

THE ALTERNATIVE TO DEVELOPMENT ON THE TIBETAN PLATEAU:  
PRELIMINARY RESEARCH ON THE ANTI-SLAUGHTER MOVEMENT

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*"I feel better off, even though my income has decreased."*  
A Tibetan herder who participated in the anti-slaughter movement,  
Hongyuan, 2008.

Deng Xiaoping's slogans of the early 1980s—"It doesn't matter whether the cat is white or black, as long it captures the mice" and "[economic] development is the first principle"—marked the beginning of economic reforms in China, and have now been in place for longer than the commune system. These accelerated after Deng's famous "Southern Tour" of 1992, which made the rapid growth of a market economy the Chinese state's hegemonic goal. The Chinese nation's resource and landscapes have been significantly shaped by this goal.

Like all local governments under the decentralised fiscal system put in place as part of China's economic reforms, governments in high-altitude pastoral areas of the eastern Tibetan Plateau, where the majority of the population are Tibetan herders and animal husbandry is the primary form of livelihood, are under tremendous pressure to promote development and generate income. Many governments have sought to develop the livestock industry by setting up livestock economic zones, inviting outside investors, cultivating local entrepreneurs, promoting the sale of yak meat by branding it as "green," environmentally-friendly and healthy, and encouraging herders to increase their off-take rate (rate of selling or slaughtering). These efforts have prioritised the increased circulation of commodities and the cultivation of a "vision of commodity production" among Tibetans.<sup>1</sup>

As a result of these integrated efforts, Tibetan herders have, over the past two decades, been selling ever-larger numbers of their livestock to Chinese and Hui (Chinese Muslim) middlemen, who transport hundreds of thousands of yaks to urban markets each year. Economic reforms thus appear to have succeeded in turning Tibetans into market subjects. However, the "opening up and reform" campaign also included political reforms that allowed the return of a measure of religious freedom, producing contradictory effects. The overwhelming majority of Tibetan herders practice Buddhism; according to Buddhist principles, killing is one of the most serious sins that can be committed, and should be avoided if at all possible. Over the past five years, increasing numbers of lamas,

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<sup>1</sup> Makley 2006: 2.

particularly from the Nyingma school of Tibetan Buddhism, have become concerned about the phenomenon of mass slaughter. Using their tremendous social influence and moral authority, these lamas have initiated an anti-slaughter movement, persuading local people through teachings at religious gatherings to stop selling their yaks for slaughter—in direct contradiction to the state’s advice regarding development. Many herders have responded to these appeals by taking oaths to stop selling their yaks for periods of time ranging from three years to the rest of their lives.

Tibetan herders’ livelihoods depend on sale of animal products; aside from the sale of dairy products, the sale of yaks has been the most important source of Tibetan herders’ annual income. Furthermore, because of linguistic and educational barriers, and unequal access to the labour market, few alternative sources of income are available. Nevertheless, when asked about the impacts of the movement on their livelihood, many herders claim that they have experienced no livelihood losses; but feel much better now that they are absolved of the guilt of slaughter. Yet a preliminary examination of household economy shows that some such households have in fact experienced significant declines in cash income, often by as much as 50 percent.

Why, given that their incomes have been significantly reduced, do Tibetan herders express the sentiment that their lives are better off, and that they have lost nothing by refraining from livestock slaughter? Moreover, what implications does this have for our understandings of China’s current trajectory of neoliberal economic development as it has been contested and compromised in Tibetan areas? This paper presents some preliminary findings with regard to the anti-slaughter movement from research conducted in Hongyuan County (Tib. Dmar thang, Rnga ba prefecture), Sichuan province, in the summer of 2008. Based on this preliminary research, I argue that the anti-slaughter movement contests and compromises capitalist development. In particular, the feelings of enhanced well-being expressed by herders under conditions of quantifiably lower income force us to question broader understandings of development and modernisation embedded within the development practices of the post-reform Chinese state.

