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DEVELOPMENT AND CHANGE IN RURAL TIBET

Problems and Adaptations

————— Melvyn C. Goldstein, Ben Jiao, Cynthia
————— M. Beall, and Phuntsog Tsering

Abstract

This article reports on a multi-year study of the impact of China's reform policies since the early 1980s on rural change in the Tibet Autonomous Region. The study was conducted with 780 households in 13 villages, using qualitative and quantitative methods.

Introduction

The manner in which China's economic reforms have impacted on Tibet's¹ rural farmers is one of the least-understood aspects of the controversy over China's management of Tibet. Many in the West have criticized China, arguing that Beijing's overall development policy in Tibet benefits Han (Chinese) rather than Tibetans. Pierre-Antoine Donnet, for ex-

————— Melvyn C. Goldstein is the John Reynolds Harkness Professor in Anthropology and Co-Director of the Center for Research on Tibet at Case Western Reserve University, Cleveland, Ohio, U.S.A. Ben Jiao is a research scientist at the Tibet Academy of Social Sciences in Lhasa, Tibet. Cynthia M. Beall is the S. Idell Pyle Professor of Anthropology and Co-Director of the Center for Research on Tibet at Case Western Reserve University. Phuntsog Tsering is the former president of the Tibet Academy of Social Sciences. The authors wish to thank the Henry Luce Foundation and the Tibet Academy of Social Sciences for their support of the research.

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1. Tibet here refers to the Tibet Autonomous Region (TAR) of the People's Republic of China, not to the ethnic Tibetan areas in Sichuan, Gansu, Qinghai, and Yunnan Provinces. See Melvyn Goldstein and Cynthia Beall, "China's Birth Control Policy in the Tibet Autonomous Region," *Asian Survey* 31:3 (March 1991), pp. 289–91, for a discussion of the reasons for this distinction.

ample, states, “From the point of view of economic performance, after forty years of Chinese Marxism, Tibet’s situation looks disastrous from any angle.”² Gabriel Lafitte similarly argues that despite large inputs of development funds from Beijing, Tibet would rank at the very bottom of the U.N.’s list of nations (if it were a nation), along with countries like Rwanda, Somalia, Sudan, Afghanistan, and Mozambique.³

The Chinese government, not surprisingly, argues otherwise. Although it recognizes that Tibet is one of the poorest areas in China, Beijing consistently cites official government statistics to demonstrate the success of its policies in improving economic conditions there.⁴ In a similar vein, an academic study of macro-development in Tibet concludes that “Tibet has moved from quasi-stagnation before 1959 to a plateau of rapid dependent growth today,” the term “dependent” here meaning that the growth derives from central government funding.⁵

In one sense, such a divergence in views is not surprising, given the dearth of independent research data. Virtually all publications on development in Tibet are based on picking and choosing from often-dubious official Chinese government statistics. Despite the fact that roughly 81% of Tibet’s population reside in rural villages, virtually no data deriving from firsthand fieldwork in farming communities exist.

This article addresses that gap by examining current conditions in village Tibet and the manner in which the economic changes engulfing the rest of China have played out there. In particular, the paper examines the interaction of three critical areas of change—decollectivization and land division, population and family planning, and economic development and labor migration—and the manner in which Tibetan farmers are adapting to it.

The data presented in this paper are based on a study of life in rural Tibet that was conducted from 1997 to 2000 by Case Western Reserve University’s Center for Research on Tibet and the Tibet Academy of Social Sciences in Lhasa with support from the Henry Luce Foundation. Thirteen farming villages from four rural townships (Chinese: *xiang*) in the two main cultural divisions in central Tibet (Tibetan: *dbus* and *gtsang*) were selected based on

2. Pierre-Antoine Donnet, *Tibet: Survival in Question* (London: Zed Books, 1994), p. 139. See also Ronald Schwartz, “The Reforms Revisited: The Implications of Chinese Economic Policy and the Future of Rural Producers in Tibet,” in *Development, Society, and Environment in Tibet*, ed. Graham Clarke (Graz, Austria: Austrian Academy of Sciences Press, 1995).

3. Gabriel Laffite, “Tibet as a Developing Society,” paper presented to the Future of Tibet Colloquium, Canberra, Australia, September 2, 1995, p. 4.

4. Information Office of the State Council of China, “Tibet—Its Ownership and Human Rights Situation,” *Beijing Review*, September 28–October 4, 1992, pp. 9–42, <<http://www.tibetinfo.com.cn/tibetzn-en/whitebook>>.

5. Barry Sautman and Irene Eng, “Tibet: Development for Whom?” *China Information* 15:2 (2001), pp. 20–74.

TABLE 1 *Location and Size of the Study Population*

	<i># of Households</i>	<i>% of Households</i>
Ü		
Lhasa Municipality		
Lhundrup County	199	25.5
Khartse Xiang	199	25.5
Village A	31	4
Village B	21	2.7
Village C	49	6.3
Village D	33	4.2
Village E	65	8.3
Medrogongkar County	199	25.5
Tsashol Xiang	199	25.5
Village F	93	11.9
Village G	105	13.5
Tsang		
Shigatse Prefecture		
Panam1	382	49.1
Norgyong Xiang	198	25.4
Village H	108	14
Village I	69	8.7
Panam2		
Mag Xiang	185	23.7
Village J	60	7.7
Village K	35	4.5
Village L	90	11.5
<i>Total</i>	780	100

SOURCE: Data collected by authors.

the authors' knowledge of rural Tibet and discussions with other Tibetan researchers. The aim of this research design was to include a mix of subsistence situations. Two of these four *xiang* were located close to county seats and better off economically (Panam County's Norgyong *xiang* and Lhundrup County's Khartse *xiang*). The other two *xiang* were located further from county seats and less well off (Medrogongkar's Tsashol *xiang* and Panam's Mag *xiang*) (see Table 1).

Official statistical data for Tibet's counties give a sense of these economic differences: Panam County placed 17th in Tibet's 73 counties, Lhundrup 47th, and Medrogongkar ranked near the bottom at 66th.⁶ There are no comparable published statistical data for *xiang* in Tibet.

