The following account derives from interviews I conducted with Serthar elders in 1994, documents archived in the county town, and published accounts of eastern Tibetan pastoralist societies, notably those by Gelek, who spent the 1970s in Serthar (Gelek, 2002b: 28). From these sources, we learn of seventy named pastoralist groups (*tsho ba*),<sup>2</sup> whose members controlled specific territories (Gelek, 2002a: 9). Those groups joined in a confederation, which was headed by a paramount leader (*dpon chen*), whose position passed from father to son in the line of the Washul clan that had colonised the region. Each of the major groups had a separate leader (*dpon po*), whose authority was passed down the line of the founding patrilineal clan. The major groups included varying numbers of encampments (*ru tsho*) that were led by men known as *bchu dpon*, who were chosen for their competence and the regard in which they were held by their communities.<sup>3</sup> Overall, membership in the founding clan offered greater prestige than membership in newcomer clans throughout Serthar, regardless of the clan composition of a given region. This attitude has persisted through the present day.

The larger groups had customary rights to specific territories, which were subdivided and allocated among the subsidiary encampments. Encampments

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2. All local terms are in Tibetan, unless otherwise indicated, using the Wylie system of transliteration.
  3. Literally, 'leader of ten', recalling the Mongol Empire's decimal system of organisation.

comprised five to ten households whose members co-operated on a daily basis, in animal husbandry and mutual protection. Their memberships might change in response to gains and losses in animal numbers, annual or seasonal variations in forage, or other environmental constraints. Most of their members were closely related, typically fathers and their married sons, less commonly married daughters, although camps sometimes included more distant relations whose households' economic needs complemented the needs of the others.<sup>4</sup> Given that land and animals are fundamental requirements for a herding enterprise, it is not surprising to find that both were jealously guarded and contested. Written and oral narratives of traditional times describe a long and complicated history of conflicts over land (Pirie, 2005) as well as thefts of animals. Ekvall (1968) offers vivid accounts of the threats posed by raiding and the various strategies for protecting a camp's herds, including armed mounted men guarding vulnerable and valuable horses, scouts sent ahead to protect camps on the move, and men spending the night at the camp's edge or in hilltop lookouts. He also reminds us that a fear of raiding parties was one of the reasons for keeping fierce dogs. While Yeh (2003) has argued that the allocation of long-term land leases to individual households in the modern era has contributed to increased conflicts over pastureland in Sichuan, Qinghai and Gansu Provinces, there is no way of quantifying the scale and frequency of these events in the past and no reliable data source for these regions in the present.

The migrations of pastoralist groups also have to be understood as conditioned by struggles over land. Legends describe ancestors of the founding Washul clan as having been displaced twice before settling down in Serthar and branching out to other areas of Sichuan. There they were joined by pastoralists from throughout eastern Tibet. The mobility of pastoralists is a given: with only livestock, a tent and daily necessities, people in the historical period were able to move in search of better grazing, more security of land use and more autonomy from predatory states. Successive migrations redistributed people with different clan and cultural affiliations across the landscape, so the populations controlling different areas were continually shifting, as powerful groups displaced or incorporated other groups that were smaller or weaker. In short, those groups that had strong leadership and effective fighting forces gained more and better grazing lands. The classic anthropological studies of pastoralist societies in other continents have suggested that the segmentary political organisation found in Serthar and among neighbouring pastoralists, such

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4. Gelek (2002a: 7) writes, 'When unrelated, the households are linked by their complementary economic imbalances: some families are rich in livestock but poor in work force, while others have an excess of workers but not enough animals to support themselves. The poorer households then work for the wealthier ones, although the two cooperate as equals in other collective activities.'

as Golok, were highly effective in group defence and intertribal competition, and supported 'predatory expansion' into new territories (see Evans-Pritchard, 1940; Sahlins, 1961).<sup>5</sup>

There were clear rights and responsibilities associated with leadership, which also could be used in pursuit of greater wealth. Serthar leaders organised the defence of the group, allocated rights to pasture, controlled seasonal camp changes, settled disputes (including disputes over property within families) and set fines for various transgressions. They retained these payments for their own use. The right to assign pastures was one of the most powerful held by leaders, and Serthar herders whom I interviewed in 1994 described leaders as taking advantage of their power to control the best territories; Gelek (2002b: 52-53) even describes a headman's 'privately owned pastures'. Group members also owed *corvée* labour to the leader in support of his personal endeavours. These leaders contracted strategic marriages of their children in order to establish alliances with neighbouring groups and solidify their standing. Consequently, leaders could amass greater wealth than other members of their group.<sup>6</sup> The fact that blood money was higher for members of the founder clan and wealthy herd owners reflected their social distinction.