### *Theories of development*

A rich body of critical scholarship on development and culture in the fields anthropology and geography frames this study. Drawing on the extensive corpus of work of philosopher Michel Foucault, James Ferguson (1990) and Arturo Escobar (1995) examined development as a discourse. Escobar’s *Encountering Development* showed in rich detail that the theory and practice of development has been characterised by extraordinary errors of cultural bias,

misunderstanding, and (ultimately) failed promises. His central argument is that there is no linear or universal model of economic and social development that can be applied objectively to the diverse local cultures of the societies that have been grouped as “the Third World.” He argues passionately that the construct of the “Third World” is an ethnocentric invention of the West following the Second World War and that development is an equally flawed regime of representation crafted from a confluence of ideology, group interests, and the attempt of the West to impose its interests on non-western peoples. In the end, development collapses as a unifying conceptualisation of social progress, following the possibility of different culture-based alternatives in specific local settings. In a similar way, Ferguson, in *The Anti-Politics Machine*, studies the ways in which “development” works in practice in Africa. He shows that development discourse creates an imaginary object, a “less developed country,” in order to justify it, and traces the effects of the application of development discourse on a society. Development, argues Ferguson, is a type of “anti-politics machine,” which pretends to be a disinterested, neutral bureaucratic function that exists outside the realm of politics. Meanwhile, its main effect is the dramatic reorientation of power through the state apparatus.

Though these studies were extremely influential and successful in countering the economism of Marxian and neoliberal approaches to development, they tended to rely on textual analysis, treating development as a universal “machine” emanating from the West. My study is grounded in the early work of Escobar and Ferguson, but is also engaged with recent works that have argued that development is better understood as a set of historically and geographically specific projects, which are further contested and reshaped by localized movements.<sup>2</sup> While a Foucauldian theory of governmentality can lead to a good understanding of the project of rule, the actual accomplishment of the “will to improve” embedded in development can be understood only through an analysis of “the understandings and practices worked out in the contingent and compromised space of cultural intimacy.”<sup>3</sup> My ethnographic study of lamas’ religious teachings and observations of herders’ everyday lives examines how dominant projects of neoliberal economic development are contested in this space of cultural intimacy.

### *Origins of the movement*

Khenpo Jigme Phuntsok (Mkhan po 'Jigs med phun tshogs, 1933–2004), the most influential lama of the Nyingma tradition of Tibetan Buddhism in contemporary Tibet, started the anti-slaughter

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<sup>2</sup> For example, Moore 2000; Sivaramakrishnan and Agrawal 2003.

<sup>3</sup> Li 1999: 295, 2005, 2007.

movement. A Tibetan Buddhist meditation master and renowned teacher of Great Perfection (*rdzogs chen*), Khenpo Jigme Phuntsok founded the Serta (Gser rta) Institute, known as Larung Gar (Blarung sgar) Buddhist Academy, in the Larung (Blarung) Valley, near the town of Serta, Kandze (Dkar mdzes) Prefecture, Sichuan Province. The purpose of the institute was to provide ecumenical training in Tibetan Buddhism and to meet the need for renewal of meditation and scholarship all over Tibet in the wake of China's Cultural Revolution of 1966–1976. Despite its remote location, it grew from a handful of disciples who gathered in the Khenpo's home to become one of the largest and most influential centres for the study of Tibetan Buddhism in the world, numbering nearly 10,000 monks, nuns, and lay disciples by the year 2000. The student body of the Serta Institute was made up of monks, nuns, lay "vow-holders" of both Tibetan and Chinese origin, and practitioners of tantric Buddhism. Khenpo Jigme Phuntsok played an outstanding role in revitalising the teaching of Tibetan Buddhism following the liberalisation of religious practice in 1980. He travelled extensively across Tibet and China teaching Nyingma traditional Buddhism. In 1989, at the invitation of His Holiness Penor Rinpoche (Pad nor rin po che), he visited India. Khenpo was also an extraordinary *terton* (*gter ston*), revealer of Buddhist treasures, uncovering many Buddhist texts in both Tibet and India.<sup>4</sup>

