

Man and the Biosphere

The Chinese National Committee for Man and the Biosphere

SPECIAL ISSUE:

THE SOURCE OF THREE RIVERS

Entering the Black Tents
Another Perspective on 'China's
Water Tower'

MAB
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Prayer flags over the Tongtian River. Every winter, sand is spread to form the words of a prayer in Tibetan script on the surface of the frozen river. This means that anyone walking over the top of the river not only gains merit but is also protected from falling over because the sand offers traction on the slippery ice. Photo by: Nyima Gyaltsen.

Why We Need More Than One Perspective

Author: Zheng Yisheng

The experiences of Tashi Dorje growing up in Sanjiangyuan (the head source of three rivers) demonstrate that it is the levels of communication and understanding between peoples that determine whether clashes over different values end up in birth or end up in death. I arrived at this revelation over time by witnessing Dorje's perseverance, his unique spirit and his sense of mission.

The Western China Development Drive has drastically transformed this part of the country, bringing unprecedented opportunities to the people here. But, for someone just passing through, it would be hard to notice the complexities, contradictions, dilemmas and confusions that the ethnic minority communities – for it is they that have to deal with this dramatic transformation -- are facing.

Certainly, those that pursue pure economic development are satisfied with the progress. They feel that the new highways, improved telecommunications and logistics are surely “positive” changes and that these projects are helping to modernize less developed areas. Unfortunately, this kind of “progress” is sometimes pursued with too much zeal. Often communities are coerced into conforming and everything is adjusted to align with market forces. As long as measures, such as GDP, rise, nothing else is relevant, and the progress is considered “good”.

But alongside this progress, the concerns of environmentalists emerge. Their objective is to protect the ecological balance. They have pushed for state eco-protection projects as part of the development drive in western China. Unfortunately, the promotion of ecological values does not take into account local traditions and the family-planning needs of the local communities. Such eco-protection projects have, in fact, not only failed to protect the environment but also harmed local communities.

From listening to local communities and those people who have taken on the role of defending local traditions, it is clear that the ecological sensibilities of ethnic minority traditional cultures are often superior to the so-called “modern approach.” These people raised objections early on that a dogmatic perspective that “sees only things instead of people” is too divorced from human happiness, social harmony and the integrity of ecosystems. But, it is also unfortunate that such loyalty to traditions inevitably make it difficult for people to accept change; for example, as seen in the changing and irreversible reality of the attitudes of youth. The situation creates the dilemma of either “giving in” or “opting out” in the face of “modernization.”

One of the starkest features of western China that we witnessed is that there are so many clashes between groups holding different values, interests and perspectives. The important question from this is how will these clashes resolve themselves? Will it end up with all sides losing? Or one in which money wins, and the concept of pollute now and clean up later dominates as it has so often before here and across the world. Or will it be one in which everyone wins? When the best of modern progress and the wisdom of tradition go hand-in-hand and produce a new development model, exploiting the strengths of cultural diversity.

Perhaps a more important question is how to direct such inevitable clashes into producing positive and constructive outcomes. I think these questions are what shapes Dorje's thinking and helps him to maintain his devotion to his unique mission. Speaking candidly, society should have been responsible and asked these questions right back at the beginning.

Dorje's communication style is extraordinary; neither humble nor arrogant. He lacks prejudice; he is unapologetic and is always resilient. Dorje uses his communication to spur the communities' initiative and gradually move towards change. He has both raised the problem of simply pursuing economic development with disregard to the capacity and preparedness of local communities. For example, how the highway and motorbikes fragmented the community. His arguments are an important feedback to decision makers. But he has also urged local communities to empower themselves and learn how to adapt to change. He has encouraged locals to improve their dealings with the outside world and explore the best development path for their community. His efforts have been aimed at not only promoting understanding but also aimed at protecting diverse ecosystems. His words are a source of new hope and a basis for achieving harmony. A condition, I believe, that is essential for such a large country, like China, which is just finding her place in the world.

Although Dorje has not made any single headline-making news, he has been working on a lot of causes quietly behind the scenes. He possesses the wisdom, vision and sense of mission that we all should have, but (mysteriously) do not.

Deep passion is rooted in pain and concern for others. If you have not yet experienced this, then you cannot understand true responsibility and forbearance.

Man and the Biosphere

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A Tibetan girl peeks out at us from inside a black tent. In the same way she is curious about us, we are fascinated by the lives of the nomads. At this moment it dawns on us that communication between different ethnic groups is of crucial importance. Photo by: Yao Hua.



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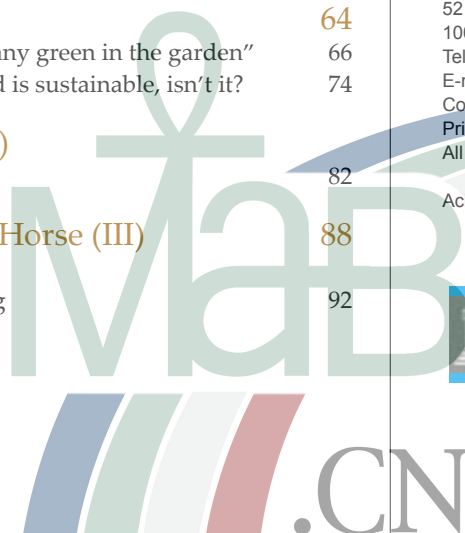
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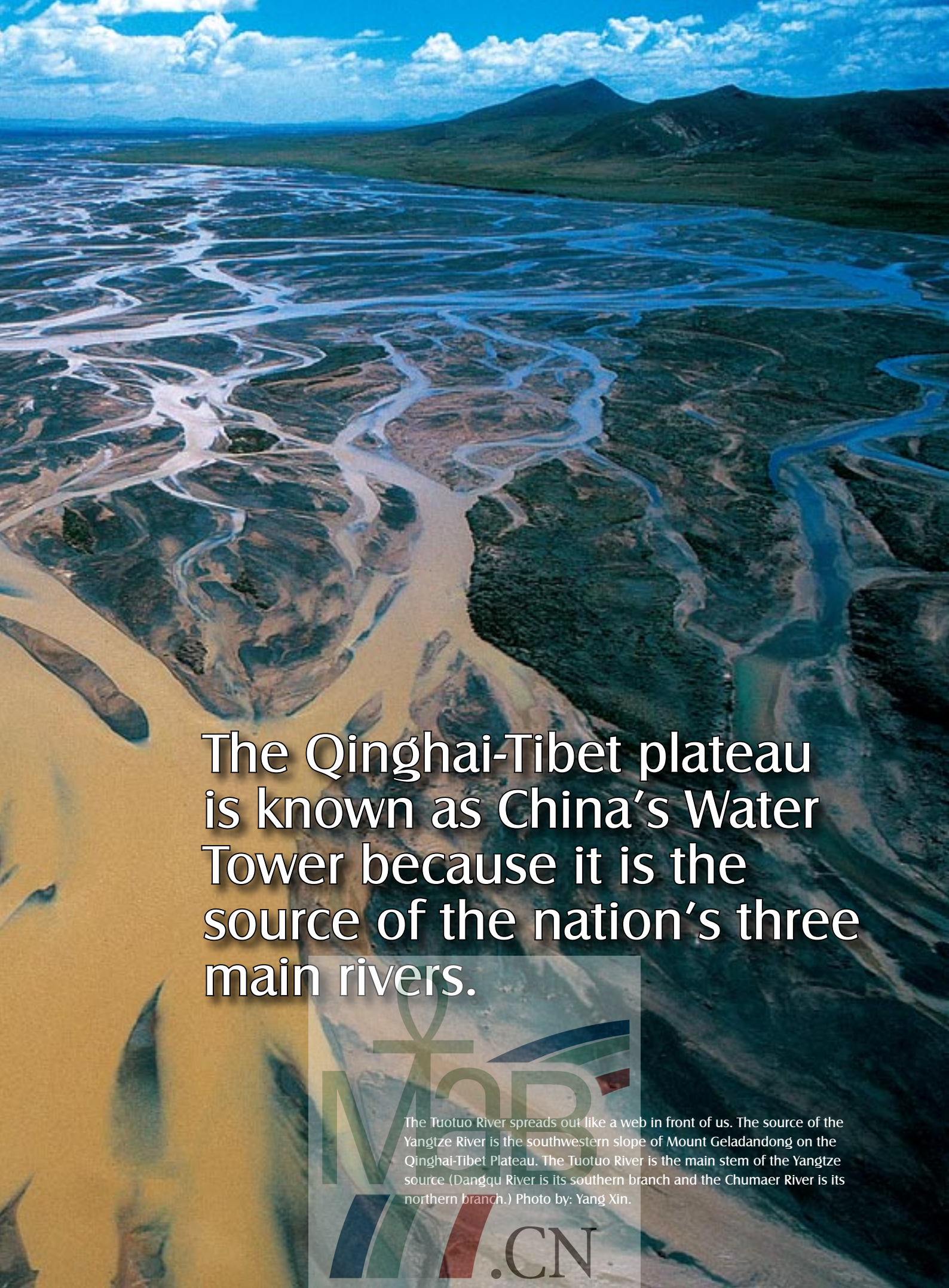
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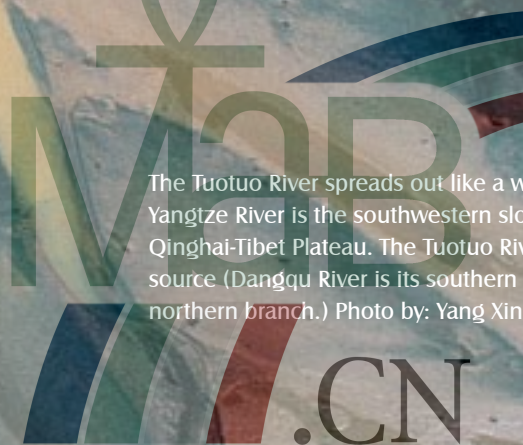
Man and the Biosphere Programme launched by the UNESCO, is a global scientific programme related to the relationship between mankind and the environment.





The Qinghai-Tibet plateau
is known as China's Water
Tower because it is the
source of the nation's three
main rivers.

The Tuotuo River spreads out like a web in front of us. The source of the Yangtze River is the southwestern slope of Mount Geladandong on the Qinghai-Tibet Plateau. The Tuotuo River is the main stem of the Yangtze source (Dangqu River is its southern branch and the Chumaer River is its northern branch.) Photo by: Yang Xin.





China's Water Tower is a gift from heaven. Modern efforts to protect its ecology come from repeated surveys, environmental studies using advanced remote sensing technology from the upper atmosphere and climate change simulations. Thus is born the country's largest nature reserve: Sanjiangyuan.



Photo by: Yang Yong



Photo by: Yang Yong



Photo by: Yang Yong

Background: The Qinghai Concern

Written by: Zhao Xinquan

Qinghai province's importance lies in the fact that a large proportion of China's water resources have their origins here. The Yangtze (Changjiang), Yellow and Mekong (Lancang) rivers all have their sources in Qinghai province. This area, the sources of these three rivers, is known as Sanjiangyuan (Three Rivers Source). Some 49% of the province's water feeds into the Yellow River whilst a considerable amount of the water of the Yangtze and Mekong rivers also comes from here. Furthermore, Qinghai province is the source of two other major rivers: the Heihe (Black River) and Shiyanghe (Stone Sheep River). The Heihe originates in the Qilian Mountains and is tremendously important to the agriculture and animal husbandry industries on the West Bank Corridor along the Yellow River in Gansu province. In addition to supporting the agriculture of the Zhangye region, Gansu province's bread basket, it is important to the Ejina Qi of the Inner Mongolia Autonomous Region. Even Premier Wen Jiabao has said that he is highly concerned about the region because the rivers' waters affect the ecology of the Minqin region of Gansu province. With so much of the region's water coming from this one province, Qinghai, the water quality is of crucial importance. About 10 years ago, a paper from the Institute for

American Strategy was published called: "Who Will Feed China?" After investigating the country's agricultural capacity and its characteristics, Chinese scientists concluded that China could indeed feed herself. But following this came another article called: "China's Water Shortage in the 21st Century Could Shake World Food Security." The main point in this article said that 70–80% of northern China's arable land requires fresh water for irrigation. With the rapid progress of industrialization, the value of a ton of water used in industry is far higher than the same amount used in agriculture and that this will certainly affect agricultural output. If a large country like China cannot secure her own food security, there is no other country that can help her meet the demand. Scientists have concluded that water shortages will eventually threaten world food security. Both articles dealt with agriculture and investigated water and water quality issues. In this respect, Qinghai's ecological situation is of critical importance.

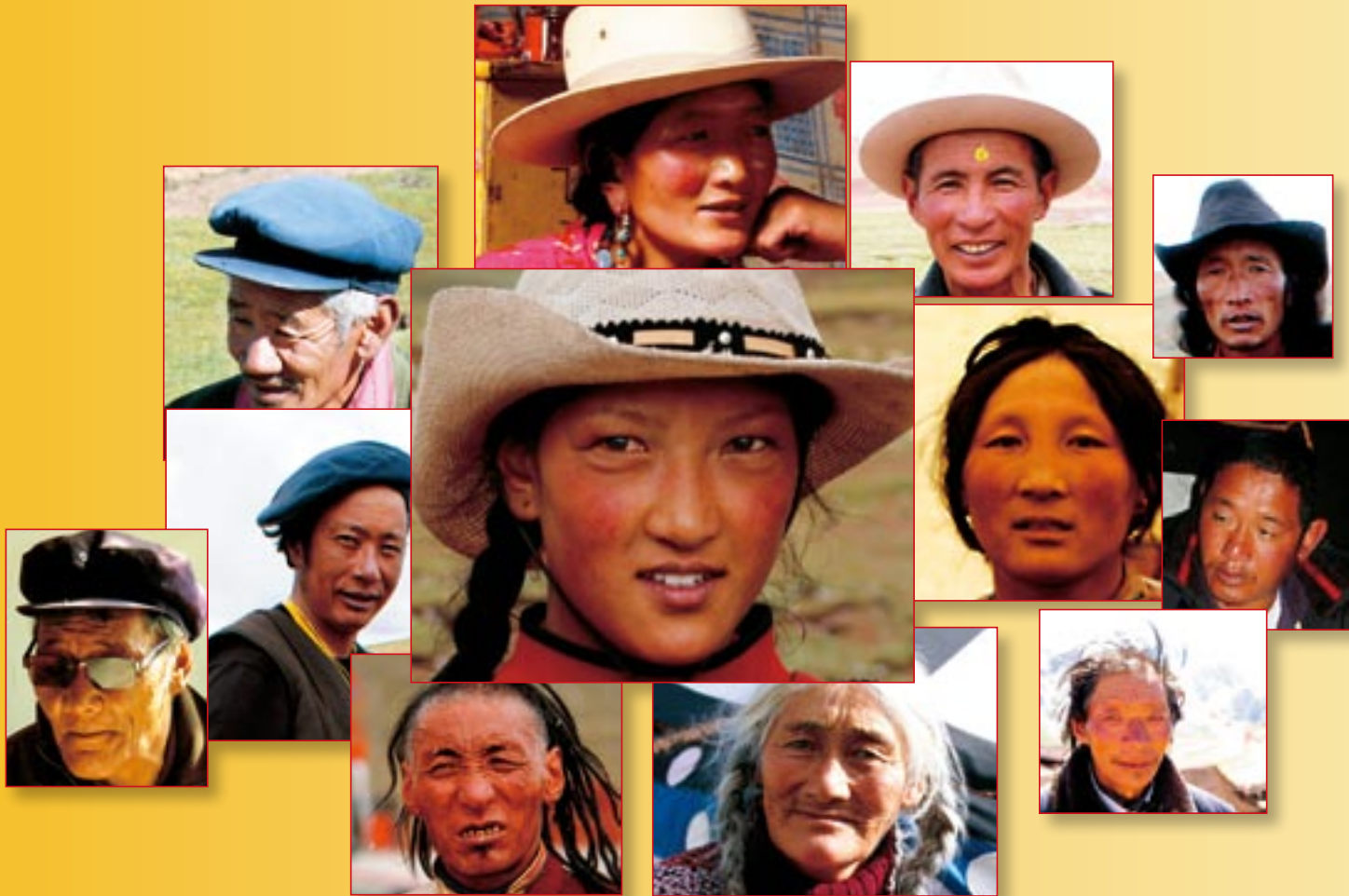
Qinghai province is also rich in biodiversity resources. Its austere environment has fostered species with special properties, as they have adapted and evolved to the distinct local conditions. For example, Qinghai province has a wide variety of plants with medicinal qualities. However, until now, we have not fully exploited such resources. There are plants

here that have evolved to deal with oxygen shortages, ultraviolet rays and extremely low temperatures. If we could use transgenic technology and insert these genes into other animals and plants then the commercial possibilities are vast. As advances in genetic technology are made, then we may be able to make new medicines from the plants growing in Qinghai province.

Thirdly, Qinghai province is blessed with many agricultural and husbandry resources ideally suited to high altitudes. Since it is common knowledge, I will not dwell too long on how Qinghai Plateau is so special because of its lack of pollution and the abundance of organically-grown food. The meat and animal products from Qinghai are very special in this regard. More importantly, the meat and animal products in Qinghai could gain greater significance if the nation's grain production comes under threat. The animals in Qinghai represent what is called competition-free husbandry, that is they do not compete with humans for grain. This may become increasingly important in China.

Fourthly, the importance of Qinghai plateau's ecosystem is reflected in a recent study by the China Academy of Social Sciences. Qinghai's ecological assets, the study concluded, is worth approximately RMB 11 trillion, a stunning number beyond all imagination. However, some





The nomads are an indispensable part of the local environment. But we know so little about their lives and what they think about changes on the plateau. What is their future? When we enter the black tents, we are entering another part of the Water Tower altogether.

specialists have queried this figure.

Out of 19.27 million hectares of usable area on the grasslands, some 16.21 million hectares is degenerated. That means that roughly 85% of the grassland that can be used is in different stages of degeneration. The most visible sign of the deterioration is the emergence of vast expanses of "black earth." Today, at Sanjiangyuan, the total area of "black earth" is 73.63 million Mu, of which 46.83 million is

riverbank land (of a gradient less than 7 degrees). The situation is grim. Nearly 10,000 households comprising of almost 50,000 people in the region have been relocated as "ecological migrants" as part of previous and current policies of reducing the grazing of animals to help reforestation projects and grass regeneration and the protection of the Sanjiangyuan region. Such projects under these policies are a sizeable operation involving a large number of

people. The Sanjiangyuan Protection Project cannot succeed unless many people agree to become ecological migrants. But this, in itself, gives rise to many issues including how to secure employment for the migrants and dealing with resistance from those nomads who do not want to leave their grassland. So far it seems that policies aimed at alleviating pressures on the grassland by relocating the local population has not been too successful.

Entering the

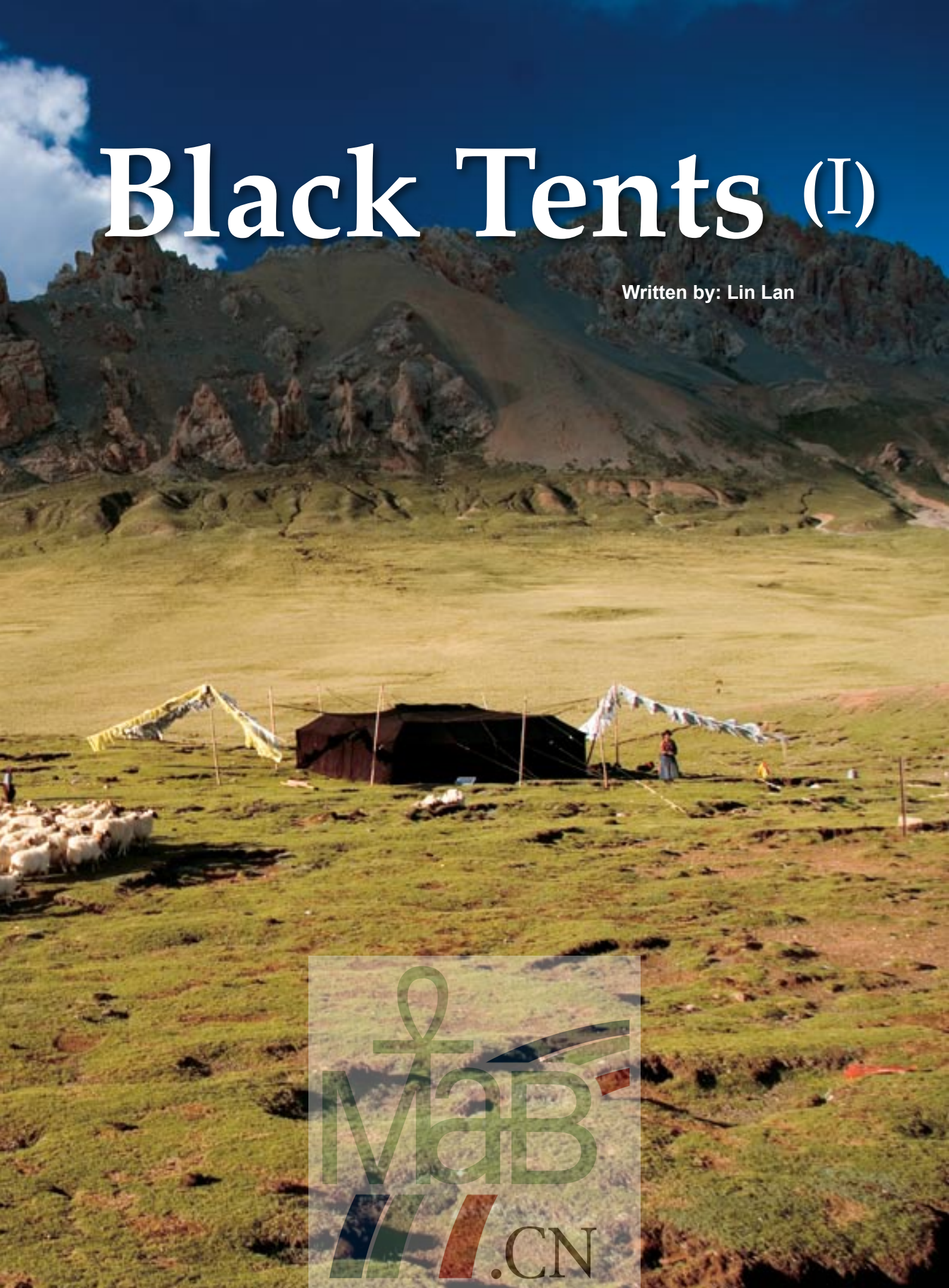
The journey was destined to be one of engagement and enlightenment. Culturally speaking, Sanjiangyuan was practically another world to us. Our motorcade of four vehicles set out in the summer of 2007 with a team of expeditionists who have been working for many years in Sanjiangyuan, ecologists, postgraduate students and members of the media. One part of the team was comprised of three business people from inland cities. With their private vehicles loaded up with supplies, these entrepreneurs became our team's logistics backup. This eclectic group set out with a common belief and a common purpose— to visit the nomads' black tents and listen to their stories by the fire while sharing yak butter tea with them. What we saw and what we heard in those ten-odd days left us with many puzzling questions and made us think about issues that we had never thought clearly about before. The stories that were told in those black tents in plain language and a peaceful tone left a very deep impression on us.

Photo by: Wang Fangchen



Black Tents (I)

Written by: Lin Lan





Drolwa's family moved back to their black tent after living in a brick house over winter. Photo by: Han Ying

“Digging gold is
like digging up the
heart of earth”





Life is very simple inside the black tent. There is a stove, some bedding and some daily necessities. Drolwa says he feels like he's suffocating if he doesn't move back to the tent in the spring. Photo by: Han Ying.



It was 11pm when we arrived at Cuochi. On the way, we had to cross numerous rivers and on several occasions we got stuck deep in mud. Cuochi is our Tibetan friend, Tashi Dorje's, home village. We heard that nomads from scattered settlements would converge on the village where the first Eco-Culture Festival would be held. It would be a great opportunity for making interviews and so we decided to head there. As we put up our makeshift camp and got ready for

the first night's sleep, little did we know that even though it was July, the warmest month of the year, the temperature could drop to minus 10 Celsius and below. None of the team slept that night.

When we got up the next morning, Gyayi, the Village Party Secretary, took us to Drolwa's home. He was the first nomad we interviewed at Cuochi. Party Secretary Gyayi, who had lived in the village for more than 40 years, would be our guide and, together with our translator Dhondup, he would keep us company throughout our investigations.

