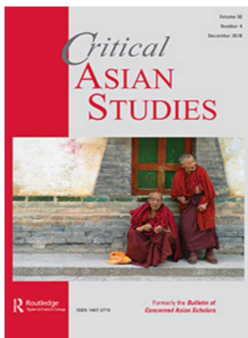

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Tibetan translocalities: navigating urban opportunities and new ways of belonging in Tibetan pastoral communities in China

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ABSTRACT
Urban development in Tibetan areas of China lags behind that of other non-coastal, rural areas and occurs at a significantly smaller scale due to remote and mountainous terrain and a lower population density. However, just as in the rest of China, urban development in Tibetan regions is characterized by an unevenness that constitutes and produces new translocal ties, as people belong to multiple localities at the same time. But Tibetan patterns of translocal ties are unique. For college-educated Tibetans, structural factors such as educational institutions and ethnic discrimination and affective factors such as attachment to home places powerfully shape the landscape of urban opportunities along ethnic lines. Instead of educational and employment structures enabling Tibetans to pursue economic opportunities in urban centers across the country, socio-ethnic inequalities and thick relational ties eventually bring many Tibetan graduates back to the urban centers administratively connected to their rural home places in Tibetan areas.

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Introduction

What does China's late-socialist, urban-centered development look like for an educated class of Tibetan professionals? Studies have documented how uneven economic development in the Chinese interior and coastal areas has spatialized inequalities, producing a landscape where younger generations in agricultural communities leave rural villages to seek economic opportunities in booming coastal cities.[1] The acceleration of urban development in Tibetan areas lags behind that of other non-coastal, rural areas of China by at least a decade and has occurred at a significantly smaller scale due to remoteness, mountainous geography, and lower population density.[2] Tibetan areas are located in China's western region, including the Tibet Autonomous Region (TAR) and the provinces of Qinghai, Gansu, Sichuan, and Yunnan.

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[1]Chang 2008; Lee 2009; Liu 2011; Loyalka 2012; Pun and Chan 2013; Sun 2004; Oakes and Schein 2006; Zhang 2001.

[2]I refer specifically to what has been termed "*in situ* urbanization" or "rural urbanization," in which rural settlements are urbanized. In other rural areas of China, this process began as early as the 1970s, and took off after the start of the reform period in the 1990s. See Zhu et al. 2013.

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The patterns of urban development in these regions differ from those in the rest of China in significant ways. However, just as in the rest of China, this urban development is characterized by an unevenness that constitutes and produces new translocal ties, as an increasing number of residents belong to multiple localities at the same time as a response to the uneven economic landscape.[3] This uneven terrain of socio-economic development motivates spatial practices such as "scale jumping:" instead of moving up the hierarchy of administrative units, people may "jump" across and down, which can rework the state's hierarchical scaling of places.[4] Tibetan patterns of translocal ties and scale jumping demonstrate how mobility is motivated not just by broad regional economic disparities. These are also motivated by economic unevenness within micro-regions as well as social dimensions of ethnic landscapes and meanings of place.

Urban-centered development profoundly alters ties between people and land. State-led economic restructuring initiatives reduce the land holdings of rural residents and diminish the need for farm labor and pastoral work.[5] Such initiatives also centralize attractive or required resources, such as education, health care, and employment, in urban administrative sites (see Tsering Bum, this issue). In this case, despite better opportunities and resources at the higher levels of the state territorial scale hierarchy, educated Tibetans eventually attempt to position themselves at an administrative scale not precisely back home, but closer to home. They seek positions in neither the metropolis of inland urban China nor their home villages, but in provincial and prefectural seats and county towns.

In this article, I document how rural economic development along with education and employment structures, particularly since the late-socialist reform period in China, increasingly draw educated Tibetans away from their rural home communities and remake them as productive citizens in a market economy. For the average high school or college-educated Tibetan, agricultural or pastoral labor is not a desirable option. Similar to their rural ethnic Chinese counterparts, Tibetan professionals seek state sector and non-state sector wage employment in urban centers.[6] But unlike their ethnic Chinese counterparts, desirable urban centers are not cities such as Shanghai, Shenzhen, Guangzhou, or Beijing. More often than not, the desired urban centers for Tibetan professionals are administratively connected to their home places or in cities with a significant Tibetan population. The importance and changing meanings of "home" (Tibetan *yul)* for Tibetans who have been educated in the state system cannot be overlooked. But what it means to return home has shifted with their experience of moving through the spatial scales of the state's administrative hierarchy. To illustrate this, I analyze how Tibetan pastoralists in one region make decisions informed by opportunities in larger cities, and simultaneously how social, cultural, and economic worlds in Tibetan places closer to home shape the choices available to Tibetan professionals from pastoralist backgrounds. This study stands as a case study in how Tibetan translocalities are producing or exacerbating inequalities within Tibetan communities as well as for Tibetan communities within the national economic landscape of China.

[3]Oakes and Schein 2006.
[4]Cartier 2006; Sun 2006; Feng and Zhan 2006; Hoffman 2006; Oakes and Schein 2006; Weng 2006.
[5]See for instance studies documenting the impact of policies aimed at managing grasslands such as pastoralist settled housing policies (Ptáčková 2011), converting pastures to grasslands (Yeh 2005), and fencing (Bauer 2005).
[6]Throughout this article, I use "ethnic Chinese" to refer to Han Chinese citizens of the People's Republic of China (PRC). I do so to call attention to the implicit ethnic and racial conflation of "Chinese" (*zhongguo ren*) with "Han Chinese" (*Hanzu*), as opposed to a Chinese national, (i.e. a citizen of the PRC) and how these implicit meanings reflect a vision of statehood that excludes non-Han citizens of the PRC.

Other studies have documented how educated ethnic Chinese are pressured to leave behind home places for more lucrative futures in cosmopolitan cities. These studies have demonstrated how the mobility of ethnic Chinese professionals continues to be constrained by factors such as gender, official residency status (*hukou*), household background, social class, and personal “quality” (*suzhi*). However, these studies do not consider the effects of ethnicity on social and spatial mobility.[7] I argue that even for Tibetan elites, structural factors such as educational institutions and ethnic discrimination, and affective factors such as personal attachment to home places and Tibetanness, powerfully shape the landscape of urban opportunities along ethnic lines. Instead of educational and employment structures enabling Tibetans to pursue economic opportunities in urban centers across the country, socio-ethnic inequalities along with strong relational ties to home eventually bring many Tibetan graduates back to the urban centers administratively connected to their rural home places.

Tibetan translocalities in China

Within the broader context of rapid economic growth in reform-era China, geographers and anthropologists have studied new forms of mobility, particularly those of rural migrant laborers who move to coastal cities. Instead of these movements to the cities displacing ties to rural places, people’s relationships to places have become translocal, tied to multiple localities simultaneously. However, these new forms of mobility do not simply create new and undifferentiated connections across economic regions. On the contrary, these exacerbate socioeconomic inequalities.[8]

State-led development has targeted the administrative seats in Tibetan areas over the past few decades. Interspersed through pastoral and agricultural areas, these urbanization initiatives have introduced new scales of economic and social unevenness between remote pastures and the nearest village shop or between a dusty township and a bustling county market. Pastoral communities, in particular, are shifting in increasing numbers to administrative seats, particularly in response to resettlement policy incentives that offer access to housing, schools, health care, markets, and other resources.

Recent studies have examined the implementation of settled housing projects for Tibetan pastoralists and their socioeconomic effects within the context of pastoral communities and rural administrative centers.[9] Less studied is the broader picture of the networks connecting these rural places with regional and national scales of the urban and how Tibetans move between these to access new opportunities centered in urban sites yet retain ways of belonging to their home communities in rural places.