Some hints of the inequalities prevailing in traditional times can be found in the old, handwritten accounts that constitute testimonies, or narratives, of exploitation. These accounts were created in 1960 to validate the government's assignment of certain families to landlord and wealthy classes. It is impossible to say whether these cases were factual, fabricated or simply distorted in order to serve political goals. The ethnographic data that I collected in 1994 suggest that there were extremes of wealth in the past; respondents to my survey recalled extremely wealthy households and also individuals who owned just a few animals and made their living as servants in the homes of the wealthy. I briefly summarise one such narrative: Drolma, aged 34 in 1960, had worked for Norlha's household from 1953-1956. She claimed to have been paid only one milk animal (*'bri*) per year and to have received only two poor-quality

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5. Lewis (1961) attributes the penchant for organised combat among pre-independence Somali pastoralists to the oppositional relationships that exist between different lineages, in combination with cultural values and the scarcity of key resources, notably water and grazing land.
  6. Such advantages were cited in a document collected in Serthar entitled 'Privileges of Feudal Leaders', although local people recalled that not all leaders were well-off. In Central Tibet one also finds powerful leaders controlling the best grazing land (see Bauer, 2006). Goldstein and Beall (1990:54) observe: 'Traditional nomad society contained important class distinctions. A stratum of poor nomads, for example, worked as full-time servants and hired labourers for wealthy nomads, even though both were subjects of the Panchen Lama.'

meals a day, compared to the four meals that the master's family ate. She was expected to work long hours, despite the toll it took on her health, and spoke of the hardships of herding yak and sheep in the snow and hail. She also claimed that she had her master's baby and that he failed to acknowledge his responsibility or provide the customary payment to a child born outside of marriage. When some yak went missing, he accused her of theft and drove her away. Other testimonies of exploitation provide lists of figures recording production and pay in an attempt to document the surplus value that the labour of servants provided for their master's households. Additional records from this time, which were archived in Serthar, document the criteria and considerations for the assignments of specific households to the landlord or wealthy class. Two decisive factors were the employment of servants and the size of the household herd. The wealthiest household described in these records owned six hundred yak, 185 sheep and goats, and sixteen horses in 1955. Most households owned far fewer animals: the retrospective accounts of animal ownership that I collected for that era suggest an average sixty yak, thirty sheep and goats, and eight horses.

In 1994, I conducted extensive interviews with members of 59 households in three townships of Serthar that local officials had described as being representative of herding conditions in the county.<sup>7</sup> The sample, therefore, was small and the sampling procedure was opportunistic: I visited every household in all encampments that were within walking distance of my campsite. Among the survey topics were household composition and animal ownership then and at two earlier points in time: in the mid-1950s, before the Chinese government arrived, and after the household distribution in 1983. Twenty-seven households had members who were able to recall their circumstances in the 1950s, and these data were used to generate several measures of inequality in animal ownership at that time.

In traditional times, domestic animals were the primary contributor to a household's prosperity, with the size of the herd dependent on the forage available, the size and skills of the household workforce, and abiotic factors such as weather and epidemic disease. Notably, *nor*, the term for cattle, also means wealth or property. Wealthy households had larger and better tents and more costly possessions, but the value of these items was dwarfed by how much their animals were worth. My surveys also included questions on sales of animal products and other sources of income, but I found these self-reports to

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7. The research was conducted between July and October in three different pastoralist *tshowa*, belonging to the townships (Ch. *xiang*) known as Yarlung, Khanleb, and Serkhog.



be imprecise and incomplete.<sup>8</sup> As Fischer (2008, 2014) has noted, productive assets offer a better indicator of Tibetan pastoralists' wealth than conventional income measures; they also allow nomads to be selective about new economic opportunities. In the past decade, with government efforts to develop towns on the plateau, modern houses have become an increasingly important household asset. My most recent surveys therefore included questions about home ownership, and I report data on this asset for the current period.

To assess changing patterns of inequality, I have selected several measures. First, I have calculated the Gini coefficient, a commonly used measure of inequality which is easy to understand. The coefficient varies between 0, which reflects complete equality, and 1, which indicates complete inequality (i.e. all the wealth being held by one person or household) (World Bank, 2011). I have provided results both for households and individual household members, with the latter number generated by dividing each household's collectively-owned animals by its number of members to create a per capita figure (Table 1). The virtue of the Gini coefficient, its simplicity, also entails certain drawbacks. One is that different patterns of wealth distribution can produce the same coefficient number; another is that the coefficient is more sensitive to inequalities in the middle range (De Maio, 2007). For that reason, I have also included data on average assets, the assets held by the top and bottom twenty per cent of the population, and the quintile ratio, a calculation generated by dividing the assets of the wealthiest quintile by the poorest. These figures are provided for the periods of time about which I have data (Table 2).

