


Releasing Lives on the Grasslands of Amdo: Entanglements of Human and Animal Vitality

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t the end of a long spring day, 26-year-old herder Tshe ring² came home after selling caterpillar fungus in the township seat. His wife Lha mo (28) had just arrived a few minutes earlier from herding the lactating female yaks and their calves back home.³ She handed him a cup of milk tea and went out to tether the animals for the night. After sipping his tea, Tshe ring took a set of five coloured silken ribbons, a thick needle and a piece of braided white wool out of a drawer and joined Lha mo. She skilfully approached a black, hornless female yak, whom she had already tethered, and bound its front legs with a rope in order to keep it quiet.⁴ Then Tshe ring braided a tuft of the animal's hump hair and sewed the ribbons to it, while speaking in a low voice to the animal:

A, fortunate one! From today onwards, your life is redeemed. Go roam freely in the mountains and eat the grass, go roam freely in the valleys and drink the water. I will not sell you for money, I will not slaughter you for meat.⁵

This ritual act was Tshe ring and Lha mo's contribution to the collective release of animal lives their pastoral community was engaged in at the moment. A few days before, a community leader had

¹ I am indebted to Puntsok Wangyal for his invaluable help with the transcription and discussion of audio recordings. I also wish to thank Katia Buffetrille, the two anonymous reviewers and the editor for their insightful and helpful comments.

² I use pseudonyms to protect the privacy of my interlocutors.

³ The general term for a female yak in Tibetan is 'bri, and the specific term for lactating ones is *bzhon ma*. For the ease of reading, I will refer to 'bri as "female yaks" and will use the expression "yak milk cow" when emphasizing their lactating condition.

⁴ When milking, women evaluate the tameness of their lactating female yaks and tie the front legs, as well as the rear ones occasionally, if the animal is prone to moving or kicking and destabilizing the milk pail or the milker.

⁵ *a g.yang la ma khyod de ring nas zung tshe blu yin/ khyod la yan nas song bas rtswa zol lung yan nas song bas chu thungs/ btsongs nas rin mi len/ bshas nas sha mi za.*

asked his fellow community members to release lives and chant *Sgrol ma*⁶ on behalf of an incarnate lama of the local monastery. Using a popular instant messaging application, he informed the community that the lama was sick and such ritual actions would be beneficial to his health. Representatives of each household responded by stating the number of *Sgrol ma* they would chant and the number and species of the animals to be released, and so Tshe ring did accordingly.

1. Introduction

Among the horses, yaks and sheep that graze on the alpine meadows of the Tibetan Plateau, some individuals such as Tshe ring and Lha mo's hornless black female yak enjoy a special status, owing to which their owners refrain from selling and slaughtering them. Often marked by coloured silken ribbons hanging from their ears or manes, these animals are excluded from both the market and exchanges among kin and neighbors. By protecting their lives and keeping them in the herds, pastoralists contribute to the wellbeing of the more-than-human communities in which they live.

This article is based on fieldwork conducted in Sog po,⁷ a pastoral area situated in the northeastern Tibetan region of Amdo, over a period of 13 months between July 2016 and December 2018. My research engages with the ways pastoralists relate to their herd animals and to other, non-human, agents inhabiting their environment. More specifically, this article focuses on one particular dimension of the human-animal encounter, that is, the freeing of animal lives by Sog po pastoralists. For this purpose, I spent most of my time in two of the county's pastoral communities, where I was able to observe both daily interactions between herders and their animals and the more occasional performance of life liberation rituals. In addition, I carried out interviews with herders on their animal release practice.

⁶ Chanting *Sgrol ma* refers to the practice of reciting the mantra associated with the feminine bodhisattva figure, *Sgrol ma* (Skt. *Tārā*), whose name means the "Saviour" or the "Liberator." Among other things, this bodhisattva is associated with longevity and compassion.

⁷ Sog po (Chin. Henan 河南) is a Mongolian polity established at the beginning of the 18th century by the descendants of the Khoshut rulers of the Kokonor, the far northeastern stretch of the Tibetan Plateau. After its incorporation into the People's Republic of China (PRC) in 1952, it was subsequently transformed into a Mongol autonomous county belonging to the Rma lho (Chin. Huangnan 黄南) prefecture of the Mtsho sngon (Chin. Qinghai) province. The unique Tibetan-Mongolian identity of the people of Sog po is discussed in Dhondhup and Diemberger 2002, Diemberger 2007, Shinjilt 2007, Roche 2016, and Wallenböck 2016.

In Tibetan, the freeing of animal lives is known by the term *tshe thar*, a composite word combining the noun “life” (*tshe*) with the verb “to be liberated” or “to be set free” (*thar*). *Tshe thar* is used both as a verb referring to the releasing action and as a noun designating the object of this action, which, besides animals, may also include plants.⁸ Hereafter, I refer to *tshe thar* by using interchangeably the verbs “to release,” “to liberate,” “to free” or “to spare.” *Tshe thar*, however, is only a general category encompassing different types of animal release rituals. In this article, I would like to discuss one specific type of life release practice termed as *srog blu* (i.e., “life redeeming”)⁹ and to shed some light on three aspects of this practice that previous scholarship on life liberation had addressed only succinctly.

First of all, I suggest that the redeeming of animal lives, as practised by pastoralists in Sog po, is not just a virtuous act generating merit, but it is also a practice of longevity, often prescribed for restoring health. This connection between life liberation and human longevity and health goes beyond normative Buddhist understandings and incentives for the practice, such as compassion towards animals or the aforementioned merit accumulation.

Secondly, I argue that beyond concerns for one’s present and future lives, the freeing of animal lives also stands as an expression of the particular relationship that herders develop with individual animals of their herds. That is why life liberation practices in Sog po can not be fully accessed without taking into consideration the careful attention herders pay to the individuality of their animals and the intimate relationships that emerge in the course of herding work. Such attention to animal individuality is an interesting juxtaposition to the universal notion of compassion that justifies, at least from a Buddhist doctrinal point of view, the release of animal lives.