6. Tibet Statistical Bureau, *Xizang tongji nianjian: 1995* [Tibet statistical yearbook: 1995] (Beijing: China Statistical Press, 1995), p. 178.

The study collected a wide range of information including data on social, economic, reproductive, and cultural issues. Traditional anthropological interview methods were used along with focus groups, participant observation, and informal discussions. In addition, two surveys were conducted: a detailed socioeconomic survey of each household and a separate reproductive survey with all women 18 years and older.

There was no interference from the government in the design or analysis of queries, and no government officials accompanied us to interviews with villagers. Nor did we have to make appointments through officials to see villagers. We were free to visit households whenever we wished, day or night.

Characteristics of Study Population

The 13 study villages contained 780 households, all of which were included in the study. 49.8% of the population were males and 50.2% were females. The median age of the sample was 22. 63.7% of respondents 18 years and older were married, 4.9% were widowed, and less than 1% were divorced. Household size was high, the average containing 7.1 persons, with a range from one to 15 people.

A breakdown of the composition of the population by age and sex reveals an expansive triangular shape, with 34% of the population under the age of 15. This is intermediate between adjacent Third World countries such as Nepal and Bhutan, which have 43% of their population under 15, and China as a whole, with 26%. The age-dependency ratio—the proportion of the population in the dependent ages (under 15 and over 65) relative to those in the productive ages (15–64)—was 63.6. This also was intermediate between Nepal/Bhutan (respectively, at 88.7/85.2) and China as a whole (47.1%).⁷

All 5,590 individuals in the 13 villages were ethnic Tibetans. There were no Han or Hui (Muslim) Chinese living there, either as residents or as temporary workers. Nor were any Chinese working in the four study rural *xiang* centers as officials or shopkeepers. The villages were entirely Tibetan in language and culture.

The study villages were farming communities, although all also kept some animals for milk and meat. In a few areas where sizable adjacent pastures existed, larger numbers of sheep and goats were raised. The diet was traditional Tibetan, with parched barley flour (*rtsam ba*) being the staple food in all areas. Villagers, however, now eat a range of non-traditional foods like rice, sweets, and, in some villages, chicken, eggs, and pork.

Constraints on religion in contemporary Tibet exist, but religion is an important part of rural society. In terms of formal practitioners, 3.6% of all

7. Population Reference Bureau, *World Population Data Sheet* (Washington, D.C.: Population Reference Bureau, 1999).

TABLE 2 *Religious Activities That Households Engaged in During 1997*

<i>Item</i>	<i>Yes % (n)</i>	<i>No % (n)</i>
Invite monks to one's house to do prayers	50.9 (396)	49.1 (382)
Purchase religious items such as incense	43.8 (341)	56.2 (437)
Give alms to monks or monasteries	38.7 (301)	61.3 (477)
Do religious rituals like Lhapsö (offerings to mountain deities)	33.2 (258)	66.8 (520)
Consult astrologer, shaman	3.3 (50)	96.7 (1,504)
Arrange for monastery to do prayers for one's household	3.3 (26)	96.7 (754)

SOURCE: Ibid.

males were monks, and 2.6% of females were nuns. 16.3% of households had one member living as either a monk or nun. These numbers would certainly have been considerably higher if there were no government limits on the number of monks and nuns.

Households were queried about their engagement in a range of traditional Tibetan religious activities during the previous year (1997). Table 2 reveals that 50.9% of households invited monks to do prayers/rites in their home; 43.8% spent money on religious items (prayer flags, incense, etc.); and 38.7% gave alms to monks/monasteries. The average household expenses for all religious activities in 1997 was estimated by respondents at 128 yuan (\$15.50), but there was a substantial range, depending on the economic status of households. For example, whereas rich and middle households spent on average 209 yuan (\$25.30) and 206 yuan (\$25), respectively, poor households spent on average only 15 yuan (\$1.80). Other communal religious practices like the pre-harvest village religious procession through the fields (*'ong skor*) were also performed.

During a 2002 follow-up stint of fieldwork in Mag, one of the study *xiang*, all 26 elderly (age 60+) were interviewed about the status of the elderly, including their religious activities. The fieldwork revealed that all the elderly engaged in daily religious prayers, but in differing amounts: 35% said they spent over one hour a day doing prayers (using rosaries, prayer wheels, or doing circumambulation); 27% spent one-half to one hour; 23% spent five to 30 minutes; and 11% spent very little time. The least-religious interview subject said he spent "very little" time but went on to elaborate that he was atypical, saying, "My children say our father is a strange man who doesn't do prayers or circumambulation. It's true. I do not have a strong religious feeling." But then he added, "We have an altar in our house and our [family

member who is a] nun offers butter lamps and the water offering [on our altar].” Consequently, it is clear that villagers in this study engaged actively in a variety of overt religious activities.

Notwithstanding this pattern, government policy considers Tibetan Buddhism in a negative light and constrains/controls it in various ways. For example, limits on the size of existing monasteries or nunneries are enforced, and there are prohibitions against the creation of new religious institutions. Moreover, in the 1990s, many monasteries and nunneries that had unilaterally exceeded their limits were forced to send the “excess” monks and nuns back to their families. At the same time, the government also began to enforce more strictly a rule that prohibits males under 18 years of age from becoming monks, despite the Tibetan tradition of boys becoming monks before they reach their teens.⁸ Similarly, the government strictly prohibits the exhibition of the Dalai Lama’s photo. There is also an official culture that criticizes traditional religious practices like divination, disparages expenditures on religious rites, and invokes tight regulations on other folk practitioners like shamanic mediums. Informal discussions with Tibetans revealed widespread resentment of this. A few villagers explicitly voiced the view that these policies are incompatible with the state’s claim of religious freedom.