In the 1990s, Khenpo saw an increasing slaughter rate of livestock from Tibetan households and the suffering of livestock in transportation to markets in China. He was primarily concerned about the suffering of the animals during transportation, as well as in the slaughterhouses, and the negative karma people accrued when killing the animals. Drawing from Buddhist philosophy, he taught Tibetans that all sentient beings are the same insofar as all beings desire to live, and all circulate in samsara. Because all sentient beings want to live and are afraid of being killed, human beings should not kill other beings for their own needs. Thus, as a religious teacher, he requested that Tibetan herders reduce, or completely halt, their sale of livestock to commercial markets. He made this request in many of his religious teachings where many people were gathered, as well as promoting the idea through modern media such as video and tape recordings of the religious teachings. In addition, because Khenpo Jigme Phuntsok was such a highly respected lama in the pastoral areas of Eastern Tibet, many Tibetan popular singers have sung songs praising him and circulating his message, some of which have been written by monks. For example, one singer, Namkha (Nam mkha) sang:

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<sup>4</sup> Germano 1998; Costello 2008; and Gayley in press.

*Nyam chung srog chags kyi smre sngags*  
The despairing lamentation of the powerless livestock

*Dbang chen mi yi kha zas su,  
gnyom chung dud 'gro'i sha khrag zas,  
snying rje med par za ba 'di,  
drang bden med pa'i tshul la ltos.  
Om mani padme hum*

Powerful human beings  
Mercilessly eat the powerless animals' flesh  
and blood as their food—  
how unfair it is!  
*Om mani padme hum*

*Nga ni nyam chung sems can yin,  
'o zho mar khul bal rtsid kyis,  
bdag po 'byor pa ldan byas kyang,  
nga tsho'i drin lan mi bsam par,  
gshed mar gtad pa'i sdug bsngal ltos.  
Om mani padme hum*

I am a powerless animal,  
Although my master is wealthy from the milk, curd, butter and  
soft fur he takes from me,  
He does not feel grateful to us,  
He sends end to the butcher in the end,  
How we suffer!  
*Om mani padme hum*

*Nga ni nyam chung sems can yin,  
'jig rten 'di na rang srog las,  
rtsa che ba ni gzhan med pas,  
rang gi las la dpe longs la,  
nged cag srog la gnod ma byed.  
Om mani padme hum.  
Nga ni nyam chung sems can yin.*

I am a powerless animal  
There is nothing more important than to have one's life in this  
world  
Put yourself in my situation as I'm being killed  
Please don't hurt our lives!  
*Om mani padme hum*  
I am a powerless animal.

Large numbers of herders responded to these efforts by taking oaths to stop selling their livestock for slaughter for a period of three

years, or forever. Because Khenpo Jigme Phuntsok was a great teacher, he had a great many students dedicated to continuing his work. After he passed away, his students and many other lamas made similar appeals to herders to refrain from selling their livestock for commercial slaughter. Today, the movement that began in Serta of herders vowing to refrain from commercial activity with their yak herds has spread across the Eastern Tibetan Plateau, including Tibetan pastoral areas of Sichuan, Qinghai, Gansu, and the Tibet Autonomous Region (TAR).

#### *Preliminary Findings*

Located at an average elevation of 3500 meters, Hongyuan County has a population of 40,000, of whom the majority are pastoral Tibetans who make their living herding yaks. Hongyuan has a very active anti-slaughter movement with many local herders participating, while the local government has also been particularly enthusiastic promoting the production of local yak meat sales as a development strategy, including through the Aba (Rgna ba) Tibetan Plateau Yak Economic Zone. Within Hongyuan, the anti-slaughter movement began in Rakor (Ra skor), a village in Qiongxi (Tib. Khyung mchu) with a population of 950 herders in roughly 200 households. My preliminary fieldwork was conducted with ten Tibetan herding families in Qiongxi Town and Amu Township (A mos khog), and in addition I interviewed several lamas and monastic scholars.

Local lamas began to teach about the importance of not slaughtering in 2003. However, the movement gained significant momentum at the end of 2005, when Khenpo Tsultrim Lodro (Mkhan po Tshul khrim blo gros), one of the four most important figures at the Serta Buddhist Institute since the passing of Khenpo Jigme Phuntsok visited Rakor village and held a religious meeting for all herders and monks. In two days of religious teaching, he lectured on the sinfulness of large-scale sale for slaughter, emphasising the cruelty of livestock transportation to distant markets, and of contemporary methods employed in industrial slaughterhouses. In response, in October 2006, all household heads of Rakor village took oaths not to sell yaks for slaughter for at least three years. The majority of households in the village were able to keep their oaths for the initial three-year period. Tsultrim Lodro also travelled to villages in five other townships of Hongyuan, holding similar meetings, and securing similar pledges.