Thirdly, I maintain that, in contrast to discourses advocating for animal release as an alternative to participation in an increasingly marketized herding economy, for pastoralists in the Sog po area, the practice of releasing animal lives is compatible with engagement in the livestock market.

In order to substantiate these three points, I will begin with an introduction of the Tibetan tradition of life liberation and will sketch

⁸ In Sog po, pastoralists also liberate trees. In the neighboring Rtse khog (Chin. Zeku 泽库) county of the Qinghai province, the practice was also witnessed by Shiho Ebihara (personal communication, April 24, 2017). According to my interlocutors, places where, beyond the official regulations, bans on hunting and logging trees exist are also known as *tshe thar*. For a study on the practice of “sealing” of protected areas, see Huber 2004.

⁹ A more detailed discussion of this term and its translation can be found in the next section of the article.

out the different types of animal release practices identified in Sog po. I will then briefly present the rise of the animal release movement in eastern Tibet and look at normative Buddhist understandings of the practice advocated by the religious leaders standing at the head of this movement. From there I will build on the complex relationship that Sog po pastoralists nurture with their livestock animals through the action of redeeming lives. I will focus on how the act of protecting the lives of certain herd animals is thought to contribute to the longevity and vitality of humans and will consider the temporal dimensions of this connection between human and non-human members of the household. Finally, I will look at the selection of the to-be-released animals, for it brings to the fore the keen attention herders pay to animal individuality and their use of *srog blu* rituals as a way for expressing intimate human-animal bonds.

2. *Animals Set Aside*

Far from being restricted to the Tibetan highlands, saving animals from captivity or death is a widespread practice throughout Asia, from the Pacific shores to the Ural Mountains and the Arctic tundra. In Buddhist communities of East and Southeast Asia, animals held in captivity are purchased and ceremonially released into their natural habitat as a means of cultivating compassion and obtaining merit.¹⁰ In pastoral regions of North and Central Asia, some with little or no Buddhist influence, herd animals are spared domestic labor, sale, and slaughter and are consecrated to deities and spirits in order to enhance the fortune of the domestic group.¹¹ The Tibetan cultural world seems to be a particularly fertile ground for the development of animal release rituals: it is a place where both the North and the East Asian traditions meet and give rise to a set of diverse practices and associated meanings.

The history of life liberation in Tibet is many centuries long: David Holler found the first incidence of *tshe thar* in the hagiography of the 11th-century translator Rwa lo tsa ba Rdo rje grags pa, authored by Rwa Ye shes seng ge in the 13th century or later.¹² Since that time and up to this day, references to animal release as an exemplary virtuous action have recurrently appeared in biographical (*rnam thar*) literature, as well as in *das log* stories, that is, accounts of people who have returned

¹⁰ See Law 1994, Shiu and Stokes 2008, Smith 1999 or Yang 2015.

¹¹ See Charlier 2012, Chiodo 1992, Fijn 2011: 230–234, Lavrillier 2005: 290–300, Marchina 2015: 97–102, Stépanoff 2011, and Vitebsky 2005: 278–281.

¹² Holler 2002: 210–211.

from death.¹³ Besides being documented through time, the practice of releasing animals is also acknowledged across space: research conducted in different Tibetan areas within the People's Republic of China (PRC) as well as in some areas of Nepal and northern India testifies to that.¹⁴

Ethnographic approaches to life liberation have developed in recent years from passing mentions of animal release rituals to contributions specifically dealing with several aspects of these practices. Researchers highlight the increasing popularity of animal release in Tibetan areas of the PRC, particularly in pastoral areas of eastern Tibet, where a number of charismatic religious leaders have launched an animal release movement encouraging local herders to restrain from sale and slaughter of the livestock.¹⁵

Scholars also point to the fact that *tshe thar* is only a general category encompassing different practices or subcategories of life release, each with its own proper name. In order to reveal the diversity found within the *tshe thar* umbrella term, David Holler proposed a typology of release practices that was subsequently taken up by Gillian Tan and later Yusuke Bessho, who refined the previous classifications with their ethnographical insights.¹⁶ These contributions are illustrative of the regional variation that characterizes animal release and the rich terminology that goes along with it.

Sog po pastoralists release the lives of bovines (yaks, cattle or yak-cattle hybrids), sheep, goats, and horses.¹⁷ These are the animals that, in the current pastoral economy of Sog po, have use value.¹⁸ Despite

¹³ Besides these traditional literary genres, Holler also refers to Tibetan texts specifically dealing with the origins and benefits of life liberation as well as written guides with instructions on how to perform the *tshe thar* ritual (Holler 2002: 211–212). For contemporary textual and audiovisual compositions on life liberation, see Gayley 2013.

¹⁴ For animal release practices in Tibetan areas of the PRC, see Bessho 2019, Chos bstan rgyal 2014: 168–180, Da Col 2012, Gaerrang 2012 & 2017, Holler 2002, Levine 2019, Tan 2016, and Thargyal 2007: 75. For animal release in India, refer to Rösing 2006: 96–98 and Gerke 2012: 169–176. For life release practices in Nepal, see Childs 2004: 122.

¹⁵ See Gaerrang 2012 & 2017 and Gayley 2013 for accounts of this movement.

¹⁶ See Holler 2002: 218–219, Tan 2016: 4–5, and Bessho 2019.

¹⁷ However, goats are rarely bred in Sog po.

¹⁸ Even though horses are marginal animals in terms of pastoral labour and horse meat is not consumed in the area, renouncing the possibility of exchanging or selling them comes to a high cost to pastoralists, for horses are the most lucrative species of all those herded on the plateau. Pastoralists also keep dogs as guardians of their household property and livestock. Holler mentions dogs of protector deities (*mgon khyi*) in his enumeration of the different kinds of liberated animals (Holler 2002: 208). But, in Sog po, I did not encounter any *tshe thar* dog, and pastoralists I interviewed did not think of these animals as the object of any release action.

what the semantic field of freeing, releasing, and liberating may suggest, these animals continue to be part of the herd after acquiring their special status.¹⁹ Their use value is only partially abolished, since they are still producers of dairy and reproducers: females are milked and their offspring does not inherit the *tshe thar* status. The liberated animals account for a proportion that oscillates, in the pastoral households I am familiar with, between 7 to 10% of the household stock.²⁰ Herders distinguish three different practices of setting aside and protecting the life of an animal. The processes through which these animals acquire their particular status and the goals of the releasing action vary. However, what the three practices all share in common is that the animals are spared slaughter and alienation from the household through donation or exchange.