Drolwa's family had moved out of their earthen home and was now living in a black tent on a raised platform in front of the house. It was the first black tent we visited. On our way coming here, we had seen the square-shaped tents with their colorful prayer flags flapping in the air in great harmony on the grasslands but it wasn't until now that we had not a chance to enter one. As we were coming from the outside in the dazzling daylight, we lowered our heads and expected the interior to be dark in contrast. But surprisingly, the tent was lit with a gentle glow. There was an earthen stove in the center with a skylight directly above it which let in a ray of light like a theater spotlight. Smaller rays of light, twinkling like stars, seeped in through the seams in the yak hair fabric and other little holes.

Drolwa: I am 64 years old. This is my son's house and we are part of the Third Production Brigade. We moved into the house in 1996 because it got too cold in the winter to sleep in the tent. But when the spring comes, the air is no good and I can't breathe in here so I move back into the tent.

Tibetan caterpillar fungus doesn't grow here so we don't have many ways to make money. We depend solely on raising livestock. When the grass is good, we raise more and when there is little rain,



Photo by: Yao Hua

we raise less. Overgrazing is not a problem. We can make about RMB10,000 a year. There are nine of us in this family, so although we don't have that much money we can eat meat all year round.

In recent years, the grasslands have been getting worse. But I can say for sure that it is not because we are grazing too many livestock. Back in 1985, we had a bad snow storm which killed almost all our animals. Our herds still have not recovered from that. The government wants us to keep fewer animals because they say it will help the grass to grow back. They told each household how many animals they could keep. I don't remember the exact numbers. But even though everyone now has less animals, the grasslands are no better. They look the same.

This is the first time that we had heard that the deterioration of the grasslands may not be caused by overgrazing. The 1985 snow storm decimated livestock numbers and yet the grasslands did not recover from less grazing. So how is it that scientists blame livestock grazing for the deterioration of the grasslands? What do the nomads think? What do they believe is causing the grasslands to die off?

The gold rush is killing the grasslands. I heard that this is happening in one particular county. People from outside were paying each household RMB 200,000 in cash to let them mine for gold on their land. Although the nomads took the money, they are now poor again and they have nothing left. It used to be the richest place with the best grazing land and the fattest sheep. But it also had the most gold. When



Nomads often build an earthen stove in their traditional black tents. Sometimes they only rest for a short while in one spot so they don't even have enough time to make a stove. In that case, their herd does not eat much grass, thus the grasslands are protected from overgrazing. Photo by: Han Ying.



the mining started, the soil lost all its nutrients. Now this village is broke. A similar thing is happening at Maduo. The nomads can get rich quick. You know, RMB 200,000 is a big sum. It's about 10 years' income for an average household. As long as the gold is left in the ground, the soil keeps its nutrients and the grass can grow. But once the gold is mined, it is like the heart of the land is taken away. The mining causes the soil to turn to sand and it gets blown away by the wind. The place is completely finished. So when business people from outside came to Cuochi and asked us for the right to dig our land for gold, we said no to all of them.

The only way to get to Cuochi is across a bridge. We got together and organized a team of local men and blocked that bridge. We wouldn't let the gold miners enter. All three Production Brigades held a meeting to discuss what to do. Even though they offered us money, this is our home and it will be our home for many generations. The mining kills the grasslands. It sucks it dry and the color changes. It's no good. So all of us men stood and

said "No" in one voice.

The boss of the gold mining company came to see us a second time. But this time he brought the county leadership with him. So we had no choice, we were forced to let them mine our grasslands. But luckily for us, the mining was not deep and it was only in sandy areas, not on grazing land. They didn't use machines. Everything was done with hand tools. Also, the workers just couldn't get used to the high altitude here and the bad feeling from us villagers and so after they mined one small plot they left. Even so, the place which they mined is ruined now.

Some of us in our team support mining, while others are against it. Up until now, of course, neither side could convince the other. After talking with Drolwa and hearing

Photo by: Tashi Dorje.



Wild yaks together with a domesticated herd. Photo by: Han Ying.





Nomads believe that it is a good omen to see wild animals on the grasslands. Their presence benefits both their own animals and the grasslands. When wild yak breed with domesticated cattle, the calves born are generally stronger and larger and can be sold for a higher price. Photo by: Han Ying.



A gold dredger and mining debris. Photo by: Nyima Gyaltsen;

his idea that “Digging gold is like digging up the earth’s heart” the pro-mining camp dismissed it but the anti-mining group found much to admire in this idea. They appreciated the theory that the grasslands and resources underneath it are inter-related. And even though there is no scientific basis for such a belief, it has helped protect the vulnerable ecological balance here for many years.

It’s not just gold mining that

affects the grasslands. Wildlife also plays a part. In the past, the grasslands also started dying off when people from outside came to kill the wild animals here. After the poachers stopped coming, wild donkeys and blue sheep began to appear on my grazing land to live with my cattle and sheep again. Wild donkeys drift around in different seasons and come and go every year while the blue sheep stay put year round. We are happy

to see these wild animals. We are even happier when the wild yak come and mate with our herds because the calves born this way are bigger and we can sell them for a better price. When wild animals come, the grasses are good. The grasses even seem to have grown thicker in the recent years.

We have set up a Friends of the Wild Yak Organization (FWO) for Cuochi’s wildlife and my son is a member. Some nomads have



agreed to give part of their grazing land over to the wild animals. The grasses will grow better with more animals and our livestock will be better off too.

It is also strange that the summer is coming later and later. In recent years, the winters have been getting warmer and the summers have been growing cooler. The water in front of our house used to be good for making tea but sometimes now it's too muddy to use. When you add milk, it won't mix. This started happening last year. Since the drought which lasted two years starting in 1995, the water has got muddier.

From our interview with Drolwa, we made two key points.

Photo by: Tashi Dorje.



Photo by: Tashi Dorje.



When we brave the cold drizzle one day we bump into Jigme Ri who was looking after his herd near Tatou. Photo by: Han Ying.



“Nature is like a circle with the wolves, sheep and people all part of it”

Two days before the Eco-Culture Festival, the nomads started putting up pretty looking tents, one after the other, at the horse racecourse. But we noticed that few of them were the black tents, most were the white ones used only during holidays. It reminded us that the festival was quite a different event from the nomads' everyday life. Even though the weather was chilly and it was raining, we decided to continue randomly interviewing the nomads.

Not knowing where to go we stumbled across a man in his fifties who was herding a flock of sheep on the bumpy road. We were driving in the jeep past a place called Tatou. The man's name is Jigme Ri. Because it was rather cold outside we invited him into the jeep for the interview. He spoke unhurriedly, taking a lot of time to answer our questions. He paused, thinking for a while before speaking and presenting his thoughts in an orderly fashion. He viewed the connections between people, the grasslands, livestock and wildlife as something akin to a “system” in the modern scientific sense.

Jigme Ri

There are a lot of wolves here. They are smart, the smartest of all the animals. They follow the shepherd and wait until he is not watching before attacking the sheep. This is my family's summer pasture and I have been here for two months. This year I lost one yak and four sheep to the wolves. Usually I lose about 20 sheep and five or six yak a year, give or take.

The biggest pack of wolves I have ever seen was a pack of 40. Every day in this area I see one or two wolves. Without the shepherd there all the sheep would be killed. The sheep have to be watched all the time or the wolves will just kill the sheep. In this case, a teenager is not much good, you really need an adult.

The wolf is quite a cunning animal and is capable of driving a flock of sheep away by itself. Sometimes when the shepherd falls asleep at night, the wolf would sneak in and try to drive the sheep away. If it manages to drive them away it can kill more than one hundred animals at once. This happened to my family five years ago when a wolf sneaked into our enclosure. Sheep are

Jigme Ri tells us that the nomads, their herds and wild animals have always been living on the grasslands together. Even though the nomads don't like it when wolves kill their sheep, they are not prepared to kill the wolves in revenge because everything in nature is interconnected. Photo by: Yang Yong.

extremely timid animals and that night they were so scared that they didn't even dare to bleat aloud. The wolf used its tail to drive them and they just followed him. When we got up the next morning, we found some 20 sheep had been killed, their bodies lying by a neighbor's wire fence just below ours. But that's not a big number. Up to 100 sheep are usually killed at once. The wolves are watching day and night. They follow the sheep, always looking for a chance. In the past, we built enclosures with yak dung, which makes it more difficult for the wolf to get the sheep away. In that case it would just jump into the enclosure and kill a couple at most. A single wolf can eat a whole sheep. If possible, it would carry away anything that's left. Normally it kills several sheep at once and keeps watch over the kill, only eating when hungry.

There have been many times that I have seen the sheep scared and running around in all directions, By the time I have rushed over, the wolf has often already caught a sheep and has it on the ground. Wolves are not afraid of people and normally don't run away until you are about 20 m away. So when a shepherd sees a wolf, he shouts and drives the sheep into an enclosure to stop the wolf from getting



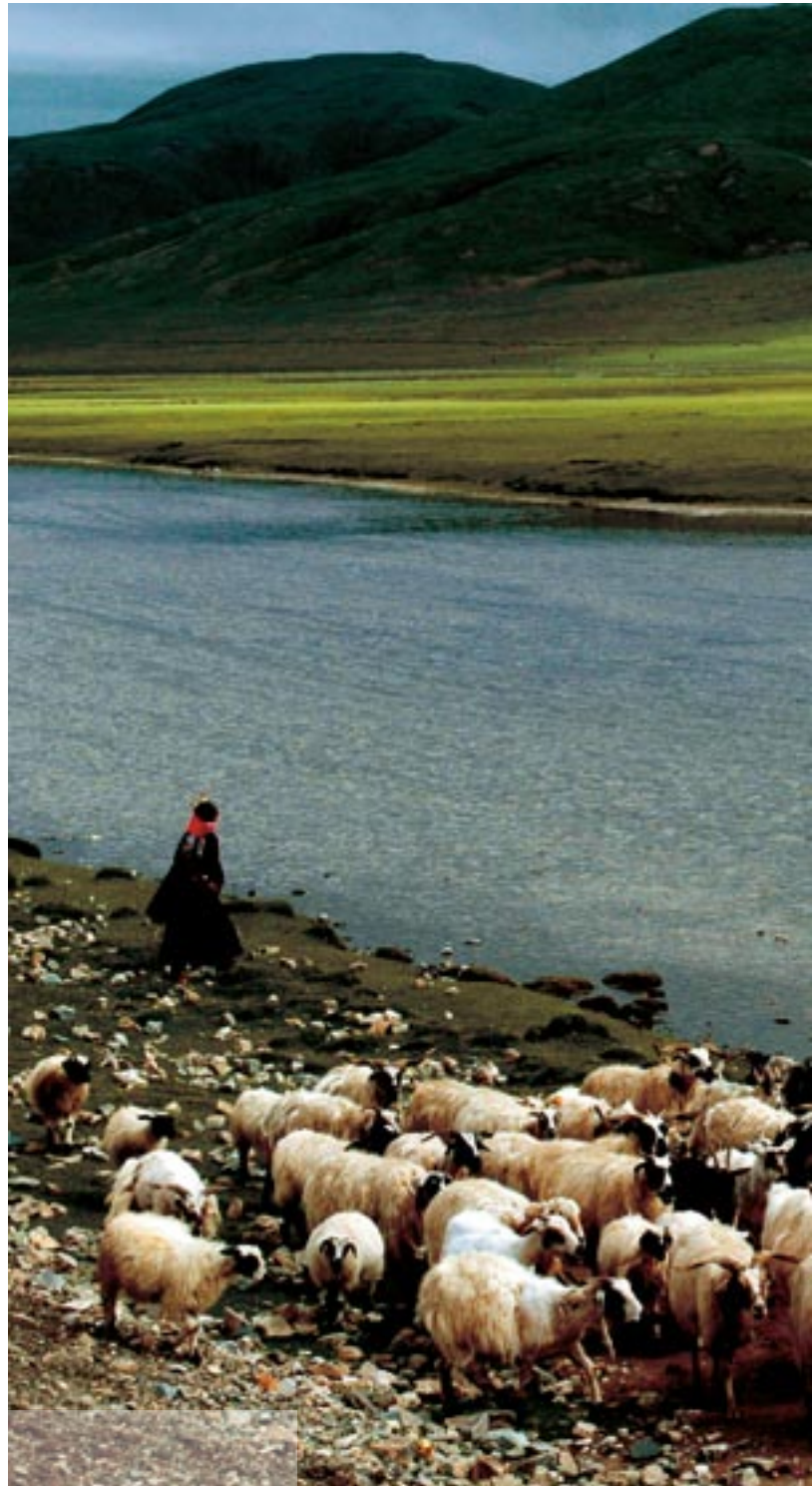
any closer to his sheep.

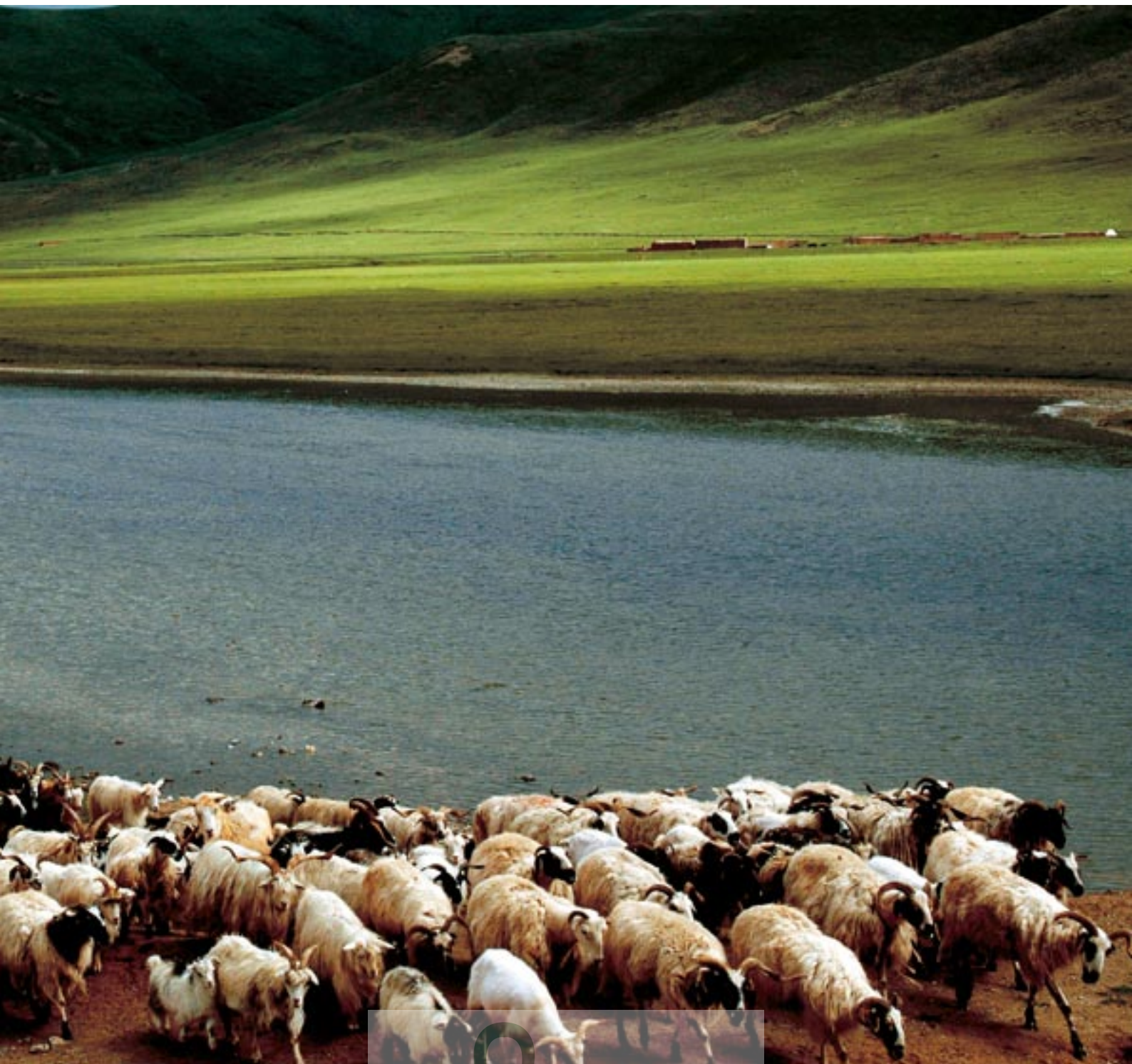
We used to use wire traps to catch the wolves. Now we don't do this any more because they are protected animals. The size of our flocks is also smaller. The government wants us to keep fewer animals and because there are so many wolves around, if your flock is too big and you don't watch it carefully, then you will lose lots of sheep to the wolves. My family was given 3,000 Mu of grassland per person. So with four of us we have about 12,000 Mu. We used to have 120 yak and 90 sheep but now we only have 70 yak and 60 sheep.

Of course, right from the beginning there were always wolves and brown bears as well as us humans. No one likes to come face to face with their natural enemy. But that's life. The wolf does affect our livelihood by eating our sheep, but the wolf's behavior is just natural. Nature is like a circle with the wolves, sheep and people all part of it. We are all part of nature. There is no reason to kill off all the wolves.

Nomads move from pasture to pasture according to the season.
Photo by: Nyima Gyaltsen.

After the grasslands were divided up between households, many nomads settled down in the valleys in groups of four or five households. From a distance we saw bald spots in the valley where the top soil had been blown away but on the tops of the mountain where land erosion is the most serious the grass coverage was lush and green. Photo by: Han Ying.





During the winter the nomads usually herd their animals down into the valleys where it is warmer and less windy. The summer pasture is higher up in the mountain. Photo by: Tashi Dorje.





With a little polishing of his words, Jigme Ri could be a modern ecologist talking about the “ecosystem” or “biosphere.” For some time now, wildlife protection laws have been aimed at local people as if they were the ones that needed to be educated about protecting nature and wildlife. But here we have a local, Jigme Ri, who pictures the situation as a “circle,” even though he has lost many sheep to the wolves. We had to admire him. He was proof that knowledge is not the exclusive reserve of scientists. The so-called “Ivory Tower” of academics has been breached by local wisdom from everyday people’s lives.

I have been coming to this grassland for 18 or 19 years and have lived in this area for some three decades. Now the government keeps accusing us of overgrazing and destroying the grassland. But before the Household Responsibility System, the size of our herds was twice or three times the size it is now. With fewer livestock, how can there be overgrazing?

When I was little, the old folk told me that hard working people would often move with their animals to a new place every 10 days or so. They didn’t have any earthen stove at home and would only stay a bit longer at a place during lambing and calving times. At that time, the animals only had time to eat the tops of the grass because they kept moving from place to place. You could tell whether someone had come to that part of the grassland before you by looking at the condition of the grass. That was before the time of the People’s Communes.

Although moving the animals around was still practiced after the People’s Communes started, it was not as good as before. For example, before you might have about 10,000 Mu of grassland to move around on, but under the Production Brigade, you might only have about 5,000 Mu. Even so, the grassland was still in good condition. In the summer, the grassland was full of flowers, just like patterned clothing. One hill might be covered in yellow flowers, the next in rose-colored flowers. All those different plants produced a strong smell, something like the smell of a Tibetan medicine hospital today. Sometimes you could taste the smell of the grass and flowers in the milk. Sometimes, if the sheep have been eating a lot of wild onion plants, then their milk would taste so strongly of onion it was undrinkable. In the summer, the yak and the sheep would take a nap after a good feed, They would lie in a group sleeping for two or three hours. Now you



This place used to have the best grazing in Cuochi. It was where the head office of the Production Brigade was located. Nowadays the grassland is so degenerated that grazing is impossible. Degenerated grassland like this eventually turns into "black earth," after which it is very difficult to recover. Photo by: Han Ying.

don't see that any more. Many of those places that used to have water are dry now and the nutrition in the earth has gone too. For example, for the amount of goodness you could get from each blade of grass in the past you would need to eat five blades today. The grass is thicker and no longer fattening. The flowers smell fainter and are smaller than before.

The climate has also changed a lot. Now the summers are colder and there is more snow and less rain. If you take a look at the grass around the stove in the tent, it grows up to about one foot tall while it is only a few inches tall outside. It was never like this before. The reason is simple. It is too cold now. In the summer, the ground is still frozen in the morning. The grass can only grow after the sun warms the ground up. It's very slow. Now it's as cold as if we were living on the mountain top.

The Living Buddha used to say that you would have to pay for bad deeds, if you weren't good and didn't try to do good things. I often think of these words now. There are more and more rats around. Perhaps that's because we used poison to try and kill them. Perhaps the grass has less goodness in it because people used to kill wild animals. Are the grasslands ruined because people have been so lazy?

In the old days we would move our animals from place to place and it was good. In the winter we would herd our animals to the winter pasture and then move onto the spring pasture in the springtime. By the time we returned to the winter pasture after summer was over the grass would all have grown back. In the old days there was no permanent settlement. Nobody would just stay all year round on one pasture.

But now the grasslands are divided between the households, everyone grazes his animals on the same pasture all year round. These paddocks just aren't big enough and so there are problems. Because people are staying in one place all year round, the grassland has turned dark. For the sake of the grasslands, it would be better if we could go back to moving around. With people moving around less and less, the grassland is getting worse and worse. In the beginning, the grassland was divided up according to the number of people in the family. But there are more people now and it has to be re-allocated. For example, when my son got married, he was given 3,000 Mu but that is far too little. On a piece of grassland that small it is impossible



to raise animals.

Now the land is given out to each household there is no more leadership. When we had the People's Communes, the Production Brigade would issue orders and tell us when we had to move. There were hardly any beggars and nobody was poor. But under the Production Brigade we didn't have any freedom. Nowadays we have lots of freedom. We can choose whether to take the animals out of the enclosure and when to take them or just leave them in one place. Every Production Brigade now has some very poor people and some very rich people. About one half of

the people in my Brigade have sunk into poverty. In the old days, nobody owned a car or their own house. They just had some 20 or so yak and a couple of hundred sheep. Now everyone has a house and some people buy cars and so they have no more money.

Nomads know all about the best kinds of grass for their animals and how to take care of their herds. Everything is up to the owner of the herd. If he wants to live a settled life then that will affect the grassland. However, if we suddenly stopped raising animals and the grassland was left unused all year, the grass wouldn't be good. Just like people's hair and yak hair, the grass needs to be cut every year. It won't grow well unless it is cut. We have to stick to our traditions and let our animals keep eating the grass across the grasslands.

The nomads themselves have changed. There used to be lots of experienced nomads in the old days but now many people have stopped caring about the yak and the sheep. I am very worried about that. Lots of people keep saying they are poor and holding their hand out to the government for money. Some people even pretend that they have sold all their animals so that they can ask for more money. People are growing lazy. They don't want to look after animals any more so they sell them and move into the cities to live as "eco-migrants". What a burden this is to the country!

The fact that the grassland is growing worse is quite natural from a religious perspective. It has happened many times in the past. As Master Lian Huasheng says, as the world slowly changes, people's hearts change too. Natural disasters come from people doing many bad things. I can't explain this using science.

When the older nomads told us their stories, their faces lit up whenever they started talking about the past. They know all the local rules quite well and are very against the practice of grazing animals in a single place. Perhaps, we still do not have a definitive answer on why the grasslands are deteriorating, but Jigme Ri has given us two: a changing climate and sedentary grazing. Climate change has captured the attention of the whole world as well as that of the scientists, the second factor – the changing in grazing practices – has elicited little interest or research. Research moreover, seems too focused on the issue of overgrazing. We have learned that Cuochi village had the largest number of livestock in the People's Commune period, over 70,000 animals in all, which was almost wiped out in the disastrous snowstorm of 1985. Today the number of animals is under 20,000. Despite the fact that there are fewer animals, the grassland has not recovered. Could it be because of changing grazing practices? This riddle needs to be answered by both the nomads and the scientists together.

His eyes express wisdom and intellect; a look which arises from his plight, striding between modernity and tradition, throwing him into a constant state of confusion. China Central Television [CCTV] awarded him one of the top 10 Public Welfare Personalities in 2007 and he is also chairman of the Sanjiangyuan Eco-protection Association. His full name is Tashi Dorje but friends and colleagues call him Tador. Cuochi, the highest village we visited in 2007 in Qinghai province, is part of the Sanjiangyuan Nature Reserve. Tador, together with villagers, initiated the community environment protection program. He says: "I often find myself in an awkward position, being neither part of the community, nor an outsider; neither a scientist, nor a nomad. My job is to act like a translator who does not merely translate words but also tries to help the nomads find the right way to communicate with outsiders and the government." Listening to him is like listening to a conversation between people living on the plateau - "China's Water Tower" - and the rest of the country.