This article is part of a broader research project that examines Tibetan translocalities characterized by the particular ways in which relational responsibilities tie Tibetans, their communities, and their places together.[10] Over a period of twenty months, from 2014 to 2016, I interviewed and participated in everyday life in Tibetan communities

[7] Bian and Xiao 2017; Hoffman 2010; Sun 2006.
[8] Oakes and Schein 2006.
[9] Bauer and Huatse Gyal 2015; Gruschke 2008; Ptáčková 2011; Sułek 2012.
[10] I borrow from indigenous studies scholars the term “relational responsibility,” which conveys a sense of responsibility to others based upon social relationships that “require actions to reciprocate and renew these relationships.” See Corntassel 2013; Simpson 2013.

based in the metropolises of Beijing and Chengdu, in several prefectural and county seats in Qinghai and Sichuan provinces, and in a pastoral community in Golok, Qinghai.[11] Tibetans from throughout China converge in Beijing and Chengdu for education, work, commerce, and medical care. My non-random sample from these cities is largely composed of Tibetans born in the 1980s and 1990s whose homes are in Qinghai, Sichuan, and Gansu provinces. They are part of a generation that grew up after the start of the reform period in 1978 and before the second phase of intensified market integration began after 2008. Many of them have or are pursuing graduate degrees in fields related to Tibetan language, history, and religion.[12] The experiences of highly educated Tibetans residing in major Chinese cities provides one extreme in the broader trend of out-migration to urban centers and the demographic groups who are able to carry out this level of urban mobility. My interviewees also included Tibetans in several mid-level urban centers in eastern Tibetan areas that generally attract groups of Tibetans from their own respective administrative jurisdictions. Finally, to better understand the home places that many young Tibetans leave behind, I made four trips lasting about a month each to a pastoral community in the eastern Tibetan region of Golok, Qinghai Province. In many cases, this cohort represents the last generation of Tibetans to have fully participated in rural household labor as children.

Translocal senses of "home"

Particularly since Deng Xiaoping's 1992 embrace of a socialist market economy, an elite knowledge class has emerged in China. This knowledge class, or higher-level managerial class, is comprised of highly educated ethnic Chinese who are able to move from (geographical and conceptual) north to south and inland to coastal cities in pursuit of higher salaries and better opportunities. Furthermore, many eventually bring their families with them, leaving behind home places where they themselves formerly feared being left behind in.[13] In these cases, people's simultaneous ties to multiple places enable them to relocate to lucrative economic destinations. Such moves remain rare for Tibetans, highlighting the lingering institutional legacies of educational and employment structures, the constraints of ethnicity in the private sector, and the importance of home place and communities for Tibetans. The uneven terrain of the national economy may offer more lucrative opportunities in larger ethnic Chinese cities but even educated classes of Tibetans face disadvantages in trying to navigate linguistic, cultural, and social environments dominated by ethnic Chinese in inland Chinese cities. Tibetan translocal relationships to places

[11]I collected information from a non-random sample of approximately 200 individuals at these various sites. I also conducted participant observation with about an equal number of individuals who published on public forums on social media. I conducted all interviews and exchanges in Lhasa and Amdo dialects of Tibetan, with the exception of one, which was conducted in English.

[12]This thus represents a self-selected group successful in their Tibetan medium track education. In both Beijing and Chengdu, a significant majority of students in these fields were from Qinghai or Sichuan, perhaps owing to the strength of Tibetan medium instruction in local educational institutions, particularly in some areas of Qinghai. Additionally, Chengdu, being the capital of Sichuan, attracts many Tibetans from Sichuan. A significant community of Tibetans from the Tibet Autonomous Region also resides in Chengdu because of numerous TAR government offices in Chengdu.

[13]Sun 2006. Feng and Zhan (2006) also document the ability of new ethnic Chinese migrants, particularly of the elite groups, from places such as Guangdong, Guangxi, and Sichuan, to actualize permanent moves to the economically booming Hainan Province. These groups adopt a new identification with Hainan as home even as they maintain their old identities linked to their places of origin.

may extend the meaning of home to multiple sites administratively connected to ancestral homes. But instead of enabling educated Tibetans to follow economic opportunities across the national landscape, Tibetan translocalities tend to bring people back to areas administratively connected to home places.

The importance of home can be understood through the density and historical layers of relational ties to family, social units, religious communities, and local deities that populate the landscape. In this way, "belonging" is not a one-way relationship of territories being owned by people, or people being enclosed by territories, but a mutual act in which people and places are tied together in cosmological, affective, and everyday ways.[14] At its most granular, "home" (Tibetan *yul)* literally means the physical abode of a person's family's residence, whether ancestral or current. But this can also refer to a sliding scale of places (relative to the interlocutors) where someone is connected to a dense web of social relations – the greater or smaller political, religious, and kinship communities where one belongs.[15] Importantly, the familial relationship, particularly between parents and children, is characterized by a Buddhist moral sense of an unrepayable debt of gratitude for the kindness of one's parents.[16] Related to this is an understanding that karmic laws of cause and effect (Tibetan *las rgyu 'bras*) have brought parents and children together in this life through their actions in the past, and how children treat their parents in this life will produce good or bad results in their next life.[17] Teachings from religious leaders also emphasize repaying the kindness of one's parents as one of the highest virtues, something that sets Tibetan society apart from others. The social as well as religious importance of upholding this relationship with parents brings many Tibetan professionals closer to their parents' homes.

In a context in which people's relationships to places have become "translocal" – being born in a village, going to school for nine years in a township or county seat, and spending four or more years in a provincial city for college and work – what does it mean to "come home"? Unlike those of their parents' generation, for whom the prefectural or county seat might be an occasional place to visit for shopping or medical needs, this educated generation has spent their formative years and early adulthood "away," forming affective attachments in the process. For educated Tibetans from pastoralist households, the experience of residing in the administrative seats connected to their home place for education has also reinforced a translocal sense of home along state administrative scales of place. Thus, among recent generations, the idea of "home" can be expanded or contracted to refer

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[14]For other studies that look at the active relationships between people and places, see Myers 1991, Povinelli 2002, and Ingold 2000.

[15]Cencetti studies the changing uses of the Tibetan term *pha yul* (literally "father's land") including its conflation with *yul* ("home" as in current place of residence) among a community of Tibetan pastoralists in Qinghai (Cencetti 2015). However, here I focus on the term *yul*. It was the most common term used in the communities I interacted with to refer to various scales of home places, including ancestral. In my study site in Golok, the term *yul,* particularly for older generations, specifically refers to ancestral homes. In my encounters, *pha yul* was a more formal, literary term that specifically meant ancestral land, but in a more abstract sense. It was usually used in contexts involving political units of country or nation, or to refer specifically to ancestral lands when interlocutors were from vastly different areas, such as between Tibetans from Lhasa and Amdo, or when foreigners were present.

[16]This gratitude for the kindness of one's parents (Tibetan *pha ma'i drin lan*) is also one of the sixteen moral codes attributed to the seventh century Tibetan king, Songtsen Gampo (Tibetan *mi chos gtsang ma bcu drug*). Although called "moral codes" several of the most important codes are directly related to upholding Buddhism. I thank Gedun Rabsal for bringing this to my attention.

[17]Indeed there are prayers for enabling people to repay the kindness of their parents and songs of devotion praising the virtue of showing gratitude for one's parents, for instance this song of devotion written in the early twentieth century and republished several years ago: http://www.tibetcm.com/classics/poem-songs/2014-12-10/2967.html Accessed March 11, 2018.

to the administrative scales of the state that are connected to someone's literal home. The following anecdote illustrates this translocal sense of home.

A friend pursuing graduate studies in Beijing told me excitedly about her plans to return home for the Tibetan New Year. She had just bought her train ticket to Xining, where someone would pick her up and bring her to the county seat. "I'll spend a few days in the county seat, then go home (*yul)* a few days before the New Year," she told me. Here, "home" refers to her village. A few minutes into our conversation, I asked her to clarify when she would arrive home at her village. She motioned towards her train ticket to Xining, saying she would go back home at the end of the month. I had to verbally retrace her path: "From Xining to the county seat, and from there, when will you arrive home?" "Ah," she replied, understanding, "I'll go back to my village four days before the New Year."