The first type of life liberation is the redeeming of lives (*srog blu* or *tshe blu*²¹), which refers to the practice of setting free captive animals or, in a husbandry context such as that of Sog po pastoralists, renouncing to take the life of a livestock animal or to sell it. In the latter case, herders commit to lifting what binds the animal's lifespan—that is, the possibility of slaughter carried out by the owners themselves or mediated through sale. The practice also excludes donation and exchange of animals, for both these forms of alienation could eventually result in slaughter. The ritual formula uttered by Tshe ring in the beginning of the article precisely expresses the herder's promise

¹⁹ An exception to this is Childs' description of the offering of a yak to a mountain deity in the Nub ri valley of Nepal as a result of which the animal was released into the wild (Childs 2004: 122). Similarly, Huber mentions the existence of *tshe thar* yaks in the upper pilgrimage routes of the mount Tsa ri in Southern Tibet (Huber 1999: 229). The author describes these yaks as feral and states that during summer, they were tended by the pilgrimage resthouse keepers (Huber 1999: 242n39).

²⁰ This figure is similar to the one reported by Holler (Holler 2002: 222), but lower than Tan's 15% (Tan 2016: 5) and Levine's over 20% for other areas of eastern Tibet (Levine 2019: 11). The latter figure is probably exaggerated (personal communication with Nancy Levine, July 9, 2019). According to Chos bstan rgyal, "pastoralists typically keep around ten head of livestock as *tshe thar*" (Chos bstan rgyal 2014: 172).

²¹ *Tshe* and *srog* both mean "life" in Tibetan, but in *srog* the emphasis is on vitality, while *tshe* refers to the duration of life. *Tshe blu* is the word used by pastoralists in the western part of Sog po district, while in the eastern part, they employ the term *srog blu*. The second syllable of *srog blu* has several spellings, and, therefore, can be translated in different ways. *Blu* is the humilific form of the verb "to buy" or "to redeem," and I prefer this spelling because it reflects the local pronunciation and it is found in local publications about the practice. *Bslu* and *slu*, as Holler (Holler 2002) and Tucci (Tucci 1980: 176) respectively spell it, mean "ransom" or "redeem." So does *glud*, the form used by Tan (Tan 2016: 4) and Nebesky-Wojkowitz (Nebesky-Wojkowitz 1996: 507). In the following pages, I will use the English term "to redeem" to refer to the practice of *srog/tshe blu*.

to protect his female yak's life. For herders, redeeming lives is an enactment of the Buddhist paramount virtue of compassion (*snying rje*) and, therefore, it is a way to accumulate merit (*bsod nams*) as well as a means to enhance human longevity.²² Along with the aforementioned, herders may have additional motivations and hopes that I will discuss further in the article.

The consecration and offering of herd animals to the spiritual beings that are part of the social world of pastoralists is another type of life liberation practice in which animals are also exempted from consumption and circulation in the livestock market. They become, instead, people's gifts to household protector deities (*srung ma*) or spiritual beings inhabiting the environment, such as mountain deities (*gzhi bdag*) or spirits of water bodies and the underground (*klu*).²³ In Sog po, herders refer to these animals as "*tshe thar*" or call them with different names that are specific to the species and sex of the animal or to the type of deity to whom they are dedicated: consecrated yak milk cows, for example, are known as *zhol mo*. These animals correspond to Holler's category of "god-animals" (*lha zog*) and to the term "god-yaks" (*lha g.yag*) documented by Tan.²⁴ Their owners are no longer the herders, but the deities themselves. By gifting these spiritual beings a mount or a yak milk cow, herders seek to please them and expect, in return, the enhancement of the fortune that will ensure the successful multiplication of their herds and the protection from diseases or predators' attacks. Contrary to *srog blu*, *lha zog* animals have to be replaced after death by new individuals who undergo the ritual and acquire the predecessors' status.

The third type of release practice consists in singling out certain animals from the herd for their connection to fortune (*g.yang*). Fortune animals (or *g.yang* animals) are individuals with singular traits—most often physical deviances—which herders read as signs of a particularly high concentration of fortune. In order to prevent it from leaving the household, a circumstance that would compromise the prosperity not only of the livestock but also the human members of the domestic group, fortune animals stay within the herd and are not slaughtered or exchanged. Contrary to *srog blu* and *lha zog* animals, however, no ritual is performed on *g.yang* animals, nor are they marked with silken ribbons. The singularity of these animals is not produced through ritual work, but it is rather a matter of their owner's

²² Alternatively, the effects of this action may be transferred to a third person on whose behalf the ritual is performed.

²³ The offering of animals to deities is yet another example of the extension of the domain of sociality to non-human agents, in this case divine beings, characteristic of Tibetan pastoral societies.

²⁴ Holler 2002: 208 and Tan 2016: 4.

careful attention to inter-individual variation within a species. Deviant traits of an individual animal are interpreted as signs of the presence of fortune, a practice that bears witness to pastoralists' elaborate treatment of atypical individuals within the herd.

As different as the release actions described above may be, one must be cautious before setting discrete boundaries between them, for this might not accurately reflect the reality of pastoralists' practice. Different types of release often overlap in such a way that the boundaries between them become blurred. What they all share in common is a concern for the protection of the life of individual members of the herd. They also establish a connection between the protection of animals' lives and the strengthening of the vitality of other living beings—other animals of the household herd, territorial divine beings or human members of the household. Given that the limited space here does not allow for all forms of life release to be addressed, the following pages are devoted to the discussion of only a few aspects of the practice of redeeming animal lives. However, one should keep in mind that this particular form of life release does not exist in isolation but is part of a wider array of animal release practices.