Despite the fact that all of the herders I interviewed showed great pride in their oaths, there were differences in terms of the perceived impact the action has had on their income and livelihoods, and whether they would continue with the policy after the initial oath period ended. Some indicated they would likely renew their oaths

in front of a lama, and further that not selling yaks did not negatively affect their livelihoods. However, further detailed questions regarding household income revealed that their cash income did in fact decrease. Other herders interviewed said that if the lama were to return after three years, they would continue their agreement, and that they feel there is no difference between selling and not selling the yaks for slaughter in terms of income and their livelihood. They explained that when they sold many yaks, they made lots of money but always felt guilty and fearful about the associated negative karma. However, when they did not sell yaks, they felt much relief from that guilt and assumed they were making good karma for the current and next life, which they claimed is much more important to them than accumulating money. In addition to this, they also argued that there are other income resources that can substitute for income from livestock, such as doing business, collecting herbs, selling dairy products, and so on. Further, some claimed that the money they earned from yak sales was spent very quickly, but that the lower income they earn now from activities such as selling milk and collecting herbs is a better quality income that lasts longer.

According to the interviewees, many rich herders said that they would continue their promise even after October 2009. One very rich household had released all of their male yaks as *tshe thar* (livestock that the owner promised to not slaughter for the entire life of the animal) and given them all to poor households to be used for assistance with transportation. Because that household has retained a herd composed entirely of female milking yaks (*'bri*), they do not need to sell them in the coming years, because they can make money from dairy products. One interviewee speculated that many rich households would continue to keep their promises after the initial oath term ended, as would poor household without many livestock to sell. On the other hand, he thought that middle-stratum households might start to sell their livestock again after October 2009, a prediction that turned out to be accurate.

A smaller number of herders stated in 2008 that participating in the movement had already had a significant impact on their income, and that they might therefore be reluctant to continue the oath for another three years. Most of the households that expressed their reluctance were those of medium income. For them, the material impact of refraining from selling livestock had been significant, because that income accounted for about 50 percent of their annual income. After they stopped selling yaks for the promised period, herders who own only small amounts of livestock have had to look for other ways of making a living, such as collecting herbs, operating small business, and finding temporary employment. However, those alternative income resources have been very limited for herders, because many of them do not read or write Chinese,

which is very important in China for obtaining a job, or successfully doing business.

One herder stated that for the last three years he had not sold any livestock, but that he would have to sell some after October 2009 and would not take an oath for the next three years. The primary reason he gave was his participation in the state settlement project, which the state designed to transform “backward herders” into modern, settled herders by encouraging them to stay in more comfortable houses rather than tents. He had to invest 30,000 RMB in addition to the state contribution of about 16,000 RMB for housing construction. Thus, he stated that he needed to sell his livestock to earn cash in order to build a house through the settlement project. In 2009, the state offered many such projects (chin. *mu min ding ju*) for each township and it is said that half of villagers in Rakor village participated in the project. Because the herders are given both a subsidy and an interest-free loan, and their houses can be built at their current village location, most have been willing to take part.

In addition to these economically medium households, some rich households also stated that they would not participate in the next round of oath-taking. For example, one herder, who is the richest in the village and a previous village leader, stated that he now has to sell lots of livestock that he has not been willing to sell for the past three years. He said that the three-year period of refraining from slaughter could only extend the lives of those animals for a couple of years, and that he is very sorry that he has to sell them again, but will do so because he needs money to build a house.

There are also rumours that some herders have sold yaks to people from other places who have not participated in the anti slaughter movement, and that these people have in turn sold them on the market. On one occasion, a man from another area came to Rakor village and bought many yaks, saying he was buying them for the purpose of milk production. But after a while some villagers found out that the man had sold the yaks to Chinese merchants. Concerned about the situation, the villagers contacted Khenpo Tsultrim Lodro, who sent money and bought the livestock and released them as *tshé thar*.