This vignette illustrates how the relative context of the term "home" expresses Tibetans' relationships to multiple places along the hierarchical scales of the state. At the same time, the importance of home is also transferred along these scales of the state. Familial pressure for Tibetan graduates to live "close to home" often means closer within the administrative jurisdictions, not necessarily in terms of actual distance or travel time. When I first arrived in Chengdu in 2015, a friend from Golok was agonizing over family pressure to return home versus his own desire to pursue a meaningful non-state career in a relatively cosmopolitan city. I watched as, over a period of several months, he took steps towards exploring options back home. Eventually, he gave up his job in Chengdu to take up a position within Golok Prefecture, but in a county far from his home place and not well connected by roads. He used to be able to travel almost seamlessly from Chengdu to his home place with a two-hour flight to Xining followed by a six-hour bus or taxi ride. But in his new job, it would sometimes take him even longer because of the more difficult terrain and the need to find rides at several junctures along the way. Yet his mother preferred this, saying as long as he was in Golok, she was happy. This illustrates another phenomenon of place-making where the meanings of traditional Tibetan places, such as "Golok," are conflated with state administrative units, i.e. "Golok Prefecture," to produce a sense of home and an attachment to it that coincides with the administrative units of the state.

Urbanization on the Tibetan Plateau

Urban development in Tibetan areas since the founding of the PRC has largely focused on administrative seats, many of which had little or no history as urban spaces.[18] In Tibetan areas of Qinghai and Sichuan, to take an example, prefectural and county seats were established in the 1950s.[19] The 1983 "Law of the P.R.C. Regarding the Organization of Local People's Congresses and Local People's Government" marked the conversion of communes to townships and urban development focused at the township levels and up.[20] The

[18]Exceptions of course exist, such as the city of Lhasa, which was established over a millennium ago, as well as Mao-era prisons and nuclear facilities in remote areas of Qinghai. See Rohlf 2013. For a discussion of how the "urban-rural" dichotomy was not a traditional concept in the Tibetan context, see Yeh and Henderson 2008.

[19]The history and building up of these administrative seats varies by locality, but in general, their rapid development into urban sites with a density of multi-story buildings has only happened in the last couple of decades. For a brief account of the history of built settlements in a pastoral area in Sichuan, see Gaerrang 2015b, 265–266. For an account of built homes in Golok, see Sułek 2012, 238–241. For a study of the development of Qinghai Province through the settling of Han and Hui Chinese in the 1950s, see Rohlf 2016.

[20]*Aba Prefecture Gazetteer vol. 1* (Ch. *A ba zhou zhi, shang ce*) 1994, 218.

Figure 1. Tongren County seat in Qinghai Province. Credit: NoGhost [CC BY-SA 4.0 (https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/4.0)], from Wikimedia Commons.

"Opening the West" (Chi. *xibu kaifa)* strategy, launched in 2000, aimed to improve living conditions for residents by building up infrastructure and telecommunications. This kind of "rural urbanization" targeted administrative seats (Figure 1). In Golok Prefecture in Qinghai, for instance, the government provided subsidies for constructing residential buildings out of new materials at the county levels and below, as well as constructed roads and bridges that connected townships and even some villages in the prefecture.[21] Around the same period, policies aimed at environmental protection moved tens of thousands of pastoralists from environmentally "fragile" areas into housing in or near administrative seats.[22]

Since the mid-1990s, Tibetan areas in China have experienced some of the highest gross development product (GDP) growth rates and one of the most rapid shifts from rural to urban livelihoods in the country. Yet this form of state-led, urban-centered development has brought subsidies and investments through the state itself or Chinese corporations, essentially benefitting an elite group comprised mostly of non-Tibetans.[23] Furthermore, several studies document the sense by many Tibetans that opportunities even in these newly urbanized Tibetan areas are increasingly dominated by the economic networks and market savviness of outsiders such as ethnic and Muslim Chinese.[24]

[21]*Survey of the Golok Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture* (Ch. *Guoluo zangzu zizhizhou gaikuan)* 2009, 138–139; 204–208.

[22]This was under the policy rubric of "ecological migration" (Chi. *shengtai yimin)* and "converting pastures to grasslands" (Chi. *tuimu huancao)*. See studies by Yeh 2005, 2009a; Bessho 2015; Ptáčková 2015.

[23]Fischer 2009.

[24]See Fischer 2005; Hu and Salazar 2008; Ma and Tanzen Lhundup 2008. For a detailed study of how ethnic Chinese migrants utilized hometown and kinship networks to dominate greenhouse farming in peri-urban Lhasa, see Yeh 2013.

The unrest that spread across the Tibetan Plateau in 2008 highlighted to policymakers a political problem that they saw tied to the economic gap between coastal and western regions.[25] To remedy this disparity, policymakers proposed an extension of the Opening the West campaign that targeted Tibetan pastoralist areas, particularly in eastern Tibet, for better integration into a market economy.[26] Thus, from 2009, a second wave of building, under the policy rubric of "Settled Housing for Herders Action Plan" (Chi. *mumin dingju xingdong jihua)* expanded the reach of settled housing for pastoralist communities. By building planned housing tracts in or near administrative seats, state officials aimed to encourage pastoralists to settle in towns and integrate into a market economy.[27]

In addition to this rural urbanization, lower and mid-level administrative seats in Tibetan areas, just as in the rest of China, have undergone a process of "administrative urbanization," upgrading their administrative status that in turn enhances a locality's access to state resources. In the case of Lhasa, urbanization has been promoted by scaling low- and mid-level rural places higher up in the administrative hierarchy.[28] Another more recent example of administrative urbanization is the conversion of numerous Tibetan autonomous prefectures and districts in Qinghai, Sichuan, Yunnan, Gansu, and the TAR into municipalities.[29]

Ethnic landscapes of urban opportunities

Ethnic Chinese from rural areas are able to access economic opportunities in major Chinese cities, forging translocal ties between their home villages and their new homes in cities.[30] But for Tibetans, even those who are highly educated, economic opportunities in Chinese cities are greatly limited by the ethnic landscape. A college-educated Tibetan man living in Chengdu drew on his own experiences and observations to explain:

> For an ethnic Chinese going to a different Chinese city, it's just a matter of a different dialect, but the culture and everything is familiar; it's easy for them to integrate into society. Tibetans, even if they want to stay in the Chinese cities, they cannot do so easily because it's like a foreign place to them. The language, the culture, the people, the places: it's all unfamiliar and it's not easy for them to get used to it and integrate into society there.

Outside of these urban centers in Tibetan areas, a handful of ethnic Chinese-dominated cities have become home to a growing population of Tibetans. These are for the most part the provincial capitals in provinces with Tibetan populations: Chengdu, the capital

[25]2008 saw unprecedented outbreaks of unrest across the Tibetan Plateau that scholars of Tibet have characterized as expressions of long-held grievances exacerbated by increased militarization and accelerated state development in Tibetan areas (Barnett 2009; Fischer 2009; Makley 2009; Makley 2018; Yeh 2009b).
[26]Gaerrang 2015b.
[27]For studies of the impact of this policy in Tibetan pastoralist areas in Sichuan, see Levine 2015 and Gaerrang 2015b; for case studies in Qinghai, see Bauer 2015; Ptáčková 2015; and Sułek 2012.
[28]See Yeh and Henderson 2008 for a study of the urbanization process in the Tibet Autonomous Region.
[29]For instance, in the Tibet Autonomous Region, four of the seven prefectures have been upgraded to municipalities in the last six years. For a discussion of the benefits associated with this move, see Yeh and Henderson 2008. For an overview of administrative upgrades in other Tibetan areas and the potential implications for ethnic minority protections, see Roche, Hillman and Liebold 2017.
[30]The institutional challenges ethnic Chinese rural migrants face in terms of official registration in their new urban homes are a different issue. The creation of a state system of controlling movements of people based on a rural-urban divide and the difficulties of switching one's household registration from a rural to urban categorization has been well documented. For a comprehensive summary of this literature, see Zhang 2001, 23–28. See also Chang 2009; Lee 2009; Liu 2011; Loyalka 2012; Pun and Chan 2013; Sun 2004.