The calculations of animal ownership combine holdings of yak, sheep, and horses, following Serthar conventions about 'yak equivalents', with each sheep being equal to 0.25 yaks and each horse being equal to 1.25 yaks.<sup>9</sup> The

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8. My household survey included questions on sales of animal skins, wool, butter and the animals themselves, as well as the then-rare opportunities for wage labour, but all such responses suffered from problems of recall. Respondents offered more precise numbers for sales of medicinal herbs and caterpillar fungus (*Ophiocordyceps sinensis*, a parasitised moth larva found on the Tibetan plateau used in traditional Chinese medicine), perhaps because these sales were concentrated within a very brief time. In recent decades, profits from this commodity have enriched pastoralists with access to rich gathering grounds (Gruschke, 2008, 2011). Sulek (2011:12) notes that her respondents appeared to underreport their profits. None of my study communities were so fortunate, so that the sales of this commodity offered, on average, only minor supplementation to income.
  9. Animal equivalents seem to be a long-standing feature of Tibetan pastoralist calculations, and were used in trade and for meeting tax obligations. The equivalents vary in different regions, according to the key animal upon which the calculations are based and the relative values of the different animals (compare Ekvall, 1968: 19; Goldstein and Beall, 1990: 82; Levine, 1999: 164). Goats, considered to be



	Gini coefficient	No. of Cases
Serthar County, 1955		
Household Animal Holdings	0.579	28
Per Capita Animal Holdings	0.497	121
Serthar County, 1983		
Household Animal Holdings	0.274	45
Per Capita Animal Holdings	0.168	196
Serthar County, 1994		
Household Animal Holdings	0.320	59
Per Capita Animal Holdings	0.270	319
Maqu County, 2013-14		
Household Animal Holdings	0.511	55
Per Capita Animal Holdings	0.535	335
Combined Assets (House and Animals)	0.462	55
Per Capita Share of Combined Assets	0.471	335

**Table 1.** Changes in Asset Inequality Over Time

resulting Gini coefficient for 1955 was higher for households, at 0.579, than individuals, at 0.497, due to the fact that the wealthy households tended to include larger memberships (Table 1). Two households at the polar ends of the spectrum illustrate the degree of difference between rich and poor. One included a woman, then in her early twenties and on her own, with just three yak; at the other extreme was an eight-person household of the former leader, whose members owned approximately five hundred yak, three hundred sheep,

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worth less than sheep, appear to have been relatively rare in the past and are kept amidst sheep herds.

	Number of Animals				
	Average*	Top Quintile Average	Bottom Quintile Average	20:20 Ratio**	No of Cases
Serthar County, 1955	74.5	219.2	12.8	17.2	28
Serthar County, 1983	52.3	96.7	24.1	4	45
Serthar County, 1994	67.4	130	25.5	5.1	59
Maqu County, 2013–14	97.2	255.1	3.2	80.2	55
Combined Assets: houses and domestic animals, calculated in yuan	283,968	688,210	44290	15.4	55

\* Averages are calculated in terms of ‘yak equivalents’, with each sheep being equal to 0.25 yaks and each horse being equal to 1.25 yaks.

\*\* This is the ratio of the average assets in the top quintile divided by the average assets in the bottom quintile.

**Table 2.** Household Asset Ownership, 1955–2014

and seventy horses.<sup>10</sup> The average holding at that time was 74.5 ‘yak equivalents’ (Table 2). Gini coefficients for developed countries are more commonly constructed for income inequality or the share of resources owned by individual adults.<sup>11</sup>

## Collectivisation and shared poverty

In the 1950s, the government established its first offices in Serthar and began, slowly at first, to implement the agrarian reforms that were underway nationwide. These changes were met with waves of resistance, including armed rebellions in 1956 and 1959, which led to the deaths of many men in fighting

10. Households with large numbers of animals then, as now, tend to speak in terms of rounded numbers.

11. To cite one example, for household income in the United States, the Gini coefficient was 0.481 in 2013 (United States Census Bureau, 2013). Wealth distribution has generally been found to be more unequal than income, with a Gini coefficient of 0.801 in 2000 for the United States (Davies et al., 2007: 8, 25).

and the losses of their domestic animals when families fled to the hills.<sup>12</sup> These events delayed the implementation of many key reforms until 1960. People were assigned to classes then, as noted above. At this time, the government classified 74 per cent of the population as poor and 23 per cent as of middling wealth, while only a tiny fraction – three per cent – were deemed rich or landlord pastoralists. Former leaders and the wealthy lost their power; they were also stripped of all but the minimal amount of property considered necessary for subsistence. The other households received an equal share of their encampment's animals and were organised into mutual aid teams (*phan rogs tshogs-pa* or *rogs res tshogs-pa*). Work organisation remained the same, and households still owned their livestock and could profit from their products and trade as they wished. Neighbours shared pastureland and worked co-operatively in herding.<sup>13</sup>

Collectives (*mnyam las khang*) were established in 1964. Wealthy families and former leaders, who previously had been ostracised and kept out of mutual aid groups, were reincorporated in their communities. At this time, the point system for work was introduced. In this system, each recognised type of work was accorded a specific number, or range, of points, according to the level of difficulty. At the end of the year, each person's points were totalled up. Households received a share of their collective's production, forty per cent based on their members' combined points and sixty per cent on the number of animals they had owned and contributed to the group.