In recent years, herders have become accustomed to eating more vegetables and rice, and have become less dependent on meat and the traditional staple of *rtsam pa*, or ground roasted barley flour. In conjunction with this general trend, the anti-slaughter movement has also had a significant impact on herders’ nutrition. During Khenpo Tsultrim Lodro’s teaching in Rakor, half of the herders also promised to stop slaughtering livestock for their own consumption. Most of these households have been purchasing meat from livestock that died naturally, while a few others have also been purchasing meat from local meat markets, which is much more expensive.



The anti-slaughter movement has had an impact on the herders' pastures; especially those households that own more livestock than their pasture can sustain. In order to ease the pressure on their pastures and increase their income, some of these herders sold dozens of female yaks and less productive, young yaks to others who promise to keep them for at least three years; or otherwise given adult male yaks to others to look after for at least three years. However, giving (as opposed to selling) these livestock occurred only rarely. During the three years pledge, anyone wanting to sell their livestock had to come to the monastery, register the livestock and ensure that the buyer took an oath not to sell the livestock to the meat market for at least three years. They also had to rent new pasture or expanded their previously rented pasture in order to accommodate the increased grazing intensity. These pastures are generally rented from herders who own no livestock or fewer livestock than their pastures can sustain.

#### *Contested development*

The anti-slaughter movement enables us to understand how capitalist development has been compromised and contested in culturally specific ways by Tibetan pastoralists. The movement contests the idea of this-worldly economic improvement that, as Deng put it "[economic] development is the first principle" (chin. *fazhan cai shi yingdaoli*). Tibetan herders have been giving up their main income source for the sake of spiritual gain. By refraining from the sinful activity of livestock slaughter, they seek a long-term state of well-being and goodness not only for their current life, but also for many coming lives. This is to be achieved not through economic development but through the collecting of positive karma. The principle of cause and effect (*las rgyu 'bras*) in Buddhist philosophy states that anything that one has done in any of one's previous lives will determine one's current and future fortune and life. If a person collects good karma, during his or her past life, then he or she will enjoy reward for that good karma in this life. Bad karma collected in previous lives, will in turn, result in punishment. The way that he/she treats other beings in the present life will determine how other beings will treat her/him in future lives. In this regard, killing is one of the most serious sins that people try to avoid in their everyday lives. If one kills another, the other will kill him/her in a similar way, if not worse in a future life. For this reason, the social position of a butcher is ranked among the lowest echelons of Tibetan society, and slaughtering is considered an activity to be avoided, unless necessary for survival.

This is radically opposed to the assumption embedded within capitalist development that all human beings share the same form of rationality and yearn for the improvement of material living

conditions as a first priority and as a goal to be achieved at any cost. The Buddhist philosophy of cause and effect as understood by Tibetan herders also contests the neoliberal idea of the importance of the free market and individual freedom for solving social and economic problems. Neoliberalism emphasises maximum personal responsibility in a free market economy. If people have problems, if they do not have the things they want in their lives, then they must take personal responsibility, put their minds to it, and have the right attitude. The taking of personal responsibility by atomized individuals is the key to bringing about positive change, and the market and individual positive attitudes are the solutions to social problems.

The anti-slaughter movement rejects the ever-increasing competition necessitated by participation in the free market. As one Buddhist monk who has been teaching in a Tibetan school explained, "One of the driving forces of our problems is increasing competition, which has been causing all of our problems such as sins, jealousy, unhappiness, dissatisfaction, and conflicts." The competition for wealth between households and individuals has driven the increasing rate of livestock selling. Tibetan lamas I interviewed believe that refraining from participation in the free market and reducing inter-household competition would resolve the social problems that Tibetans face today. They see controlling endless desires as a way to solve problems whereas capitalism as a system only works through the proliferation of desires. For teachers and participants in the anti-slaughter movement, both social and individual problems can be solved not through participating in the competitive market, but through collecting more positive karma and controlling one's desires, which is also the only way to have better current and future lives. What many herders said during their interviews was that they already had means to make an adequate living without needing to sell their livestock in the market for slaughter.