of Sichuan; Xining, the capital of Qinghai; and Lanzhou, the capital of Gansu. For instance, Chengdu by one unofficial estimate has over 100,000 Tibetan residents.[31] This large population of Tibetans is largely due to Chengdu's proximity to Tibetan areas in western Sichuan Province, as well its institutional ties to government offices in the Tibet Autonomous Region (TAR). However, long-term residence has not transformed Chengdu into a "home place" for the Tibetan professionals I spoke with. In fact, even though many have purchased apartments in the city, they also either voiced a desire to eventually return to their Tibetan home places or decried their inability to stay in their own Tibetan home places in the long run. With the purchase of a certain square footage of real estate in Chengdu, Tibetans could switch their residential registration to Chengdu, enabling them to enjoy fewer restrictions than those imposed on their counterparts registered in Tibetan administrative areas, such as more easily process passport applications. In spite of this, some Tibetan professionals who owned Chengdu real estate retained their residential registration in their home provinces, explaining to me that they did not want to give up their connection to home or that they would eventually return to their home provinces.

Arguably, having concentrated areas of Tibetans provides a buffering and supportive community of other Tibetans in otherwise ethnic Chinese environments. At the same time, the location of universities or state sector employment, along with ethnic discrimination, channels many Tibetans into particular neighborhoods in these cities. The following anecdote illustrates the experience of how ethnic discrimination in an ethnic Chinese city structures urban opportunities for an elite professional class of Tibetans, even within a neighborhood heavily populated by Tibetans.

"The landlord won't accept you"

I was apartment hunting in Chengdu with a Tibetan friend, a female professional in her thirties who had already lived in Chengdu for several years. We were at one of the many branch offices of a major real estate brokerage company in the city. It was a busy tiny corner office staffed by young ethnic Chinese college graduates at the edge of a new development where many Tibetans resided. One harried broker looked up a few listings that we had chosen. He automatically crossed off one of the first listings for us: "The landlord won't accept you," he said without mincing words.

"Really? Why?" my friend asked in fluent but Tibetan-accented Chinese, knowing the inevitable answer. "Some landlords lay down criteria for their rentals," the broker explained. "This one specified he would not rent to ethnic minorities (Chi. *shao shu minzu*)." The broker unapologetically explained the reasoning: "Our customs are just different." "Yeah," my friend quipped, "you guys sleep lying down, and we sleep standing up."

We had already experienced racism from the first day of apartment hunting. The owner of the first apartment we had made a serious offer on did not respond for several days. The landlord, a woman, had been present when we came to see the place. Afterwards, the

[31]Delhamo 2017. In addition to Chengdu's Wuhou neighborhood, pockets of Tibetan communities are also found in the Ximen and Chadianzi neighborhoods, and in nearby areas such as Shuangliu, Pixian, Dujiangyan, and Xinjing, often based on regional and institutional networks. For a brief history of Tibetan neighborhoods in Chengdu, see Trine Brox's study of the Tibetan market concentrated adjacent to Wuhouci in Chengdu. She cites official census numbers from 2010 that counts the Tibetan population at over 30,000. This reflects the registered population but actual numbers are much higher (Brox 2017).

broker had interrogated me about my ethnicity, refusing to believe I was not Tibetan even after he inspected my passport. When asked why he needed to know, he explained that they needed to tell the landlord who their prospective renters were. After several days of silence, we were notified that the woman had discussed things with her husband and they had decided not to rent their apartment to anyone. My friend then sent her cousin, a younger female in her mid-twenties, to look at some apartments for us. She reported that no one wanted to rent to Tibetans.

The broker looked up a couple more for us until another broker relieved him. This guy was young, fresh out of college; a bit inexperienced, but well-intentioned. He called the landlord of an apartment we liked and asked if the property was still available. It was. The second thing he asked was: "The thing is, the people who want to rent, they're … ethnic minorities. Can you accept that? Okay, okay … . Bye." He hung up, turned to us, and told us that the landlord had said, "Oh … .Well, let's just forget about that." This almost exact exchange happened three more times. Finally, my friend, who had been patiently watching this young broker ineptly dead end our apartment prospects, lectured him. "You know, you don't have to tell them right off the bat that we are ethnic minorities," she said. "But we have to be honest with the landlords," the young man explained, "They need to know who their renters are. We are required to tell them." "Really?" my friend asked testily, "Is it in your company policy to tell the landlords what ethnicity their renters are?" He faltered, "No … it's not written in the policy, but … ." "I see," my friend said, "It's just understood." She continued:

> Your job is to facilitate connections between the landlord and renter, not to cut them off. You should be connecting us to the landlord. Then after that, it is up to the landlord and renter to communicate to each other. If the landlord doesn't want to rent to ethnic minorities, that is between the landlord and us, it has nothing to do with you. The way you bring it up off the bat, it's as if it's a liability, so of course they don't want to rent to us! I've dealt with this many times before. We are all humans, and in spite of whatever differences, we can connect if we have a chance to meet face to face. If you just say we're ethnic minorities and we don't have a chance to meet, of course they will say no. But if you give us a chance to meet the landlord and we connect in person, we will have a chance to understand each other.

The broker agreed to try this different tack but seemed a bit unconvinced. He called another landlord, and without bringing up ethnicity, made an appointment to see the place. On our way over with him, he told us that he really felt for my friend: "Being Tibetan, it must be so hard to find a place to live. If I were in your position, I don't know what I would do."

The experience of discrimination along ethnic lines reinforces a sense of Tibetanness that is profoundly different from their ethnic Chinese compatriots, and a sense of injustice at being misrecognized by cultural others as unworthy, uncivilized, and even dangerous. In spite of these experiences of ethnic exclusion, Tibetans in cities commonly complained that city life negatively changed young Tibetans. Specifically, this critique goes, urban living Sinicizes them, making them less identifiable or relatable as Tibetans and more like ethnic Chinese, who are perceived as distant, unfathomable, and even duplicitous. While cities are sites for socioeconomic advancement, they are simultaneously experienced by certain groups of Tibetans who live there as places of loss or the threat of loss, of a uniquely Tibetan self and way of life.

Tibetan college graduates have significantly fewer private sector employment opportunities than do ethnic Chinese due to requirements for Chinese language skills as well as ethnic discrimination.[32] From 2012 to 2014, nearly thirty percent of graduates from seven Qinghai tertiary schools obtained employment in the state sector, compared to only fourteen percent of graduates nationwide.[33] This overdependence on state employment also means that Tibetan graduates are more likely to return to their home provinces to seek employment rather than face stiff competition in an ethnic-Chinese-dominated private job market where they are at a cultural and linguistic disadvantage. Furthermore, graduates of ethnic nationalities universities (*minzu daxue*) are also historically slotted to return as trained state sector cadres to their home provinces. Because Tibetan graduates are twice as dependent on state sector jobs, they are also disproportionately impacted when there is a decrease in availability of state sector jobs relative to graduates and a lack of opportunities in the private sector.[34]

Schooling to scale up and the decline of pastoralism

The transition of Tibetan communities from pastoral nomadic to settled and urban is closely tied, among other factors, to the entry of their children into the secular education system. The educational paths of individuals are based on their household registration (*hukou*) and follow the hierarchical structure of administrative units: from primary school in a pastoral village or township to secondary school in the county seat to higher education in the prefectural seat or provincial capital. In this way, the state education system, particularly since the late 1980s, has been a powerful driver of rural Tibetans to urban centers. One of the important long-term effects on pastoralism of entering the state education system is that schools pull individuals out of rural livelihoods and train them for entering the urban economy.[35] Particularly after consolidation in the 1990s and 2000s closed many schools at the village level, most schools are located at the township level and above, which are often long distances from rural households. Because this distance usually requires Tibetan youth to board from a young age, the choice is often a binary one: between pursuing higher levels of education or staying at home to contribute to farming or nomadic work, with little compromise between the two.