Educationally, Khartse, Tsashol, and Mag *xiang* all had primary schools. The first two *xiang*’s schools included first to sixth grade, and the latter only grades 3–6, as students in that *xiang* go to village schools for grades one and two. Norgyong *xiang* did not need a primary school since it is contiguous with Panam’s County seat and its students attend the county’s primary school after completing grade three in their village level school. On average, 48.4% of all individuals in the study had been to school for some period. However, among children 7–15 years of age, it was reported that 80.6% had attended school at some time, and 75.4% were currently attending school.⁹ Of those currently in school, 54.1% were male.

We did not try to assess the quality of teaching or levels of knowledge, but 53.5% of males and females aged 15–45 reported that they can read Tibetan. Official statistics for 1995 reported 38.5% literacy, but this was for *all* persons 15 years and older.¹⁰ In our sample, this percentage increased to 73% when only males of that age range were examined. By contrast, only 9.5% of individuals aged 15–45 reported that they can speak some Chinese (including

8. Tibetans believe that to create excellent monks it is essential for them to join the monastery at a young age.

9. This is similar to the primary school statistics for the TAR, which for 1997 reported that 78.2% of all children aged 7 to 13 were enrolled in primary schools (*Xizang tongji nianjian: 1998* [Tibetan statistical yearbook: 1998] (Beijing: China Statistical Publishing House, 1998).

10. *1995 Nian Quanguo 1% Renkou Chouyang Diaocha Ziliao: Xizang Fence* [1995 national 1% population sample results: Tibet section] (Beijing: China Statistical Publishing House, 1996).

the local village officials). Most of those reporting an ability to speak some Chinese resided in Norgyong, the *xiang* located just beside the county seat.

With this general introduction, let us now turn to the major changes in post-Mao Tibet, beginning with decollectivization.

Decollectivization and the Post-Mao Agricultural Economic Structure

As in the rest of China, decollectivization in the TAR from 1981 saw the division of virtually all commune land among member households. In Tibet, this was normally done on a per capita basis.¹¹ Once land division was implemented, the basic productive resource—arable land—typically was fixed in the household. Children born after land division did not (and still do not) receive land, and households, with a few exceptions, have no way to increase their holdings, because land cannot be bought and sold.¹² Households, therefore, essentially hold their land indefinitely, albeit on an unspecified long-term lease arrangement.

Despite this limitation, land reforms have had a profound effect. Households were once again the basic unit of production that they had been in the pre-communal era. They controlled their labor and capital and, by and large, could manage their farms as they saw fit.¹³

The impact of these reforms on farmers' standard of living is almost universally perceived by villagers to be positive. 94% of all 780 households felt their livelihood had improved since decollectivization, and in even the poorest *xiang*, Medrogongkar, 93.4% of respondents responded positively, saying their livelihood had improved. When responses were analyzed by socioeconomic status, it was found that 99.1% of rich and 81% of poor households reported that they had better livelihoods. The almost universal reason villagers offered for this was not new technology but rather their newly acquired freedom to work hard on their own resources for personal profit.

11. In the areas in the study that had been part of communes, all individuals, regardless of age or gender, received equal shares on the day of decollectivization. In Lhundrup, an area that had been part of a state farm, non-working members were allocated only 70% of the share of working members.

12. The main exception to this involves marriage. Generally, children who marry into other villages do not keep the share of land they acquired at the time of land division. However, when a marriage takes place in the same village, land does shift to the household receiving the bride or groom. It should be noted that there appear to be a few village areas in the TAR where land reverts back to the government at death, and is reallocated to children born after decollectivization. This is not usual and was not the case in any of our study sites.

13. There are some exceptions to this. For example, farmers were required to buy set amounts of fertilizer for their fields, and in some areas, households were made to sow specific crops in delimited areas so that whole sections of farmland could be planted with the same crop.

Similarly, when respondents were asked whether they think they now have a better life than their parents, 85.5% responded positively. Only 8.6% said they were worse off. As Table 3 illustrates, even older villagers in the age category 60–79 years held this view—and their parents would have been adults at the end of the traditional society, i.e., they would have been between 40 and 60 years of age when the socialist period began in 1959.

There was also optimism about the future. When asked whether they think their children will be able to have a better livelihood than they now have, 92% said yes. In sum, villagers overwhelmingly reported that their material lives had improved since the end of the communal system. A number of specifics about village life were examined in order to compare these reports with actual conditions.

At the time of decollectivization, each household received a share of the commune/state farm's livestock, on a per capita basis, in addition to arable land. These animals (sheep, cow, ox, *dzo* [yak-cow hybrid], yak, mule, donkey, and horse) became private property that households were free to sell or buy as they wished. Table 4 reveals that the number of livestock per household has increased 82% since land division, and more so (109%), if non-traditional animals like pigs and chickens are included.

For villagers, milch animals (cows, female yak, and *dzo*) are one of the most important types of livestock because they provide the milk that Tibetans process into butter and consume in Tibetan tea, which is considered essential to a high-quality diet. Table 5 reveals a striking 668% increase in such milch animals. Not surprisingly, this increase has made butter tea (versus black tea) a staple for most households, 91% of which reported they drank butter tea every day. 95% of the households also reported that they use more butter now than during the commune era.

Animals are also used for plowing. With the exception of study villages in Lhundrup County that have used tractors to plow their fields since the early days of the state farm in the 1960s, the other village sites all used animal power (pairs of *dzo*, yaks, horses, or oxen) to plow. As Table 6 shows, there was an average increase of 124% in the types of animals that can be used for plowing.

Agriculture was the core of the local subsistence economy in all of the study villages, and five main crops were planted: barley (57% of fields), wheat (20%), mustard seed (12.7%), lentil (10.8%), and potatoes (3.6%). Between 72% and 81% of respondents reported that the yields of these crops had increased since decollectivization (see Table 7). However, it should be noted that only 19% of households reported that their yields are now much

TABLE 3 *Responses to the Query: "Do You Have a Better Life Now Than Your Parents Did?"* (in %)

<i>Current Age</i>	<i>Better</i>	<i>Worse</i>	<i>Same</i>
60–69 (N = 111)	87.4	6.3	6.3
70–79 (N = 39)	92.3	5.1	2.6

SOURCE: Ibid.