The collectives were replaced by communes (*mi dmangs kung hre*) in 1968. Animals now belonged to the commune, and people received a yearly share of its production, based forty per cent on how many people lived in their household and sixty per cent on how many work points they earned during the year. The situation has been described as one of shared poverty, but even then there were small inequalities: households received different shares of their commune's production based on the above formula, they had different numbers of milking and riding animals for personal use, and those with someone working for the government had additional income. A major source of economic inequality then – one which has carried over to the present – was the different endowments in pastureland held by different townships, based on the territory they had been allocated.

When the government began to administer Serthar, it allocated specific territories to specific groups, and this resulted in some groups gaining access to larger tracts of land or lands with higher productivity. Although most

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12. Government records for the period suggest that the number of animals fell by as much as half, with relatively greater losses in small stock, although these estimates should be treated with caution.
  13. Famine conditions brought on by policies of the Great Leap Forward contributed to another rebellion in 1961 that led to the breakdown in the co-operative system, although it soon resumed again.

allocations roughly conformed to traditional territories, some groups were moved to different regions, sometimes to provide a better balance of land to people. One major set of reassignments followed Serthar's success in winning a longstanding border dispute with Darlag County in southern Qinghai Province. Serthar had lost the land to Darlag in the early 1960s, but got it back in 1986. This parcel included an estimated seventy-three thousand hectares of grazing land (Levine, 1998), which prompted the government to reassign the population of certain townships to the newly accessed territories. In some instances, people returned to sites their parents had grazed before government-drawn county and provincial boundaries existed.

With these exceptions, communes and their members' rights to particular territories became set during this period and increasingly difficult to change. In earlier years, people found it easier to change the groups with which they affiliated – for example, to move to a relative's group that had better grazing – but this became less and less common. By the time of my research, pastoralists could change their groups only when they married, with one spouse, typically the wife, joining her husband's group. The fixing of group territories and of people to groups were only two of the many new constraints on mobility. Another change concerned seasonal camps. In traditional times, most encampments moved four times a year. This was shifted to a two-season grazing system, with winter camps placed closer to roads and regional headquarters. This reduction in seasonal mobility was tied to government programmes supporting the construction of winter houses and fences, which were introduced during the commune period, and were precursors to later programs supporting barbed-wire fencing, brick and concrete housing, and differentiated, contracted rights over land.<sup>14</sup>

## Cultural revival

In the early 1980s, in a seeming turnabout from its previous policies, the government instituted what is known in English as the Household Responsibility System (*gen tshang lam lug*; Ch. *jiātíng liánchǎn chéngbāo zérènzhì*) and dissolved the communes, distributing their major property, livestock, to their members. In Serthar these changes were implemented in 1983 and involved the following distribution: seventy per cent of the animals went to households according to number of family members and the remaining thirty per cent went to 'full labourers' in those households (in contrast to 'part labourers', i.e. children

14. The first houses and fences in Serthar were built with sod, which removed the thin layer of topsoil, leaving denuded patches of land on which nothing would grow. Sod houses and fences, moreover, were usable only briefly, since the sod soon dissolved in summer rains.

and the elderly). Households also got to keep their private herds and had the option of buying animals that were difficult to value or divide up, such as horses.<sup>15</sup> Production quotas were phased out and taxes of various kinds were introduced; pastoralists were free to decide the composition of their herds, which pastoral products to sell, and where to buy goods. What most opted for was a modified subsistence model of household production, in which they produced to meet their needs and had limited engagements with markets and government offices. People sold surplus butter, wool, and some animals for slaughter, plus the skins of animals they slaughtered for family consumption. They collected and sold medicinal herbs and they used their earnings to buy manufactured clothing, household goods, tea, grain and manufactured foods in the county town.

One difference from past times was the striking equality in herd sizes at the outset of the Household Responsibility System. The reconstructions provided by respondents to my household survey show that, in 1983, the Gini coefficient was 0.274 for household herd ownership and 0.168 for individuals' shares of those herd animals (Table 1), while the 20:20 ratio had dropped from 17.2 in 1955 to 4.0 (Table 2). At that time, government outreach was emphasising security of ownership and encouraging the expansion of household herds and the sales of more animals. A document entitled 'How the Poor became Rich after the Responsibility System', dated November 1983 and archived in Serthar, demonstrates government support for individual efforts in animal husbandry and income-earning from increased animal sales, together with new forms of earnings through sideline production.<sup>16</sup> An excerpt from one of these success stories follows:

In Rags bKram commune, X, the husband in a two person family ... makes a living by pastoralism and sideline work. They received thirty animals in the distribution and also had 47 self-kept animals, for a total of 77 animals.<sup>17</sup> In 1983, when the responsibility system was instituted, he worked hard and became rich. X got rich because he is open-minded and knows that if you work you get rich. Before the responsibility system, he was influenced by 'leftist theories' and paid attention to 'thought construction', but not animal production. After the Third Plenary Session advocating socialist modernisation, he got rid of the 'three afraids' (of the policy

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15. The systems of redistribution varied in different pastoralist areas inside the Tibet Autonomous Region and in eastern Tibetan pastoralist regions (see Horlemann, 2002).