3. Cultivating Compassion

In the first years of the new millennium, as the People's Republic of China launched an ambitious campaign to bring development to its Western regions, voices were raised in eastern Tibet challenging the ways in which this development should be achieved.²⁵ China's development project was based on the premise that participation in the market economy was crucial for the backward Western regions in order to catch up with the modernized Eastern provinces. In pastoral areas of the Tibetan Plateau, this campaign was translated into state-backed efforts to integrate livestock herding into the market economy. The turn from a system of extensive pastoralism into an intensive one was not new, as rangeland policies had taken this direction since the 1980s reforms. The new development programs intensified the process, which resulted in herders selling ever-growing numbers of herd animals to the meat market. Concerned by such increase in livestock slaughter, the charismatic founder of the Serta Larung Buddhist Academy of the Five Sciences (Gser thang bla rung dgon rig lnga'i nang bstan slob grwa, commonly known as Bla rung sgar)

²⁵ The campaign, known as "Open Up the West" (Chin. Xibudakaifa 西部大开发), started in the year 2000 and its definition of the "West" includes all Tibetan areas within the PRC.

Mkhan po²⁶ 'Jigs med phun tshogs (1933–2004) launched an animal release movement encouraging herders to liberate the lives of their animals.²⁷ Mkhan po 'Jigs med phun tshogs and the disciples who succeeded him at the head of the movement, particularly Mkhan po Tshul khriṃs blo gros (b. 1962), have focused their teachings on the negative consequences of killing and the importance of compassion towards all sentient beings, including the animals that make up pastoralists' herds.²⁸ They have used their enormous influence on the lay pastoral communities of eastern Tibet to encourage herders to forgo selling livestock for slaughter.²⁹

The compassionate treatment of animals, for which the Bla rung sgar religious leaders advocate, rises from a long-standing Buddhist concern for animal ethics.³⁰ As beings endowed with sentience, animals experience suffering and seek to escape from it. They are not ontologically distinct from humans (or other sentient beings) but instead are placed in a continuum hierarchically divided into six realms. The law of cause and effect subjects all beings in these six realms to a cycle of rebirth (Skt. *saṃsāra*) characterized by suffering. Movement within this potentially endless wheel of existences is determined by the karmic force, or moral value, of past deeds. In other words, beings circulate in the potentially infinite time frame of the *saṃsāra* and may morph into different types of existence depending on the morality or immorality of their actions. Due to the mutability of forms that a being may adopt across lifetimes and the virtually infinite time frame of the *saṃsāra*, all sentient beings have the potential to be each other's parents in past and future lifetimes. This is the idea encapsulated in the Tibetan

²⁶ *Mkhan po* is the Tibetan Buddhist academic title obtained after completing a rigorous course of philosophical study. It is the highest degree of studies awarded in the Rnying ma school of Tibetan Buddhism.

²⁷ Although the genesis of Mkhan po 'Jigs med phun tshogs' life release advocacy had begun as early as in the 1990s, in 2000, the same year as the "Open Up the West" campaign started, he gave an important speech requesting pastoralists to forgo the sale of livestock for slaughter (Gayley 2013: 255–258).

²⁸ See Gayley 2013 & 2017, Barstow 2017, and Hardie 2019 for Bla rung sgar's animal welfare movement. See Robin 2009 for a depiction of *tshé thar* in contemporary Tibetan cinema as a demonstration for the external, non-Tibetan (i.e., mainly Chinese and Western) audiences of a quintessentially compassionate action that is associated with being Tibetan. Her analysis on the ethnic character of compassion resonates with the works of Gaerrang 2012 and Gayley 2013.

²⁹ The impacts of the animal release movement on pastoralists of eastern Tibet are well documented by Gaerrang (Gaerrang 2012 & 2017) and Gillian Tan (Tan 2016). Their works discuss how herders negotiate two competing understandings of herd animals—the market logic that sees them as a commodity on the one hand and the Buddhist view of animals as sentient beings worth of human compassion on the other—by looking at their decisions regarding livestock sales and life release.

³⁰ For the doctrinal foundations of Tibetan Buddhist masters' advocacy for animal welfare, see Barstow 2019a and Gayley 2017.

expression “all beings have been our mothers in the past” (*mar gyur sems can thams cad*), which is frequently invoked in religious teachings on animal liberation, as well as in life redeeming prayers.³¹

Besides bringing animals closer to humans through a reference to past kinship bonds, advocates for sparing animal lives also put a special emphasis on the animals’ ability to experience pain. Their teachings often describe in great detail the suffering and fear that livestock animals feel during the process of sale and slaughter. Through visualisations and examples, these Buddhist teachers ask their followers to identify with the animal’s feelings, thus bridging the distance between human and animal forms of sentience.³² Focusing on filial relationships connecting present humans and animals in past lives, as well as identifying with animals’ experience of fear and pain are two ways of triggering human compassion towards animals.

Tibetan advocates for animal welfare—from the 18th-century Rnying ma master ‘Jigs med gling pa to today’s Mkhan po Tshul khrim blo gros—repeatedly focused in their teachings on the compassionate treatment of animals. So did the 19th-century Amdo yogin Zhabs dkar,³³ whose life is a paradigmatic example of dedication to the freeing of animal lives. This wandering hermit practiced multiple forms of life release: he used the donations received from his patrons to purchase fish from fishermen and sheep from herders and patiently protected fledglings from a predator eagle while staying on retreat at the Blue Lake’s Mtsho snying Island.³⁴ Zhabs dkar also gave teachings on the faults of taking animal lives and persuaded his followers to take vows to refrain from slaughtering.³⁵ In the end of his autobiography, Zhabs dkar counts the number of animals he saved from death in hundreds of thousands.³⁶

As an enactment of the Buddhist paramount principle of compassion, life liberation not only benefits the released animals but also has a positive impact on the life of the performer of the action. From the perspective of the Buddhist economy of spiritual merit, such moral actions allow their performers to accumulate merit and thus to

³¹ The idea of filial bonds linking humans and animals in past lives can be found in scriptural sources dealing with the compassionate treatment of animals such as the *Lañkāvatāra Sūtra* and the *Mahāparinirvāṇa Sūtra*. Both sutras have been extensively used by Tibetan Buddhist advocates of animal welfare (Barstow 2019b).