TABLE 4 *Number of Animals Per Household*

	<i># Of Animals/ Household at Decollectivization</i>	<i># Of Animals/ Household in 1996</i>	<i>Amount of Change</i>	<i>% Change</i>	<i># Of Animals/ Household in 1996 Minus Chickens and Pigs</i>	<i>Amount of Change</i>	<i>% Change</i>
Lhundrup	9.2	18.5	+ 9.3	+172	15.8	+ 6.6	+ 72
Medrogongkar	7.1	24.9	+17.9	+252	23.7	+16.6	+234
Panam1	20.1	35.1	+15.1	+ 75	28.0	+ 7.9	+ 39
Panam2	22.2	43.0	+21.1	+ 95	38.5	+16.3	+ 73
<i>Total</i>	14.5	30.1	+15.8	+109	26.2	11.9	+ 82

SOURCE: Local *xiang* and village records.TABLE 5 *Changes in the Number of Milch Animals Per Household from Decollectivization Until 1997*

	<i># of Milch Animals at Decollectivization</i>		<i># of Milch Animals in 1997</i>		<i>Amount of Change</i>	<i>Amount of Change</i>
	<i>Cases</i>	<i>#</i>	<i>Cases</i>	<i>#</i>	<i>#</i>	<i>%</i>
Lhundrup	181	0.2	198	3.7	+3.5	1,519.3
Medrogongkar	183	1.1	198	4.7	+3.6	327.8
Panam1	179	0.2	197	3.5	+3.3	1,415.1
Panam2	168	0.4	185	3.5	+3.0	694.4
<i>Total</i>	711	0.5	778	3.9	+3.4	668.4

SOURCE: Local *xiang* and village records.

larger than during the commune era.¹⁴ These reports of moderate increases in yields were supported by our in-depth and focus group interviews.

14. At all sites, the official *xiang* statistics were found to be overstatements, and thus are not used in this article. The issue of farm yields will be dealt with in a separate paper.

TABLE 6 *Changes in the Number of Plow/Transport Animals Per Household from Decollectivization Until 1996*

	<i># of Plow Animals at Decollectivization</i>	<i># of Plow Animals Now</i>	<i>Amount of Change</i>	<i>Change Rate %</i>
Lhundrup	0.376	1.121	0.745	+198.3
Medrogongkar	1.799	6.696	4.525	+208.4
Panam1	1.119	1.964	0.845	+ 75.6
Panam2	1.880	2.589	0.709	+ 37.7
<i>Total</i>	1.382	3.093	1.712	123.9

SOURCE: Local *xiang* and village records.TABLE 7 *Perceptions of Changes in Crop Yields after Decollectivization*

	<i>Barley</i>		<i>Spring Wheat</i>		<i>Mustard</i>		<i>Lentils</i>		<i>Potato</i>	
	<i>N</i>	<i>%</i>	<i>N</i>	<i>%</i>	<i>N</i>	<i>%</i>	<i>N</i>	<i>%</i>	<i>N</i>	<i>%</i>
Same	98	13	88	13	97	13	44	8	105	14
Less	48	6	51	7	35	5	8	1	28	4
A little more	428	55	360	52	420	56	338	60	413	55
Much more	149	19	139	20	146	19	119	21	146	20
Don't know	55	7	56	8	55	7	58	10	57	8
<i>Total</i>	778	100	694	100	753	100	567	100	749	100

SOURCE: Data collected by authors.

The critical question for rural households is whether they are able to produce enough grain to meet their family's food needs. Focus group discussions were held to discuss in detail the grain situation of all households in each village. These discussions revealed that 77% of households produced either enough grain or a surplus of grain. Direct survey questioning of each household revealed a similar result—67% said they had one or more year's grain stored away, and another 21% said they had six months' to a year's grain in storage.

Key Indicators

Barley is not only used for parched barley flour, the Tibetan staple food, but also fermented to produce beer. This is consumed in large quantities and is another key "high-quality" traditional food. 95.4% of households said they consumed more beer than during the commune era, and 76% of households said they now make beer regularly. On average, households reported using approximately 416 kilograms of barley per year for making beer. That

TABLE 8 *Consumption of Meat/Fat in Two Counties*

<i>Site</i>	<i>% (n) Daily</i>	<i>% (n) 1–3 Times a Week</i>	<i>% (n) Once or Twice a Month</i>	<i>% (n) Holidays and the Busy Work Season</i>	<i>% (n) Rarely or Never</i>	<i>Total</i>
Lhundrup	26.1 (52)	45.2 (90)	14.6 (29)	12.6 (24)	1 (2)	100 (198)
Medrogongkar	18.7 (37)	37.9 (75)	12.1 (24)	25.8 (51)	4.5 (9)	100 (196)
<i>Total</i>	22.6 (89)	41.9 (165)				

SOURCE: Ibid.

amount of grain is roughly equivalent to the output of 3 *mu* (2 hectares) of land which, in turn, is roughly equivalent to the share of land one person received at the time of decollectivization. Thus, conditions are such that most households are able to divert substantial amounts of the main staple crop to the production of a high-quality, non-staple food.

Another important measure of Tibetans' diet and living standard is the consumption of meat. Table 8 reveals that the majority of families in Lhundrup and Medrogongkar reported that they ate meat/fat frequently, either daily or several times a week. For example, in Medrogongkar's Tsashol *xiang*, the poorest one in the study, the proportion was 56.6% of households, and in Lhundrup's Khartse, the second richest *xiang*, it was 71.3%.¹⁵

Another empirical indicator of improved livelihood and quality of life is housing. 55% (N = 430) of households reported that they had either built a new house or expanded their old house since decollectivization. The average reported cost of these improvements was 5,078 yuan (\$614) (median = 3,000 yuan [\$363]). Even in Medrogongkar, 42.4% of households reported they had either built a new house or expanded on their old house.