16. This account parallels those Bauer (2005) found in Nyelam County, Tibet Autonomous Region.

17. While the numbers of private animals that households were allowed to keep rose in the years leading up to this reform, this number seem high when compared to government records and interviews from other parts of Serthar (on the keeping of private herds in Golok, see Horlemann, 2002).

changing, of being criticised for being rich, and of being capitalist)<sup>18</sup> ... He broke through the self-satisfied natural economy. He sold animals and local products, including herbal medicines, to the government. In addition to traditional techniques, he invested in new instruments of production and stored hay. This decreased his animal losses ... Despite natural disasters this year, he achieved a great deal. He lost only two animals and all the young animals survived ... The general increase in his herds was 20.77%.

By 1994, when I began my research in Serthar, a new inequality was emerging and was differentiating households whose herds were expanding from those who were falling behind. These differences can be attributed to several factors: the number of working adults in a household, their skills in herd management, the family's health and simple good luck. Within eleven years, the average household herd had increased from 52.3 to 67.4 and the 20:20 ratio had increased to 5.1 (Table 2). Gini coefficients also show an increase in asset inequality between 1983 and 1994, from 0.274 to 0.320 for households (Table 1). Other researchers have similarly reported increased inequality in animal holdings in Tibetan pastoralist regions following the introduction of the Household Responsibility System (see Goldstein and Beall, 1990; Horlemann 2002).

By 1994, it was clear that fixed land allocations were starting to contribute to a far more intractable problem (Levine, 1998). In 1986, townships had received assignments of territories, and the encampments within each township were allocated specific grazing lands. By and large, these territories were consistent with the land managed by communes and work brigades, which mostly conformed to *tsho ba* territories in traditional times. There were some exceptions, many associated with the reallocation of lands attendant on the 1986 land settlement with Qinghai Province (discussed above). Another exception concerned the group whose best grazing lands were taken over for the county town, which has continued to expand over the years. Despite government efforts to balance out differences, the resources available to different groups never were wholly equal, and the mismatches of land to populations that were experiencing different rates of growth had even greater impacts with time. Once the group-level allocations had been fixed, such inequities became impossible to undo. The programme of land contracts for individual households only added to such problems.

## Private property and the new built environment

The government began laying the groundwork for major reforms in the late 1980s that were meant to modernise production and increase profits, but that

18. The Third Plenary Session of the Eleventh Central Committee of the CPC, 18–22 December 1978.

also would lead to irrevocable changes in pastoralists' lives. The first involved the division of land into separate parcels and the assignment of those parcels to individual households. Doing so was a complex endeavour and involved a series of stages, beginning with surveys and calculations of the carrying capacity of different areas. This information was used to delineate land parcels that were contracted out to individual households (Bauer and Nyima, 2010). Counties developed special formulae to determine how to provide parcels of appropriate size and productivity to households; the length of the contract also has varied from place to place. In Kakhog (Ch. *Hongyuan*) County, for example, the parcels contracted to households were assessed according to the size of their animal herds, and the contracts were written for fifty years (Wu and Richard, 1999). In Dzachuka (Ch. *Serxu*) County, the land contracted depended on the number of household members (worth thirty per cent of the calculation) and the number of animals (worth seventy per cent), and the contracts had a seventy-year duration. Encampment members typically received adjoining parcels of land that they once had used collectively; in many areas, these households continued to graze their animals together in summer, ignoring any parcel boundaries.

Land distribution was implemented in conjunction with other reforms meant to support more intensive use of grazing land. These policies were known as 'the three components' (*cha 'dzom gsum*, or Ch. *san peitao*) and involved the construction of durable houses for living at the winter sites, next to fenced-in plots where fodder crops for hay were to be grown, and animal shelters to increase survival rates in harsh winters.<sup>19</sup> Initially there was resistance to investing in fixed structures, especially houses, because of concerns that they would be vulnerable to break-ins during the summer season when most people were away, but persuasion and government subsidies prevailed. Observers of pastoralist communities have reported different responses to fencing and the quasi-private use-rights over property that land contracts ensure. Yeh (2003) reports an increase in conflicts over pastures, while Bauer (2006: 73) suggests that fencing is also a response to the growing numbers of people and animals using an area. He suggests that it has been accepted because it fits the system of pastoral production in Tibet and may be 'formalising and legitimating existing social patterns of resource management'.