³² See Gayley 2017 and Hardie 2019.

³³ Zhabs dkar tshogs drug rang grol (1781–1851).

³⁴ For Zhabs dkar’s use of donations to purchase animal and set them free, see Shabkar 1994: 116, 223. For the story of his saving of the fledglings, refer to Shabkar 1994: 139. The Blue Lake is known in Tibetan language as Mtsho sngon po. Mtsho snying, the island in the middle of its waters, stands for the “lake’s heart.”

³⁵ Shabkar 1994: 327–328, 352, 447, 517, 524.

³⁶ Shabkar 1994: 542.

influence their trajectory in the cycle of rebirths. Freeing lives is one of the ritual actions available to Buddhists for progressing in their spiritual path.

The cultivation of compassion and the accompanying accumulation of merit alone, however, do not fully explain the redeeming of animal lives, since the *srog blu* type of practice is most often performed to address specific concerns for human's health and longevity.³⁷ If taking lives, as advocates of animal release warn, is a serious sin resulting in a shortened human lifetime and a rebirth in the lower realms of existence, freeing animals has opposite karmic consequences. Barbara Gerke's study on conceptions and practices of longevity among Tibetans in the Darjeeling hills stresses how the lifespan is "a negotiable entity that people have and can manipulate."³⁸ Alongside with other ritual practices such as long-life empowerment ceremonies (*tshe dbang*) and longevity attainment practices (*tshe sgrub*), animal release is considered to be particularly effective for prolongating one's lifespan (*tshe*).³⁹

For pastoralists in Sog po, increasing longevity and restoring health lie at the center of their *srog blu* practice. Performing such a ritual is, first and foremost, a therapeutic action that enhances the vitality of a person whose life is perceived to be in danger. Caring for the health and longevity of a certain human calls for the involvement of an animal, with whom a reciprocal relation is established: extending its life affects that of the person who performs the action or, alternatively, that on whose behalf the ritual is conducted. Life redeeming, thus, brings to the fore the important role herd animals play for the health and longevity of their owners.

4. *Extending Animal Lives, Enhancing Vitality*

Three-year old Shes rab had been receiving treatment at the local district hospital for one week, but fever and cough did not recede. He was also losing appetite: the boy refused to eat and even to be nursed. Worried about their son's suffering and his lack of response to medical treatment, Shes rab's family consulted an incarnated lama of the local monastery. The young lama advised them to take the child to the provincial capital and prescribed the release of 13 livestock animals. While the toddler had his pulmonary infection treated in a hospital in

³⁷ The place of human interests in the compassionate treatment of animals is a central issue of animal ethics and the discussion of whether Buddhism can be considered speciesist, see Stewart 2014.

³⁸ Gerke 2012: 9.

³⁹ Gerke 2012: 8.

Xining, his father Nyi ma (28), who had stayed home in the winter pasture, redeemed the lives of eight sheep of the household's flock. Three other households, all kin and neighbors of Shes rab, also redeemed the lives of two female yaks and three sheep, adding up to the total number of 13 animals. As Nyi ma later recounted, he chose the sheep by throwing a sash over the flock several times. The animals upon whom the sash fell were given the *srog blu* status by uttering a simple formula "from today onwards, you are Shes rab's redeemed life."⁴⁰ A week after the release of the sheep and yaks, Shes rab's health was restored.

When I met the family for the first time, Shes rab was a healthy five-year-old boy. I first learned about his disease and recovery one evening when, as I helped Nyi ma's aunt Mtsho mo (32) tether the yak milk cows, she pointed to one of them, a horned animal with a black coat and a light grey muzzle, and told me it was Shes rab's "redeemed life" (*srog blu*). The boy's parents referred to the sheep whose lives they had redeemed for their son in the same way. The individual animals strengthening Shes rab's vitality in a critical moment of his life remain in the herds as embodiments of past acts of care and will be linked to the boy, whose life they support, until they die. In the accounts of the child's disease and healing, Shes rab's parents and grandparents stressed, again and again, how his recovery only started after, as advised by the lama, he was taken to Xining and the animals were released on his behalf.

The connection between redeeming lives and healing emphasized by Shes rab's family is central to the release practice of pastoralists in Sog po. Although preventive *srog blu* rituals for enhancing longevity may be performed at different stages of a person's life cycle, for example at birth or when people reach an advanced age, committing to protect an animal's life is, most often, a therapeutic action for restoring health. When the life of a person is perceived to be threatened by illness or accident, household members consult a religious specialist. After performing a divination (*mo*), this specialist may prescribe the redeeming of animals' lives alongside with other actions—ritual or not—for the removal of obstacles threatening the life of the concerned individual. These religious specialists prescribe the exact number of animals to be released and may as well indicate the species, the sex or the color of the animals' fur. The animals are chosen among those that comprise the household's stock. However, in exceptional occasions when the number of animals to be liberated is very high, religious specialists may prescribe the freeing of other

⁴⁰ *khyod de ring gi nas bstan 'dzin gnam mkha'i srog blu yin*. Nyi ma said he did not tie any ribbons to the *srog blu* animals.

animals such as fish of small size, the cost of which is not as burdensome to the household as livestock. In this case, pastoralists buy captive fish from the market and release them into ponds, streams or lakes.

As seen in She rab's example, the restoring of somebody's health and the lengthening of his or her lifespan may involve other households besides the concerned individual's one. Often, the recipient of the benefits of the *srog blu* practice is not the person who owns the animal and performs the ritual but another one on whose behalf the action is performed. This person can be a relative or a person from the same community. Or, as in the first example opening this article, it can be a religious master of senior age for whom herders redeem animal lives as a way of showing devotion.