Thus, despite many reports of extreme poverty in rural Tibet, our data reveal that the majority of inhabitants in the areas studied have made marked progress since decollectivization and secured basic subsistence, in the sense of good food and housing, according to traditional Tibetan standards. However, despite these improvements, because conditions during the communal period in Tibet were poor, the current level of development and the standard of living in rural Tibet are still limited. Compared to rural eastern China, Tibetans clearly have a long way to go, even in the better-off areas. For

15. Data from Panam1 and Panam2 had to be discounted because of a linguistic error in our survey question about consumption of meat (Tib. *sha*). Unbeknownst to us, the referent of the term "sha" in Panam does not include meat fat, as it normally does in other areas like Lhundrup and Medrogongkar, so the Panam responses did not answer the question we asked.

TABLE 9 *Percentage of Households in Different Economic Strata by Site*

	<i>Lhundrup</i>	<i>Panam1</i>	<i>Panam2</i>	<i>Medrogongkar</i>
Rich	28	40	19	14
Middle	24	30	23	23
Lower Middle	27	19	24	30
Poor	24	8	31	37

SOURCE: Ibid.

example, none of the 13 villages we studied had running water in houses, and only the village immediately adjacent to a county seat had a running water tap for the village. Similarly, only that village had electricity. None of the areas had improved dirt roads, let alone paved roads.

Moreover, roughly 14% of sample households were poor by our criteria,¹⁶ and another 28.5% fell into the category of lower-middle households (which we defined to mean that they had a difficult time meeting their basic subsistence needs). Table 9 further reveals that in the two poorest *xiang*—Medrogongkar and Panam2—roughly one-third of the households were poor (37% and 31%, respectively). And, in Medrogongkar, 47.2% of the households reported they were not producing enough grain for their own subsistence from their land. By contrast, government statistics for China as a whole report that less than 5% of the rural population was below the poverty line.¹⁷

Another indication of deficiencies in the rural standard of living derives from the project interviewers' subjective assessments of the physical condition of each family's house. They reported that two and a half times as many houses were considered to be in poor condition than were considered to be in good condition (12.5% good, 55.1% average/adequate, and 32.5% poor).

Still another area where rural Tibetans lag behind is in education. Although improvement is clearly being made, and the majority of children now go to school for some period of time, 19.4% of children aged 7 to 15 had never been to school (69.4% of these were females); only 17.3% of individuals who had ever gone to school had completed primary school (six years). Furthermore, only 7.1% had gone beyond primary school. Given the rapid

16. After extensive discussion with local officials, individual villagers, and focus groups, we operationalized a household as poor if it did not have sufficient grain either from its own fields or from income earned in work, and had to borrow or get welfare to meet its needs. In borderline cases, other factors such as the quality of the house, the number of possessions in the house, and the number of animals were also considered.

17. World Bank, *China: Overcoming Rural Poverty* (Washington, D.C.: World Bank, 2000), p. vi.

TABLE 10 *Material Possessions Owned by Households*

<i>Item</i>	<i>% of Households Owning at Least One</i>
pressure cooker	71.4
at least one set of knotted carpets	60
metal stove	57
bicycle	53
Coleman lantern	49
tape recorder	43
altar	36
sewing machine	30
wristwatch	26
radio	25
small tractor	18
clock	7
solar stove	8
television (only one village had electricity)*	5.8
truck	2.8
solar generator	1.5
large tractor	0.9
motorcycle	0.4

SOURCE: Ibid.

*In the one village that had electricity, 18.7% of households had television sets.

modernization of Tibet's economy, it could be argued that rural Tibetans were not getting adequate education for competing effectively in the new market economy.

The material situation of village households is another empirical way to assess standard of living. We addressed this by asking households about their ownership of a range of durable consumer goods that went beyond the "basics" of pots, pans, beds, and bedding. As Table 10 reveals, the results were mixed. For example, while 71% of households owned a pressure cooker and 60% had a Tibetan carpet set, just slightly more than half had a metal stove (57%) and a bicycle (53%). Moreover, less than half had a tape recorder (49%), and only 30% had a sewing machine.

Thus, although virtually all villagers felt that village material life had improved considerably as compared with the commune era, there is an obvious need for improvement in rural conditions. However, whether the gains made since decollectivization are a trend that will continue is linked to two other trends: population increase and non-farm income.

TABLE 11 *Mean Number of Live Births and Surviving Children to Currently Married Women Aged 20–59 (by Five-Year Age-Categories)*

<i>Age Category</i>	<i># of Women</i>	<i>Mean (Median)</i>		<i>Range</i>	<i>Mean # Live Births Surviving</i>		<i>% of Live Births Deceased</i>
		<i># Live Births</i>	<i>S.D.</i>		<i>S.D.</i>	<i>S.D.</i>	
20–24	73	1.1 (1)	0.8	0–3	1.0	0.8	9.1%
25–29	144	2.3 (2)	1.2	0–6	2.1	1.1	13
30–34	142	3.4 (3)	1.4	0–7	3.0	1.3	11.8
35–39	137	4.1 (4)	1.7	0–8	3.8	1.6	7.3
40–44	93	5.7 (6)	2.4	0–14	5.0	2.0	12.3
45–49	85	6.5 (6)	2.7	0–15	5.6	2.3	13.9
50–54	78	6.9 (8)	2.7	0–13	6.1	2.6	11.6
55–59	63	7.1 (7)	2.8	0–12	6.0	2.6	15.6
<i>Total</i>	815	4.3 (4)	2.8	0–15	3.8	2.4	11.6

SOURCE: Ibid.

Population Dynamics

While China's new semi-market economic system was unfolding in rural Tibet, decisions were made in Beijing and Lhasa with regard to family planning that had an important impact on rural society.¹⁸ In contrast to inland China, from the mid-1970s to the late 1980s, the government opted not to emphasize birth limits and family planning in Tibet. No official birth limits for rural Tibetans were set until the early to mid-1990s, and even today, such limits are not only higher than in inland China but are not strictly enforced. Not surprisingly, rural Tibet has been, and still is, characterized by relatively high fertility.