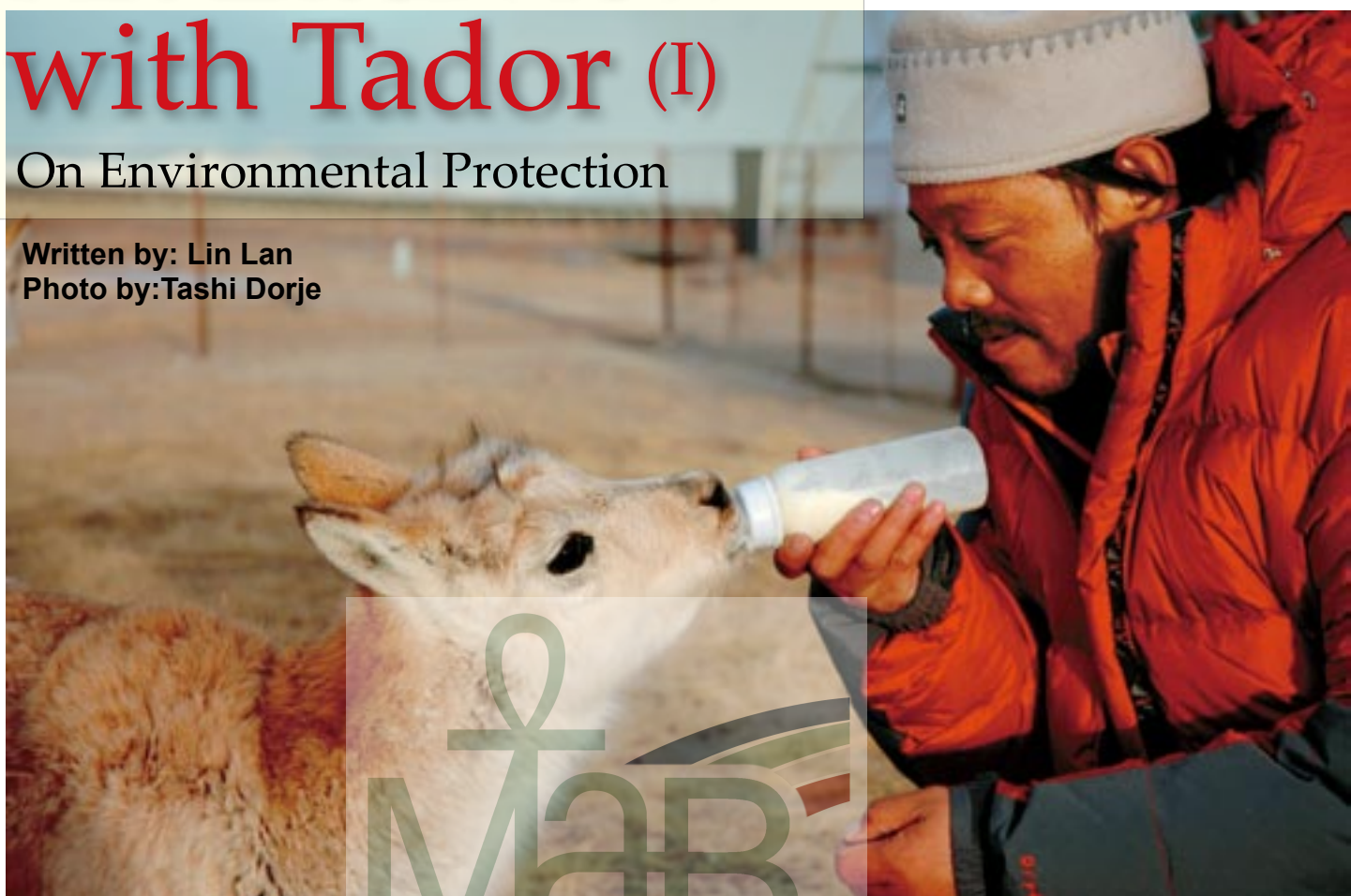
An Interview with Tador (I)

On Environmental Protection

Written by: Lin Lan

Photo by: Tashi Dorje

Tador is feeding a baby
Tibetan antelope.



In 2007, when our motorcade of four SUVs set off from Chengdu (the capital of Sichuan province) for Cuochi, the highest village in Qinghai province, every vehicle carried a “Sanjiangyuan Survey” sticker on the windshield. Before we arrived there, this little known village meant nothing more to us than its connection with the term “China’s Water Tower.” Nevertheless, after we arrived in the village and visited the black tents, our conversations almost never touched on the topic of the “Water Tower” but instead focused on the grassland, animal husbandry, cattle and herding. Our vehicles would run on the rolling grassland for days without us catching sight of anyone because most of the nomads do not live by the river. Although we had arrived at the site of the long talked-about “Water Tower”, there wasn’t really anything to say about it. But we didn’t find that strange. Perhaps that’s because we fell into the practice of “When in Rome, do as the Romans do.” Although we had almost forgotten this issue, Tador raised it as the first topic of importance in our interview. “Should this place be described as Sanjiangyuan or the grasslands?” he asked. As a matter of fact, the local nomads prefer the latter term. And so we arrive at the crux of the problem. To protect “China’s Water Tower,” we first need to rediscover a lost perspective.

Tador:
Local Tibetans had never heard the name Sanjiangyuan in the past. They only knew this area as the “the place of snow and four rivers.”

I was born in Suojia township, Zhiduo county in Yushu prefecture. Kekexili is my native home and Cuochi my adopted one, lying along the Tongtian River [Sky-Reaching River]. When I lost my parents at age eight, I wandered into this region. I must say I am a born vagabond! And fit for working with non-governmental organizations because I am very familiar with Sanjiangyuan.

We never called this area Sanjiangyuan in the past. We called it the “place of snow and four rivers.” Our ancestors knew, mysteriously, that this place we lived in was surrounded by mountains of snow. We even called ourselves “snow people” or “snow mountain people”. And although we have never seen any, we all believe that there are lions living high up in the snowy mountains. When I show the herdsmen maps, they can actually see where it is they are living. They also call this place the ritual site of Guanyin [Kwun Yum, Goddess of Mercy, Avalokiteśvara Buddhistsattva].

The Tibetan people here don’t call the branch of the Changjiang (Yangtze River) here the Tuotuo River. Instead they know it as “Regie” which literally means “Cow River.” The upper reaches are known as “Buqu”

and the lower reaches, “Zhiqu.” There is another saying that describes the Yangtze as a “a carpet of gold.” We have a legend that says the Yangtze River and the Yellow River are racing to see who can run faster. The majestic Yangtze, twists and turns, and with each turn a temple is built and a culture is born. Moreover, the Yangtze’s journey travels on a gold-paved road. So, the Tibetans believe that the bed of the Yangtze River is made of gold. The Yellow River is less majestic and less expansive, and it rushes in so much haste that it even forgets to take off its shoes, rushing downward past the Zhaling Lake and Eling Lake.

In the Tibetan language, the Yangtze is only known by one name -- “Regie” -- whilst other rivers have different names along different stretches. Mount Geladandong is the source of the Tuotuo River, which is also the source of the Yangtze River. Locals say the Yangtze is filled with water from the nose of a cow. The glaciers there have retracted badly now. Because the Geladandong is not considered a holy mountain, its cultural history is not so long, but its name is interesting. It means “100 yak butter lamps.”

The Tongtian River is also known as the “Regie.” It’s pretty wide and takes about half a day to get across in the winter when it’s frozen. Last year when I took some nomads to Yunnan province, I told them to look at the Jinsha River – a tributary of the Yangtze and so actually we should call it “Cow River.” They wouldn’t believe me that it was the same river. “Our Cow River is so wide, and this is so small. It must flow towards us,” they said.

So should we call this place Sanjiangyuan or the grasslands? The nomads would likely choose to call it the grasslands.

I have something that I would like to discuss. The nomads living in Sanjiangyuan don’t spend much time thinking about water. They see so much of it all the time, even though they don’t suffer from flooding, water is not something which they attach value to. It has no monetary price. In the 260,000 square kilometers of Yushu prefecture where I live, the Yangtze waters 58% of the area and we have never suffered from floods or water shortages. Water simply isn’t something which is thought about much.

Now outsiders call the region “Sanjiangyuan Nature Reserve,” which sounds strange to the locals. My organization, named by people from outside the area, is called Sanjiangyuan Eco-protection Association. When we go to the local communities and tell the villagers how important “China’s Water Tower” and the Reserve are, the herdsmen have problems really understanding us because they have no previous concept or words for “Nature Reserve” in the Tibetan language. Although



Wall posters in Tador's community.





the name, “Sanjiangyuan Nature Reserve,” has become well known, people here have no real attachment to its meaning. Local residents still can’t really understand the concept of “Sanjiangyuan” or “Reserve.” But what they do understand is the importance of the grasslands, because their lives and culture are inextricably linked with it. Therefore, in recent years, one of the biggest questions has been whether or not to rename the Sanjiangyuan Nature Reserve as the “Grasslands Reserve.” If we did this it would resonate more closely with the locals and their lives. For the nomads, the grasslands mean everything and that includes all the rivers and the wetlands.

Whenever I talk to outsiders, I feel like when they hear the word “grassland,” they immediately think of Inner Mongolia and not Qinghai province. Apart from academics, officials and researchers, this province’s grasslands have yet to really enter the Chinese public’s consciousness. Outsiders continue to refer to this area as Sanjiangyuan. My Association’s top priority is to work on issues related to the grasslands and the

nomads but there are still many issues that are unclear; for example, the big controversy over whether over-grazing is really happening.

The policy of “stop grazing to allow the grass to grow back,” has been enforced in Sanjiangyuan. It is similar to the policy of “stop farming to allow the trees to grow back.” The grassland and the nomads need each other, they are not enemies. Instead of prohibiting grazing per se, the nomads should be encouraged to start practicing “appropriate grazing.” The yak grazing on the Qinghai-Tibet plateau is an integral part of the grassland and is the product of a long process of evolution. The two are inseparable. Alongside the cattle and the grasslands, are the people, in other words, the nomads. If grazing is prohibited, what will they do? This is how one-sided the outside perspective is. It does not consider the needs of the people living here; it merely looks at protecting the rivers.

Although the herdsmen do not know much about environmental protection, environmental protection is ingrained in their religious beliefs and daily life.

We have always had a strong culture of protecting nature. You can see this in how we worship holy mountains and lakes. So, although we don’t have a word for “Reserve” in the Tibetan language, in many respects the locals here have always treated this area like a reserve. While their practices are not strictly speaking the same as modern-day environmentalists, their purpose is also to protect the environment. They are not simply acting for short-term human gain. Outsiders often blame locals for the damage done to Sanjiangyuan’s ecology, but this is hard to stomach. Maybe locals don’t know much about that term “Reserve” but they are very knowledgeable about the holy mountains and lakes. It is so crucial that we use the right language in dealing with this issue! If you talk to them about the need to protect the rivers and the wetlands they just wouldn’t understand. As far as they can see, the rivers are flowing as normal. Why would they need protection?

The annual ritual worship of holy mountains is meant to readjust the human-mountain relationship. They are to offer apologies and also praise to the holy mountains before the New Year starts. More and more mountains are being consecrated and worshipped. Locals’ sense of environmental protection isn’t just confined to the holy mountains and lakes but also covers all places that they live. Take Cuochi village for example. When villagers get together they don’t leave their rubbish behind when they are done. They also urge workers on the highway building sites not to litter. The village has also designated a special team to pick up rubbish along the highway. When a man comes out of his home and spots a buzzard, wolf or falcon, he



Friend of Wild Yak Organization, an NGO independently founded by Cuochi village to protect the wildlife and the grasslands.

takes it as a good sign, but when he sees land erosion he gets upset.

Although I count as a local, I also take things I have learnt from outside and bring them back home, such as the concept of wildlife protection. But whenever the nomads ask me questions I can't explain to them very clearly: for example, the practices of survey methodology. If you ask the villagers to fill in a questionnaire or mark up a 1 × 1 (meter) land sample that measures the height, varieties and coverage of grasses, they wouldn't refuse to do it but would promise to do it without knowing why they were doing it. They don't understand what this survey can do. A nomad is more likely to assess the grasslands by saying all his 40 cows have had calves this year, which means the temperature, grass and water are all good. They could also tell you when the first rains of the year fell and when the flowers started blooming. If you asked them to record these kinds of observations they would understand



immediately why it was important and be glad to do it.

Working on some projects, I often heard the word, “donor.” This is the person or organization that gives the money for the project. Each project has to listen to the donor’s requirements and promote the name of the donor, etc. Every project comes with many demands from the outside world. There are some projects which need to be conducted over a long time frame, but some donors rush them so they can finish in just a few years. And once they end the donor leaves. Some ecological, cultural and development projects are also executed in a disconnected manner without a central integral plan and even less consideration for the livelihoods of the local communities.

Because I have been working in environmental protection for many years, I have come to realize that there is a big gap between locals and outsiders in the

way they understand environmental protection and how environmental protection should be conducted. My job has been to build a bridge between the two sides.

I remember that we came across similar issues in our investigation on the Inner Mongolian grasslands. Just in their daily lives, nomads confront many problems closely related to the environment. These problems are unimaginable to city dwellers who see the situation, say, as a problem of how to stop sandstorms. Different perspectives end in different approaches. Sometimes these approaches are anti-commonsense. For example, initiating reforestation projects in areas where trees cannot grow or establishing a dairy industry in a village which would struggle to keep cows. Such a project may well end up bankrupting the villagers. Many measures to combat sandstorms have been launched without a full understanding of the natural conditions and the cultural needs of locals and these usually fail. When we first fixed those “Sanjiangyuan Survey” stickers for our “China’s Water Tower” project, we had somehow forgotten an important lesson we had learned from our trip to Inner Mongolia. Curiously, we have unconsciously slipped back to our former outsiders’ perspective. Our inbuilt prejudices are hard to shake off. But by the time we reached the black tents on the plateau, though, we were set back on the right track.

No doubt, it is a major step forward that our team now understands how the needs of the local community relate to the needs of “China’s Water Tower” but we need to seriously apply this understanding if we are to get effective results. There is still much controversy over such basic issues as whether there really is over-grazing, and if so, what is the real reason for the over-grazing. There is also a significant cultural gap in what is understood by environmental protection between the locals and outsiders. For example, the nomads believe that mining the grasslands endangers the heart and the body of the grasslands, but the mining authorities claim the mines will not do any damage because the mines only cover small areas. That leaves investors and the nomads at opposite ends of the spectrum. Outsiders and locals are left looking at the environment from different perspectives. But it is crucial that both sides communicate because it is only in this way that protection measures have a hope of being successful.

As we leave Cuochi en route for our homes, the “Sanjiangyuan Survey” stickers are still there on our vehicles. But now everyone’s understanding has moved on. When we browse through the notes we took during those two weeks’ of interviews on our laptops, we found some of our former ideas irrelevant. In any project, the wording of any slogan has to take into account not only the ideas of those from outside who are investing or controlling the project, but also the ideas of local residents. Because it is the local residents who will be most affected in the end.





The Lost World of the Wind Horse (I)

Written by: Nyima Gyaltsen
Photo by: Nyima Gyaltsen

The author of this article is a Tibetan scholar who left Sanjiangyuan and recently went back to revisit his old home. He said: "If I had never left, I would never have realized how valuable my culture is."

Prayer flags. Photo by: Yang Yong.



The Wind Horse in Tibetan is called Lungta. “Lung” means wind and “ta” means horse. It is a prayer flag made from paper or cloth. It is also a religious art form and is used as a way to communicate with deities that Tibetans have worshipped for thousands of years. It is thrown into the air or hung up on strings on certain special days. It is colored red, blue, yellow or green, with each color representing one of the four cardinal directions of north, east, south and west. In the center is the Wind Horse carrying Maniratana, the soul, while in each corner there are the protective gods in the form of four revered animals, both real and mythical – a garuda [a mythical eagle-like animal with golden wings] symbolizing vitality; a tiger, symbolizing the body; a dragon, symbolizing prosperity; and a snow lion. People also believe it represents the harmony of heaven, earth, humans and animals.

In the unsophisticated minds of the nomad, these animals have lived around them throughout the ages. And they also believe that the animals can take different forms; for example the garuda has its spirit in the eagle and in many other birds while the snow lion is embodied in the Tibetan mastiff and other dogs. From these beliefs, come the Tibetan view of nature and how their world is constructed and how life is born. However, with the passage of time and the influence of economic development, these beliefs are being eroded in the mind of the younger generation. Their ideas on ecology, culture and natural laws are changing.

As a Tibetan and a member of the nomadic culture, I have also faced confusion when presented with different cultural ideas from outside.

One of the most frequently seen rituals in Tibetan areas is the chanting of prayers while throwing prayer flags bearing the image of the “Wind Horse” and with prayers written on their surface into the sky.



An altar for the worship of water alongside the Yangtze River. Tibetans esteem water and believe you should not wash in clean water sources because of the dirt you will leave behind.



The Disappearing Wings

I remember I would often play on the grasslands near my home when I was little. I would gaze at the blue sky and leisurely clouds while lying on the grass tired from playing games. Occasionally, I could hear the crisp cry of the eagle soaring above. My grandmother would say that this was a sign that rain was coming. I asked her curiously why the eagle didn't usually cry like that. Stroking my head gently, my grandmother would reply with a question of her own. "Did you mess with the wild flowers? They are gods' children. When you upset the gods, they are going to make it rain. First the eagle gets unhappy and then your mother's breasts will ache." Since that time, whenever I have an urge to pick wild flowers, her words come to mind and I look up to see if there are any eagles flying in the sky.

According to the Bon-pa [the indigenous religion

of Tibet before the introduction of Buddhism] tale called The Origin of the Dark-Haired Dwarf the world was empty in the beginning from which Liangyi (Yin and Yang) was born. Liangyi gave birth to a dew drop from which a lake was born. From this lake, an egg appeared, which then hatched into two birds, one representing light and one representing darkness. The two birds mated and laid three eggs; one white, one black and one spotted, from which the gods and humans are born.

In some ways this is the most affectionate depiction of how the animals that Tibetans love were born into this world. In the ancient Tibetan Song of Creation

[Genesis], it goes further. "In the beginning of the Spa [universe], the heaven and earth is mingled together. It is the big bird that separates them. What is above the big bird's head? It holds the heaven up high."

That is why I have a special love for all birds and I believe they can feel my reverence.

There is another incident which taught me another lesson that I must respect all forms of life. My family went on a picnic to the mountains. We had a lot of food, and we chatted and sang and had a really good time. Suddenly a bird which I couldn't identify flew down near us and stared at us with curious eyes. It had beautiful feathers, just like a rainbow. We were stunned at the sight and my father murmured in a hushed voice: "Don't move. Let's see what it will do."

As if it wasn't afraid of humans, the bird looked around and then came straight towards us and started pecking at our food. My mother gave it some crumbs and said: "Here is your meal. Please don't touch anything else." We smiled and continued chatting.

After it finished it just hopped back and forth and I suddenly thought I should bring it back home with me. I declared solemnly that it was my bird and I was going to keep it. Despite strong opposition from my grandmother and mother, I put it in a box and brought it home. I made it a larger cage from strips of wood and gave it some food and water.

I became absorbed in trying to think of a name for it as I fell asleep that night.

The first thing I did after getting up the next morning was to rush to the cage to see the bird. But as I approached the cage a shocking scene emerged in front of my eyes. The head of the bird was hanging out between the wooden bars, its body slumped inside. Blood was dripping off the edge of the cage and had formed a pool on the floor. The bird had cut its neck on



A sky burial site.

a nail on one of the wooden bars as it tried to struggle free out of the cage.

The bird had rejected me by giving up its life. It was a protest against me depriving it of its right to fly. My attempts at being compassionate failed and suddenly looked foolish faced with this death. At that moment, I clearly realized that I was greedy to possess the bird's beautiful feathers and its blood was a manifestation of its longing for freedom.

When I became an adult I thought everyone would have developed a similar understanding in their relationship with living things.

But, wherever I went on city streets, big or small,

and in parks, I saw caged birds everywhere. I spotted their elaborate cages hanging on balconies of high-rise buildings and from trees in the parks. People misinterpret the birds' cries as singing and their struggles as dancing.

In my home province, the nomads have a saying: for man, hell is when you fall into a dream made of your desires. If you are a bird, hell is when you fall into human hands. Because of this, all the birds living on the plateau are protected everywhere. The nomads respect their freedom. It's natural. In our traditional belief, birds and all forms of life (including humans) are equal. Once the equilibrium of any harmony is



broken, the sky becomes overcast with dark clouds. That's why on temple walls we can often see the images of the Six Longevities which are devoted to the long life of human beings, mountains, waters, trees, birds and other animals. The six blessed longevity symbols for humans, animals and nature represent peaceful co-existence, interdependence and the symbiosis between mankind and nature. This is how Tibetans have always viewed the ecological balance and it is how they have long been aware of the need to protect the environment.

In the past, the "Spirits of Nature" were highly esteemed and devoutly worshipped. Birds hold a special place in the hearts of the people from the Qinghai-Tibet Plateau with their strongly-held religious beliefs. In particular, the condor, is worshipped as the bird that keeps sky burial sites clean.

Whenever I spend a long time back in my home province, I occasionally stumble upon sky burial sites with a large crowd gathered around the burial platform (durtro). At these times, you will see prayer flags flying, you will hear horns bellowing, and you will smell incense burning. Together they produce a solemn atmosphere. To start the whole process, Bshan-pa [the ritual master] stands by the corpse, raises the conch shell, and blows towards the sky. Then he starts reciting the prayers for the safe passage of the dead person's soul. As the incense smoke rises up, it is not long before tiny dark dots emerge in the formerly empty sky. It is the condors, answering the call to see the deceased off. One after the other they descend to the burial platform and wait patiently for the Bshan-



Prayer flags.

pa to terminate the ritual. When the Bshan-pa stands up and gives the signal, the leading condor flies up onto the platform and takes a few steps onto the body. The rest of the birds then swarm in. A little while later, only the skeleton is left. The Bshan-pa will then smash up the bones with an axe and mix the remnants with yak butter and tsampa [roasted barley flour] and throw it to the birds. According to the elders, if the condors won't touch the body then it means the dead person hasn't closed their eyes on this world yet or the person committed too many sins. In either case, it would be a sad thing for the family of the dead person. If this happened, monks are invited to chant prayers to plead for salvation for the dead person. The body will be cut into small pieces, mixed with yak butter and tsampa and fed to the condors.

An altar strung with prayer flags.

Although sky burials are followed strictly by Tibetan Buddhists, their purpose is not to take the souls of the dead people to heaven on the wings of the birds. Instead, Buddhists believe the soul and the body are independent of each other. Both Tibetan Buddhism and the indigenous Tibetan Bon-pa religion both preach that the soul and the body are separate. The soul is the "self" while the body is just a vehicle borrowed by the "self" from nature. Sky burials are viewed as being a noble act and a person's last chance to contribute something to the world. It is a virtuous act after having taken up space in the living world.

Because of its geography, high altitude and low temperatures, the soil of the Qinghai-Tibet plateau is frequently frozen, especially in winter. The nomads long ago realized that it was not practical to bury dead bodies under the ground. In light of this, they developed a more practical and sensible way of dealing with bodies, namely the sky burial. But sky burials would be impossible without the co-operation of the condors, for it is these birds that help to clean up the remains of the dead.

City dwellers are rather disturbingly attracted to birds, in particular falcons. Several times, I have seen dead falcons, stuffed, with glaring eyes and extended wings. Although the stuffed birds appear sharp and smart, their lives have long ago withered away. Many of these birds are then put





Tibetans walk clockwise around mountains and lakes as part of their worship of nature and as a way of gaining merit within their Buddhism religion.

on display in luxurious houses in large cities far away from the birds' homes. The owners of these dead creatures then appear proud to receive the admiration of visitors.

But nomads have long ago realized the delicate balance involved between man and beast. And if a crisis appears for one particular species, for example its numbers have dwindled so that its very survival is threatened, the nomads know when to rein in their production and consumption to ease the pressure on nature. It has been a process over hundreds of years for the nomads to gradually grasp the laws of nature. They now understand interdependence of species and the truth behind survival on the grasslands.

Because of the degeneration of the wetlands, there are rat burrows all across the grasslands these days. The zokor [an Asiatic burrowing rodent] exacerbates the situation by feeding on grass roots and building sandy molehills. The pika [a small chinchilla-like animal] has always caused trouble on the grasslands but provided there are enough of its natural enemy, birds of prey,

around, their numbers do not get out of control. But without care, if we just pursue economic development on the grasslands, we may see uncontrollable numbers of rodents on the grasslands, which could cause serious ecological harm.

I have heard nomads say they are opposed to using poison to kill the rats because the chemicals will kill all the animals on the grasslands. We cannot afford to risk the consequences of this kind of experiment. The poison may kill farm animals and birds of prey may die if they eat a poisoned rat.