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19. Plans involving three components were also implemented in Dzachuka County and Golok Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture, where a demonstration project was launched in the 1970s, although not introduced more widely until the 1980s (Horlemann, 2002). Gruschke (2008) discusses the government's *Si peitao Jianshe* agenda, or 'Comprehensive Set of Four Constructions' (in the Grassland Areas), as beginning in 1996. It included fixed settlements on winter pastures (Ch. *jianshe dingju dian*), fenced areas, the construction of animal sheds and grass planting.



Laws concerning the land contracts presume that parcels are unitary, that they cannot be subdivided, and that the land cannot be bought and sold, although it can be loaned or leased (for summaries of successive legislation, see Bauer and Nyima, 2010). The consequences of this policy soon became apparent, as the recipients' children came of age and married. When land was managed collectively, children who married would take their share of the household's animals and start managing their animals on the land of, most commonly, the husband's group. It also was common for the youngest son to remain in his parents' tent and take care of them in their declining years. (In families without sons, daughters would assume this responsibility.) Now households faced a choice: either they could informally share contracted rangelands among their children, or they could designate one child as their heir. Currently, in areas with more ample lands, siblings have been informally sharing the grazing lands designated in their parents' contract. In Serthar, however, most communities perceive a critical shortage of grazing land, and parents have been selecting one child to take over their land, creating a de facto system of single-heir inheritance for most households. And, contrary to past tradition, many of these children have been daughters. The other children may stay in their home territories, and may gradually reduce their involvements in pastoralism, or decisively end this by selling all their animals and moving to town. Those who wish to remain as pastoralists but lack sufficient grazing land may request vacated parcels of land from local officials. If an older person dies without heirs, the land reverts to the originating community and can be allocated to another household.

## New houses for black tents: sedentarisation

The government initiative that has had the most dramatic impact on the lives of Tibetan pastoralists since the turn of the millennium is the creation of new housing tracts in county towns and subsidiary townships. These housing initiatives are linked to the broader 'Open the West Campaign' (Ch. *xibu da kaifa*) and are driven by a number of stated goals, including economic development and environmental protection. For those pastoralists occupying areas deemed ecologically sensitive, degraded, or within the boundaries of new national parks, the moves have been obligatory (Yeh, 2005, 2009).<sup>20</sup> But for others,

20. The creation of the Sanjiangyuan, or Three Rivers, National Nature Reserve in Qinghai Province is the leading example of so-called ecological resettlement (Ch. *tuimu huancao*). The creation of the Shouqu Yellow River Natural Reserve, and projects to protect the banks of the Yellow River, in Maqu County, Gansu Province precipitated the construction of a small pastoralist resettlement.

buying a house and moving to town involves a decision, and it is a complicated one, entailing assessments of opportunities in animal husbandry, the growing importance of children's education and the lure of modern life.

In Sichuan Province, the farthest-reaching pastoralist housing program was initiated in 2009, with the 'Herdsman's Settlement Action Plan' (*'brog dmang gzhis chags bya 'gul 'char gzhi*, or Ch. *mumin dingju xingdong jihua*) and 'New Life Tent Action' (*sba gur nang gi 'tsho ba gsar pa*, or Ch. *zhang-peng xin shenghuo*). The goal was to construct tract housing and provide new, square white nylon tents, meant to replace the old-style yak hair tents, for one hundred thousand households (Sichuan, n.d.). In Serthar, the government gave away the tents at no cost and provided a fixed 20,000-yuan subsidy to those eligible for a house, with the remaining costs to be borne by the owner. That amount sufficed for a small, unimproved structure of at least two rooms, with larger structures costing a good deal more. In addition, home owners have to pay considerable sums of money to finish their houses, to provide protective surrounding walls and gates, even windows and doors in some instances, in addition to outbuildings and furnishings. Subsequently, the government agreed to pay for the recommended installation of detached bathrooms, each with a toilet, washroom, and solar-powered water heater. In Maqu County, planned housing tracts were constructed earlier, and people began moving into them as early as 2003. There, subsidies from national and local governments reduced the initial purchaser's cost by 35.5 per cent, with homeowners expected to finish the house at their own expense.<sup>21</sup> The cost to the first buyers was about 15,000 yuan. These homes were worth 75,000 yuan or more, depending on their finishing and desirability, in 2014. In both areas, serious problems have surfaced with the quality of construction of some homes.