As Table 11 illustrates, the 141 currently married women aged 50–54 and 55–59 (i.e., women who have completed their reproduction), had, on the average, 6.9 and 7.1 live births, respectively. Similarly, women under the age of 44 (i.e., women who started their reproduction after decollectivization) also had high fertility. For example, currently married women aged 35–39 had, on the average, 4.1 live births, and those 40–44 had 5.7.

The proportion of births that were third, fourth, or a higher birth order also indicates high fertility and is evidence for the absence of any program of systematic forced birth limits in Tibet's rural areas. Of the 131 births that occurred in 1997 to the women in our study, 45.4% were third or higher birth order, 31.5% were fourth birth order or higher, and 20.8% were fifth or higher. Similarly, 70.1% of the 1,110 women who have ever given birth (i.e.,

18. This section derives from Melvyn C. Goldstein, Ben Jiao (Benjor), Cynthia M. Beall, Phuntsog Tsering, "Fertility and Family Planning in Rural Tibet," *China Journal* 47 (January 2002).

who are ever-parous) had three or more live births, 55.9% had four or more, and 41.4% had five or more. The absence of a policy of birth control in Tibet's rural sector is also reflected in the fact that even local officials had large families. The average number of surviving children for the 20 local village heads for whom we had information was 5.1.

This high fertility, moreover, was coupled with moderate/low mortality. For example, only 12.9% of children born to the oviparous women in our sample had died.¹⁹ 65.2% of these women had no children die, 21.2% had one child die, and only 13.6% had two or more children die. In other words, on average, 87.1% of all children born to women in the study survived. This mortality rate is moderate to low in comparison with indigenous Tibetan populations in northwest Nepal that had no modern health care when they were studied in 1976. For example, in Limi, 43% of the children born to living women had died,²⁰ and during the same time period in nearby Nyinba, 54.3% of children born to living women had died.²¹ However, it should also be noted that relative to other groups in China, the offspring mortality experienced by women in the present sample is still high. For example, Chinese statistics indicate that the Han Chinese, Koreans, Mongolians, and Hui had lower proportions of children dying: 2.6%, 5.5%, 6.8%, and 8.6%, respectively.²²

The laissez-faire population policy that characterized rural Tibet in the 1980s changed in the 1990s, and birth controls are currently being emphasized in rural areas, where the official limit is normally considered to be three births per couple. However, it is clear that for most of the period since decollectivization, Tibetan villagers had no birth limits, and even today, the official three-child birth limit is not strictly enforced. The result of this has been population growth. For example, in the TAR as a whole, the number of ethnic Tibetans increased 35.3% in the 17 years from 1982–99 (1,764,000 to

19. Another recent survey reported 13.2%. See Nancy Harris et al., "Nutritional and Health Status of Tibetan Children Living at High Altitudes," *New England Journal of Medicine* 344:5 (February 2001), p. 345.

20. Cynthia M. Beall and Melvyn C. Goldstein, "Fraternal Polyandry in N.W. Nepal: A Test of Sociobiological Theory," *American Anthropologist* 83:1 (March 1981), p. 8.

21. Nancy Levine, *The Nyinba: Population and Social Structure in a Polyandrous Society*, Ph.D. dissertation, University of Rochester, 1977, p. 304.

22. Tianlu Zhang and Mei Zhang, "The Present Population of the Tibetan Nationality in China (in English), *Social Sciences in China* 15 (Spring 1994), p. 57. This paper also reports a higher 1990 mortality rate for the TAR (17.4%) than we found. Data also came from Jianhua Shi and Shuzhang Yang, "Xizang zizhiqu renkou shengyu zhuangkuang" [Fertility status in the Tibet Autonomous Region], in *Dangdai Zhongguo Xizang renkou* [Tibetan population in China today], eds., National Population Census Office under the State Council and the Population Census Office of the Tibet Autonomous Region (Beijing, 1992), pp. 266–82.

TABLE 12 *Change in Number of Mu Per Capita from Decollectivization to 1996*

	<u># Of Mu Per Capita at Decollectivization</u>		<u># Of Mu Per Capita Now</u>		<u>Amount of Change in Mu</u>	
	<i>Cases</i>	<i># Per Capita</i>	<i>Cases</i>	<i># Per Capita</i>	<i># Per Capita</i>	<i>%</i>
Lhundrup	180	5.1	199	4.3	-0.7	-14.5
Medrogongkar	176	2.6	198	2.1	-0.5	-21.1
Panam1	181	3.3	198	2.4	-0.9	-28.6
Panam2	163	2.3	185	1.9	-0.5	-20.7
<i>Total</i>	700	3.3	780	2.7	-0.7	-19.9

SOURCE: Local *xiang* and village records.

2,388,009).²³ Data from the localities in our study sites revealed similar increases.

Land Holdings Per Capita

The absence of an active family-planning policy has fostered population growth which, given the matrix of fixed land resources, has impacted negatively on rural Tibetans by fostering a decrease of 19.9% in per capita land holdings since decollectivization (see Table 12). This decrease would be slightly higher if the farm land that was taken out of production for new house sites or lost to flooding was included in government statistics. Not surprisingly, 33% of all study households said that in 1997 their fields in general did not produce enough grain for household needs, and 26% reported that they did not produce enough during the previous year.

At the same time, Tibet, as in the rest of China, experienced inflation in the price of manufactured goods and other essential products such as fertilizers. For example, in the TAR, the cost of deep dressing fertilizer increased 107% between 1988 and 2000, and sugar, tea, cooking oil, and rice increased by 133%, 188%, 336%, and 400% respectively, between 1984 and 2000.²⁴ By contrast, the price of barley, over the period 1985–98, increased only 56%.²⁵ There have also been increases in taxation and fees for services previously provided free by the government, e.g., salaries of local leaders and health

23. Rong Ma, *Xizang de renkou yu shehui* [Population and society in Tibet] (Beijing: Tongxin chubanshe, 1996), p. 37; Tibet Population Sampling Bureau, *Xizang tongji nianjian: 2000* [Tibet statistical yearbook, 2000] (Beijing: Zhongguo tongji chubanshe, 2000), p. 325.