For both religious and practical reasons, the nomads keep a special place in their heart for the birds. They are esteemed as deities. However, many birds have gone from our skies. The garuda, the symbol of fire and light on the Wind Horse prayer flag, is obscured by the smoggy, polluted air from the city. Now we have airplanes and so people are less concerned with legends and religion and more bothered with getting to places fast and accessing information. But when we are in such a rush where on earth are we really flying to?

Entering the



Photo by: Wang Fangchen.





Black Tents (II)

Written by: Lin Lan



Walsang is carrying a bloodied sheep's leg when we first see him. A wolf had attacked his sheep. Photo by: Lin Lan.



Walsang points out the scratch marks made by a brown bear on his window frame. Photo by: Han Ying.



“A bear’s life is as precious as a person’s. No one should shoot it or harm it.”

Drolwa’s ideas are commonly-held among the other nomads, which we found out as soon as we started talking to them. The nomads believe that spotting wildlife on the grasslands is a sign that the grass is in good condition. In fact, this belief is similar to the “eco-diversity” issue we have already discussed. To be healthy and to maintain a balance, an ecosystem needs a number of different species co-existing together. The nomads often use words such as “good omen” or “good pasture” when talking about ecosystems because these words are closely connected with their lives.

There are often conflicts between wild animals and humans. Take for example those stories frequently covered in the media such as farmers clashing with elephants or takins (a goat-like antelope) attacking people. We wondered if such conflicts were also common here. A few days ago we met Jigme Ri. Wolves had just attacked his sheep but he has decided not to take revenge. Is his reaction normal? We decided to go and talk with Walsang because we had heard that brown bears had attacked his herd several times over the past few years. His house is surrounded by mountains and when we arrived he was just emerging from his house and carrying a sheep’s leg in his hand. This was a tough looking guy.

Walsang:

“Look! Wolves attacked this sheep. The wolf began

biting off the leg. This is my summer pasture. I have been here for 15 days. In the past two weeks, wolves have killed eight of my sheep. In the past, the wolves mainly ate marmots [large ground squirrels]. They used to only attack livestock in the winter when the marmots were hibernating. Now, the wolves have started attacking the sheep even when there are marmots about. I don’t know why. The wolves used to go for the neck of the sheep first and now they start by attacking the leg. This means the sheep is still alive while the wolves are eating him because they don’t eat the head first. It’s so tragic. Because of the wolves I only have two horses left from a herd of about a dozen. Sometimes, the wolves don’t go for the yak or the sheep, they just focus on the horses. They attack the horse’s head and eyes first and start eating once the horse is blinded.

As well as the wolves, there are snow leopards here. Three or four of my sheep have been taken by the leopards. We saw it with our own eyes. The snow leopard is large. They are as tall as a sheep but a bit longer and slimmer. During the years when we had People’s Communes, we used traps twice to catch snow leopards because they attacked our livestock. The leopards can jump long distances from rock to rock in the mountains. Its tail is almost as long as its body. It is a powerful animal and it can drive away or even kill a dog with a sweep of its tail. It doesn’t really eat any of the flesh, just sucks out the blood. After a leopard has killed an animal and is finished with it, its flesh

is colorless and bloodless. A while ago, a leopard killed one of my sheep. When I first saw the body, I couldn't tell if the sheep was dead or asleep because there was no trace of blood.

But it's not the wolves or the leopards killing my sheep that is the biggest problem. My biggest headache is the brown bear. I stay here every year from June through until the end of August. There are seven people in my family and each got 3,000 mu [15 mu = 1 hectare] of pastureland when it was distributed. The land is divided into three parts for use in different seasons and it supports some 100 yak and 500 sheep. The herd is a good size but because the pasture is so close to the mountains, we see a lot of bears. The bears don't usually eat sheep or hurt people, although injuries sometimes happen. I heard someone at Lechi Village was attacked last year but it doesn't happen very often. The biggest problem is that the bears damage our homes.

Nomads used to live year round in black tents. The tents always had people living in them and so we didn't see bears very often. But since 1988 and 1989 people here have started building houses. Some pasturelands have more than one house which families use depending on the season. But when the house is empty – when the people are following the herds – bears may come to the house. Houses near the mountain often have bears in them when they are left empty.

My family has three houses. And in just this year, bears have been to one of my houses several times. They come as soon as the people leave. They really are smart. It was in 2002 or 2003 that we met the bears for the first time. It was in the summer. My family was living in the tent on the summer pasture. A neighbor passed by my house on the winter pasture and saw that it was in a right mess. All the windows were smashed so he came and told me. We usually don't lock our houses and that time my house was unlocked. But you know bears don't use the door they just smash the window to get in and then rummage about inside. All the window frames are scratched up by its claws. What could I do? All I could do was to fix it up later. But before I had a chance to fix it, the bear came again. I don't know if the second visit was the same bear or not. It also got in through the window. It dragged a quilt outside and pulled all the barley and flour stocked up inside onto the quilt along with the yak butter and started eating. When I went to check out the house with my wife there was a big white patch on the ground, just as if it had been snowing. It wasn't until we got closer that we realized that it was because of another bear visit. It's kind of funny. Altogether that bear destroyed about 200 kg of flour and barley. In case of another bear attack, my wife and I decided to store all the clothes and sheep skins not in use in a big petrol barrel. However, we were raided by bears a third time

and the clothes were discovered. It pulled the barrel upside down and ripped all the clothes and sheepskins it found inside into strips. The bear toppled a cupboard inside the house and the TV, which was sat on top, smashed to the ground.

Each bear raid cost me about RMB3,000 to RMB4,000 in damages. The creature is so smart that it never uses the door. It gets in by smashing up the window every time but sometimes it also takes down the door. Cuochi village's three Production Brigades have all suffered bear attacks. I heard that the houses of two families were damaged this way at the end of last May. There is a family in the Third Production Brigade whose house is often attacked by bears. Since the family built a high wall around their home they have not been attacked again. One family that was raided by bears had all their cups lined up in a row and filled with dirt. The photographs were crumpled and then thrown into the stove. Sometimes bears will mix yak butter with cattle dung and then smear it on the walls and floor.

According to the government, the brown bear is a protected animal. That means if people suffer injury or damage from the bear then they should get compensation. But there never is any. Everyone wants to have some compensation. If we wanted to we could catch the bear with traps but we don't do that. We could also trap the wolves for attacking our sheep. But we never do. We sure can catch the bear if we used traps. But we would never do that. We would never trap the wolves either, even though they have attacked our sheep. According to our religion, a bear's life is as precious as a person's. No one should shoot it or harm it. The bear's wildness or greed is the same as a person's. In fact it's not because the government says it's a protected animal that we don't hurt it. It's because our religion forbids us from hurting it.

But it's a big problem for us to repair our homes every year. Perhaps the only way out is not to live in houses anymore. We could go back to living in tents all year round. How can we deal with this problem? Can science help us?

Walsang's question left us speechless and we immediately held a discussion. From a scientific point of view, it is important to understand the habits of wild animals to stop conflicts like these from happening. From example, building a high wall may be enough to deter bear attacks in the future. Conflicts between people and animals are becoming very common. Those people who suffer may either seek compensation from the state or take vengeance by killing the animal. Walsang and the other nomads are trapped in a dilemma. They are helpless in the face of their religious beliefs and the conflict with the bears. Although we couldn't immediately come up with a solution, after hearing Walsang's and Jigme Ri's stories we felt that human tolerance had to be the foundation of the ultimate solution.

“You should treat everything with kindness.”

As we were talking, the home owner's daughter, who was out herding, came back. Her name is Pema Dolkar. She is 16 years old but has never been to school. She often tells her parents that she wants to go to school. She began helping herd the family's animals as soon as she could speak. Every day, she rises early and goes to bed late. She milks the cows and takes care of the sheep with her mother. As we talked with Walsang, Gyalmo, his wife, kept herself busy in the tent, making tea or cutting the meat. When we asked if we could talk to her about the women, she started her story by saying: “Nomad women live a hard

life.” She continued to skillfully prepare lunch as she spoke to us.

Gyalmo:

Nomad women live a hard life. The three months of July, August and September are the busiest because we have to make butter, dry the yak dung and make cheese. We don't go to bed until midnight and have to get up again to milk the cows between 4 or 5 o'clock in the morning. We milk about 30 yak twice a day. Some years there are more yak to milk, more like 40 of them. Then we milk from 3 or 4 o'clock in the morning and we don't finish until about 7 o'clock. Girls normally



Gyalmo, Walsang's wife kept herself busy even while we are interviewing her. Here she is with a spindle in her hand. Photo by: Lin Lan.



Walsang and his daughter Pema with Gyay, the Party Secretary, and Dhondup Chopel, our translator, who accompanied us during our visit. Photo by: Lin Lan.

Photo by: Tashi Dorje.



start milking the cows from aged 13 or 14 with their mothers. For a woman, it is very important that she can milk a cow because that shows whether she is a good woman or not. Most of the milk is used to make butter and yoghurt and a small amount is used to make cheese. Butter has a lot of uses; we can use it to make soup because it tastes good and is nutritious. We add butter when we cook figs, meat and steamed buns. We also use it to make butter lamps. A butter lamp is the cleanest kind of lamp. On the grassland, meat and butter are our staple foods.

During the three months of July, August and September, as well as doing all the milking and making butter, we also shear the yak and the sheep. In the morning, we collect the dung from the milking cows and start drying it for our winter fuel. It doesn't dry easily and frozen dung is no good as a fuel. We use the whole summer to prepare a whole year's worth of fuel dung. Shearing takes about one week. So, the hardest work is milking as it lasts three months. Yak hair gets loose in the summer and you can pull it off by hand. We then spin it and weave it into fabric to make sacks or tents. These black tents you see are made with yak hair.

As well as those three months, there is also the time when new lambs are born which is February and March depending on the weather. If the weather is good, more lambs survive but if it is rainy and cold, a lot of them die. The government has built us incubators and more lambs survive now. But these incubators have their problems too. If we put too many lambs inside they will die too. The women take care of the sheep during this time. If it is cold and there is no dung on the ground the sheep's feet can get frostbitten. We also need to take the lambs to their mothers so they can feed them. The lambs can easily die from cold or from disease but many die simply from digestive problems.

The months of April, May and June are the easiest. That's when we can stay near the fire. The main job is still taking care of the herds. We would go to bed around 10 pm and get up at 8 or 9 am. From October to December is also an easy time because



Tibetan women spend a big part of their day everyday milking the animals. Photo by: Nyima Gyaltsen.



Shearing. Photo by: Tashi Dorje.





the nights are long and the days are short. We spend our time spinning the yak hair and the sheep wool into thread. Those women who have to take care of the herds are the busiest.

As well as working, those women with children have to make time to educate them. That means telling them how to be good people and that you should treat everything with kindness. For instance, if you are happy when someone comes and helps you then you should be willing and happy to help others, such as helping the older people with their herds and so on. My son will protect any living thing. Although I would like my son and my daughter to go to school, we can't afford it because we have such a big herd and not enough people to look after the animals.

My parents died when I was 7 years old and it was painful for me. I went to live with my grandmother at Lechi village. My mother died from some illness. In her last years she just lay in bed. In her last five or six years she lost all her hair. My father died not long after she did. I have two older brothers and one younger one. I started taking care of the herd when I was aged 4 or 5 and I got married at 18. All these years I have been a nomad with my husband and life is happy. I am 40 years old; I was born in the year of the sheep. I have been to Geermu and Qumalai only once each and to Lhasa twice. It takes four days to ride a horse to Wudaoliang and another day and night to reach Lhasa by bus. All Tibetans must go to Lhasa at least once in their lives, no matter what. Although I would like to go to see all those nice places I see on TV, I can't leave my animals behind. I am happy to see the grasslands, sheep and Living Buddha on TV. I don't like high-rise buildings or big crowds of people. Us nomads can't live without our animals. I much prefer living on the grassland compared to living in cities like Geermu or Qumalai.

But the kids, well they may prefer the cities. Who knows? It is for them to choose.

As Gyalmo was talking, Pema listened quietly sitting next to her. She is a timid girl and when she heard the words: "go to school" or "go to the city", her pretty eyes twinkled. But still she did not speak up. It was easy to see that Gyalmo is devoted to her homeland. On the one hand, she attaches great importance to teaching her children to be kindhearted but at the same time she is tolerant amid all these changes about their choices for the future.

The female members of our team took out bottles of sunscreen and shampoo from their bags and gave them to Gyalmo and Pema as gifts. The two women gladly accepted them. After opening one bottle and smelling it, Gyalmo said:

Nowadays, we also use these things bought from outside because they are convenient. Young people, like my daughter really like them because they smell so nice. But when I was little, people of my mother's and grandmother's generation used yak butter and cream on their hands and face. Yak butter was also used to make hair look dark and glossy and the skin on the hands and face smooth. If I compare the two, I like the old stuff more.

This activity had lightened the atmosphere inside the tent, but then the brilliant sun shining outside just a moment ago suddenly dimmed and bean-sized hail stones began falling furiously. Pema rushed out of the tent without a word to gather the sheep. Scared by the onslaught of the hailstorm, the scattered herd was running uphill into the distance. By the time Pema had gathered the sheep together and driven them back, the weather had cleared up. Two rainbows were hanging in the sky above the tent.



Phuntsok's family. Photo by: Lin Lan.

"I am grateful to the cattle and sheep who have fed me."





The Eco-Culture Festival opened today. The nomads participated with pious expressions from the solemn Sangsol ceremony [when juniper, an aromatic plant, is burned] to the Kora [a circumambulation while chanting prayers] of a mountain. We left the racecourse to continue our investigations in the snow. Our chances of finding a good interviewee looked slim because most of the nomads and their families were busy with the Eco-Culture Festival. Just a few people were left behind to watch over their homes. Amazingly, on the way to the village center, we spotted three people getting ready for the festival in Phuntsok's tent. They were preparing to take part in the festival the next day. It was like heaven had offered us this chance to meet with them today.

Phuntsok:

I am 45 years old and I was born here. When the grassland was divided up, there were five of us in my family and we got 2,000 Mu each. But only about 7,000 Mu of this was usable. Generally speaking, our Brigade's land is not so good. A lot of places are sandy. Now my family has voluntarily just about given all the land back to the wildlife. I am grazing my own animals on my father's land as both my parents have passed away.

I gave up grazing on my own land because I don't have that many animals and my father's land is more than enough for them. I have about 40 yak. I don't have any sheep. It is not many animals. Those people who keep on wanting more can never be satisfied. But my family is happy with this many animals. We can keep warm and we have enough to eat. Actually, I would like some more animals, but what would I do with more cattle and sheep? Would I sell them and



These holes on the Sanjiangyuan grasslands are made by rats. Their numbers are increasing at an alarming rate.
Photo by: Tashi Dorje.



These people are planting pesticide in rat holes on the grasslands. Pest control takes places several times a year.
Photo by: Tashi Dorje.



Pika. Photo by: Tashi Dorje.

Nomads don't support killing animals so they won't help out with the pest control. So these men, from outside, have been hired to spread pesticide on the grasslands. Photo by: Tashi Dorje.



then buy a motorbike or a car? I know many other nomads have built their own houses and bought their own cars. But we don't need those kinds of things here. So there's no reason to get more animals so we can buy these kinds of useless things. I don't know much about machines and I wouldn't know what to do with them if they broke down. And if bought a motorbike or a car I would need to get even more animals so I could afford to buy petrol. Why do I need to do that?

Although there were different opinions on whether "development" is good or bad, there was one question that did not have an answer, namely: "Do humans have an unlimited desire for better living conditions and material objects?" If the human race continues to pursue unbridled "development," does the earth have enough resources to support this? Shouldn't people place some restraint on their material desires? Listening to Phuntsok set us off on another round of discussion on this issue. His tent was simply furnished with an iron stove, a large heap of yak dung and some bedding. He lives much more simply than any one of us, but he does not have any desire for anything else. Is this because he does not have any ambition? Or is his self restraint a great example to us all? Someone then said it reminded him of the story of the fisherman who was told to work harder so that he would have a chance to sunbathe, something which he gets for free everyday when he works anyway. What is the secret to having a good life? Is it living in a house? Driving a car? Or is it living a very simple life, much as Phuntsok does now? What was striking to us was that it was the outsiders like us asking these kinds of questions. Such questions have never occurred to Phuntsok. We were all very impressed by his peace of mind. However, there was another question that occurred to us: What does Phuntsok's future hold for him in the face of this clash between the material and the spiritual?

A piece of land has to have a master. Once the master is gone, the land is ruined. The ground loses its goodness. So a piece of grassland with no animals is like a home without an owner. The inside is empty, just the outside remains. If all the animals on a piece of grassland are killed, the land loses its goodness. The grass won't grow well and the animal blood will get into the water and make people sick. All the minerals under the ground are like parts of the human body. If someone comes along and digs out the minerals, then it's like they are taking the heart out of the land and it will go bad. If a piece of land has wild animals then its spirit is different. The grassland without animals is like a child without a mother. The piece of grassland we gave up has wild animals on it now. They are like part of our family. In the past, people would come and kill the wild animals. That was really cruel. It made insects come out of the sky and more rats to appear on the ground. It was punishment for killing the wild animals.

When we had the People's Communes, we used to



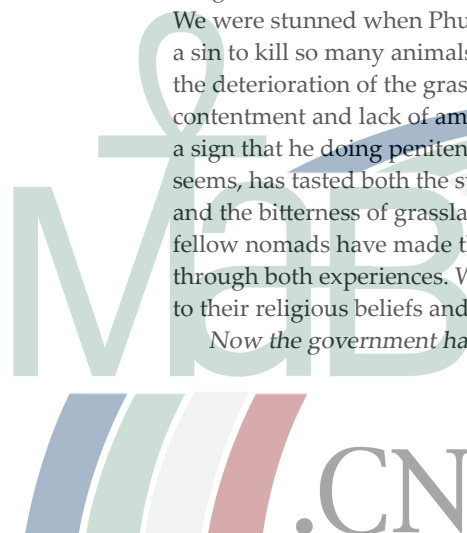
This is Lucky Valley, a place which used to have good grazing. Six years ago the grazing stopped and now it has "gone to the dogs." Phuntsok believes that the grasslands will suffer if animals don't graze on them. Photo by: Lin Lan.

get orders to sell a lot of animals to the slaughterhouse. It is very cruel to let the animals see the other animals being killed while waiting for their turn to be slaughtered. That's why the grass started to go bad. But living conditions then were better than they are now. We had more things and we sold a lot of animals. Nobody had a religion then. In fact, I am grateful to the cattle and sheep who have fed me. We have enough milk, butter, yak hair and sheep wool. We don't need to make any more money or need any more animals. Except for those people who have moved away, the people here who continue to look after animals and live as nomads, think like I do. I think this is better.

So perhaps the grasslands have been "overgrazed"? Phuntsok said there were orders to raise and sell a large number of animals during the time of the People's Communes. But we still don't know how much this affected the grasslands. This needs to be investigated by scientists.

We were stunned when Phuntsok suggested that it was a sin to kill so many animals and that this contributed to the deterioration of the grasslands. Perhaps his current contentment and lack of ambition to raise more animals is a sign that he is doing penitence for these "sins." Phuntsok, it seems, has tasted both the sweetness of the market economy and the bitterness of grassland deterioration. He and his fellow nomads have made their life choices after living through both experiences. Who can blame them for adhering to their religious beliefs and abandoning rationality?

Now the government has this policy of limiting the



number of grazing animals to help the grasslands recover. This is good. The government has also built houses for us. I only worry that some people might like the government subsidies so much that they just want the money but don't want to work anymore. In my Brigade, only about 10 households out of 40 are not taking government subsidies. Not only is the burden on the government greater but these people aren't even contributing by looking after animals. I believe that it's better to support myself. There are some things I don't understand that have happened since the numbers of animals were cut and the "grazing ban" was started.

For example there is a place called "Lucky Valley" on the way from here to the village center. It got this name because in the past the grass there was very good. Then the owner moved to Geermu as an eco-migrant. Since this person left few people have been there in the past six years. So no one is using the land for grazing. I went there not so long ago and the place is turning into a desert. There are signs of rats everywhere. The whole place stinks of rats.

In the old days, the rats never used to come so far up the mountain. The rat I am talking about is a type that has a long and thin tail, not a pika [a small chinchilla-like animal]. I don't know when the rats first started to come here in such large numbers. Perhaps it was about two or three years ago. In the old days this would never happen. Now you see rats on the mountain sides and even on the tops of mountains. It's like they have suddenly turned up from nowhere. It's like they have dropped out of the sky. The pikas eat grass but rats eat the roots. The grass is dying because of all the rats.

It's not only "Lucky Valley" that has changed. The grassy mountain slopes have also changed a lot. When I was little, the mountain in front of my home didn't have very good quality grass. It did not grow high but it was thick. Now it has turned into a place of reddish sand. I don't know if it is because of the drought. In those places that didn't used to have water, suddenly there is water making the ground all patchy. When the drought came, the water dried up and the place turned sandy. During times of heavy rain, the grass and topsoil are all washed away, leaving behind just barren black earth. If you touch this earth, it makes your hand turn black. In these kinds of places the grass just dies and it can never grow back.

These days winters are warmer and the summers are colder. Even in the morning, the ground can be frozen. In the old days it was never like that. This has happened in the past few years. The topsoil is frozen, especially in the early morning. When you walk on the soil it sounds different depending on whether it is frozen or not, so I know right away. Now, early July is so different compared to the past. It is not like summer at all, it is cold like winter. This must surely affect the growth of the grass. Before grass can grow

the earth needs to be thawed out by the sun. With the soil so cold, the grass is not growing so well. Maybe I am wrong, but I feel that the grass used to grow in the night-time but now because even in summer it is too cold, the grass doesn't grow in the night-time anymore. It has to wait until the daylight when the sun makes the soil warm enough for it to grow.

My family still lives like nomads. We move to different pastures for each of the three seasons, and we live in a house during the winter. For the rest of the year we live in a tent following the herd. During the winter when I live in the house, I can't wait to get out. Us nomads have always lived in tents. My wife and children keep asking me to wait a while. They say it's too cold to leave the house and move back into the tent but I feel so stuffy in the house. It is so different from living in the tent. As soon as I move out my mood changes. It must be my habit, because I feel so good and my spirits are much better.

Each house costs tens of thousands of Renminbi to build and you can't even move it from place to place. You can move the black tent wherever you want. If it gets broken you just patch it up again and you don't need to spend any money. My family has a black tent, it's about twice as large as this one. I am roaming around just by myself this time so I am using this white tent for the time being. But I still think the black tent is better. This kind of white tent is used by construction workers working on the roads or by researchers. The color doesn't go with the yak. The black tent looks good with the prayer flags and the yak.

My son is five years old now and I plan to send him to live with a relative and go to school when is 7 years old. I have been a nomad for many generations and I am happiest when I am out with my animals. I only feel comfortable when I am herding.