Looking at the *srog blu* animals of the herd, household members tell the stories of illness and healing of their kin, community members and religious leaders. The presence of such animals is a living medical history of the family and those they care about. Each *srog blu* animal stands for a social relation and embodies a part of the constellation of past acts of care towards the people a household is linked to through kinship, community or devotional bonds. Social relations are thus reproduced in the *srog blu* practice of herders and are recorded on their herds through the setting aside and marking of individual animals.

On the grasslands of Sog po, the act of redeeming an animal's life is performed by the herders themselves, often without any assistance of a monastic or ritual specialist. The redeeming action is carried out in diverse ways: as a simple agreement between household members to refrain from slaughtering and selling a particular animal or, inversely, an actual ritual performance involving an object (e.g., the silken ribbons held together by a braided piece of white wool), an action performed upon the body of the animal (i.e., attaching the ribbons to its ears or mane) and an act of speech. The latter consists, in its minimal form, of an announcement made to the animal that it holds a new status as a support of the life of a particular person: e.g., "from today onwards, you are She rab's *srog blu*," said the boy's father to the sheep.

More elaborate forms of the *srog blu* prayer usually include a promise to refrain from slaughtering the animal for meat or selling it for money and an encouragement to freely (*yan*) graze the mountain slopes and drink from the valley's stream. The prayer may as well include wishes for all sentient beings to be freed from suffering and for the *srog blu* animal itself to attain spiritual realization. For example,

my interlocutor *a ba*⁴¹ Mgon po skyabs (70) shared a redeeming prayer, which opens with the following verses:

May the teachings of the Buddha spread! May sentient beings enjoy happiness and well-being! May all sentient beings who have been our mothers, from the limit of the sky to the ground, be liberated from the suffering of the lower realms! For you to attain the status of liberation and omniscience! From today onwards, I will not slaughter you for meat [...].⁴²

The prayer then continues with the same ritual formula that Tshe ring uttered while redeeming the life of the black female yak in the first example opening the article.

Speaking to animals is very uncommon for my interlocutors in Sog po.⁴³ This is not to say that herders do not communicate verbally with their animals in the course of daily herding activities. However, they mostly do it through vocalisations, whistles and melodies and they rarely use words with a semantic meaning. During the *srog blu* ritual, herders directly address the animal in Tibetan, using the second person pronoun (*khyod*) and forms in the imperative mode. A herders' message to the *srog blu* animal places it in a particular position, distinct from other, non-redeemed individuals of the herd. The life redemption vow taken by the human establishes a reciprocal relationship with the animal, owing to which extending the latter's lifespan is repaid with an improvement of the former's health and an extension of his or her longevity. After eliminating the possibility of sale and slaughter that would certainly shorten the animal's life, its retained vitality turns into a support of the human's life force.

As much as the redeeming of animal lives connects individual animals and humans in the present existence, this relationship may as well extend beyond the frame of a human's current lifetime. When discussing the benefits of redeeming lives, a significant number of my interlocutors referred to the animals' ability for guiding humans in the

⁴¹ *A ba* is one of the terms used to address fathers in Amdo Tibetan, but it is also employed to refer to elder men of the community.

⁴² *sangs rgyas kyi bstan pa dar spyad/ sems can la bde skyid ldan spyad/ mar gyur gnam mkha'i mtha' dang mnyam pa'i sems can thams cad ngan song dang ngan 'gro gi sdug bsgal las thar spyad/ thar ba dang thams cad mkhyen pa'i go 'phang thob bya'i rgyu'i gis/ de ring nas zung khyod bshas nas sha mi za [...].* A *ba* Mgon po skyab's release prayer is very similar to those documented by Chos bstan rgyal (Chos bstan rgyal 2014: 173–174).

⁴³ One instance when this does happen is during slaughtering, in the moments preceding suffocation when herders express their gratitude to the animal.

afterlife from one state of existence to the other.⁴⁴ After the person who performed the releasing action or on whose behalf the action was performed dies, the *srog blu* animal assumes a psychopomp function: it appears in the intermediate Buddhist state (*bar do*) and assists that person in his or her difficult passage to the next life. Skal bzang, a 48-year-old herder, described this encounter as follows:

After you die, you have to cross a big, big river—the Fordless River of the Dead, it is called. You must cross it, but there is no bridge. As you keep running up and down hopeless because there is no way to cross the river, the yaks, sheep and horses that you have released in this lifetime arrive at the *bar do*, and they carry you to the other side of the river. [Also], you have to travel [through] Yama's Grey Plain of the Dead. It is a huge, huge plain and you have to walk through it. If you have *srog blu* horses, yaks or sheep, they will carry you. This is what nomads say.⁴⁵

This psychopomp function attributed to *srog blu* animals is not shared by everyone though. While most of my interlocutors were familiar with it, the importance they attributed to the role of *srog blu* animals as guides in the intermediate *bar do* state differed significantly from one person to another.⁴⁶

Monastics I discussed the issue with also seemed to have differing, contradictory views on the psychopomp function of *srog blu* animals, some even dismissed it altogether. An incarnate lama from Gtsang Monastery⁴⁷ referred to those who shared such views as “[people] without knowledge of the [Buddhist] doctrine,”⁴⁸ and underlined the lengthening of present and future lives as the main effect of the life

⁴⁴ Chos bstan rgyal and Levine also refer to the liberated animal's role in ensuring a safe passage through the intermediate state and to the next rebirth (Chos bstan rgyal 2014: 174; Levine 2019: 10).

⁴⁵ *shi song nas khyod chu che/ che zhig la brgal dgos ni red/ gshin chu khams pa rab med zer go do go/ yin da min da chu la brgal dgos gal zam pa med la/ khyod chu la brgal thabs med par bkod pa med la yar mar rgyug nas bsdad yod dus da bar khyos zog ra lug ra rta de tsho tshe blu byed yod na 'chi khar thon 'jog rgyu red ya/ yong nas khyod khur nas chu'i phar gar bskyal 'jog ni red/ gshin rje'i gshin thang skya mor bskyod dgos ni red/ thang che che che zhig la rkang thang nas 'gro dgos rgyu red/ de dus yang khyos rta ra zog ra lug ra de tsho [...]* *srog blu yod na khyer nas 'gro rgyu red/ de mo bshad rgyu red 'brog pa gis.*

⁴⁶ Yong 'dzin skyid, a 24-year-old herder, said she was not familiar with *srog blu* animals guiding the deceased through their journey in the *bar do*, but that guardian dogs did. She knew this from elders in her community.