The anti-slaughter movement also contests the expansion of capitalism into cultural Tibet in other ways. The Aba Tibetan Plateau Yak Economic Zone aims to promote the yak industry and incorporate herders and their livestock more fully into the market economy. By providing services and preferential policies for local and outside enterprises, the planned zone attempts to establish a market for "green" yak products including meat, dairy products, and tourism services and products. The ultimate goal is to induce more herders to participate in the market and instil the values of market competition, but these efforts have been severely challenged by herders refraining from selling livestock in the market as a result of the anti-slaughter movement. Tibetans believe that economically rational decision-making, accurate calculation, and hard work are only some factors of one's success. The most important factor in one's success is *tshogs gsog bsod nams*, which means "collection of

good karma.” Many Tibetan herders state that they do not believe and do not see any of those who are engaging in the livestock trade for the purpose of slaughtering becoming rich, because they collect negative karma along with their business profits.

At the same time, the fact of some households’ unwillingness to participate in the next three years’ pledge shows that the dominant ideology of capitalist development and the various development projects have had a material impact on herders’ lives and decisions. Most of these herders expressed the opinion that they could not avoid having to sell livestock in the slaughter market, mainly because the capitalist-development ideology and the various changes in the social system have given them no other option but to follow the demands of the new social order. Modern society instils in them many new needs such as the need for education, health care, new transportation, and housing. Accompanying those needs are new secular values that go along with capitalist development.

In addition to these herders, there are also some educated Tibetans of the younger generation who criticise the movement, saying that it is not realistic and hurts the herders economically. A Tibetan teacher who is teaching in a middle school has openly criticised the lamas who initiated the movement. He said that selling livestock is the only way for Tibetan herders to improve their lives, and that therefore lamas should not ask herders to stop. One could say that many young, educated individuals have become subjects of capitalist ideology.

### *Conclusion*

In conclusion, I have demonstrated, based upon preliminary research, that by employing Tibetan Buddhist idioms and religious concepts, Tibetan herders and lamas contest capitalist development and construct an alternative vision of development that is based on their own understanding of the world and value system. Through their participation in the anti-slaughter movement, they have been trying to create a different cultural landscape where all beings are treated equally, and where killing and slaughterhouses do not exist. Tibetan herders and lamas are articulating their own understandings of development that are based on Buddhist philosophy rather than neoliberalism. Thus, development is not a universal machine that produces the same hegemonic results everywhere. Across China, market development has clearly had different impacts and been understood differently in Tibetan areas than other regions.

At the same time, the majority of Tibetans do not adhere to the alternative vision of development advanced by the anti-slaughter campaign. Many herders plan to take up livestock sales again after their initial oath period ends. Of these, many herders express that

they feel they have no option, but that if they did, they would not sell their livestock for slaughter. Even those who are not going to participate in the future feel guilty and reluctant about their decisions to resume commercial slaughter. Thus, many Tibetan herders are constantly negotiating between two different ideologies: one grounded on Buddhist belief, and the other on secularism and capitalism. This constant tension is illustrated by one herder who said that when he thinks of his family and his children's future lives and sees his neighbours adopting practices and ways of being associated with modernization, he feels he must sell his livestock to make money to catch up in terms of the rate of material improvement; but then when he hears the lamas' teachings and thinks of what will happen when he dies, and he is afraid to sell a single head of livestock.

Within the cultural politics of development in pastoral Tibet, some herders have been making one decision at the cost of another, while others have been moving their position back and forth across the line between different cultures and ideologies competing and contesting with each other in development. The result is a hybrid form of development with strong Tibetan characteristics. The results of this ethnographic study stand in contrast to those grounded in modernisation theory that see all cultures ultimately moving along the same linear path toward the same end. Development is not merely a technical or quantitative matter of income levels or material possessions, but also always a process of the creation of certain kinds of subjects and of cultural contestation and change. This study reveals the cultural politics of changing values, showing development in Tibet to be a cultural process, something that has not been captured effectively in the existing literature, implicitly grounded in modernisation theory.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Cf. Goldstein *et al.* 2008, and 2010.

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