In both Serthar and Maqu, the market in houses is fluid and not subject to government intervention. Houses can be bought and sold, as well as being rented out or loaned to relatives. The responses to these opportunities have been predictably varied. I interviewed members of households that had developed a stake in the market economy, in transport or government service, and that had sold or let out their government-subsidised houses in outlying places in order to buy, at cost, houses in the township or county capital. There were pastoralists whose contracted rangelands are adjacent to major towns and who had built houses and commercial structures on that land. Others that were eligible for a house but committed to full-time pastoralism had taken the

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21. People update their houses with panelling, brick and tile, glassed-in porches, storage and shower rooms. They also furnish them with painted cabinets, tables, benches, televisions, freezers and even washing machines, bulky and fragile items that are inconceivable for mobile tent dwellers (for prices of these items in 2010, see Sulek, 2012).

government subsidies but then turned around and sold the house. Still other full-time pastoralists, who said they had no interest in resettling, had accepted the subsidised house and left it vacant or used it as a storage facility. Some said that the expense of acquiring and finishing the house was beyond their means, which left them with two unappealing options: one, sell their house to someone with more resources and continue to manage without one; or two, sell all their animals in order to buy, finish and furnish the house, foregoing future pastoral products for their own provisioning and future earnings from animal-product sales. These dilemmas have their source in the fundamental incompatibility between living in a densely populated settlement and the need for mobility in order to successfully raise yak, sheep and horses.

One common strategy in Serthar and Maqu has been to acquire a house *and* continue to use contracted rangelands; this requires subdividing the family. Divided family arrangements appear to be prevalent throughout eastern Tibetan pastoralist regions (see Ptackova, 2011; Bauer, this volume). Typically, elderly people and school-age children live in the houses, sometimes together with young adults who have town-based jobs, while active adults raise livestock on their contracted grasslands. Obviously, households with a hand in both town and rural occupations have two types of valuable assets – the house and the herd – and two sources of income, from town jobs and the sales of animals and animal products in addition to the food produced by their own herds. Dual residences, however, are possible only for larger or multi-generational households and make sense only for households with substantial herds. Young couples who have recently started out on their own, without much in the way of grazing land and with few animals, may be unable to pursue this option. Small families are also more vulnerable to health crises that may prompt the decision to move to town, both because the loss of a family worker may undermine herd management and because they need town-based health facilities.<sup>22</sup>

Observers of sedentarisation have expressed concerns that living in town will lead households to impoverishment due to the loss of major productive assets (i.e. domestic animals) and their lack of qualifications for well-paying jobs (Ptackova, 2011; Human Rights Watch, 2013). People who are considering moving to town must weigh the unprecedented opportunity of acquiring and living in a subsidised house now against losses of income from pastoralism over the longer term. For many the lure of a house is an opportunity that cannot be passed up (Sulek, 2012: 246). Some then realise that selling animals to acquire a house leaves them with too few animals to justify continued

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22. These dilemmas are illustrated in the film *Summer Pasture* (2010), which was made in Dzachuka.

involvement in pastoralism, or find that they are simply unable to manage living in two places. This was the situation of a number of interviewees. One household in Maqu County illustrates the factors that can tip the balance and lead people to become full-time town dwellers. This household included a husband and wife, aged 41 and 37, with three school-going children. The couple came from poor families and they started their married life with a small herd. They acquired their subsidised house in 2009, spending 25,000 yuan for their share of the purchase price and improvements. Their home now includes three simply-furnished rooms, one kitchen and one bathroom in about sixty square metres of space and a small outbuilding. The first year they had the house, they left their children there with a relative and continued with their annual cycle of grazing animals, living in a tent in summer and in a wood and sod house, ten metres in size, in winter. But the wife became seriously ill and had to be hospitalised twice, which led them to move to town full time. They now rent out their land to other pastoralists for the sum of five thousand yuan per year, and seek out construction work to meet daily expenses.<sup>23</sup> This situation can be contrasted with another household in that same town. That household includes six people, a man and his wife, both aged fifty, their youngest son and his wife, and two grandchildren. The older couple live in town with their grandchildren, and the young couple live on the grasslands, caring for a cattle herd of approximately two hundred yak, one hundred sheep and six horses. Although they have a subsidised house in their township, they let that out to a relative and bought a dilapidated house in the town and enlarged and improved it dramatically for the cost of approximately one hundred thousand yuan.

These choices and other chance circumstances contribute to major divergences of wealth in eastern Tibetan pastoralist communities. Those individuals who have long-term contracts for good grazing lands, who have the family workforce necessary to manage large herds, and who also own valuable real estate, are doing well. At the opposite end of the spectrum are those with poor quality land and small herds, and those who have left pastoralism and are living off earnings from irregular work or menial labour. The consequences can be seen for the 55 households that were surveyed in Maqu in 2013 and 2014. These households live in two pastoral townships located near the County town,

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23. My information on earnings is very limited. Respondents to my survey spoke of earning approximately eighty yuan per day for construction work and one thousand yuan per month for low-level, stable employment. A number of individuals with whom I spoke are employed transporting goods and construction materials; it was difficult to calculate earnings from such ventures given vehicle purchase cost, maintenance, fuel and so on, in addition to the irregular nature of such work.