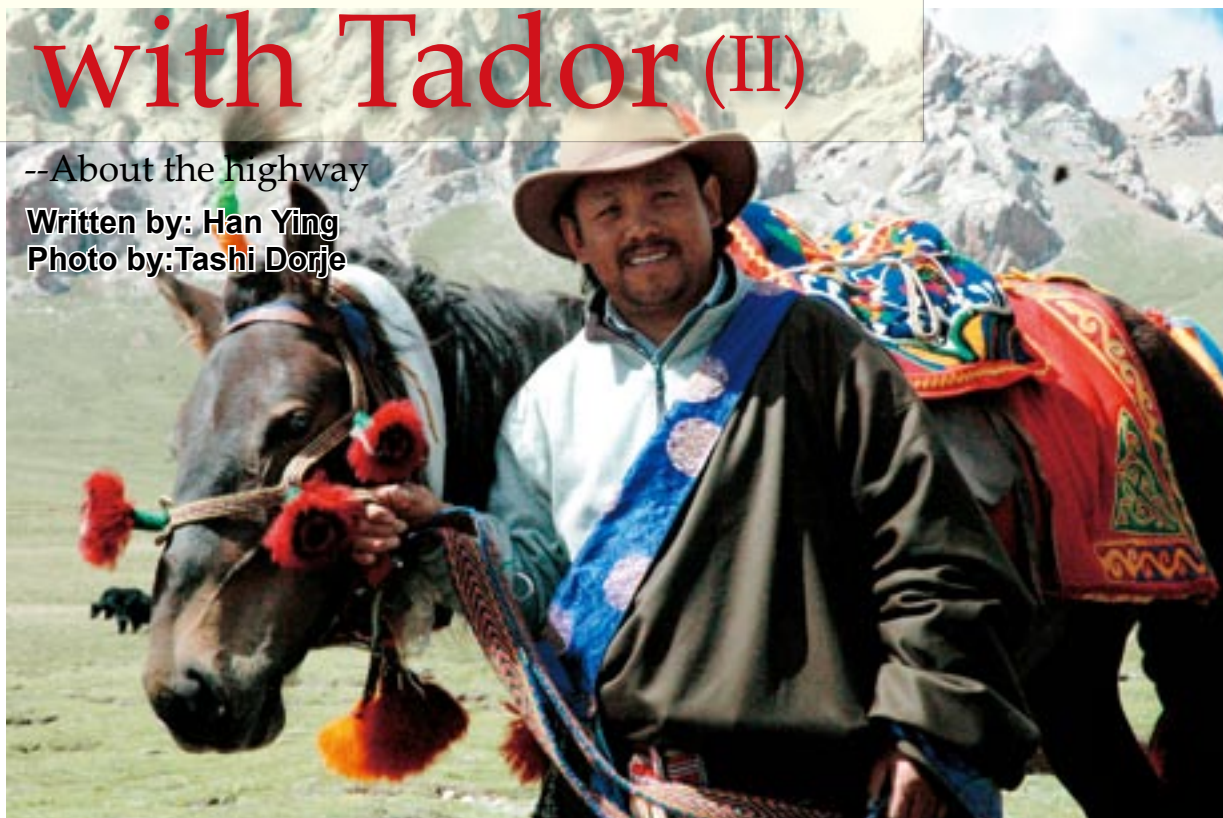
We were touched by Phuntsok's gentle story. We fell into a heated debate after hearing about how he was so contented with his lot, about how he is grateful towards nature, and his feelings about the sinfulness of keeping and killing too many animals in the past. We are all left speechless after he said: "I believe that it's better to support myself [rather than take government subsidies]." While everyone agreed that the economy of the eastern part of the country should help fund the protection of the ecology of the western part, not many people had given much thought to exactly how to use these funds. We had thought the nomads would welcome the subsidies and were surprised to hear that Phuntsok and many others like him do not want to take this money. While this region does need monetary help it also needs to be distributed via a system which inspires motivation and is sustainable. It was just one more example of the difference between our two value systems.

An Interview with Tador (II)

--About the highway

Written by: Han Ying

Photo by: Tashi Dorje



On our way to the plateau, members of our team were constantly debating issues, and sometimes things got quite heated. We argued about what was the main cause of grassland degeneration.

Was it man, or was it climate change? In order to protect the ecosystem should people living on the plateau continue to live as nomads or should they be forced to live in cities? How can popular culture become more tolerant of other cultures? Most of the time, no one group won these debates. The air was very thin up there and those of us who took part in these debates were left panting for breath. But even so, debates were still feverish and ended up with us all agreeing to call another "meeting." We were about to enter a totally new world and we were getting so excited before we had even met the nomads. But there

was one topic which curiously almost everyone agreed on, and that was highway construction. Everyone agreed that highways should be built as soon as possible across the plateau. At that time, none of us foresaw that many of us would change our minds completely.

The roads on the plateau are bumpy and it takes a lot longer to go places than it does on the roads in eastern China. It's also a big problem if the car breaks down. Although our convoy fell into some marshy pot holes we always recovered and our trip was never jeopardized. Even so, our biggest worry was the condition of the road. On our way we drove past construction workers paving the highway to Cuochi, one of Qinghai's most remote villages. We guessed that if we came back the following year the road would be asphalt all the way. So we were very surprised that the



locals had a very different view to the road than we did and even some who had originally supported it in the beginning.

Tador:
The locals used to look forward to having the highway but they never expected it to be here so soon.

In the old days, everyone got around by yak caravan (Dawa). In the nomad regions, a boy could show he was a man by helping out with a yak caravan. Boys start herding cattle when they are just eight years old, but it takes a grown man to deal with a yak caravan. You need at least two men, one on each side of the yak, to pile all the loads onto the animal. Boys of around 15 or 16 years usually start working on yak caravans. Only then is he considered a man.

Young boys usually follow their fathers when they go with the caravan. There are many rules. Every day they cover a fixed distance and at night they put up at a certain location. Because young boys are not strong enough to do the loading and unloading they usually take care of the yak after they have been unloaded at the end of the day.

Suojia township's first government building was constructed with timber carried from the Nangqian Forestry Station by yak caravan. It took several months to finish. All the logs had sharpened tips on one end which was made when the wood was hauled along

the road. At that time, it wasn't clear how many cattle and sheep were being grazed on the plateau, but the number of beasts of burden was always clear. Draft animals escaped slaughter because they were needed for transportation.

The first time we saw a car, we thought it was really weird and very fast. The villagers all said that it was Chairman Mao Zedong riding a bull. When I went to school, I had to walk a long way from my home to the township. When we were children we all wanted to drive our own cars on a highway. Starting from the 1980s, lots of Production Brigades [made up of one or more villages] applied for highway access to their villages. Over time such requests have grown stronger.

Everything has speeded up in recent years. Change is happening so fast. Things that might take hundreds of years in the past can now happen very quickly. Like the highway. All of a sudden, the highway was there. I never expected to see the highway in Zhiduo county in my lifetime. I could never have imagined that it would be finished in just a few years. It was so fast! When a faculty member from Beijing University came to Cuochi the year before last, he had to maneuver across 13 rivers and each time he crossed a river he almost got stuck. On several occasions, he had to spend the night there. Now the highway is finished with 50 tunnels and four bridges along its 50 odd kilometers. For the people of Cuochi village, it is as significant as the building of the Three Gorges Dam.

Other people had told me before that the highway would be a "double edged sword" and now I really know what they meant, especially when I left and then came back here.

When I was Party Secretary at Suojia, if you wanted to leave the area the only way was to cross the Moqu River. Many people lost their lives attempting it. It was impossible to cross in spring time. In those days we really longed for a bridge! Last year they built us a concrete bridge across the river. I was so amazed but very happy. In the old days I would never have been able to imagine a bridge like this being built over the river. Where would all the money come from? Now we have the bridge. That's development and progress.

Before the highway was built, there wasn't really any need to buy a car or a motorbike. Now the road is ready, everyone is stampeding to buy a car. That's the biggest change. Especially those people who live near areas where there are cordyceps [a caterpillar used in Tibetan medicine]. The nomads just spend all their money on cars and now cars are common all over the place. Fuel prices are also rising because of demand. And also people want to race each other in showing off their wealth. You have some people buying top luxury brands, driving around aimlessly with their wife and



A construction digger cuts into the ground to build a new highway. This is a problem because it is a big taboo in Tibetan culture to dig up the ground.



kids. In the past, most of the vehicles on the road would be going somewhere, taking goods or people to places. But it's different now. While cities are putting restrictions on the number of private cars on the road to improve air quality, here on the grasslands the number of cars is growing. Now some nomads have started renting houses in Xining [the capital of Qinghai province], spend the winter there and come back here for the summer. It's like they are "vacationing" from November to April. Some civil servants are also doing that, leaving the county government offices empty. It is even worse at the township level. In the winter even the caretakers abandon the offices. The highway has brought greater convenience and higher living standards in material terms to people here, but the question remains how are all material things being paid for? It's being paid for by the sale of livestock and the cordyceps. But do we have enough resources to sustain all this consumption?

A friend of mine, working in Zhiduo county, says the highway must bring lots of benefits. He says, for example, that anyone who falls ill can now get to hospital quickly and grains and necessities can be brought in regularly, making it convenient for everyone. However, since the road was opened, some things have been destroyed. For example, nomads are attracted by cars and are selling off half of their livestock to buy one. He doesn't really need a car or even a motorbike. He's just copying everyone else. What happens after he sells off all those livestock and buys a car? He still has to buy grain, but he has lost half of his animals so he doesn't have as many assets as before. If you don't have much to sell, what good to you is the highway? In the past, cattle and sheep were trucked out and rice and flour were trucked in. As the numbers of cattle and sheep are dwindling, and the numbers of cordyceps dug away, there is not much left to truck out. What are left are conceited and self-satisfied people rushing

around in their cars. You see, the highway doesn't bring us much. What use is a road that goes everywhere? All those cars bought by the nomads are burning up fuel and when they are broken down they are just thrown away. The highway does offer great conveniences but many people now are much poorer than they were. It hasn't made people richer. The road would only be useful if we still had lots of animals and yak butter to truck to the outside.

The highway is a "double-edged sword" because one end of the highway is simply "not ready yet."

I am always talking with friends about the changes that have come with the highway in the past few years. Everyone claims "the highway is the way to prosperity," and while it does offer a great deal of convenience, still so many people are getting poorer. The problem is the highway has linked up a formerly isolated world with the outside world and this inside world is not ready for such a connection. The people here are not ready for so many changes. The road was given to them before they could make an informed choice.

Our most precious resource is our traditional practice of animal farming. You can only find yak in places where you can find Tibetans. Such places are rare. Only Tibetan people take care of yak. You can't raise yak in a shed. I have herded yak myself and I know they like to eat all sorts of things including the droppings of the corsac fox and the wild donkey and they can eat things that live under rocks. Some energetic yak have so much energy that they run and jump all day long and they don't spend much time grazing at all. Although they don't eat that much they still grow very strong. But now the highway is here there are fewer yak. Something must have gone wrong.

How should we interpret this? The issue is how can we protect this area and promote it without damaging it like the highway has done.

Actually it might be an advantage for a place like Cuochi not to have a highway at all. Originally we thought they would never build an asphalt highway to connect Cuochi with the Qinghai-Tibet highway which is 80 km away. We thought we could put up a sign on the highway to advertise horseback sight-seeing tours. We could take tourists to the village on horseback. It would be a purer form of highland experience, a "Plateau Tour." We never imagined that change could have happened so fast and so drastically. In no time at all they had built that asphalt road and now tourists come by the busload directly into the village. After a quick look, they leave. They don't gain any real experience, the local community doesn't gain



any major benefit, and it's only the tourist agencies that gain revenue.

It was vitally important to plan and design the highway properly because Cuochi village lies in the core of the Sanjiangyuan Nature Protection Reserve, the habitat of some very special wild species. The plan should have been carefully thought out in terms of where to put wire fences, how the road would affect the livestock and people and the wildlife. Of course the villagers wanted the road to be located in the closest and most convenient place for them, but the road shouldn't be just about them. It should have been planned to help the nomads and with minimum disturbance to the wildlife. But the construction teams would just take sand from one area without giving any thought to environmental protection. We told them not to do that and we taught them the words of Buddha. Unexpectedly, they listened to us. All the problems with the highway have come from rushing it without thinking carefully about the route and assessing the impacts.

The nomads are beginning to understand that the highway is a lot more complicated than they thought.

In the old days, the nomads welcomed visitors from outside, they weren't wary about them at all. Now so many people from outside are just looking for a profit and the nomads realize they have to become a lot more savvy in their dealings with them. They are building an airport in Yushu and that is going to bring manifold changes when it's finished. I'm not saying change is bad. Without change life would just be stagnant. The issue is not about if we want change or not, but whether we are prepared for these changes and if we have any control over these changes? What is the highway connecting? It is connecting two different worlds. One world is strong and the other is very vulnerable. When the vulnerable side is just not ready for the connection, it is inevitable that there will be problems.

As we leave the village, one of our team members who was once a vehement supporter of the highway has made a complete about turn. He said he now believes that the highway should be stopped to protect the nomads. On our way back, the issue that once had the greatest amount of consensus is now one of the most contentious. The question is not whether a highway should be built or not, the question, as Tador said, is that right now "the villagers are just not ready" for it. It's not just the nomads that are unprepared; the rest of society is not ready either.

The highway is a channel for social, economic and cultural exchanges. Whether these exchanges lead to positive outcomes have a lot to do with the "rules of the game" that are in play. Without the right rules, the highway simply becomes a "double-edged sword." Therefore, slogans like the "Highway is the way to prosperity" become pretty dubious because without the proper care the highway doesn't necessarily bring prosperity. If one end of the highway is strong and the other end of the highway is frail, something has to be done to put the two ends on a more equal footing. There is nothing wrong with development per se and there is nothing with having a highway. The question is in the preparations for building the highway many factors need to be taken into account. If these are properly assessed the highway will be beneficial and will help with cultural exchange. The man in our team who completely changed his mind about the highway is a private businessman. He belongs to the strong end of the highway. He visited the black tent, he saw how the nomads lived and he understood that the highway had left many of them helpless. If those people who were responsible for the highway had had his conscience and sense of responsibility then that would have helped them plan the highway well.

When we set out from Chengdu, no one expected that the new highway would become such a hot and contentious topic. And nobody could have predicted that the protection of China's Water Tower was in any way connected with the highway and the "rules of the game."



The Tibetan mastiff is a nomad's best friend. He is an integral part of the grasslands. Photo by: Tashi Dorje.

The Lost World of the Wind Horse (II)

Written by: Nyima Gyaltsen

The Loss of the Snow Lion

Although no one has ever actually seen a Snow Lion, the earth element on the Wind Horse prayer flag, from folklore, the Tibetan mastiff is believed to be its descendent. For generations, the mastiff has lived with people and protected their homes.

Even though this legend is still often heard, things have changed a lot for the Tibetan mastiff. Today it no longer represents the brave Snow Lion to many people. It has become just another way to make money.

The market selling mastiffs by the Jiequ River is a sad scene indeed

these days whenever I walk past.

The dog sellers at the market talk to me proudly about the pedigree of their dogs as if it is a great story.

"Our dogs are actually not dogs," one middle-aged hawker once told me mysteriously.

"What do you mean?" I asked.

"They are the offspring of the Snow Lion," the hawker said, pointing at his brooding mastiffs waiting to be sold. "Look at them, don't they look and behave like lions?"

The Tibetan mastiff does look a lot like a lion when you look at its head, snout, eyes, chest, neck, limbs and mane. Mastiffs are also very proud animals, they are strong and tough and majestic, just like a lion.

And because of this, the mastiff has now become a status symbol, something wealthy people buy for a lot of money to show off their riches.

But the mastiff that I know is not this kind of animal. The mastiff of my youth is a dog with lots of energy, an animal that belongs to the grasslands. My uncle once told me that if there was no such thing as a Tibetan mastiff, our forefathers would have domesticated the leopard or another animal to help us. But there is no other animal as brave and understanding as the mastiff. These dogs have lived closely with nomads for

hundreds of years and there are many touching stories about the relationship between man and his dog.

When I was young I remember there were a couple of mastiffs, the size of calves, that would scare me whenever I walked along a patch of the grasslands. When I used to ride pass them on my horse they would chase me. I would whip my horse and scream like crazy for him to go faster. I would be so scared I would be trembling. Sometimes the dogs would get so close that their fangs had almost closed on my leg, but then they would suddenly stop, circle around my horse and then leave as if nothing had happened.

Later on I heard that the mastiffs were only chasing me to scare me away. The other nomads told me that each mastiff has his own territory, usually around his master's tent. Any person or animal that crossed that invisible line would be chased. The mastiff is a rational animal. He never flies into a rage or attacks something or someone for no reason. His job is to defend his master's home and he never tries to cause trouble between nomads.

But the mastiff isn't just a good looking dog with a majestic bearing. According to the nomads the mastiff can be trained to single-handedly drive a herd of cattle or a flock of sheep back home. The mastiff really understands the life of a nomad. It's a pity that I have never seen a mastiff herd animals by itself, but I have had countless encounters with nomads coming home with his herd and his mastiff. Whenever I come across such a scene, the mastiffs are always so hard working, running around behind the cattle, and helping to herd stray yak back into the pack. Their bodies silhouetted against the sun. The mastiffs don't bark or run around frantically. Their occasional growls work like the nomad's voice, and sound loud and clear on the



A mastiff on the grasslands. Photo by: Nyima Gyaltsen.



Tibetan mastiffs have become very popular and can fetch a lot of money. In town, mastiffs are often seen tied up on the back seat of motorcycles roaring by. Photo by: Nyima Gyaltsen.

A mastiff kennel is often built with yak dung.
Photo by: Nyima Gyaltsen.



grassland.

The mastiff is an indispensable part of nomadic life. He is a loyal servant to the grassland. Whenever I think about the mastiff, my heart truly aches for its devotion.

Pasang's story of how his mastiff died of old age is so moving.

One night, as Pasang was feeding his aged mastiff fluids and holding his dog's head gently he saw tears spill out of his dog's tired eyes. Pasang thought his mastiff was crying because of his old age and so he stroked the dog's head and said: "Well, let's see how much older you can get."

That night all was quiet as usual.

The next morning, his wife shook him awake and said the dog had vanished.

Curious, Pasang went out to see for himself and indeed, the dog was nowhere to be seen.

He was puzzled and he went off to look for his missing mastiff. After a while he saw a dark dot in the distance and he walked over to investigate. It turned out that it was his mastiff lying there dead. It had died quietly, his body facing away from home. The nomads believe that dying mastiffs will leave the house or tent because they know that if they die inside the house it might bring bad luck to the owner.

Old Pasang carried the dog's dead body back into the tent and asked his wife to mix up some tsampa with a medicinal herb ball he had got from a temple. This was to be the dog's last meal. Finally he placed the body into the river where Tibetans believe the dog



A mastiff for sale. Photo by: Nyima Gyaltsen.

would be carried to another world.

Old Pasang said with a smile: "The dog is good now. He is going to be reincarnated as a human in a good family."

Many of the old Tibetans believe that mastiffs will be reborn as people in the next life and that is why they are so understanding in this life. Perhaps babies are born crying because they are so thrilled to be back home in a world so familiar from the previous life.

Stories from the grassland have little relevance to my current life because so many years have gone by since I have left. However, the other day, I suddenly started remembering them when I was on the street. Those beautiful scenes from childhood memory can no longer be found in reality.

The dog market is thriving today. The dog sellers have beaming smiles because they are thinking about growing rich overnight from selling their animals. Things have changed: craftsmen have given up their traditional trades, government employees their jobs and monks their robes, and everyone is roaming around the streets with their own mastiff. All over the walls one can see posters advertising these dogs. Life is so sad for the mastiff these days, always tied up and squatting with lifeless eyes. Sometimes people even tie them up into taxi trunks or on the back seats of motorcycles. Everyone is now an expert on the mastiff. It has become its own big economy headed by "dog bosses."

However, there is an old Tibetan proverb that says: "It's a disgrace to your family if you need to sell your dog."

I am not sure if there is any truth in the proverb but I know people living on the Qinghai-Tibet plateau who got their mastiff, their lifelong friend, only through many generations of dogs handed down through the ages from nomad family to nomad family.

"In the old days, the dog used to help out in the home but now it looks like people don't need them for that anymore," one old man said after seeing the spiritless mastiffs in the market.

"Why do these rich people want to buy a dog that they don't even really need?"

Some other people in the market were as puzzled as him.

"I heard that rich people are buying dogs just to stroke them when they are home watching TV."

"The rich have such funny ideas."

"Look at the dogs," the old man continued. "See what terrible condition they are in."

"They are being treated so badly in this life so then it will be our turn to be treated badly in the next life."

I asked a peddler: "Don't we Tibetans have lots of traditional stories telling us that the dog is man's best friend?"

"Sure," he answered.

"Then how can you think of selling them?" I asked with a smile.

"Whenever someone wants to buy something there will always be someone to sell it to them. It's just a business. We are not killing them, after all. On the contrary, when rich people buy them they will enjoy better lives than me or you," he declared righteously.

Although I did not have the right to start accusing the dog seller, I was saddened by his words. I could see nothing resembling happiness in the eyes of the mastiffs on sale. In fact I have seen some dog sellers grooming the mastiff's mane to make it look finer or even injecting the hormone testosterone in the animal to boost its sexual drive so that more puppies can be born and then sold just like a product. I have even seen dog sellers take their animal to the hairdressers to have its fur died for RMB 1,000 a go. The "good-looking" dogs are sold and crammed into bus luggage compartments and shipped away. The "bad-looking" ones are sometimes abandoned as strays. These poor animals are either killed by passing vehicles or grow sick from disease. Sometimes they are trucked away to be slaughtered at some far away place. I heard a story about one mastiff that broke free from the back of a truck but once he was caught again he was just flung back on board. He sat there whimpering with a broken leg.

Economic development has caused people to grow more greedy and this has harmed our ecosystem. Nowadays people are less and less interested in nature and don't respect life like they used to.

Our future depends on how we live our lives today. The "Snow Lion" that once protected and lived with our people is disappearing from the grasslands just like its ancestors did. What is left behind? Only the shadow of our one-thousand-year-old memory.

Entering the



Photo by: Wang Fangchen.



Black Tents (III)

Written by: Lin Lan





Dolma Kyi, who now lives in the Migrant's village, has come back especially for the Eco-Culture Festival. Photo by: Lin Lan.

"It makes me sad when I can't see any green in the garden"

When we set off on this journey, our team was made up of many different voices. Some of us were touched by the sight of what we thought of as the "outlandish culture" of people living in black tents and tending to livestock. Others wondered why the region was still so impoverished and backward. Naturally, some of us started to talk about the relocation of nomads. As a matter of fact, relocation is a controversial topic for the nomads. Some of the nomads do not want to rely on government support because

they believe it turns them into "empty sacks that can't stand up by themselves." However, other nomads want a better material life. They want access to better schools for their children and other aspects of modernity from the outside world. We paid a special visit to Dolma Kyi to hear her views and to listen to her experiences. Dolma Kyi left Cuochi and moved to the suburbs of Geermu with her husband and grandsons under the eco-migration policy. She had come back to Cuochi to take part in the Eco-Culture Festival.

The Migrant's village in the suburb of Geermu sits in the Gobi Desert in front of a mountain and next to the Qinghai-Tibet Highway which is constantly rumbling with traffic. Photo by: Wang Fangchen.



Dolma Kyi:

I am 74 years old and in fairly good health. I am living in the Migrants' village in Geermu but my son and daughter still live here looking after animals.

The government told us to move. They said the grasslands and the environment were no longer good and they should be protected. After we had a family meeting, my husband and I decided to move. The first reason we wanted to move was because it is too cold here. People my age prefer to live in a house when it's winter. The second reason is that if we move then my grandsons would have access to a better school. I didn't move because I was poor. At Geermu, the government built houses for us and each household receives RMB 500 a month for living expenses. When we moved it was the right time for my two grandsons to start school and so we moved with them.

But we are not used to life there yet. You have to pay for everything and things are expensive. In the countryside you can get by because there's not much you need to buy. But in the Migrants' village we have to buy everything and we don't have any income. First of all you have to pay to live there. The RMB 500 the government gives us is not even enough to cover the electricity and water bills. And then you have to buy your own food. Most of the people who moved there are poor or old and life is actually harder for them now. Some young people who moved there and who came from nomad families have lost their feeling for the herds and they don't want to work with animals any more. Now they act like they were born into this world just to sit and drink.

There are people from all over, not just Cuochi, in the Migrants' village. There are six groups, each

one with a leader. Only three people in each group have the chance to get work building houses. People are voted in because so many people want the jobs. Those who aren't chosen just have to help themselves. Someone my age can't get a job, so we end up spending money but not being able to earn any. Even though the young people can't earn much money they still go out drinking every day.

We wanted to move because we wanted to help my two grandsons go to school. There is a school in the Migrants' village built especially for the children. There's only one school and the teacher there speaks a different Tibetan dialect to us. In the beginning, the kids couldn't understand anything. And because they grew up on the grasslands they couldn't speak any Chinese either. So right from the beginning they had big problems in keeping up with the other students. And since we've moved it's like they have grown wings. We really can't control them anymore. When I try to discipline them they answer back. Back on the grasslands they were so well behaved. Now they've grown rebellious. Some of the kids have begun stealing money from their homes. Now I'm worried that they could do worse things in the future.

In the past, the children growing up on the grasslands had good manners and they were likely to grow up into good people. All the children in Cuochi village, for example, listen to their mothers. In the village there is a wholesome environment which teaches the children lots of important things. My two grandsons, one is 10 and the other is 12, are not too bad at the moment but when I see the changes in the other kids, I think it'd be better for them to come back and live in the village. They have already changed so much. It's like they can't live without money now. If they could grow up here on the grasslands they would be



away from the bad influences of the Migrant's village. It's not good for children to grow up in a place where people drink and steal so much.

Life in the Migrants' village, though, is much cleaner. The children wash their faces and feet everyday. The teachers ask them not to have long fingernails and those who have dirty fingernails are sent out of the classroom. Being clean is good for their health. When we were nomads we didn't really pay much attention to keeping clean. No one cared if our nails grew long. In the Migrants' village, the kids always have to have new clothes. The teachers are always telling them to wash their clothes and keep themselves clean. But because we have to wash the clothes all the time, the clothes are beginning to fade. Once all the color is gone we have to buy new ones.