From my observations and interviews with Tibetans from eastern Tibetan areas, I found that even among the generation born in the 1980s, education was not a given,

[32]For an example of this, see Zenz 2017, 64. For a study of Tibetans' online and offline discussions about ethnic discrimination against Tibetans in Xining, see Grant 2017. For a discussion of ethnic and racial prejudice in China, see Tuttle 2015.

[33]This number is even higher for tertiary institutions with higher percentages of Tibetan students. See Zenz 2017, 62–63.

[34]It is worth mentioning the special restrictions on mobility that Tibetans from any other province face within the Tibet Autonomous Region (TAR). Lhasa is the largest Tibetan city, a major center for pilgrimage, and would potentially be an attractive site for urban employment for Tibetan graduates from all over the Tibetan Plateau. Indeed, graduates who are able to procure state sector employment (and residential status) in Lhasa are often happy to go. However, beginning in 2008, Tibetans who are not registered residents of the TAR are required to apply for travel permits to the TAR from their local security authorities. Once in the TAR, they face interrogation at their point of entry and must surrender their national identification cards that are held in order to ensure their timely departure from the TAR. They are additionally required to stay in specific hotels and to check in regularly with a security office associated with their home province. While it is beyond the scope of this article to examine in depth, it is worth considering how these restrictions further constrain urban opportunities for Tibetan graduates.

[35]In their study of rural education in the late 1990s in the TAR, Postiglione, Ben Jiao, and Sonam Gyatso document households' reluctance to send children to school because it would take children away from needed household labor such as herding. Postiglione et al. 2005.

but an extra benefit families could provide their children only if they could spare the household labor and had the means to finance tuition, room, and board.[36] A common household strategy was to send only one or two children to school while keeping the rest at home. Because daughters were generally expected to marry out, at least one of these children kept at home was typically a son who would take over the family farm or herd and provide for his parents in their old age. But this often meant making difficult family decisions about the fate of their children at a young age.[37] Several university-educated friends, now in their thirties, reported that they were originally slotted among their siblings to stay home. However, due to various factors, such as their own desires to go to school, one of their siblings failing the entrance exam for secondary school, or the enforcement of the compulsory nine-year education policy in their area, their families were able to reassign household labor responsibilities to a different child in order to enable them to attend school.

An alternate household strategy that has become increasingly common is to invest the entirety of a household's future in the urban-centered economy by sending all children to school. Such a choice was not a commonsense one even two decades ago. A friend and her three siblings, all born in the 1990s in a pastoral area in Golok, reported that in their township they were the only family who sent all of their children to school. Since that generation, sending all of one's children to school has increasingly become the de facto decision due to several converging factors. These include the enforcement of the compulsory education policy, the valorization of urban life, and the decreasing need for pastoral labor brought about by the household responsibility system.

Compulsory education policy and household strategies

In some areas, locally-enforced education policy has played a major role in families' schooling decisions. The national nine-year compulsory education policy, rolled out in 1986, initially was not uniformly implemented. For instance, a university-educated friend recalled that her parents had planned to keep her home for pastoral work. But then the enforcement of the compulsory education policy in her area of Ngawa Prefecture in the mid-1990s threatened fines that apparently outweighed the expense of tuition. Her parents sent her to school, changing the course of her life. In other Tibetan areas, the enforcement of the policy waxed and waned over time, enabling some families to pull their children from school when they knew enforcement was lax. Throughout the 1980s and 1990s, even though many families saw education as a path to an easier life for their children, farming and herding were still viewed as decent and stable livelihoods. In fact in some cases, because of the high dropout rates that existed as recently as a decade ago, schooling was seen as a risky path that not only did not ensure wage employment, but could likely turn children into nonproductive or unskilled rural laborers. But attitudes towards urban life and livelihoods have shifted in recent decades.

Official statistics on educational enrollment provide a sense of the scale of this shift. The official rate of children enrolled in primary schools in Qinghai increased from 51.4 percent

[36]This is also confirmed for semi-pastoral areas in the TAR in the study by Postiglione et al. 2005.
[37]Tsering Bum (2013) provides a first-hand account of the difficulties of such a family decision.

in 1970 to 99.7 percent between 2011 and 2014.[38] In 1985, just one year prior to the implementation of the compulsory nine-year education policy, 79.2 percent of children in Qinghai were enrolled in primary school. This rate increased to 81.5 percent in 1990 and 87.4 percent in 1995.[39] More recently, the rate at which primary school students continued onto junior secondary school rose from 89.6 percent in 2001 to 94.3 percent in 2014. But the most striking increases during this same period were continuation rates from junior to senior secondary school and from senior secondary to the tertiary level. In 2014, 92.4 percent of junior secondary students in Qinghai continued on to senior secondary schools, compared to 63.1 percent in 2001.[40] Between 2001 and 2016, tertiary enrollment in the province increased more than four-fold, from 17,900 to 61,900.[41]

The valorization of urban life

Even the previous and current generations of farmers and nomads (the parents of educated Tibetan professionals and the siblings of professionals who did not complete school) view urban life, and the path to it via secular education, as a comfortable alternative to agricultural and pastoral lives that demand intensive labor and physical hardship. In 2015, I spent part of the summer with the family of a Tibetan professional I had met in Chengdu. Her mother, who had been a nomad for most of her life, described her reason for sending her children to school: “Doing nomad work is hard. I didn’t want my children to have a hard life like I did.” This was a reason echoed by several other parents across regions in eastern Tibet.[42] Because of the gendered division of pastoral labor, parents I spoke with often wanted their daughters to go to school to save them from an inevitably difficult life as a nomad woman.[43] Changing social attitudes also place greater value on urban livelihoods. For instance, the need to pay for tuition, health care, homes, cars, and consumer goods has driven pastoralist households to seek sources of cash income, whether from selling livestock for slaughter, harvesting caterpillar fungus, taking out high-interest loans from private lenders, or ideally, having a family member in a salaried government position.

Many Tibetans believe government jobs bring a family socioeconomic status and financial security.[44] University graduates in particular face strong expectations from their families to secure government positions. Meanwhile, compared to government posts, pastoral livelihoods are seen as jobs for the uneducated, or in the rare cases of

[38]These figures include all residents of Qinghai Province. Tibetans generally comprise a majority of the population in Qinghai, which also has a smaller population of ethnic Chinese, ethnic Chinese Muslims, Monguors, Salars, and other groups.
[39]All China Data Center. China Data Online. “China Yearly Provincial Macro-economy Statistics for Qinghai. Basic Statistics for Education.” Accessed December 10, 2017.
[40]All China Data Center. China Data Online. “Qinghai Statistical Datasheet 2015 (Chi. *Qinghai tongji nianjian 2015)* Basic Statistics on Basic Education in Main Years.” Accessed December 10, 2017.
[41]All China Data Center. China Data Online. “China Yearly Provincial Macro-economy Statistics for Qinghai. Basic Statistics for Education.” Accessed December 10, 2017.
[42]Postiglione et al. document how in the late 1990s, the articulation of schooling as a means to attain a better life by semi-pastoralist households in Central Tibet echoed what they were told at meetings with local leaders. See Postiglione et al. 2005, 15.
[43]According to the experience of a Tibetan professional’s family, a pastoral household in Ngawa, this has even created localized shortages of eligible wives for pastoral men, who have to seek women skilled in, and willing to do, pastoral labor from areas further afield.
[44]While this is true for other areas in China, the over-dependency of Tibetans on state sector jobs, as discussed earlier, combined with the lack of suitable opportunities in the private sector, make the social pressure to gain state sector employment much greater for Tibetan graduates.

returning graduates, those who sacrifice or have failed to gain other opportunities. In reality, fierce competition among increasing numbers of graduates that far outpace the increase in available government posts means that only a small fraction of graduates actually realize this dream. For instance, between 2010 and 2015, by one estimate, 17,362 Tibetans from Qinghai, Gansu, Sichuan, and the TAR completed their tertiary education in a Tibetan-medium degree program. Yet in the same period, only 5573 state sector positions were advertised in the home provinces of these graduates.[45] I often heard anecdotes about these discouraging odds. In 2017, an estimated 1500 applicants sat for a recruitment exam for seven township positions in Barkham County, Ngawa Prefecture. Yet I found that the dream of a government post remains a strong motivation for households to send their kids to school, even among the current generation of school-aged kids. A not uncommon warning pastoralist parents give to their young, uncooperative children starkly illustrates the devaluing of pastoral livelihoods: "Do you want to become a nomad like me? Because if you don't do well in school, that's what you'll be doing!" This devaluing of pastoral livelihoods in favor of schooling echoes the directives of local officials beginning in the 1990s and intensifying in the 2000s.[46] But it rationalizes the transition into a profoundly uncertain wage-based market economy.