Nyima, and in the town itself.<sup>24</sup> Their members were asked about the animals they currently owned and the size and features of the houses they owned in town (in sixteen cases, the interview took place in the house, allowing a cross-check of its features). For this sample, I present a new calculation of asset value that combines the estimated value of the household's domestic animals with the estimated value of their house.<sup>25</sup> Not surprisingly, we find a major divergence and dramatic level of inequality for household animal ownership, with a Gini coefficient of 0.511 and a 20:20 ratio of 80.2 (Tables 1 and 2). This clearly is due to the fact that many town dwellers own no yak, sheep or horses at all. When these households' two major assets – livestock animals and real estate – are combined and converted to their cash value, the degree of inequality, as measured by the Gini coefficient, falls to 0.462 and the 20:20 ratio to 15.4. Still, these measures of inequality are a good deal higher than the numbers calculated for Serthar in 1983 and 1994, and appear more similar to measures of inequality in traditional times.

## Conclusions

This account of changing asset inequality relies on small samples from two different pastoralist counties, Serthar in Sichuan Province and Maqu in Gansu Province, and on retrospective accounts of animal ownership in the past. Because of these limitations, one has to be cautious in drawing conclusions about patterns of inequality among Tibetan pastoralists and how these patterns have changed over the past sixty years. One finding that seems reliable is the increase in asset inequality since the dismantling of the communes; it is commonsensical and consistent with other studies of pastoralist communities (see Goldstein and Beall, 1990; Horlemann, 2002). Survey responses about historical times are supported by oral accounts and also by archival records documenting unequal animal ownership. Reportedly, leaders in the past were able to reserve better grazing lands for themselves and often owned larger herds than their fellow pastoralists. Elites also are said to have benefitted from obligatory assistance from other group members. Because animals were the

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24. The town and township are more precisely known as Dzoige Nyima (*mDzo dgyud Nyin ma*).

25. The following assumptions were used in making these calculations: reported numbers of animals were converted into their 'yak equivalents'; it was assumed that 70% of these animals were saleable (i.e. right age and condition); and that they were worth the 2013–14 market price for yak: 3,500 yuan. I assessed the value of the house according to recent sale prices in the neighbourhood, the number of rooms and the house's general condition.

key assets and because herds were decimated by epidemics and weather disasters, asset wealth was volatile in traditional times. Today, long-term rights to lands of different extent and productivity, as well as the market in houses, are creating more durable economic advantages. These advantages are readily perpetuated within families through intergenerational inheritance and thus likely to contribute to class-based social differentiations in future.<sup>26</sup>

Socio-economic inequality and distinctions of rank based on clan membership seem to have characterised a number of eastern Tibetan pastoralist societies in past times. In concluding, it seems worthwhile to examine possible reasons for this situation. The popular image of pastoralists living outside of states, based on such classic accounts as Evans-Pritchard's (1940) ethnography of the Nuer, is of societies with fundamental equality, with little differentiation beyond seniority, personal influence and clan origins. More recent studies of East African and Middle Eastern pastoralists, however, have called such characterisations into question, leading Salzman to conclude that pastoralist societies have 'varied considerably on a continuum ranging from hierarchical at one end to egalitarian at the other' and that these variations depend on relations with states and patterns of land-use (Salzman, 2004: 52–3). Other factors that have been identified as contributing to social inequality include kinship-based exchanges that level differences in wealth, such as bridewealth transfers among African pastoralists (Goody, 1973: 17) and the extent of market involvement (Barfield, 1993; Bradburd, 1994).

In Serthar, marital exchanges contributed to economic differentiation, rather than serving as a levelling mechanism. At marriage, brides and grooms both receive a share of their parents' herds (Gelek and Hai Miao, 1997), with this property becoming part of what Goody (1973: 14) has termed a 'conjugal fund'. Even though animal wealth is volatile, access to more animals at the outset of a marriage offered an advantage to young people from well-off households, as did connections with fathers in leadership positions. As far as I can tell, there are few social practices to level disparities in animal wealth, beyond occasional loans or gifts of animals, mostly as part of mutual aid between relatives. This and camping together with close kin allows families experiencing hard times to weather their difficulties. Even today, close relatives take care of one another, including exchanges between families who have settled in town and those who have maintained a pastoralist lifestyle. Some of the poorer urban dwellers whom I interviewed in 2014, however, complained of being cut

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26. I have no evidence of leaders from the traditional period taking advantage of their prior status to secure contracts to better grazing land or preferred town real-estate in the present day. A few interviewees who held leadership positions in the modern period appear to have benefited from their positions, sometimes simply through better sources of information, in ways that added to their household wealth.

off by their more economically successful kin. It remains to be seen how asset and income inequalities will come to differentiate members of these populations and whether, as I anticipate, class-based inequalities will develop in the not-too-distant future.

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