Listening to the old lady talking about her grandsons' education reminded us of a discussion we had earlier. We all agreed that education is crucial to changing life on the plateau but we did not agree on what kind of education is the



Each house in the Migrant's village has 80 sq m of floor space and a garden of about 250 sq m, hung with pretty Tibetan decorations. Photo by: Han Ying.



best and what changes are needed. Some of us said that education would help the children have better prospects for their future; maybe they would have a chance to travel overseas or earn enough money to buy a car. But others said that education should be tailored to the environment and suit the special local needs of the development of the plateau. In other words local knowledge should be a part of the curriculum. But here is Dolma Kyi and her biggest concern is whether her grandsons will grow up into good people or bad people. She moved because she thought the school would be good for them but now she is worried that there are too many bad influences.

Getting around is easy in the Migrants' village because the

highway is right in front of you. To buy groceries you have to catch the bus into town. Each trip costs RMB 2, which doesn't sound much but it adds up when you travel a lot. They are talking about putting in telephone lines but then that is just one more bill to pay. When we lived on the grasslands, we would eat meat every day but now we mainly eat just vegetables. One jin [500 g] of meat costs RMB 13 and that is only enough to make one dish for the family. It's difficult to buy yogurt, butter and milk. We usually have to wait for someone here to send us yak butter and cheese. I am happy to see a glass of milk even if I can't drink it. The milk in town cannot compare with the milk from the grasslands. It tastes like the worst kind of milk

we have here, the milk that's left over from making butter and cheese. We hardly ever drink this kind of milk on the grasslands because it is such poor quality and it is not very nutritious. Even so, I am happy to see any kind of milk in town although it is pricy and doesn't taste very good. But if I want to put milk in my tea, I have no choice. But it makes such a pale cup of tea!

In town, we buy frozen meat and it tastes so different from the fresh meat on the grasslands. The mutton and beef from the butchers also tastes different. Maybe it's because I am not used to it. I don't know. But it's just how I feel. The beef and mutton from the butchers doesn't taste of blood, and frozen meat just has no flavor.

Geermu is in the desert and so there's no difference between winter and summer because there is nothing green there. It makes me sad when I can't see any green in the garden. There is a little bit of green and some artificial plants in town, but only a little. Here in the grasslands there are grass and mountains everywhere but at Geermu there is only the Gobi Desert, sand everywhere. As I grow older, I may fall down any time. I don't want to die in the sand; I want to die here on the grasslands. And there are no birds there so I wouldn't be able to get a sky burial.

Apart from all the sand at Geermu, there are the bugs. All kinds of bugs. Many of us migrants get bitten badly by the pests. Some so badly they need to see a doctor. We heard from the other migrants who had been there longer that the bugs would be gone by July or August. These bugs start off tiny but after they've sucked your blood for a bit they swell up. They have four legs and if you bat them away while they are still sucking your blood, their needle gets left stuck in your skin. Then the bite swells up and the only thing you can do is to wait it out.

There is another bug that you can find inside and outside the house, everywhere. It flies around food and is poisonous. If people eat food that it has touched then they get sick. We don't have any of these kinds of bugs on the grasslands. It is much cooler here than in town. Some people can't stand the heat in Geermu. Sometimes the sun is so strong that it makes people ill too. Since I moved there, I have had headaches and my feet get swollen. Maybe this has something to do with the heat. If I push down on the skin of my foot then it leaves a dip. A lot of us older migrants get this kind of swelling. The locals there say it is because we are not used to the local conditions. I have been to see a doctor but the medicine costs so much. Actually I have taken a lot of medicine but it hasn't made me feel any better. I know of many migrants who seem to be always sick now with things like headaches.

The mosquitoes attack you from above and then you get baked by the sand from below. There is no sand inside our homes but outside it is everywhere. When the wind blows in the winter, it reminds me of when it snows on the grasslands. The sand flies everywhere and covers all the windows. To be honest, since we moved there, I have not had one single happy day, physically or spiritually. Every day is the same. Some people say that it is impossible to live in such a place.

The government told us that the grasslands were dying and said it would recover if we moved away. But I don't see any evidence that the grasslands are getting any better since we've moved away. It looks just the same. In fact before 1985, you could say we had too many cattle and sheep. We had animals not only to feed ourselves but to sell. And we sold more than we needed. At that time, people also used to come and kill the wildlife. This is such a cruel thing. The wild animals help the grasslands. When

you start killing the most important things in nature, then the worst types of things do well, just like all the rats that we have now. We hurt the environment whenever we do cruel things. The color of the land has changed. I can't explain it clearly but it is like a child who has lost his parents. The land's expression looks like such a child's.

Now, local people have started protecting the wildlife but they are not doing it because the government tells them to, but because they feel it in their hearts. And it's because of this that the grasslands have improved in the

last few years. I think this is the reason. To protect the wildlife we set up the Friend of the Wild Yak Organization. Now you can see more and more wild animals and that is very good. Whenever I see a wild animal I feel like I am seeing my own family, my father and brothers. The wild yak and Tibetan antelope [*pantholops hodgsoni*] are truly beautiful.

We were silent as we listened to Dolma Kyi gently talk. It was all her personal story. Some might think that maybe it is because she cannot adapt to change that she has these feelings about living



in Geermu. But even if that were true, these migrants still have to live through and experience the reality of what she has described to us. And because that was the first time we had heard this story, the situation was unimaginable to us. The questions that now needed to be discussed were how these migrants can adapt and why should they adapt? Some of us said that it always takes a while for a migrant from the countryside to get used to his or her new city environment, and this situation cannot change. Others of us said that development paths should

be diverse and not always be exactly the same. And although no consensus was reached in the end, it can be seen that as we visit more black tents, our discussion has only got deeper and deeper. The earlier superficial argument between progress and primitiveness is now being brought up less and less. It could be said that we have reached one of our trip's goals.

Postscript:

After leaving the plateau, we took a special trip to the Migrants' village in Geermu to pay a visit to those nomads who had moved

down from Cuochi village. Driving along the Tibet-Qinghai highway, the climate got warmer and drier as the altitude fell. We started out wearing storm jackets and shivering but in Geermu it was too hot even for short-sleeved shirts. The Migrants' village is in the Gobi desert, just 5 km outside the city on an open expanse of barrenness in all directions. The houses are distinctively designed and decorated with Tibetan patterns. Each household has a nearly 200 sq



The government is building a pedestrian bridge for the children who have to cross the highway to get to the migrant children school. It will be the only pedestrian bridge in the city of Geermu once it is finished. Photo by: Lin Lan.

m garden and there is even a stupa at the entrance to the village on which prayer flags fluttered in the hot sandy wind. The village was quiet with just a few elderly people walking slowly, turning prayer wheels in their hands. There were also a number of lethargic looking youngsters chatting with each other. They were sheltering from the hot noon sun under the shade of some houses.

We knocked on the door of one of the houses. Once the door opened, we were all amazed at the sight before us. Someone in the team even whistled. The square garden was large with an evenly paved concrete path leading to a building in the middle. To someone from the city, a house like that amounts to a luxurious villa.

One of the team members whispered: "How much do you think this house costs? It would be at least RMB 3 million in Beijing!"

The person who opened the door to us was a tired-looking middle-aged woman in Tibetan costume. Because of the language

barrier, we could only gesture at each other. Some young teenagers ran over and asked us excitedly where we came from in fluent Chinese and said they'd be glad to translate for us. After that, several more villagers gathered round and started telling us their life stories.

"When we were taking care of the herds back at home, we didn't have to pay for any of the water we drank or the beef and mutton we ate. Now we have to pay for everything. We even have to pay to go to the bathroom. A jin of meat costs RMB 12. One family might spend RMB 300 a month on meat alone. When we lived on the grasslands, meat was the staple food. But now we make do with vegetables, plus some flour and rice."

As there is no cattle dung here, we have to burn coal in the winter. Every winter we need to burn around 4 tons. That costs around RMB 500. In the summer we use gas, about one tank a month. And that costs RMB 71. Sometimes in one month, even one tank is



The school for the migrants' children.
Photo by: Lin Lan.



not enough. What's more, all our friends and relatives are in Qumalai. We don't have anyone here. And so we spend a fortune every month on long distance calls to them, but we have to do it. The bill for calling them on our home phones and mobiles is about RMB 70 to RMB 80 a month. There are a lot of people in the city who don't have jobs, so we can't find any well paid jobs here. It is very hard to get a good job if you don't speak good Chinese."

We felt helpless after listening to the problems of the villagers. They told us that they all came here voluntarily, some because they were old, some because they wanted their children to go to school, and others because they thought they would have a better chance at getting a good job in the outside world. They were excited at the prospect of getting a RMB 500 a month subsidy. Living as a nomad, they would never get so much money. However, living in the lowlands turned out to be not as wonderful as they imagined. Here they have so many expenses and they have a hard time making ends meet. If we just say that they just have to get used to it, that it's just a part of 'modern' life, how can they ever hope to cope? The young teenagers then took us to the Village Committee. The Committee director shook his head in annoyance and told us the Committee's biggest headache was how to solve the problem of how to find employment for some of the migrants. He said that that the young men could learn to drive and then work in the transportation industry, but opportunities for the women were slim. He led us into his office. It was a majestic looking two-storey building. Inside were some volunteers working for Green Rivers, an NGO active in Sanjiangyuan for some time. These volunteers were trying to help the new migrants adapt more quickly to their new lifestyle. The

nomads have to deal with so many problems, many of which are incomprehensible to us. Before we heard it from their own mouths, we would never have imagined them. For example, migrants have to be taught how to use traffic lights to cross the road and how to read public bathroom signs. Some of the migrants had spent all their lives on the grasslands. They face so many problems moving to the city. To get to their primary school, the migrant children need to cross a busy highway with cars zooming by at high speed. The city had built its first flyover for the children so that they could cross the highway without getting hurt. Geermu had never had a flyover before. The Village Committee was

running a training course teaching the migrants how to grow vegetables in a greenhouse and how to make Mani [prayer] stones to sell as tourist souvenirs. The Committee says it will negotiate with the railroad authorities to sell the souvenirs on the Qinghai-Tibet train.

The government appears to have considered many of the problems faced by the migrants and worked exhaustively to solve them. As we listened, we had to admire the government's efforts. But what about the migrants? Is there a way that the grasslands can survive and the nomads can find a sustainable livelihood? Can we meld modern lifestyles with the traditional lifestyles of the nomads?



A villager is learning how to carve a Mani (prayer) stone. The Villagers Committee plans to sell them on the Qinghai-Tibet train as tourist souvenirs in the future. Photo by: Wang Fangchen.



Mola. Photo by: Wang Fangchen, Han Ying

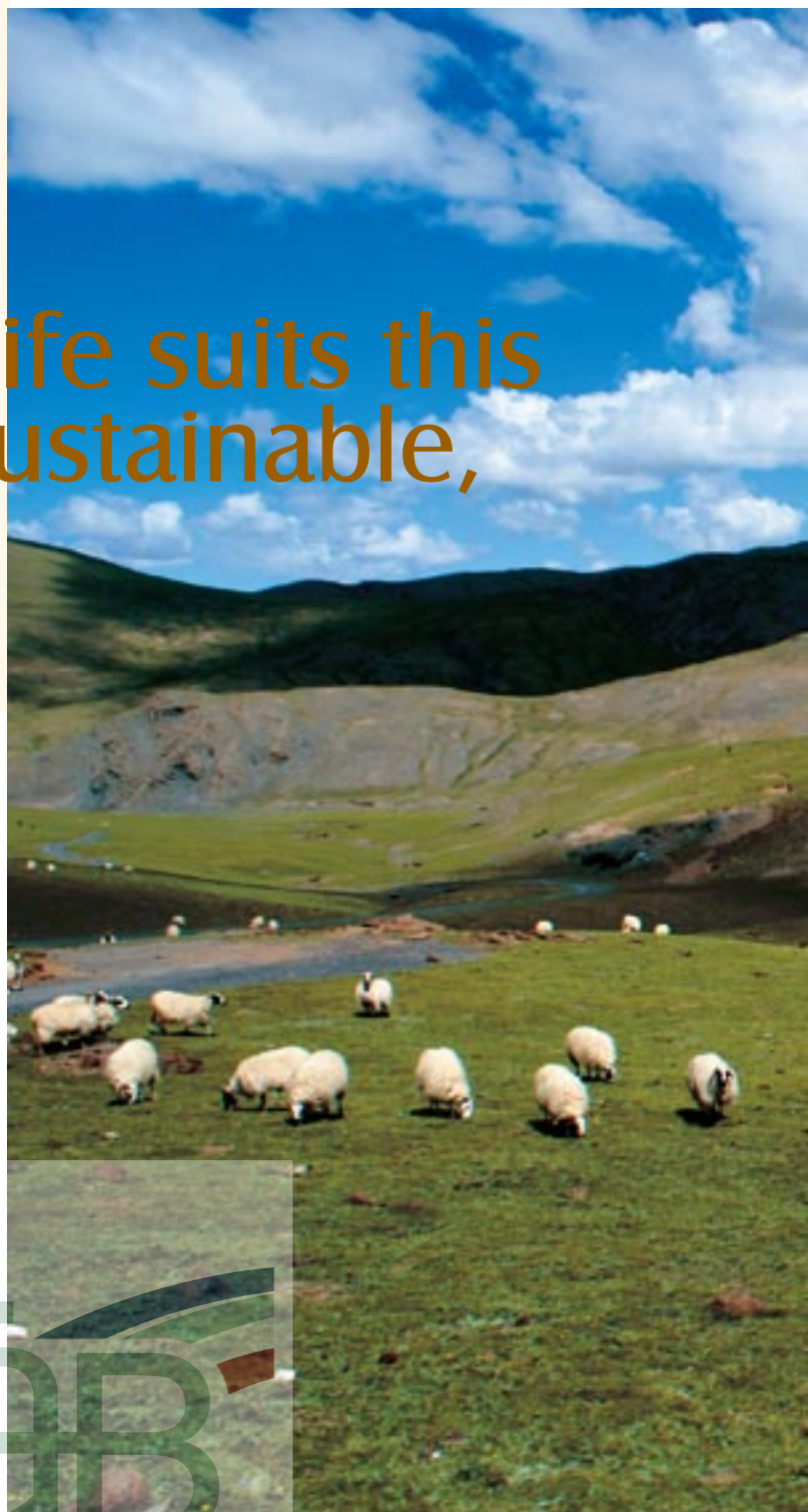
“Our way of life suits this place and is sustainable, isn’t it?”

Over our whole journey, it is Mola who provided us with an integrated perspective on the changes that happened in Cuochi village. He had been the village Party Secretary for several decades and was still a member of the county’s People’s Congress. We heard that during a discussion about gold mining on the grassland, he once banged on the table in protest. This man, who had lived and held a “leading role” for decades here, understood these changes, both experienced by the people and the grasslands, very well.

Mola:

I am 66 years old. I was Party Secretary of Cuochi village for 13 years and Lechi village for 17 years. I retired in March 2000 and my son is now the Party Secretary of Lechi Production Brigade.

Before 1958, I lived as a nomad on the southern bank of the Tongtian River. I was 14 or 15 then and the grass was thriving on both sides of the river. However, one year in the late 1950’s or early 1960’s everything







Mola is disappointed with the youth of today. He says many of them waste time dancing in town, playing pool and racing about on their motorbikes and that they don't want to tend the herd anymore. Photo by: Tashi Dorje.

changed. From that year on many places suffered a turn for the worse; the streams dried up and the grass went bad. Take the old site of Qumalai County for example. It used to be a place of good grass and water, the best pasture in this region. But then they tried to plant crops there. The ground was completely dug up and crops were planted for two years after the digging, but there was never any harvest. Later, the place turned sandy and up until today has never recovered. Now there are just a few small bushes. The leadership told us to dig up all the turf, pile up the grass, burn it and spread the ash in the field so it would act as a fertilizer. It was all done with spades and pickaxes. This was before the Township or People's Commune times. About 1,500 people worked for three years, doing nothing else. The field was ploughed even in the winter because there was competition to grow the most crops. This was in 1958 and 1959 – the years of the “Great Leap Forward”. The People's Commune was founded in 1962 and after that they didn't try to grow crops there any more.

In the early Commune years, Qumahe Township had not yet been founded. Qumahe means Red River. It was made up of four Production Brigades, including the villages of Cuochi

and Lechi. The grasslands were vast then. The main grazing land is all within the territory of the new Qumalai County. When we crossed to the other side of the river, the whole area to the west was empty grassland. The Production Brigades were controlled by the Party Secretary and the Brigade Leader (later called the Revolutionary Committee Director). Below them, it was the group leaders who were in charge. They dealt mainly with decisions on animal husbandry. There were so many wild animals then, of all species. It was a better time because people had enough to eat. If a household owned a cow, even though it could not be sold, at least the family had milk. In addition, a family was allowed to slaughter one sheep a year. The herds were driven to different pastures in different seasons in the nomadic way and arrangements were made by the Production Brigade. Every October 15 each year, all animal products were gathered together and counted as that year's harvest, which was eventually distributed. The rule was roughly like this: each cow that gave birth that year needed to contribute 15 Jin [1 Jin = 500 grams] of butter and 9 Jin of chura [cheese]; each cow that had given birth the year before had to contribute 7 Jin of butter and 5 Jin of chura; each sheep had to contribute 2 Jin of wool; and each yak, 0.5 Jin of wool and 1 Jin of hair. After all these contributions were deducted, the rest was distributed amongst the households according to work points. There was quite a bit of freedom at that time and people didn't starve. There were few problems on the grasslands.

After 1965, however, there wasn't enough grassland to go around. Previously, those grasslands that were above the Quma River were uninhabited. You could say that that area was the territory of wildlife. But by 1965, we needed more grassland and so we moved higher and higher. One man from the Husbandry Bureau took a month to find new pastures. When he came back, the two brigades of Lechi and Cuochi moved upland. At that time I was from Lechi and I went to see the new pasture. It was spring time and I saw a lot of grass. The grass was yellowish and the water was a bit salty. I also saw a lot of wild donkeys there. But I never expected that once we moved there, a large number of our livestock would die. It was just like they had all caught some disease. The skin on their dead bodies became separated from their flesh. All the weak ones died, while the strong ones survived. Maybe it was because they just weren't used to the high altitude or the coarseness of the grass. There weren't many wild animals around and the grass was quite withered, really not nutritious enough. Because of that, after a discussion, the Lechi Brigade went back down but Cuochi stayed. After a while of grazing the animals there, the yellowish grassland turned green.

In 1968 and 1969, the size of the herds started to expand. One Production Brigade used to be composed

of six or seven Work Groups but by then it had grown to eight to ten. Each Work Group had two flocks of sheep and two herds of cattle. A flock of sheep was made up of 700 to 900 animals, some of them as many as 1,000. The cattle were broken up into two herds. Under one Work Group, one cattle herd was comprised of bulls, infertile cows and juvenile animals, in short, those that didn't give milk. The other herd was made up of all the cows that had milk, around 60 to 70 animals. Three or four workers would milk 30 to 40 cows every day. The milk was used to make butter and chura. In the summer, some people would start milking from one, two or three o'clock in the morning until daybreak. The second round of milking was done in the evening.

From 1972 to 1984, the number of livestock just kept growing. There were also a lot of wild yak, argali [a type of wild sheep], blue sheep, wild donkeys and Tibetan antelope. The grassland was used solely for grazing our animals. Because of the size of our herds, whenever it was time to shear the sheep and yak, the whole brigade had to be mobilized. At that time, although the number of livestock had been climbing to a peak, the grassland was not suffering. The Township (Commune) had some 270,000 animals. All of us followed a nomadic life and lived in tents. There were no houses. It wasn't until 1987 that some families started building homes.

In 1985, a snowstorm almost wiped out our entire herds in a single week. The first snows came in mid-October and the ground was still white with snow until February the next year. We didn't even spot a single wild animal during that time. Since that year, the grassland has been bad. The Household Responsibility System (privatization) had just been adopted with livestock distributed among individual families. The Lanzhou Military District sent aircraft to drop supplies to help fight the disaster. But we only had enough resources to save people's lives and we couldn't help the animals. All along the Qinghai-Tibet highway, temporary tents were put up by those nomads who had managed to make it out. They had abandoned their livestock to save their own lives.

But it was not only the livestock that suffered, the wild animals also died. Before 1985, we often saw a herd of about 20 white lipped deer on the grassland. They all died in the Tongtian River during the snowstorm. The snow hurt the Mongolian Gazelle too but now their numbers have gradually recovered to a certain degree.

After the 1985 snow disaster, the whole grassland has gone bad. We started to see so many rats and other pests in numbers we had never seen before. Cuochi's grassland was the best for cattle and sheep in winter and summer. Now it is so bad that no one lives there anymore. I am an old man and this is what I have seen.



As for why this all happened, I think I need to ask you. You will meet a lot of elderly people here who will tell you the same stories. There is a place called Naru at Lechi where the Brigade head office was once located. That place used to be grassy and now it is desert.

The grassland has seen big changes. Many people say the main reason is because people came here to mine for gold. This is the time of the year the gold miners used to come. But mining is like taking internal organs out of a human body. In the same way it hurts a person, it hurts the earth to dig it out of the ground. The gold mining first started back in 1990 or 1991. The miners all came from outside. Locals would never mine for gold. In the past it was even taboo to dig the ground to build a house let alone mine for gold.

After the grasslands were divided and distributed among the households, people started building houses and settling down. Another important cause of the failure of the grasslands is the fact that people started

settling down in one place, and stopped their nomadic way of life. The nomadic lifestyle is a way of life that suits this place and problems start to happen if that changes.

Another reason is the changing climate. Since 1985, the wind has been growing stronger and stronger. Now it is so strong that the grass roots are exposed and all the top soil has blown away. Although the wind was always strong in the past, we had never seen it as strong as it is now. Summer temperatures are now sometimes much cooler and often during the rainy season there is no rain at all.

The most important causes of the grasslands failing, though, are gold mining and the Household Responsibility System. In the past, we would move to various pastures according to the month and stay there for about three months at most. Now we use the same plot of land all year round, day in and day out. This never happened in the past. The grass is eaten as soon



The wire fence helps to mark out pastures but it also traps wild animals.
Photo by: Tashi Dorje.

as it comes out of the ground.

I heard they are going to build a migrants' area around the Township and the government will support the nomads for 10 years by giving them subsidies. But what happens after 10 years? When I hear this, I get worried. The government is giving out money to the old folk and young people and telling them to live in the cities. It is no good for the young people. They stay up late and don't get out of bed until midday. They just fool around doing nothing. Their health is being affected and their memory is getting poorer. They start looking old at age 30 and they can't work like young people used to. In the past, young Tibetans didn't get tired when they worked and they were happy. Now young people don't even have enough energy to stand upright after working just for a little while and their spirits are low too. The people are degenerating. The children are too and I don't know if it has anything to do with drinking Pepsi.

People prefer the Household Responsibility System because everyone loves freedom compared with the People's Commune time, when people were told what they could and couldn't do. Now you can do whatever you like. You can sleep in or you can herd your animals. I think that is very important. But some things, such as "returning grazing land to grass" and the directives telling us to do this or do that, just make us confused. I hope the whole country maintains the rule of law while allowing nomads to have their own land, livestock and justice.

Although I am retired now and am a bit out of touch, I do pay attention to news about this. I know that Sanjiangyuan is important; it is a holy place for





Sometimes the yak die from eating plastic garbage that is now increasingly seen on the plateau. Photo by: Tashi Dorje.





water and an important source of water. People say that if it is not properly protected then places downstream will have a lot of trouble. In the mean time, I have also noticed that many people accuse us nomads of destroying the grasslands. But we are not outsiders. For thousands of years we have lived here and depended on the land and we have never damaged it. So what is the problem now? We take care of our animals; we have never farmed the land, built factories or mined for gold. In the heart of the Sanjiangyuan region, we don't even dig cordyceps [a caterpillar used in Tibetan medicine] relying mostly on animal husbandry. Our way of life suits this place and is sustainable, isn't it?

Mola's words are simple and straightforward. He is the man who took the nomads to Cuochi almost 40 years ago. That time it was uninhabited and up until now, he has lived through all its stories. Through these stories, we can follow roughly the ups and downs of the grassland and what has caused them. Our team needed to listen to these stories very carefully. Many of our previous arguments have arisen because we were ignorant of the changes that this place had undergone. Some of our team believed that this vast and wide plateau cannot be affected by something so insignificant as humans, compared with the power of the climate. However, the stories about Cuochi gave us another truth: livestock died in large numbers because they couldn't adapt to the changes of the higher altitude grasslands; the fact that herds swelled to record numbers under the People's Commune system; and how the disastrous snowstorm of 1985 followed by the gold mining and the Household Responsibility System also had an impact on the grasslands. The other key factor, it seems, governing the rise and fall of the land is "whether man and nature live in harmony," something essential for coping with climate change. In Mola's words, what is needed is an answer that allows the nomads to preserve "their way of life" in a way that "suits this place".