⁴⁷ Gtsang Monastery (Gtsang sgar don grub rab brtan gling) was founded in 1765 on the territory of the Gtsang A rig, one of the six *tsho ba* (i.e., tribes) of Sog po. In 1931, the monastery became part of the 'Ba' (Chin. Tongde 同德) district, which in the current administrative division belongs to the Mtsho lho (Chin. Hainan 海南) prefecture of the Qinghai province (Wallenböck 2017: 203).

⁴⁸ *chos lugs mi shes ni red.*

redeeming action. The lama juxtaposed this effect to the consequences of killing, which are considered to reduce the chances of a human rebirth and shorten the span of both present and future lives.

However, the idea that domestic animals may assist humans in their transitions across lifetimes has a long story in Tibet. It is documented in Old Tibetan funeral texts dating largely to the 9th and 10th centuries.⁴⁹ Contrary to the psychopomp animals sacrificed in early funerary rituals, present day *srog blu* animals are not killed but, instead, have their lifespans extended. Refraining from taking an animal's life is reciprocated on the part of the latter by its assistance in the human's afterlife. The practice of life redeeming, as understood by herders who recognize in their *srog blu* animals the ability for guiding them across lifetimes, brings the relationship between humans and their animals to temporal and spatial dimensions that go beyond those of the present existence. The connection that is established at the moment of the life redeeming action does not cease after the death of the involved beings but instead continues into the intermediate state and until the human consciousness reaches the next rebirth, in this way suggesting multiple temporalities of the life redeeming encounter.

The *srog blu* practice of pastoralists in Sog po and the ways people reflect on their connection to the liberated animals are diverse. Not all pastoralists perform the ritual alike nor do they imagine their relation to the animal whose life they have redeemed in the same way.⁵⁰ However, a concern for the health and longevity of humans and the idea that animals have a capacity to act upon them remain at the center of the *srog blu* encounter. Therefore, the vitality of humans is not viewed as a matter of humans alone, but as one that involves non-human members of the domestic group, i.e., the animals making up their herds. In the *srog blu* ritual, the removal of the obstacles binding the life of a herd animal, namely the power to take its life, lifts the obstructions to the human's lifespan. The vitality of the animal is not traded but instead multiplied: extending the life of the animal lengthens, in its turn, the lifespan of the human.

5. Attending to Animal Individuality

Sog po's mobile pastoralists live, work, and move across seasonal pastures with their yaks, sheep, and horses. The animals released by pastoralists are, with few exceptions, individuals belonging to the

⁴⁹ See Dotson 2018, Stein 1971, and Lalou 1952.

⁵⁰ Some herders do not conduct any ritual gesture upon the animal whose life is about to be redeemed.

herds they raise. Far from seeing them as “an undifferentiated mass of food on the hoof,” herders perceive their herds as “a social unit made up of individualities united by relations of descent, friendship, and hierarchy.”⁵¹ The intricate knowledge pastoralists have of the individuals that compose their herds and the relations between these animals is at the basis of their herding work and their livestock management decisions. The comprehensive naming system used to refer to yaks, sheep, and horses is indicative of how pastoralists’ senses become finely attuned to the morphological diversity characteristic of their herds. This naming system distinguishes animals according to age, sex, color and pattern of the coat, color of the muzzle, presence or absence of horns, shape of the horns and even strength or reproductive status.⁵² The particular treatment of the uncommon fortune animals (*g.yang*) mentioned earlier is yet another indication of the keen attention herders pay to animal singularity.

Released animals are individuals whose morphological and psychological traits, biographies and relations with other individuals within the herd are well known to human members of the household. It is precisely these particular characteristics of individual animals and the relations they develop with humans that herders look at in the process of selecting the animals to be released. Nyi ma selected the eight sheep whose lives he redeemed for his son by throwing a sash upon the flock, a method that is also mentioned in Holler’s study on animal release rituals,⁵³ but that I did not come across at any other time during my research in Sog po.

The choice of the animals to be released is constrained by the instructions given by a ritual specialist prescribing the release, as well as by the family’s economic situation. Herders seek to balance the burden that refraining from selling and slaughtering animals puts on their husbandry activity in different ways. As in the case of Shes rab’s illness, several households may contribute *srog blu* animals from their herds. Herders also privilege those animals the release of which has a smaller cost, such as female over male yaks. Besides being producers of milk, the former are important for the continuity of the herd for they bring offspring, while males are bred mainly for meat.⁵⁴ Beyond these constraints, however, there is room for choice, and herders often

⁵¹ Stépanoff *et al.* 2017: 66.

⁵² Chos bstan rgyal 2014: 117–120, 131–133, 143–145.

⁵³ The author reports that animals can be selected for release by throwing a bootlace upon the herd (Holler 2002: 216).

⁵⁴ Sulek (2019: 196) quotes a monk from Mgo log saying *tshe thar* should be performed with male animals rather than females, but the author observes that the pastoralists’ practice diverges from this rationale, for female and male animals are released evenly.

favour individuals with whom they have developed personal, affective bonds. Animals with particular morphological or psychological characteristics or a high reproductive capacity are also preferred.

Herders appreciate the morphological diversity of their yak herds which, in Sog po, are made up of a majority of black-colored animals. Individuals with white, grey, red or patterned coats are often the object of herders' life redeeming practice. Besides physical singularities, herders also pay keen attention to the reproductive health of their animals: exceptionally fertile individuals such as female yaks calving at a young age, as well as those who calve every year instead of the regular once every two years, are also the object of the life redeeming practice of pastoralists. Keeping them in the herd has the instrumental purpose of potentially increasing the herd's size. Finally, animals bearing a promise or a potential for fertility, such as female yak twins, are also given the *srog blu* status. Here, the practice of redeeming lives meets that of setting aside atypical animals who are seen by pastoralists as repositories of fortune (*g.yang*).