24. Local records and *Xizang wu jiazhi* [Tibet merchandise price history], ed., Economic Planning Bureau (Lhasa, 2000), manuscript.

25. Local records. According to *Xizang wu jiazhi*, between 1984 and 2000, there was an 89% increase.

care. All individuals 18 to 60 years of age are required to provide 20 days of free labor annually. This inflation has leveled off over the past two years, but the overall effect has been to exacerbate the income shortfall of many families.

One obvious solution to these problems would be to open up new land for farming. However, in our study areas, there is virtually no land available for this. Nor is arable land available for leasing from others, because there has been very little permanent outmigration. Increasing yields on existing land is also not a viable option without large outlays of new funds for irrigation works. Similarly, the value of Tibetans crops is unlikely to increase in the future, as Tibetan barley and wheat have no marketability in the rest of China. They are only consumed by ethnic Tibetans, and urban (and many rural) Tibetans actually prefer flour from Nepal or China to that made from Tibetan wheat.

Villagers are trying to cope in a number of traditional and non-traditional ways. One traditional option—making sons monks and daughters nuns—could relieve some of this pressure, because monks and nuns relinquish their shares of land to their household when they join the monastery. However, its utility is limited because, as mentioned earlier, there are membership limits on monasteries and nunneries. In the 1990s, not only were these limits enforced in the areas we studied, but monasteries and nunneries with residents in excess of government-set limits were forced to return the “excess” monks and nuns back to their home villages. This, of course, exacerbated the decreasing land-person ratio. Goldstein witnessed in 1997 an interesting interchange about this between the mother of an “expelled” nun and the local party secretary at the former’s house. The party secretary was a local man and knew the family well. The mother served him a cup of local Tibetan beer, and after some small talk, she launched into a diatribe about the recent expulsion of her daughter from the nunnery. She was very verbal and basically said that this policy was destroying the lives of monks and nuns like her daughter who, after returning to the village, were neither real nuns nor real villagers. The party secretary didn’t try to enlighten her with any of the official rhetorical justifications. He just shook his head and, with a forlorn look on his face, said, in effect: “There is nothing I can do. There is nothing anyone can do. You will have to try to make the best of it.”

Villagers are trying to cope in a number of other traditional and non-traditional ways. One strategy employed in many areas was the revival of traditional marriage patterns such as fraternal polyandry (two or more brothers jointly marrying a wife), since this helps to conserve land intact across gener-

ations, and concentrates adult male labor in households.²⁶ Another was the revival of traditional inheritance norms that favor the main household against segments that fission off. From the standpoint of the main household, this helps to ensure that it will remain economically strong, although the practice creates weak new households. A third, and unexpected, strategy was the use of modern contraception to bear fewer children.²⁷ There was widespread feeling that the cost of having many children is high, especially for poorer households. Our reproductive survey revealed that of the 515 currently married women aged 25–44, 52.6% were using modern family planning, and of the 372 currently married women aged 30–44, 58.1% were using contraception. However, most of these users have been utilizing contraception only since the mid-1990s, and over half (52%) of these women began using contraception only after they had had four or more children. Thus, this high usage is recent, and appears primarily aimed at preventing fifth and subsequent pregnancies and, to a lesser extent, birth spacing. Contraception has not, therefore, yet had a large impact on overall fertility and population growth. Moreover, even if contraceptive use increases in the coming years, as we think it will, population growth is likely to continue for the indefinite future because of the young age structure of the population, albeit probably at slower rates.

This leads to the fourth major adaptive strategy—participation in off-farm work.

Development Policy and Off-Farm Work

Although the rural Tibetans in our study are generally unable to participate in the migrant labor market in inland China because they do not know the Chinese language and, even if they did, there is already a scarcity of jobs for ethnic Chinese there, they do pursue non-farm work opportunities in the TAR. In fact, they see this as critical for their economic well-being.

The study found that 48.8% of the 780 households surveyed had one or more members engaged in non-farm labor for part of 1997–98. Table 13 shows that in three of the four study areas, the percent of households sending one or more non-farm laborers averaged 57%, while in the fourth and poorest area, Medrogongkar, only 24.2% of households did so. A total of 19.4% of all individuals between the ages of 15 and 49 engaged in some form of non-farm work that year, and 27.2% of individuals between 20 and 34 did so. 44% of males between the ages of 20 and 34 engaged in non-farm work.

26. Ben Jiao, *Socio-economic and Cultural Factors Underlying the Contemporary Revival of Fraternal Polyandry in Tibet*, Ph.D. dissertation, Case Western Reserve University, 2001.

27. This topic is examined more fully in Melvyn C. Goldstein et al., “Fertility and Family Planning in Rural Tibet.”

TABLE 13 *No. of Households Having One or More Non-Farm Laborers (in %)*

Lhundrup	53.8
Panam1	55.6
Panam2	62.7
Medrogongkar	24.2
<i>Total</i>	48.8

SOURCE: Data collected by authors.

NOTE: Focus group interviews reported that 70.7% of households usually send at least one member for non-farm income.

TABLE 14 *Percentage of Households Having One or More Non-Farm Laborers by Economic Status*

<i>Economic Status</i>	<i>% Having One or More Non-Farm Wage Laborers</i>	<i>% of Households Having Two or More Non-Farm Wage Laborers</i>
Rich	61.6	21.5
Middle	54.6	15.4
Lower middle	42.3	2.8
Poor	30.8	3.7

SOURCE: Data collected by authors.

TABLE 15 *Median Income in Yuan for Households from Non-Farm Work by Economic Status*

	<i>Median Income</i>
Rich	3,900
Middle	1,500
Lower middle	1,000
Poor	700

SOURCE: Data collected by authors.