Of course, the "preservation" that Mola referred to doesn't have to mean stagnation. When we talked with Gayi, the incumbent Party Secretary of Cuochi, he said: "Wouldn't it be better if the government subsidizes and helps us to buy better and improved tents that are easy to put up, warm and comfortable and preserve our nomadic tradition and that won't give too much pressure on the grassland?"

Mola and Gayi's dream is for a modernized nomadic lifestyle. We didn't know if it would ever come true but their words gave us a lot to look forward to for the future of the black tents.



An Interview with Tador (III)

--About the Motorcycle

Written by: Han Ying

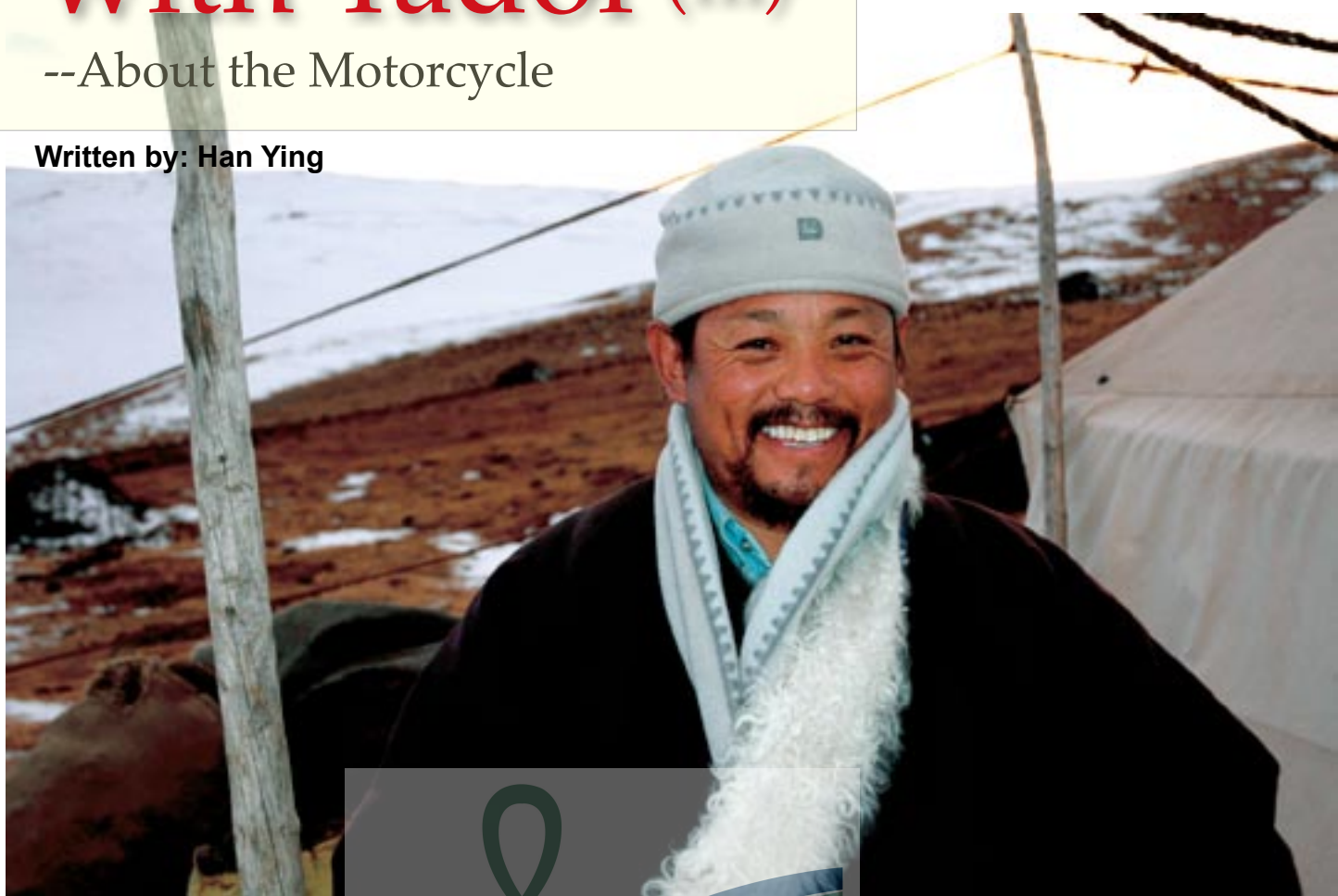




Photo by: Tashi Dorje.

We heard a motorbike approach, the handlebars were decorated with long leather tassels and strapped to the bike was a cassette tape recorder blaring Tibetan music. As the bike approached the music grew louder and louder. The biker was clad in traditional Tibetan clothes and wearing dark sunglasses. The bike roared past and faded off into the distance. This is a very typical scene on the plateau today. It signifies that this ancient land is modernizing and that two cultures are meeting each other head on. The motorcycle, the symbol of modernization, has made its way onto the plateau.

Regrettably, we do not have any statistics on how many bike owners there are on the plateau. Neither do we have any figures on the size of the bike sales and

maintenance industries, fuel consumption and their costs and benefits. But evidence that the bikes are now commonplace and that many nomads have grown poorer because they sold livestock to pay for their bike, seems to indicate that motorbikes have caused an uncommon storm on the plateau. The younger generation seems to be crazy about motorbikes, while there are others, mostly the older generation that are beginning to complain about its alienating role.

Tador: **The plateau becomes a giant motorbike market**

In the old days there were hardly any motorbikes. When I was in high school, there was only one in the whole of Zhiduo county. People thought motorbikes were amazing. Some Tibetans who knew a little Chinese language misheard

it as "Mudeche" which translates as female car, and so thought that if the female car was that fast, there must be a male version which was even faster and more powerful still. When motorbikes first became common they were mostly second-hand ones. Motorbike sellers would swindle people here by buying used motorbikes, doing them up and selling them as new. Back then people here still liked to ride horse-back, they didn't think it was backward or stupid, but they were just curious about motorbikes and thought they were fun.

A lot of funny things happened back then. Nomads thought about motorbikes the same as they thought about bulls. If they fell off, a big strong nomad just wanted to tame the machine just like he would a bull. To tame a bull, we grasp its ears or horns and wrestle it to the ground. So one time this nomad who had fallen off decided

to tame his motorbike. So he grabbed the handlebars and pulled on them as hard he could. He hit the accelerator by accident and fell off again. Getting back on his feet, he grunted defiantly: "I can wrestle even the strongest bull in my herd to the ground and I will sure beat you too." Another nomad wasn't quite sure how to ride his new bike and to stop himself falling off he fixed a long pole horizontally behind the seat. So wherever he went, there was the pole on the back of the bike.

Today more than 80% of bike owners are young men who treat their bikes like toys. Except for a few occasions when the bike is useful to do something for the family it is usually ridden about just for fun, to and fro. It's understandable to ride a bike if you want to travel a fair distance, but some young nomads use it every time they leave home even for a place just a few hundreds meters away. Young people are even using it to drive herds these days. They think it's fun. Every day a big crowd of young men drive to the county on their bikes, just like they were going to work. But when they get here they go drinking and play snooker, just throwing all their family's money down the drain. At festive times, like the township anniversary, they get together a parade of 100 or so bikes. Actually it's quite a sight and a pretty good marketing promotion.

Before the highway was built, it was hard to get spare parts and maintain your bike. If something went wrong, many nomads just used to throw the bike away and buy a new one. Today, many nomads buy bikes to show off. You have to buy a brand name to compete. So if your friend has a brand name bike then you have a lot of pressure to get a brand name too. There are some people who say that the plateau has become a giant motorbike market for bike manufacturers.

From the motorbike comes poverty

In the old days people used to compete against each other to see who was the hardest working, but it's different now. With the new market economy, so many people have lost their senses. It's fashionable to have a motorbike. I am guessing that about 50% of homes that once herded sheep now no longer have any left because they sold them to buy a bike. Animals have become a tool for earning money just to buy motorbikes and fuel.

I have a friend who has a dozen bikes at home. He buys a new one every time his bike breaks down. His relatives keep giving him cattle and sheep but he still can't make ends meet because he keeps selling the animals to pay for things. His home has all the modern furnishings with brand name appliances and toiletries. People from the city keep praising him, saying he is a great businessman because he keeps selling so many animals. But now he has no yak left and he is really hard up. His wife has left him and has taken the children and moved to Geermu. Now all he has left are his dozen motorbikes.

In the old days it was normal to borrow a bike from your neighbor. Now you can't do that, you have to rent one and the price could be as high as RMB 2,000 or RMB 3,000. That's why everyone wants to buy their own bike now.

Now there are so many loan sharks on the plateau. And most of them are lending money for people to buy motorbikes. Most of the people who borrow money aren't using it to pay for medical treatment but for buying cars or bikes. If you look at impoverished homes here about 80-90% of them have become this way because they have borrowed to buy a car or a bike. They can't afford to buy one so they borrow money and the



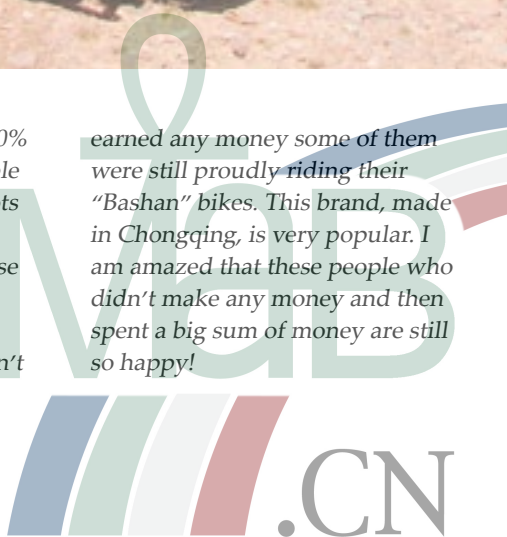
A crowd of motorbikes like this one has become a familiar sight on the grasslands today. Whenever there is a gathering or event, people come by motorbike. Photo by: Cheng Jin.



interest rate can be as high as 20% to 30% and that rate is acceptable to them. The year before last, lots of Cuochi nomads headed east to dig for cordyceps. But because many of them had never done it before they came back empty handed. Even though they hadn't

earned any money some of them were still proudly riding their "Bashan" bikes. This brand, made in Chongqing, is very popular. I am amazed that these people who didn't make any money and then spent a big sum of money are still so happy!

When I was still working in the township, it was well known that you could spot a poor household from the outside because they would be the one with no livestock and with a bike or jeep out front. These families don't have money to buy fuel and so their vehicles just





Tibetans decorate their motorbike handlebars with tassels of all different shapes and colors. Photo by: Han Ying.

stay parked outside their houses. Because of this the township People's Congress decided not to distribute poverty-alleviation aid to those families who were poor because they bought a motorbike or car. This decision was made to try to convince other people not to make the same mistake.

The motorbike has not only brought about poverty but also poor health. The Living Buddha of Cuochi village is also a "barefoot doctor." He says the younger generation is in poorer shape than before. He said he never used to prescribe much medication for the young people but nowadays he has to do this a lot more. In the old days, when we rode horses, you could get off and walk for a while if it was too cold to ride. It's impossible to push a motorbike and now more people are suffering from arthritis because of this. In the winter, bike riders get so cold that they wrap themselves up in blankets or quilts when they're riding.

Those families that have resisted selling off their animals to buy motorbikes and fuel are actually doing pretty well. Gerong is the richest guy of the Third Brigade of Cuochi village. His family is still very traditional. Most households have got rid of their beasts of burden but Gerong still has his. Him and his brother still live together and live a traditional nomadic lifestyle. They haven't built a house or bought motorbikes. Every winter they move to a new pasture every two weeks and sleep in their winter tent. His black tent is the largest and best looking. It is made from the hair of yak tails. They live a good life, eating mutton and yogurt in the winter and buying flour by the cartload. Such a contrast should make people rethink about whether buying a motorbike is worth it.

Behind the Hype

I can't stop thinking about

this craze to own a motorbike on the plateau. It is undeniable that a motorbike is a good means of transportation and suits local conditions. But why has it also brought about so many problems?

In the past, riding a horse was a kind of entertainment. The herds would roam against a background of snow-capped mountains and blue sky, you would hear the ringing bells; it was a kind of folk lore, joyful, happy and peaceful. As a nomad, selling your horse was as bad as selling your brother. It was just something you wouldn't do. In the old days, very poor families that couldn't afford to drink tea themselves would still give it to their horses in winter for energy. Now, whenever the old folk see trucks loaded with horses being driven out for sale, they say the world is coming to an end.

I think, our biggest problem now is the competition to own more material things. We can learn a lot from others, but it is important to distinguish whether what we are learning is good or not. Although we didn't own a lot of things in the old days, we were happy and contented. Now nobody has time to sing songs or tell stories. Everybody is just thinking of their private interests. We weren't like this before. Competition was not something that was encouraged. In Buddhism, altruism is the most important thing and selflessness is considered the ultimate pursuit. Now, the spirit of competition has entered our souls from the outside making us think only of ourselves and our private interests.

In the old days, the decision makers at home and in the community were the elders because they were the ones with all the experience and they had the ability to judge.

Now everyone is making their own decisions about what to buy and how to spend their money. Our traditions and spirit of collectivism have gone. In the past, the father

was the head of the household and he had the final say. If he was not at home it was the other senior male members of the family. The mother also wielded authority. But that's all changed now. No one can control their children and the family's wealth is squandered. In the past, youngsters learnt from their elders. Now they are just tempted by all the new shiny things coming in from outside.

Once you open the door, you can't shut it again. We have to find a way to adjust. I am really opposed to people using the words "poor" and "backward", to describe us nomads. The government shows great concern for the nomads and we are grateful. But if too much aid is just given out, you just spoil people. First of all you have to help the people stand on their own two feet, not just do things for them. Actually, we have advantages and strengths that outsiders don't have. Although the nomadic lifestyle looks difficult to someone from the city, because we live in the open amongst all the elements – the wind and the snow -- but to us, it is paradise. We can just roam wherever the grassland is good. But we can also use science and technology to improve our nomadic life. For example, we can design better tents that are lighter and more comfortable.

My dream is to advance our nomadic animal farming in parallel with modern society. Our lifestyle on the plateau adds to the world's cultural diversity. It is very important to protect it.

Why have so many young Tibetans chosen the motorbike over herding livestock? They appear to have forgotten some very basic things. Such as livestock is a renewable resource from which you can make money if you hold onto it, but motorbikes just consume resources and wealth. In the beginning, we were very confused about this situation. But then we slowly realized, through

conversations with people on the plateau, that temptations to amass material goods can grow to an extent that it twists people's good judgment. And this kind of temptation is so easy to spring up in a formerly isolated region that has just opened. It is similar to what happened in the rest of China in the early years of Reform and Opening.

After leaving Cuochi, the image of the motorbike on the plateau was seared in my memory. I hoped that this situation would not be permanent and that it was just a passing phase as the plateau dealt with the modern world. All the funny tales we heard, all the strange things and the disparities are inevitable and they will not last. Such hurdles are natural along the way. They provide an opportunity for the native culture to realize that the outside world is not perfect and it cannot be copied without some caution. To quote Tador: "The ability to deal with the outside world is very important." One of the ways we can nurture this ability is through cultural exchange.

The motorbike is a sign that isolation cannot last and survival depends on integrating into a culturally-diversified world. The nomads have played an important role in protecting "China's Water Tower." Can they now play a key role in the future development of the plateau? From the standpoint of someone who belongs to the dominant culture, I hope that we can develop cultural diversity. Zheng Yisheng, the sociologist, points out in his book: "In our work for western China today, there is nothing more important than the conscientious and creative efforts of the ethnic minority communities in organically integrating the traditional with the modern."

The Lost World of the Wind Horse (III)

Written by: Nyima Gyaltsen

Wild yak and wild donkey bones are hung from the front and rear tent poles of the black tents. Because wild yak bones are hard to come by these days often people will use domesticated yak bones instead. Photo by: Han Ying.

A few years ago, as I was visiting some relatives on the grassland, my cousin was busy getting ready to set off for the summer pasture the next day. It was the first time since he had gotten married that he was moving.

On moving day, he invited a monk to join them. He told me that after we had finished lunch, he, my uncle (on my mother's side) and the monk would go and check out the summer pasture. I asked him if I could tag along.

My cousin looked a bit nervous. It was only natural because whenever he had moved house before my uncle had been in charge. This was the first time that

he had to lead the move as he was now head of the household after all. He obeyed all the commands given to him by the monk and my uncle and I saw him running around all over the place.

An hour and a half later, we arrived at the summer pastureland. When we got there the monk and my uncle started talking about something and pointed to the grasslands. We all got down and had a rest. The summer pasture was a wide strip of grassland that ran from the east to the west in the middle of the mountains which were on the north and south sides. Off to the south, I could see cooking smoke curling up into the air.

After the monk and my uncle had a good look



round, they decided that this was a good place to settle. My uncle asked my cousin to get a sack from the horse. Inside were several packages which were taken out and opened, just as I had seen in previous moves. They were powdered gold, silver, copper, turquoise and carnelian [a reddish brown semi-precious stone]. These are all used to decorate stupas.

Curious, I asked my cousin what they were and what they were used for? He replied: "This is called the eight treasures powder. It is a kind of tax."

"What tax is it and paid to whom?" I asked, but before my cousin could answer, my uncle sternly gestured for me to be quiet.

Then began the prayer ceremony. The monk started

ringing a bell and reciting prayers while my uncle and cousin began lighting the incense. After this, they began scattering the "eight treasures powder" in all directions.

It wasn't until we were on the way back home that my uncle explained to me what was going on.

"Our time in this world is only transitory," he said. "Everyone is the same and we must respect our master. Nature is our master and we are only here today because Nature allows us to be. That's why every time we move to a new place, we must pray to the local gods because they are our landlords. When you stay at a hotel you must pay for the room. In the same way your body is where your soul lives. You have to pay for that."

The moving formally started the next morning on a clear and sunny day. The yak caravan started off in the golden dawn light carrying heavy loads of furniture. All you could hear were nomads yelling, the horses neighing, the dogs barking, and a trail of laughter.

As we neared our destination, the real work began. My uncle and cousin went off to look for the best place to put up the tent. I pointed to the flattest piece of grassland and suggested putting it up there. My uncle took one look and shook his head. He pointed and said: "This is no good because there is water just behind it."

"The water is not coming this way, so what's the problem?" I queried. It was only a tiny stream.

"If we block off the water source of the mountain gods in the south, we'd be in trouble," my uncle explained.

Nomads take serious stock of the surrounding geographical conditions whenever they are deciding on where to set up a new camp on the grassland. They believe that if they disrupt natural patterns they may cause a disaster. For example, they can't set up camp between a holy mountain or valley and a stream. They believe that before humans arrived on the grasslands, mountains and streams had long enjoyed a close relationship. If humans disrupt that it will damage the natural harmony and bad things will follow. If a camp is set up in front of a tree, then the nomads must plant several more so that they do not block the passage of luck between one life and the next. There are so many rituals like these.

"Remember, we are the guests here and we should not break nature's rules," my uncle said. His words must have been passed on for thousands of years on the grassland.

After about half a day's work, several black tents had appeared on the peaceful pasture. As I gazed on such a familiar sight, I thought I heard the voices of my ancestors coming to me from thousands of years in the past. Although it is simply and coarsely made, black tents have given shelter to humans for hundreds of generations. They are close to my heart.

Nomads have told me that long ago black tents

were made from the skin of a whole yak. The hide was spread out and fixed to the ground with pegs in each of the four legs. The middle of the hide was propped up with a stick. So it was basically triangular in shape over a shallow pit. Later on, in the winter time, a new hide was cut into two or three fan-shaped pieces and laid out on the sides of the pit to dry. As the leather hardened, each piece was taken out and sewn together along the narrow end while the wider end was left to drape on the ground. It looked like a Mongolian yurt. It was easy to put up and easy to fold away again and carried off. As textile technology developed, nomads began making tents from yak wool and still make them to this day. In ancient times, it is said, people would wipe the fat from their hands onto the leather to help prevent chapping and waterproof it. With new improved materials, people don't need to do this anymore. The pliable and tough fabric of the woolen tent can prevent water from gathering on its surface. The fabric naturally shrinks when it's cold and thus stops the wind from getting in but expands when it's hot and allows fresh air in. There is no doubt about it; the black tent is the best kind of home for a nomad when he's following a herd on the grasslands.

The Tibetan plateau is filled with deities. Among them, is the god of water and he is the one that affects Tibetans' lives the most. Sometimes he takes the shape of a fish and sometimes he is seen as a frog. On the Wind Horse prayer flag so common in daily life, he is most often depicted as a dragon. People have never forgotten that the land they are living on was once an ocean. Many of the precious stones and minerals that Tibetans wear as jewelry come from the sea and in almost all Tibetan art works you will see images of the ocean. In Tibetan medicine, the different stages of pregnancy are given names like the "fish stage" and the "turtle stage," etc. Some Tibetans practice water burials and there are so many taboos about dealing with and being close to water sources such as springs and rivers. Before a nomad will set up his tent or a farmer will build his house, a turtle is placed on the site. If there is no living turtle nearby, a dead turtle is carried in a circle around the site. This pacifies the water god who, upon seeing the turtle, thinks his family is still in control. The water god will then protect those who are living on the site.

A long time ago I had heard that the original shape of the black tent was copied from the shape of a turtle. It symbolized endurance and eternity, and with each patch representing part of the shell and a story. The nomads believe that this "turtle" tent design can protect them from all kinds of disaster.

Although the ocean has long gone, its spirit lives on in the daily life of the Tibetan people.

Everyone had now lit some incense and they had begun praying again.

"Didn't you burn incense yesterday?" I asked.

Life freeing ritual.



"Yesterday we burnt incense to ask permission to live here from the master," my cousin answered with a smile. "Today we are burning incense to greet the master and all our neighbors."

The water in the river continued flowing past a bend and then it disappeared around the mountain in the distance, shimmering golden under the noonday sun.

What neighbors? My cousin's family is the only one here. He must have been talking about the spirits on the grassland.

Ritual offerings are first hung up on tent poles before the furniture and household items can be moved in.

A tent normally has two poles, the upper pole and the lower pole. The upper one represents paternity (fathers) and the lower one, maternity (mothers). As the father is the master of the house, more offerings are hung on the paternal pillar as it has a closer connection with the local gods. The offerings hung on the maternal pillar are mostly symbols of the household, such as a stone sling and a herding whip. If the paternal pole was to crack or break suddenly, it would foretell conflict between the family and the local gods. At that point, the family should immediately conduct some kind of disaster-averting ritual. If the maternal pole breaks it means some female members of the family – maybe the mother, or the daughters or sisters-in-law -- are lazy. In that case the offender should be found and made to change her ways.

Some nomads don't believe in opening the tent's skylight fully during the night-time because dirt may

Incense burning.



Deliverance ceremony for cattle waiting to be slaughtered.

get into the tent or the good communication between the family and the mountain and water gods could be disrupted. The skylight acts as a clock for the nomad. When it's open the sunlight casts light on the ground inside the tent and tells the people inside what time it is. The skylight is angled in a certain direction to receive blessings from the stars. In the same way, the direction of the tent's entrance also has a meaning. Nomads generally do not have their tent entrances facing west, because that invites in enemies, whereas a north-facing entrance invites disaster.

Although they look like they have been set up on the grasslands at random, the position of the tents is determined from a very complex set of rules. Nomads say the gods will be happy if a good family sets up a tent on their patch of the grasslands and that will bring good winds and good rain in the next year. It will also help to heal anyone who gets sick in the area. But if a greedy or violent family sets up their tent on the grasslands, the gods will be unhappy and countless disasters will happen. The black tents and the grassland

have become one. They are inseparable.

But with the growth of private interests, river water has turned murky and is polluting the gods' eyes. People have put up signs saying this river belongs to them; cattle and sheep have lost their grazing grounds; and the gods have lost their homes. The dragon that brings good weather, rain and winds, has left the grasslands and moved off to a distant place. Machines are all over the plateau cutting into the ground. The place is bloated with greed. The nomads have lost their grasslands and the animals have been swept away.

In the end, the black tents will disappear too.

In the same way that the departure of the black tents will make the grassland lonely, the departure of the gods will make people's hearts lonely too. The children of the dragon, who have lost their blood, will live in pain and face endless calamities.