Market integration and idle nomads

Importantly, the marketization of the pastoral economy over the last few decades particularly by means of introducing new land and livestock management techniques has also contributed to the decreasing need for pastoral labor. This reduced need for labor frees up more family members to pursue non-pastoral endeavors. Pastureland in many nomadic areas was divided in the 1980s when communes were disbanded and replaced by the household responsibility system. Traditional grazing practices, even when pastureland had been collectivized, allowed several encampments to utilize large swaths of pastures together. However, the aim of the household responsibility system was to equitably divide land based on household size and the premise that individual households would take better care of privatized resources.[47] The divvying up of land has meant smaller parcels for each family to use, acting as a limit on herd sizes. Additionally, the variable terrain and quality of grasslands meant that some households were allotted much more productive plots than others. As a result, many families have had to cull herd sizes over the years to prevent overgrazing.[48]

The culling of herds additionally has been motivated by increased cash needs and local official pressure to commodify the pastoral economy through the sale and slaughter of yaks.[49] A male in his thirties from a nomadic family recalled that in his youth, his

[45]Zenz 2017, 76.
[46]See Postiglione et al. 2005 for a discussion of household schooling decisions in late 1990s Central Tibet. See Makley 2018 for a discussion of the effects of the "New Socialist Village" and school consolidation initiatives on household schooling decisions in the 2000s in eastern Tibet.
[47]Levine 1998; Goldstein 2012; Gelek 1998.
[48]Some families reported increased herd sizes, which might be explained by the quality of their pastures or livestock management practices, among other factors. But in general, narratives of decreasing herd sizes as well as diversity of livestock were common. Furthermore, families with increasing herds, or poorer pastures, reported having to make financial and household labor decisions between culling herd sizes or renting more pastures from their neighbors.
[49]For a brief overview of local government promotion of developing the livestock industry in the late-socialist reform period, see Gaerrang (Kabzang) 2015b.

family would only sell some of their older yaks for meat every few years. Nowadays, they sell some of their male yaks every year to raise cash for household expenses.[50] Official data for numbers of livestock slaughtered provide an indication of herd culling trends. According to the 2015 Qinghai Province statistical datasheet, in 1978 a total of 331,200 large animals and 1,849,400 sheep and goats were slaughtered. The number of livestock slaughtered annually has more than tripled in the intervening decades: in 2014, 1,149,000 large animals and 6,353,300 sheep and goats were slaughtered.[51] Decreasing herd sizes are also reflected in official statistics. In 1978, the number of large livestock stood at 5,688,000, increased to 6,226,000 by 1992, and remained at less than 5,000,000 from 1997 to 2014. The number of sheep and goats in the province increased from 16,450,000 in 1978 to 17,657,000 in 2005, and declined to 14,571,000 in 2014.[52] Given a total population in Qinghai of 3,648,600 in 1978 and 5,834,200 in 2014, decreasing herds indicate significantly fewer heads of livestock per person.[53]

In addition to smaller herd sizes, many nomadic communities have installed fences along their plots of pastureland. As previous studies have noted, the practice of fencing in Tibetan pastoral areas is neither uniform nor without conflict.[54] In my study area of Golok, households reported new fencing installed in the last decade that has greatly reduced the time and labor needed to manage herds. Herders in their thirties from two different pastoral areas recalled that prior to these fences, herding was a full-time endeavor, and pastoralists sometimes spent an entire day, or even night, searching for stray animals. In some areas I visited in Ngawa, where the threat of predators such as wolves is low, the use of fencing has eliminated the need to herd livestock into enclosures each night. The building of roads that run along their pastures also have enabled some pastoralists to spend more time in their villages, shuttling to pastures only when milking or other tasks required them there.

Smaller herd sizes and the conveniences brought by fencing have greatly reduced the amount of labor needed for pastoral work. Many nomadic households can now get by with only one or two family members taking care of their herds. This frees up their children to go to school. Almost all the families I encountered during the course of this study were sending their children to school, with the expectation that they would return – not to

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[50]For a study of the cultural politics of selling livestock for commercial slaughter vis-à-vis the Buddhist anti-slaughter movement, see Gaerrang (Kabzang) 2015a.

[51]All China Data Center. China Data Online. "Qinghai Statistical Datasheet 2015 (Chi. *Qinghai tongji nianjian 2015)*. Major Livestock Slaughtered in Main Years." Accessed December 11, 2017. Some of the fluctuations in slaughter numbers might be explained by natural disasters, such as the snow disaster in 2005 that can explain the spike in slaughter numbers for large animals in 2006, or the anti-slaughter movement initiated by Serta's Larung Gar in 2002. But one would expect the effects of this movement to be more visible in areas more closely connected to Larung Gar, such as in Sichuan and some parts of Golok. For an in-depth study of the anti-slaughter movement in Hongyuan County (Tib. *Khyung mchu),* Sichuan, see Gaerrang (Kabzang) 2012, 2015a.

[52]All China Data Center. China Data Online. "Qinghai Statistical Datasheet 2015 (Chi. *Qinghai tongji nianjian 2015)*. Number of Livestock in Main Years." Accessed December 11, 2017.

[53]All China Data Center. China Data Online. "Qinghai Statistical Datasheet 2015 (Chi. *Qinghai tongji nianjian 2015*). Population and Natural Changes in Main Years." Accessed December 11, 2017. These figures, of course, include both urban and rural populations in Qinghai.

[54]Bauer 2005 provides a study of the implementation of fencing policy in the Tibet Autonomous Region and the problematic "tragedy of the commons" rationale behind it. Notably, he discusses the difficulty of interpreting whether the desire for fencing expressed by pastoral communities was a grassroots sentiment, or an echo of official directives, or a bit of both: while fencing was a visible symbol of modern pastoralism that significantly reduced pastoral labor, it was also one of the few material resources pastoral communities could realistically procure from local governments. Yeh 2003 provides a study of grassland conflicts in eastern Tibetan pastoral areas arising from state allocations of land over pre-existing territorial claims that were aggravated by the visible marking of territory by fencing.

carry on the family's rural subsistence livelihood but after successfully completing college, to gain a government position close to home. In this way, they would be able to financially support their families and take part in family, social, and religious events.

These household decisions, even in the 1980s and 1990s, were often shaped and structured by government directives encouraging market integration. Families often understood that higher levels of education, instead of contributing to the traditional, land-based household economy, powerfully draw individuals into the urban-centered economy of non-subsistence work. The difference in recent decades is that families increasingly see better futures tied to the urban economy and are actively positioning their children to take part in it, even at the cost of the continuity of their own land-based livelihoods.

The rural shift to the urban

More school-aged children attending school means recent generations of Tibetan children spend much less time on the lands of their families and ancestors. Primary schools have in the last decade been consolidated in townships. Many of these township primary schools are equipped with dormitories because it is not feasible for most students to travel daily between the school and their family's pastures. In my study area in Golok, most school children only go home on the weekends and seldom participate in meaningful ways in their family's pastoral activities.