Villagers engaged in five basic types of non-farm work: (1) migrant manual and low-skill labor (usually construction); (2) skilled and craft labor (usually carpentry, masonry, or painting); (3) private business (running a shop, trading, transportation); (4) ritual work (such as mantra specialist); and (5) government employment (such as official, teacher, health aide). Migrant la-

borers typically left the village for a four-month period beginning with the end of planting and ending at the start of harvesting.

Villagers consider off-farm income essential for achieving a high standard of living, and Table 14 provides data in support of this. It shows, for example, that whereas 61.6% of rich families had one or more members engaged in non-farm, income-producing activities, only 30.8% of the poorest families did. And while 21.5% of rich households had two or more non-farm income earners, only 3.7% of poor households did.

Households in the study earned a wide range of income. Because a few households had incomes over 10,000 yuan (\$1,209) per year—these operated trucking and construction businesses—median-income figures are used in the following analysis in order that these few households do not skew the results. For households that had a member engaged in non-farm work, the median income earned was 1,280 yuan (\$155). That was equivalent to approximately 29% of the cash value of their total agricultural production.²⁸ In Table 15, the importance of non-farm income for standard of living is illustrated by the fact that rich households had 5.6 times as much non-farm income as poor households, and middle-income households had 2.1 times as much. It is not surprising, therefore, that villagers explicitly consider securing income from non-farm work essential for a high standard of living in today's world.

However, despite this involvement in non-farm work, villagers and their leaders almost universally complain that there are not enough jobs for them, and because their skill levels are low, that most of those who find jobs get only the lower-paying jobs. Thus, the income they earn is low. For example, roughly 52% of those who worked at off-farm labor engaged in manual labor, whereas only 26% engaged in skilled work, 18% in business, and 4% in government jobs. The different earning capacities of these types of jobs is substantial. In 1997–98, the reported median income earned per worker in manual labor was only 1,000 yuan (\$121), while that of those in skilled labor was 65% higher at 1,650 yuan (\$196), and in business it was 100% higher at 2,000 yuan (\$242). Working for the government was the highest income at 2,160 yuan (\$261).

Villagers and many of their leaders are frustrated by the dearth of job opportunities in construction projects, blaming this not on the lack of economic investment in Tibet but rather on the unrestricted influx of non-Tibetan migrant laborers. Thus, the third area of policy change that has had a critical

28. To obtain this estimated cash value of crops, we multiplied the average number of *mu* [1 *mu* = 0.067 hectares] per household (17.4) by the average seed sown for barley (30 *jin*) [1 *jin* = 0.5 kilograms] by an average yield of 11 times the seed sown to get the total yield in barley. The price for a *jin* of barley in 1998 was 0.78, so this was multiplied to get the cash value. This is a rough estimate, since a portion of the crop is wheat and oil seed, but it suffices to give a general idea of the importance of this income.

impact on rural Tibet in the post-Maoist era is the type of development policy that has been implemented in Tibet and its impact on non-farm wage labor opportunities.

Throughout China, the post-Mao reforms have freed villagers to move from their official village residence and allowed them to seek work elsewhere. However, minority areas pose a special problem to economic development policy, since minority autonomous regions were explicitly created to preserve minority cultures and benefit minorities. The autonomy law of 1984 gave autonomous regions the right to override national laws when they were deemed not suitable for the needs of the minority population, including economic and development issues.²⁹ A question for the government, therefore, was how to implement the market-development and migrant labor policies in Tibet where, for many reasons, Tibetans were clearly disadvantaged vis-à-vis non-Tibetans (Han and Hui). Two models were discussed in the 1980s. In one, rapid development in Tibet would be stressed, with the door to Tibet being open to all Chinese without restraints. The government would provide huge amounts of infrastructural development money, and whoever came to compete for jobs was fine. The overt rationale for this was the need to accelerate the pace of development in Tibet.

In the other model of economic development, Tibetans would be given preferential treatment for jobs, contracts, etc. The aim was still rapid development, but this would be tempered somewhat so that the citizens of the minority autonomous region would be the primary beneficiaries of economic growth. This approach is somewhat analogous to the model being used in China's dealings with more advanced Western companies, where combinations of preferences and constraints are used so that the less skilled group—the Chinese—has time to catch up and compete.

The debate over these alternatives was settled in the mid-1980s, when China opted for the former model. The result has been an influx of huge numbers of non-Tibetan migrant laborers and businesspeople (mainly Han). The majority of the residents in Tibet's capital, Lhasa, now are Han Chinese, and the secondary towns are moving in that direction. Thus, as rural Tibetans found it increasingly necessary to compensate for decreasing per capita land holdings and turned to off-farm labor, they found (and find) themselves in difficult competition with large numbers of better-skilled, experienced China workers and businesses. Given the current policy, this competition from non-Tibetans will certainly increase as the new Western Region development policy pumps more funds into infrastructural projects in Tibet. Tibet's economy is likely to shift further and further into the hands of Chinese firms and labor-

29. The law is cited in <http://www.novexcn.com/regional_nation_autonomy.html>.

ers. The development of a rail link between Tibet and Inner China will further exacerbate this trend.

Conclusions

Decollectivization in Tibet has clearly brought improvement to the livelihood and standard of living of rural Tibetans, although it has also created economic stratification and a stratum of very poor households. However, the state's policies on land tenure, family planning, and development/migrant labor have interacted to create serious structural problems for rural Tibetans. Tibetan villagers now cope with increasing population, decreasing land per capita, and increasing prices and taxes, by utilizing a variety of traditional strategies such as fraternal polyandry and adopting new coping strategies such as family planning and non-farm wage labor. However, although the government is trying to improve this situation by making a more concerted effort to reduce fertility and population growth in Tibet by increasing the use of contraceptives, with regard to the key problem area—access to income from off-farm labor—there is no sign that the government is considering reforming the current “open door” policy to provide, for example, job preferences or set-asides to citizens of the autonomous region in the government-funded construction sector, or to establish tax-rebate programs for construction projects that hire Tibetans. Thus, unless major changes in development policy such as these are instituted, the progress rural Tibetans have made since decollectivization may not continue, let alone increase, in the coming decade.