In the past, every time I tossed Wind Horse prayer flags into the air, I'd feel protected by an auspicious and powerful force. But witnessing the loss of the Wind Horse's sacredness, I have suddenly started to feel vulnerable. In my childhood, the nomads told me that when we fell ill or when we faced trouble we only needed to ask the gods for help. The garuda would help swelling to go down; the dragon would help those who had the pox; the tiger would help those who were weak; and the lion would help those who were distressed. But have we abandoned all our gods now? If we lost those symbols of fire, water, wood and earth that we draw on the Wind Horse flag, what would happen to the Wind Horse? What would happen to this symbol of air and spirit? If the earth falls sick who can we turn to for help?

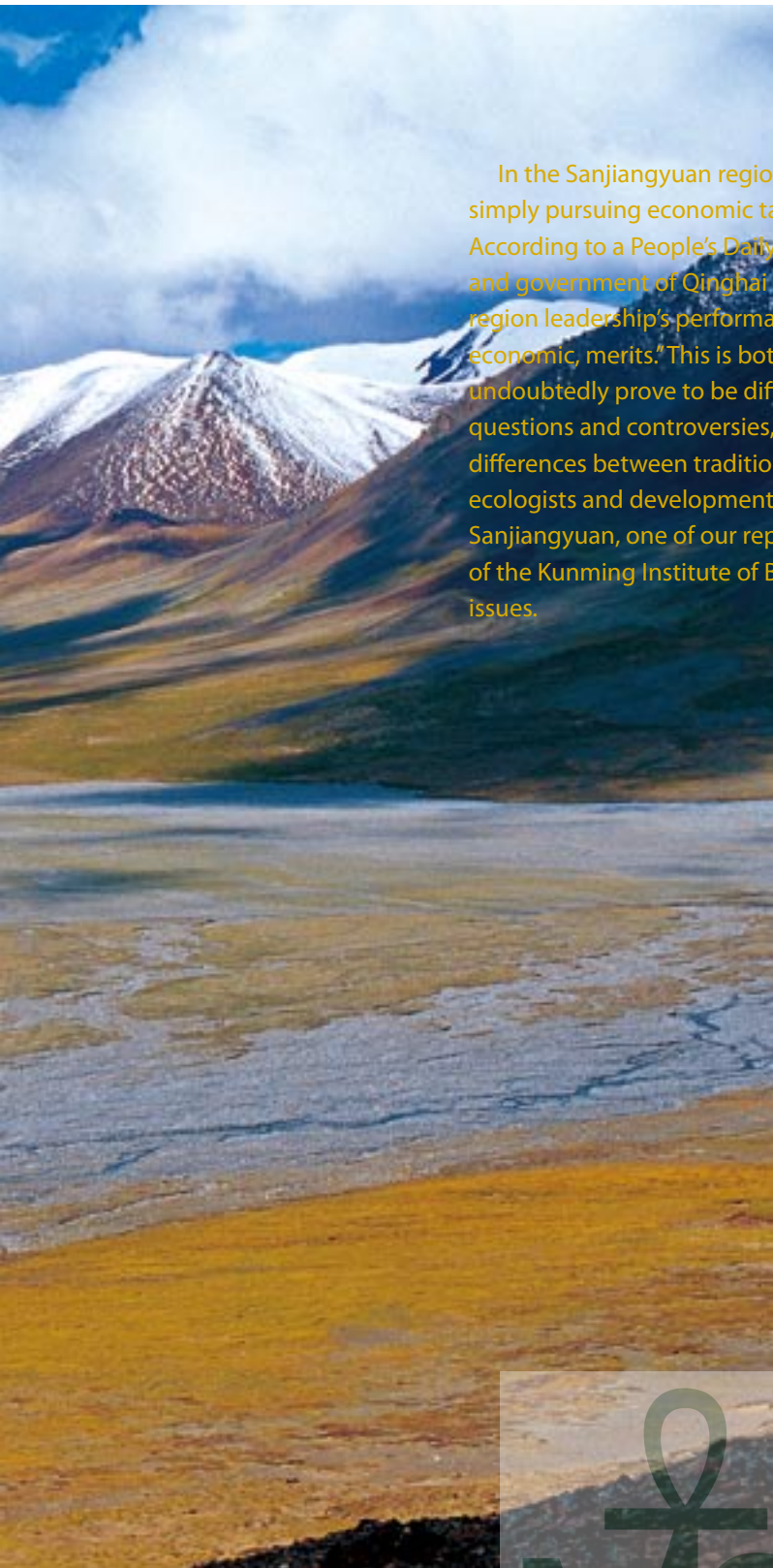


Connecting Cultures

An Interview with Yang Yongping

By our staff reporter





In the Sanjiangyuan region, an important step has been taken to move from simply pursuing economic targets to focusing on ecological targets instead. According to a People's Daily report on September 20th, 2005: "The Party Committee and government of Qinghai province has recently decided that the Sanjiangyuan region leadership's performance will be assessed in terms of ecological instead of economic merits." This is both a rational and a very important step, but it will undoubtedly prove to be difficult to manage. The change has sparked numerous questions and controversies, including the need to reassess how to deal with the differences between traditional ways of thinking and the ideas of scientists and ecologists and development models based on these two camps. After the field trip to Sanjiangyuan, one of our reporters interviewed Mr. Yang Yongping, deputy director of the Kunming Institute of Botany, under the Chinese Academy of Sciences on these issues.

Reporter: We have just taken a short trip to Cuochi in Sanjiangyuan where we saw positive changes in the environment following intense investment from the government in recent years towards improving ecological protection. However, from several in-depth interviews with local people, we also learned that the locals are concerned with how these changes have happened, although, at the same time, they are keen to see development in their region.

Yang: Owing to Sanjiangyuan's ecological position, both the central and provincial governments have put a strong emphasis on environmental protection. The reason why they have decided to stress this is because prior to this too much importance was given over to the production industry. For instance, back in the eighties, regional development was solely dependant on the number of farm animals. Obviously, prioritizing the region's ecological role is based on a rethinking of this past emphasis on production. This is a very important change across the board. To achieve such a change, a lot of detailed follow-up action has to be taken. We should recognize that those many questions we will encounter are just technical details that would be required for any major change. These are challenges that have to be met and not evaded. This transformation is still in its early stages, the emergence of these problems is very natural. And as time goes by these discussions will just get more and more involved. The important question at the moment concerns the compensation given to the nomads. Many nomads still rely on raising animals to make a living and we have to formulate a way to compensate them adequately and appropriately for making them give up grazing some animals to help



control the use of the grasslands.

Reporter: This issue of how to compensate the nomads reasonably and appropriately seems to be a very important one. If we want to ensure there is strong ecological protection, the questions arises of how to also find a reasonable way to allow the development of the animal husbandry industry. I wonder if some ideas so far raised are incompatible: for instance the emphasis on the importance of eco-protection on the one hand, but then there is pressure to rear more animals for maximum economic gains on the other. By combining the strengths of modern science and the wisdoms of nomadic traditions, is it possible for Sanjiangyuan to initiate a stage of ecological development by “leap-frogging” to an industrialization phase of its animal farming practices?

Yang: We cannot ask the nomads to keep their relative low standard of living just to protect Sanjiangyuan’s ecosystem. Thus we are seeking a point where protection and development meet. In other words a way to achieve sustainable development that suits the local conditions has to be found. However, sometimes there is inertia caused by the habit of only thinking from a production angle and looking at the relationship between humans, animals and the grasslands in a too simplistic and one-dimensional manner. If we were to adopt a development model which industrialized animal farming practices in the region and where a single species of grass was planted, it would be impossible to preserve biodiversity. In the old days, many nomads would rather die than let their animals suffer and that is a good illustration that the relationship between man and nature is not as simple as scientists imagine. To help the nomads achieve a better standard of living is not an easy task. Ecologically sound development calls for diversity and a lot can be done to find a meeting point between the preserving the eco-system and maintaining development that will benefit both the grasslands and the livestock. Eco-tourism and grassland culture may offer new income opportunities. Animal husbandry and crop farming regions can enter into co-operation in which the latter could help the former by providing fodder whenever there are natural disasters and help to raise the value of animal products. Then each region just needs to work out the smaller details on its own sustainable development plan.

Various scholars have proposed this “leap-frogging” to an industrialization stage of animal farming and it also corresponds with the plan to develop the region scientifically. In the past, we believed it was good to industrialize crop farming and animal farming. But there are vast differences between industry, crop and animal farming. Agriculture cannot simply be industrialized in a region like the Qinghai-Tibet Plateau because of its distinct natural and climatic conditions.

While it might be appropriate for other regions to plant man-made grass strains and use genetic techniques to improve yields, this would be difficult in Sanjiangyuan. We simply can’t transplant development models from the West here. Sanjiangyuan needs its own ecologically sound development model.

Reporter: During our investigation in Qinghai we heard from many nomads who said they did not believe that over-grazing was the main cause of the deterioration of the grasslands. They said they believe climate change, mining and the “Household Responsibility System” are the mains reasons for the deterioration. Privatization of the land has put a stop to the nomadic way of life and created a stationary lifestyle instead. Do you believe over-grazing is the main reason for the grassland degeneration in Sanjiangyuan?

Yang: I would like to qualify the term “over-grazing” first with two modifiers. The first one is “regional.” “Over-grazing” is the natural result from a rapid growth of the population on the one hand and relatively limited area of grassland on the other in some areas. But it is important to note such over-grazing is regional, it only occurs in some areas. The other modifier is “seasonal.” The nomads often split their pastureland into winter and summer pasturelands. The summer pastures usually cover a larger area and are located at higher altitudes where the grazing time is shorter. These areas are not likely to be over-grazed. However, during winter and spring, the animals are grazed at lower altitudes in the valley where it is warmer and there is less rainfall. Because of limited space in the valley where bushes or woody bushes [suffrutescent plants] of lower edibility grow the animals are grazed for longer periods of time. And because of this we have seasonal over-grazing. Moreover, the plants of the Qinghai-Tibet Plateau grasslands are highly susceptible to climate fluctuations, so in years of climate abnormality or extremity, over-grazing can also take place. Therefore, in order to analyze whether over-grazing is causing grassland deterioration you have to take into account the time of year and where the grazing is taking place.

The nomads are reluctant to accept that over-grazing exists but they do confess that in the past they did rear too many animals and sold them for slaughter, and thus as a consequence they have committed sins and the grassland is suffering.. In fact, this is just their way of saying that there was over-grazing and that they accept that they used to own too many animals. However, they will never accept that the nomadic lifestyle can cause grassland degeneration and they do not have a word for “over-grazing” in their language. They see it as punishment for killing too many animals and committing too many sins and this is their way of accepting the over-grazing accusation.

Reporter: The nomads said that when they kept animals before they would often move from pasture to pasture, sometimes staying so short a time that they even did not have enough time to build a fireplace. They said the grasslands and the animals were in good shape. But when they are forced to keep their animals in one place, so-called "sedentary husbandry," they are worried that they are over-grazing. Even though the number of animals does not change, but because they are not moving, their animals will over-graze the single patch of ground they have been given. So far, this kind of over-grazing has not really been a big part of the main discussion. The issue of over-grazing has only been examined under the context of the size of the herds but not from the fact that the way the animals are being herded is changing. Is this one of the reasons that the issue of over-grazing is still so contentious?

Yang: That is true. On the Qinghai-Tibet Plateau, nomads have traditionally moved from grassland to grassland. This practice has maintained a balance between allowing the grass to recover and giving the animals enough time to graze. Since the "Household Responsibility System" was introduced we have come across many unexpected problems. While it is true that this system allows investment and output on the farmland to be artificially controlled, the good management of the natural grasslands cannot be achieved with mere hard labor and investment. Moreover, operation costs have risen because each household is now working individually. For example, in the past if 100 cattle required one person's care, under the "Household Responsibility System" these 100 cattle are now distributed between two or three households. In the past, livestock could wander about freely, but now they have to be contained and it is costly to keep one's livestock from roaming into someone else's pastureland under the "Household System." In the past, the cattle were grouped by age and gender and managed separately but this cannot be done under the "Household System." Of course, the "Household System" has its benefits too. It protects the nomads' private interests for example. So there is no easy solution for this tricky situation with many different elements.

For a long time, people thought the nomadic lifestyle was a backward way of conducting animal farming. Some people thought that living in tents instead of houses was also very backward. It is incorrect to look only at the tools people are using and use that to judge whether they are advanced or backward. In fact the nomads have been able to balance the needs of the grasslands with the needs of their animals and the needs of nature for many generations. It is very important that we step up research on the nomadic lifestyle. The results from this research can be used to help and guide the nomads in improving their lives.

For example, science can help them with more accurate weather forecasts.

Reporter: As well as the issue of "over-grazing," we came across a wide variety of opinions on the topic of environmental protection. There are strong differences between the nomads and the prevailing thinking on this in society at large; for example, on the issue of banning mining on the grasslands, the control of pests and the establishment of reserves. While both have the same goal – conservation – how do we reconcile these differences? It seems to be too simplistic to simply say one is right and the other is wrong. In fact, sometimes they both seem to be saying the same thing although on the face of it they look conflicting. Since the issue is so complex it seems that the key is better communication.

Yang: Yes. Under many different circumstances, people use different words for the same thing. For instance, the term "reserve" comes from international terminology. Following the establishment of the first national park and its management system in the United States, reserves and management systems have been founded in other countries based on the same model. The Sangjiangyuan Nature Reserve was established in this manner. We know that the nomads on the Qinghai-Tibet Plateau worship and protect the holy mountains, lakes and wildlife because of their religious beliefs. Although the language of the two sides is different, they have similar goals of protection and I think they can complement each other.

It is not true that mining only affects a small part of the grasslands for a limited amount of time. Pollution from mining activities can spread to a large area through the contamination of water, air and earth. The authorities are beginning to pay more and more attention to this and the government of Qinghai province has shut down some small gold mines. When the nomads say that the gold miners have gouged out the heart of the land, they are speaking from both a religious perspective and the fact that they cannot share in the profits of the mining. They are therefore unsupportive and in agreement with the government policy of protecting the Sanjiangyuan area in this respect.

The prevailing view is that rodents are the second key cause of grassland degeneration after over-grazing. Because of this, pest control via the spread of pesticides is often used as one of the ways to halt the deterioration of the grasslands. Of course, pesticides also harm other parts of the food chain, for example the animals that eat the rodents such as birds of prey and foxes. The nomads don't blame the pika for the grasslands' problems because they consider the pika a natural part of the grasslands. Their view is simple but it is holistic. Because of their religion they are not allowed to kill so they are not generally willing to take part in pest control.

Reporter: It seems there are two totally different knowledge systems applied to the problem of the grasslands. Since coming back from our Sanjiangyuan trip we have all been confused about why there is such a huge gap between the two ways of looking at the plateau. Now, as greater environmental protection efforts are made for Sanjiangyuan, we can expect to see faster and greater changes. How will we bring these two knowledge systems closer together?

Yang: From my studies on the Qinghai-Tibet Plateau, I have discovered that the nomads separate their yak herds into six different groups: one-year-olds, two-year-olds, three-year-olds, bulls, milk cows and cows producing no milk. Each group has a different name. These different groups are grazed in different paddocks. The nomads really know their animals and really know the grasslands. They haven't attained this knowledge from books or study, or by conducting laboratory experiments. While the nomads' beliefs and practices may appear simple, they are actually quite complex and fairly comprehensive. They make decisions on where to herd and which animals to herd based on many factors. For the scientist, for example, if we want to investigate how two different species of grass grow we can do experiments in a laboratory. But for the nomads, they think about all sorts of conditions before deciding on their grazing practices which includes such things as the weather, what other nomads are doing, their cultural practices and their religious beliefs. Their decisions are very complex.

Science uses a deductive approach to arrive at a simple conclusion. Science is an import from outside. A single experiment is considered inconclusive and scientists must do many repeat experiments to arrive at a conclusion. Scientific knowledge comes from a linear system whereas local wisdom comes from an interleaved network. Unfortunately, local knowledge has not been given the proper respect it deserves so far. Scientists do not make any effort to incorporate local knowledge into their research. It is just like when people do not understand why the nomads prefer to live in tents rather than houses. We apply our own standards of comfort to the nomads but we have not first considered that the nomads' concept of comfort may be different from our own.

But we also need to realize local knowledge has its limitations. We need to connect both sources of knowledge – that of the nomads and that of science – not reject one or the other. This will streamline the work on the plateau. We urgently need to connect the two cultures.

R: How can we do that? How can we connect the two cultures? We are on the outside, and so what can outsiders do? Please could you give us your opinion from your own personal experiences?

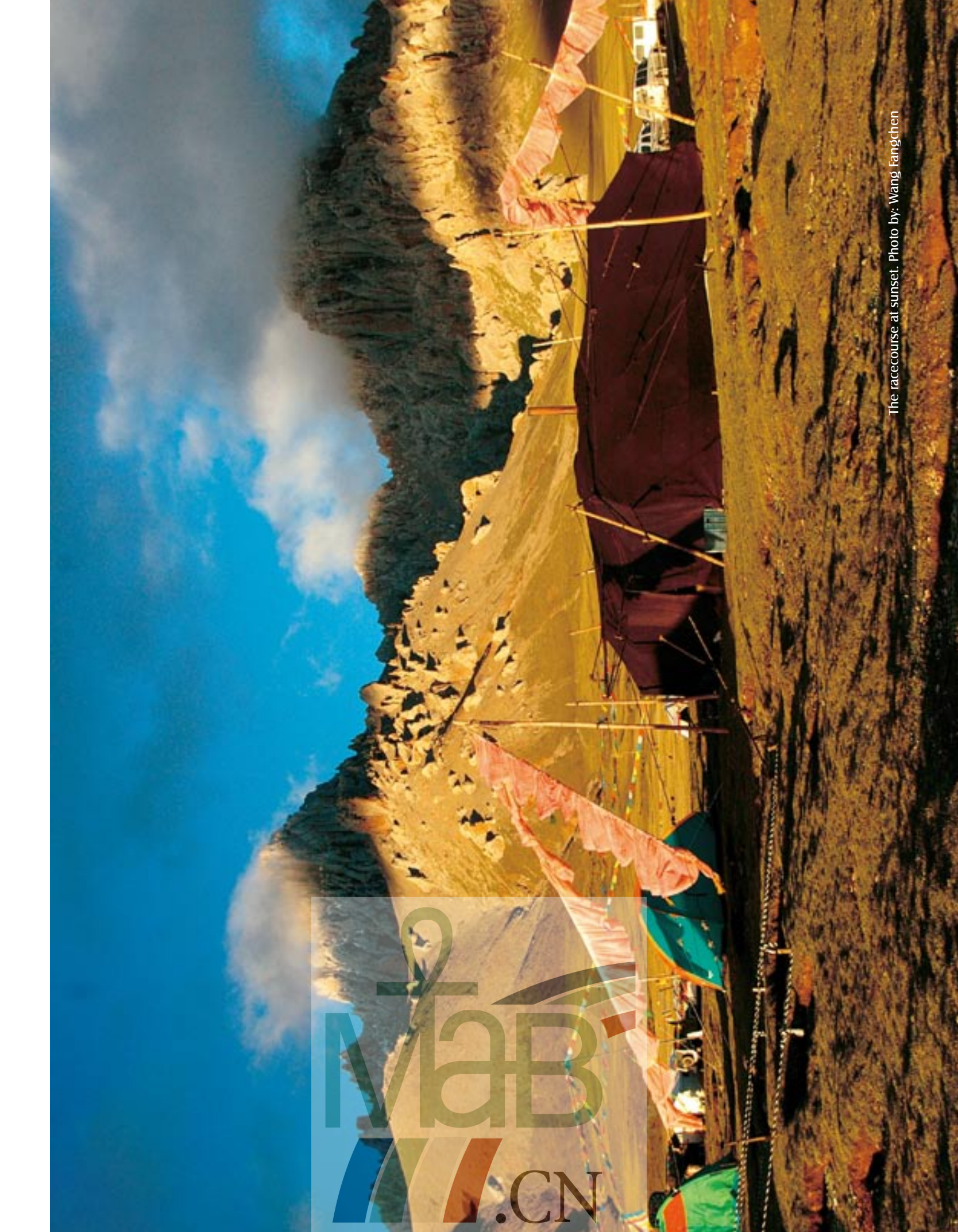
Yang: I majored in natural sciences: I studied Botany

as an undergraduate and Systematic Botany for my postgraduate studies. Back in 1997 I started work as a botanist and began to interact with ethnic minorities. As well studying plant life I also studied the local people who were using those plants and their local knowledge on those plants so I naturally built up a number of contacts with those people. Firstly, I was shocked that they knew so much that I didn't know. In fact their knowledge pool was at least as big as mine – a researcher who had studied for years in universities. They know all about the different kinds of species, the ecosystem and the land at different altitudes. Secondly, I was surprised that their knowledge was actually a better basis for making local decisions on development. While science can give us many answers we can also gain a lot of knowledge from local people.

However, communication between scientists and local people is not very easy particularly because of the different language we use to describe things. I have a lot of examples to illustrate this problem. When we used to survey local communities, particularly in ethnic minority regions, we needed the help of a translator. By using a translator, we thought, we would have no problem in getting across the meaning of our questions. But in reality that was not the case. There were frequent misinterpretations because of this problem. When I was doing some botanic research in an ethnic minority region in southwestern China, I found it very difficult to communicate with the locals. That is why many anthropologists urge scientists to learn the local dialect and to get some experience of the local situation before starting any research.

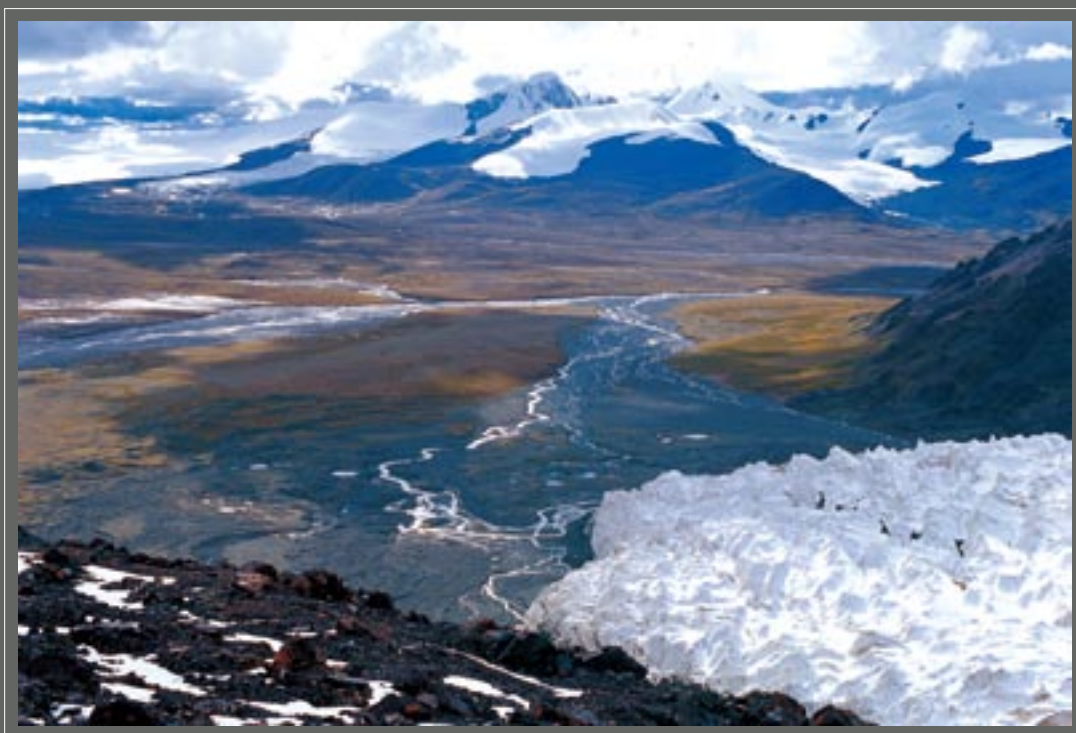
I have a tentative plan to integrate science with local knowledge by having scientists and nomads working together to set up an indexing and surveillance system for grassland assessment. I hope that such a system will be possible and scientifically sound and that the nomads can help in its establishment and execution.

British scientist, C.P. Snow wrote a book called "The Two Cultures and The Scientific Revolution." He worked at Cambridge University during the day and wrote and exchanged views with artists and writers by night. He has suggested that science and the humanities needed to communicate. As a scientist, I agree with Snow. I also need to learn how to talk with non-scientists and improve my understanding of the world both from scientific and cultural sources.



The racecourse at sunset. Photo by: Wang Fangchen





Glaciers at Sanjiangyuan. Photo by: Yang Yong