For a smaller group of day students, whose families have homes near schools, going home each day means going to their urban residences, not their family's pastures. Among college graduates currently in their twenties and thirties who I interviewed, those from pastoral households remembered their childhood chores, such as collecting dung, helping with milking, or herding smaller livestock. Yet for current school-aged children in these same households, going to their family's pasture lands is akin to leisure time: they watch television, if one is available, or play around the encampment. Parents often consider their children's contribution to pastoral labor both unnecessary and detrimental to their education. Some families actively discourage children from pastoral chores because they want them to focus on schoolwork instead.[55]

Children who continue on to middle and high school in county or prefecture seats usually must reside in school dormitories. For many, these schools are located even further away from their homes, making visits home possible only during school holidays that vary from a few days to a few months. Similarly, attending university in major cities often means that Tibetan students are unable to return home except for longer school holidays, such as the winter and summer breaks. Graduates who remain in cities to work often have even fewer opportunities and shorter windows of time to visit their home places, depending on the annual leave policy of their work place. Many young Tibetan professionals in cities such as Beijing or Chengdu can only visit their home places once or twice a year – usually for Tibetan New Year, which falls during the dead of winter, and if possible, again during the summer, the most pleasant time of year in Tibetan areas.

[55]The exception to this in some areas is the harvesting of caterpillar fungus. In some areas of Golok, primary schools are given holidays during caterpillar fungus harvesting season to allow children to help their families harvest the lucrative fungus. However, in 2015, this holiday was not given in some counties, leading some families to speculate that this was a sign that caterpillar fungus harvesting would soon be discouraged in their area.

From this pattern, we can see that to pursue higher education is to be increasingly separated, both by time and space, from home. Most Tibetans from pastoral households who are currently in their twenties and thirties grew up in a period when the effects of the rangeland household responsibility system and fencing on the need for labor were only beginning to be felt. Thus, many from this reform period generation still know the rudiments of milking, herding, dung collection, and other tasks. The situation is markedly different for more recent generations of Tibetan rural youth, who are not needed by their households to perform essential pastoral work. As one university graduate in his thirties mocked his ten-year-old niece, "We are a nomad family, and look at her – she's afraid of yaks!"

The urban return to the rural

Not surprisingly, for Tibetans pursuing a university education, my data illustrates a trajectory that climbs the ladder of administrative centers: from pastures, villages, townships, and towns to county and prefectural seats and eventually to provincial capitals and large inland metropolises. However, even while some graduates remain in these large cities for employment, an overwhelming majority of my interviewees either positioned themselves to be closer to their home places or expressed a desire to do so eventually.[56] A common sentiment expressed by university-educated Tibetan professionals in their twenties and thirties working in Beijing or Chengdu was, "A few years living here is fine, but I want to go back home eventually." Another common desire was simply to return home, to a place they felt deep ties to. As one young Tibetan professional in Chengdu explained, "When I get old, I want to be in my hometown because that's where I have my best memories in life." A recent graduate echoed this sentiment in an online essay:

> I am thirty-three years old this year, born to a pastoral family in Qinghai, Golok. Up until I was twelve years old, I lived in the pastures, after that I was continuously away for education and employment … . We left the grasslands and entered the cities. Modern life made everything so convenient, provided us with the opportunity to touch this world with our own hands. But we are clear who we are. We constantly miss the taste of butter tea and *tsampa*, and also the rough hands of our parents … . Several of my friends always discuss "Do you want to return to live in the pastures?" We all have a sense of powerlessness. We wish to have powerful hands and change all of this; the seeds of action are sprouting in each of our hearts.[57]

Two of the main reasons that compel graduates to return closer to home is to reconnect with their communities and in response to strong family pressure. One young professional told me about her plans to work a few years in Beijing before returning to her home in Gansu. "I left my home place when I was young … . It's changed so much and I should go back and better understand what's going on there," she said. "And my parents are there too."

The post-graduation paths of recent graduate students illustrate this pattern. Two doctoral students, originally from Qinghai, completed their studies in Beijing and took

[56]For a poignant sense of the pains of separation and assimilation as a Tibetan in Beijing, see Lhashamgyal's essay, "Tibetans of Beijing." Lhashamgyal 2015.
[57]Sonamgön 2017.

government positions in Xining. A masters student from Golok Prefecture in Qinghai also graduated from a Beijing university and secured a government job in the prefectural seat of Golok while a graduate from Xining worked in a non-governmental organization (NGO) in Chengdu, then returned to the county seat of his home place in Qinghai to start an enterprise.

The pressure for graduates to return home largely depended on the economic and domestic labor needs of their families. Particularly for graduates from smaller families, or those on whom responsibilities fell to provide for parents, the pressure to move closer to home was intense. This pressure to return home was even greater for graduates who found employment outside of the state sector, whether in NGOs, private enterprises, or in the service industry. Such employment was viewed by parents as low-status wage labor and unstable. Parents pressured their daughters in particular to leave such jobs because of the presumed greater social and economic risk: of working too hard, not having strong social networks to protect them, and not securing their futures with a stable job and establishing a family.

These graduates were often pressured to leave their non-state-sector jobs and sit for state sector exams in their home areas, even if this meant they would remain unemployed at home for months or years while they competed with each year's increasing number of new graduates for a limited number of state positions. Furthermore, many of these graduates reluctantly left their non-state sector positions, describing state sector careers as "meaningless" or "uninteresting."

At the same time, parental pressure to move closer to home dovetailed with the relative socioeconomic advantages college graduates enjoy within Tibetan home places compared to the competitive disadvantages they face in ethnic Chinese-dominated cities. Relative to inland Chinese cities, Tibetan areas are sites where Tibetan graduates enjoy stronger social networks and cultural and linguistic fluency. Not insignificantly, their time in inland Chinese cities for school and work also gives them a higher status and comparative advantage over their Tibetan counterparts who never left their home places. Tibetan returns closer to home places can thus be understood as motivated by an overreliance on state sector employment in Tibetan areas, which channels graduates back to home provinces, as well as widespread ethnic discrimination in the private sector that forecloses many employment opportunities in ethnic Chinese-dominated cities. At the same time, a strong desire to retain ties to home places and communities, the cultural logics of parent–child relations specific to Tibetan society and a Buddhist moral world, and the relative socioeconomic advantages graduates enjoy in home areas compared to the larger national economic landscape bring many graduates closer to home.

Another reason for returning home is to ensure that their children are educated in their home communities. A graduate from a prestigious university in Beijing told me: "It's much better for my daughter to go to school in my home place," her home place being a pastoral area of Qinghai. Yet, for many Tibetans who still reside in their rural home places, they desire the status of big city education for their children. A friend who quit his job in Chengdu to return to his home region of Golok critiqued the reasoning of many parents in Golok:

> So many people send their kids to inland schools, the farther away the better. Then they can say that their kid is at school in Beijing or Shanghai. It doesn't matter if the school is good or not. They feel proud … these kids become totally Chinese.

For these reform-era Tibetans who have gone through the urban education system, this was in fact one of the main reasons for wanting to school their own children in rural home communities rather than large inland Chinese cities, at least for basic education.[58] That the quality of education is better in major inland cities such as Beijing, Shanghai, and Chengdu is not disputed among Tibetans, especially by those who have benefited from an education in major cities. However, this cohort of Tibetans, through their long-term separation from home, has already undergone the experience of losing touch with their culture, community, and ways of life.

Tibetan professionals also face discrimination and structural inequalities in everyday life when competing against ethnic Chinese peers in the job market. My interlocutors felt that these experiences reaffirmed mainstream messages of Tibetan "backwardness."[59] However, these Tibetan urbanites also demonstrated a renewed self-confidence in Tibetan culture.[60] In fact, they turned a common ethnic Chinese critique of Tibetan backwardness into a Tibetan critique of Chinese ignorance. Stories of ethnic Chinese ignorance of Tibetan culture were commonly shared in informal Tibetan gatherings. At one such gathering, a Tibetan state sector employee described how an ethnic Chinese colleague inadvertently offended her by stating that she enjoyed being stationed in Lhasa because she loved "backward places." We all laughed, uncomfortably but knowingly, at the ethnic Chinese woman's insensitivity towards her Tibetan colleagues as well as her ignorance in referring to the cultural and religious center of Tibet as a backward place. Then one of the Tibetan woman's friends responded that this in fact reflected the Chinese woman's low level of culture and education.