For herders, the practice of redeeming animal lives is often a way to express appreciation for particular animals with whom they develop personal bonds of affection. These bonds are created through the sustained and physically intimate contact that emerges from taking care of vulnerable animals as well as performing certain herding tasks. An example of the former are nursed sheep (*gso lug*): these lambs, after becoming orphans or being rejected by their mothers at birth, are raised simultaneously by the humans, who bottle-feed them lukewarm female yak milk diluted in water, and the sheep with whom they graze. The special circumstances of these lambs' upbringing change their behaviour in such a way that, instead of avoiding contact with humans as other sheep do, *gso lug* actively seek it by approaching humans and their domestic space where other herd animals seldom go. Herders—often women or children—who nurse these lambs equally develop a particular attachment to them. They pet them and may as well adorn them with bells or let them into the house or tent. Most of the times, nursed lambs are also bestowed with the status of *srog blu* animal and thus remain in the flock until they die of old age.

Some herding tasks, such as milking female yaks⁵⁵ or riding yaks and horses, require a close cooperation between humans and animals. In these joint actions, humans and animals reciprocally adapt to each other in the pursuit of a common goal.⁵⁶ These continued, physically intimate activities also create the conditions for the development of

⁵⁵ Milking is an exclusively female activity that involves women, female yaks, and their calves. Ewes' and mares' dairy products are not consumed in Tibet.

⁵⁶ Stépanoff *et al.* 2017: 66.

personal bonds between herders and individual animals, which often result in the practice of life redeeming. Women tend to select the tamest female yaks and those with a high milk yield. After Nyi ma's aunt Mtsho mo mentioned the connection of her yak milk cow to Shes rab, I asked her why this particular animal was chosen. She said its long teats made milking easier, and that it produced milk in abundance. Mtsho mo also appreciated its docile (*g.yung mo*) nature, as the animal did not kick while being milked and thus its front legs did not need to be tied. By stressing the animal's elevated milk yield, Mtsho mo's choice highlights the attention herders devote to signs of prosperity in their herds. Mtsho mo based her decision on the experience and knowledge of her yak milk cows, built through a regular and physically intimate practice of milking.⁵⁷ Mtsho mo's choice, therefore, recognizes the particular relationship she has developed with the animal over the course of this daily activity.

6. Conclusion

In Tibetan pastoral areas of the PRC, the freeing of animal lives has been promoted in recent times as a way of countering the faults of pastoralists' increased participation in the livestock herding market.⁵⁸ Worried about the high toll that the economic development has taken on the lives of herd animals, a number of charismatic Tibetan Buddhist leaders have encouraged pastoralists to refrain from selling and slaughtering their yaks and sheep. Releasing the lives of livestock animals is presented as the perfect opposite of sale and slaughter: it is a practice of compassion, a virtuous action that accrues merit and thus allows those who engage in it to influence their trajectory in the *samsāra*. The lamas and *mkhan pos* have themselves led massive release rituals, involving both Tibetan and Han Chinese followers, in which high numbers of animals have been freed as an enactment of compassion. The Buddhist notion of compassion, which is of universal character rather than being directed toward particular species or individual animals, has prompted such spectacular life liberation ceremonies. This is an important counterpoint to the more specific, local, and small-scale release activity discussed in the present article.

The animal release practice of Sog po pastoralists brings to light the attention herders pay to animal individuality and the particular

⁵⁷ For a description of women-female yak interactions during milking, see Tan 2016: 3–4.

⁵⁸ For an analysis of the ambiguities and contradictions of Tibetans' market participation, or lack thereof, in the current context of state-led economic development, see Yeh 2013.

relationships they cultivate with herd animals. This adds depth to the rather uniform view of livestock animals voiced by the religious masters at the head of the *tshe thar* movement at Bla rung sgar. In their calls for animal release, these Buddhist leaders focus on what is shared between animals and humans—namely the ability to experience fear and suffering—and filial bonds in past and potentially future lifetimes. By placing the value of life at the center, their discourses not only flatten out the differences between various animal species and individuals, but also those between humans and animals. Pastoralists, in contrast, search for particular morphological traits or productive capacity in their herd animals and favour individuals with whom they nurture personal bonds, often developed over the course of close interactions.

In the grasslands of Sog po, where the echoes of the *tshe thar* movement launched at Bla rung sgar are only tenuous, pastoralists acknowledge the positive karmic dimensions of freeing animal lives and refer to its opposites, i.e., the slaughtering and selling of livestock, in very negative terms. However, herders in Sog po do take part in these activities: they remain actively engaged with the livestock market and have not given up selling animals for slaughter, neither temporarily nor permanently. Ending and extending the lives of animals coexist, and the number of animals whose lives are protected is actually higher in prosperous households with large herds.⁵⁹

For pastoralists in Sog po, sparing a herd animal sale and slaughter is much more than just a meritorious act: it is a therapeutic and longevity practice, a way of securing a safer passage through the afterlife, and an expression of personal bonds a herder develops with particular individuals of the household herd. In the *srog blu* act, the extension of animal lives affects, in its turn, the vitality or life force of humans. Similarly, the offering of livestock to deities and the setting aside of fortune animals contribute to the strengthening of the vitality of divine beings and other members of the herds. All these practices illustrate how the vitality of herd animals is entangled with that of humans and divine beings that are part of the pastoralists' social world.

⁵⁹ It is difficult to imagine how pastoralists could completely abstain from selling animals while keeping husbandry as their main economic activity. Gaerrang's dissertation shows how pastoralists in his research site did not renew their vows of refraining from selling animals after a period of three years (Gaerrang 2012). In Sog po, herders employ different strategies to limit or reduce their participation in the livestock market, without refraining completely from engaging in it.

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