Such critiques of ethnic Chinese dominance should also be seen in the context of economic competition. Converging with this post-2008 renewed confidence in Tibetanness was the national promotion of "mass entrepreneurship and innovation." The PRC State Council launched entrepreneurship into the national spotlight in 2015 as a solution for underemployment. But in the Tibetan context, this state campaign has opened up new spaces for promoting specifically Tibetan values in a market-oriented economy.[61] One Tibetan state employee in a county seat in Sichuan articulated his reasons for wanting to become an entrepreneur:

> Business is the key for Tibetans … . Some ethnic Chinese see Tibetans and they just want to give them money because they think they are poor. But if you do business, people respect that. They pay money for something and that is that. You are equal. Also, without making money first, Tibetans cannot go on to do better things to help themselves, their language, and more.

[58]For interviewees, maintaining "Tibetanness" included language, culture, and a way of thinking that was specifically Tibetan. The ability to send children to schools in home places largely depended on whether parents working in cities could move closer to home, or if they could send their children to stay with their parents or relatives. While many Tibetan professionals in Beijing and Chengdu schooled their children in these cities, this was often lamented as a less than ideal situation.

[59]See also Andrew Grant's 2017 study of Tibetan online and offline discussions about ethnic discrimination in Xining, where Tibetans challenged discrimination by claiming the legal rights promised to them as citizens.

[60]More often than not, a direct reference to the significance of 2008 was not mentioned, but alluded to by phrases such as "in recent years" (Tib. *nye char gyi lo)* or "these days" (Tib. *deng sang)*. That year marked a watershed moment in which Tibetans understood their sense of cultural crisis not as a parochial phenomenon, but as a sentiment that linked them to their Tibetan co-members across a broad spatially and culturally defined region.

[61]See for instance Premier Li Keqiang's high profile support for entrepreneurship (Zhao 2015): http://english.gov.cn/premier/news/2015/05/12/content_281475106023233.htm

For this Tibetan professional, developing Tibetan businesses is a way to build a domain where Tibetan language and culture can thrive, as well prove Tibetans as coequal citizens with ethnic Chinese. However, Tibetan job seekers and entrepreneurs who adapt to being competitive in a Chinese-dominated private sector are often criticized for losing a Tibetan way of doing things. New forms of Tibetan entrepreneurship (Tibetan *khe las),* initiated largely by highly educated Tibetans in the last several years, illustrate how Tibetans articulate a Tibetan alternative to a competitive marketplace dominated by ethnic Chinese. One astute Tibetan entrepreneur, a college graduate in his thirties, explained that Chinese businesses had already ruined their own reputations. Because of their profit-at-any-cost model that resulted in all kinds of fake products and public health emergencies, consumers no longer trusted Chinese entrepreneurs. But Tibetan businesses still had their integrity.

According to this Tibetan entrepreneur as well as many others, what set Tibetan entrepreneurship apart were the Buddhist concepts of "benefiting others" (*gzhan phan)* and the karmic law of "cause and effect" (*las rgyu 'bras).*[62] From this perspective, financial profit should neither be the ultimate goal nor be held above other social and moral values. Many Tibetan entrepreneurs and aspiring entrepreneurs I spoke with voiced a desire to run economically viable businesses that simultaneously benefit society and support Tibetan culture and ways of life. One entrepreneur, in a public lecture in Chengdu, urged his fellow Tibetan entrepreneurs to adhere to ethical business practices and cautioned against wasting the good reputation of the Tibetan name for short-term material gains. Furthermore, he exhorted them, "Everyone, go back to your home place! Your own home place, your own pastures, your own tents … and undertake entrepreneurship!"

The speaker's call to return to their home tents and pastures may lay at one end of the spectrum of an urban return to the rural. But reexamining the data over a longer period of time reveals a slightly different pattern in the rural-to-urban trajectory of Tibetan university students. A common pattern after graduation was to return, not necessarily to home villages or pastures, but to a provincial, prefectural, or county seat connected to home places. Many others who remained in Beijing or Chengdu voiced their desire to return closer to home in the future. However, many from these elite groups of university graduates in Beijing and Chengdu returned, not to pastoral work in their literal home places, but to trans-local homes found in the urban spaces of administrative centers.

Conclusion

University-educated Tibetans often spend ten or more years in large urban settings, forming trans-local attachments to urban centers administratively linked to their rural home places. Yet in spite of the increasing shift from rural homes and livelihoods to life in urban centers, the importance of home in personal identity has not diminished. In fact, for Tibetans who have spent long periods of their lives away from their rural home places, this separation is often experienced as a loss of their pastoral and cultural heritage as well as a heightened nostalgia. But the trans-local experience of schooling and employment has also expanded the sense of "home" to include townships, counties, prefectures, and provinces connected to rural home places.

[62]See Holly Gayley's 2013 study of the re-articulation of Buddhist ethics for social reform that began in the mid-1990s as a Buddhist response to market reforms in Tibetan areas, and became more broadly popularized in the post-2008 period.

A host of factors continue to curtail the integration of Tibetans into the broader Chinese economic landscape – from the marginality of Tibetan culture and language in ethnic Chinese-dominated economic life to structural inequalities produced through education, an overdependence on state sector employment in home areas, and ethnic discrimination.[63] Because of this, urban-centered development chips away at Tibetan ways of life that are linked to rural livelihoods yet also limits the ways and places where Tibetans can integrate into an urban economy.

These structural factors, together with a sense of cultural loss and family pressure to return close to home, motivate many young educated Tibetans to seek closer ties with their home communities, for both themselves and their own children. Many of these university graduates return not to pastoral work but to the urban spaces of administrative centers – as teachers, government office workers, and more recently, entrepreneurs. Being situated in these townships and county towns enables them to live close to their home communities while still being able to take part in, and be mobile within, urban networks and lifestyles. With increasing numbers of Tibetan graduates seeking opportunities in the urban administrative centers of their home places and the inability of state sector jobs to fulfill employment demands, employment challenges will continue.

However, a handful of Tibetan graduates are currently creating new employment prospects through entrepreneurship models that aim to connect urban economies with Tibetan rural resources and distinct ways of life. The convergence of these patterns of Tibetan returnees with the national promotion of local level entrepreneurship has opened up new possibilities that require the kind of trans-local connectivities these Tibetan professionals possess. Indeed, increasing numbers of young Tibetan professionals are turning to entrepreneurship as a way to create meaningful and sustainable sources of income for themselves and rural Tibetan communities. Often based in urban nodes of county, prefectural, or provincial seats, these young professionals are well positioned to seek out commodifiable resources from their rural home communities and turn these into marketable products for urban consumers. The importance of a Buddhist emphasis on benefitting others and a desire to sustain Tibetan ways of life guide these Tibetan entrepreneurs to critique "profit-at-any-cost" operations and offer a specifically Tibetan alternative in its place.

These moves closer to home (whether in search of stable state sector employment or for entrepreneurial ventures) are a response to the uneven economic landscape of China. While ethnic Chinese professionals are lured to lucrative coastal cities, such movements are largely foreclosed for Tibetan professionals by the PRC's ethnic landscape. Instead, their competitive advantage is found in the uneven economic terrain of Tibetan landscapes produced by late-socialist reforms. Here, closer to home, the urbanization of administrative seats creates spaces of urbanity that are linked to rural home places. Yet the enduring importance of home and a desire to maintain connections to Tibetan ways of life, speak to an alternative logic guiding Tibetan trans-local practices.

[63]For studies on the production of marginalization through education and economic structures in Tibetan areas, see Fischer 2009 and Postiglione 2008.

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