

PREFACE

'You can stay with us! We have a big house with many people. It is better for you. The public house is not clean. Please come! My father is away, but I will ask him later, but please come!' A young nun was smiling a beautifully open and friendly smile, inviting us to her house – without her father's consent. We were standing in one of the narrow paths connecting houses in Sharlung, a farming village in Tsang, Central Tibet. She was on her way home, and we were on our way back to the 'public house' (*chikhang*), our shelter for the past two days. She pointed to a white house behind the stupa and repeated 'Come!' Her offer seemed very tempting indeed, not so much because of the meagre standards of our designated accommodation, but more because of my research interest in daily lives in local households. We thanked her for the generous offer and said that we would very much like to stay with her family but that we would have to ask the village leader, who, we had been told, was currently away. She laughed again and explained: 'But my father is the village leader! I will ask him upon his return tomorrow.'

We had left Lhasa three days earlier. It was with a particular combination of anxiety and excitement that we drove our loaded land-cruiser out of the city, heading for Panam county: Samdrup, my co-researcher from Tibet University; Runa, my four-year-old daughter; Mingzom, her nanny; and myself, a PhD student in social anthropology from the University of Oslo. None of us had been in this area of Tibet before, and although I had prepared myself with readings and lengthy talks with people from Panam, I was uncertain of what to expect upon arrival. My initial interests had been social mobility, hereditary divisions, artisans and skilled workers, and others classified as low ranked (*menrik*), and I had chosen Panam because of people I had met and remarks I had heard during my previous stays in Lhasa. There, while eating in small Tibetan restaurants, I had encountered musicians who would come inside to play their *dranyen* (Tibetan lute), performing for a small fee. Although people enjoyed the music, these musicians were often referred to as beggars (*longkhen*). I had noticed that many of these travelling musicians were from Tsang, and often from three villages in Panam, an agricultural

valley located between the cities of Shigatse and Gyantse. Later, in Lhasa, when asking a friend from Panam if he had heard about these villages, he laughed a little and said: ‘You have clearly not heard the saying: Sachung¹ is purely a blacksmith place, Bargang is purely a butcher place’ (*Sachung garwé gartsang yin, Bargang shembé shemtsang yin*).² His birthplace was higher up the valley but, he said, ‘everybody knows about the blacksmiths (*gara*) in Sachung and the butchers (*shenba*) in Bargang’. Based upon these observations and information, I decided to go to Panam for fieldwork.

Armed with travel and research permits provided by Tibet University (TU), as well as an exchange agreement signed by the Tibet Autonomous Region (TAR) government and the rectors of Norwegian universities, Samdrup and I approached the Panam County administration building. The few other researchers travelling to rural Tibet in the previous years had often ended up staying in the county seats due to administrative regulations, and it was my aim at least to be able to stay in the township centre and, hopefully, in a village. This was in the beginning of the 2000s, and looking back, it was a period of relatively relaxed policies and openness to foreign collaborations. Although it felt very restrictive at the time, and the process involved careful negotiations and manoeuvring, it was possible to get research permits for social science and humanities projects as long as they focused on what was perceived to be non-sensitive issues. For more than 25 years, Norwegian universities had a highly successful collaboration with Tibet University, exchanging students and working together on research projects. This agreement allowed me, as one of very few foreigners, to obtain a permit to conduct a longer fieldwork in a rural area of the TAR. Approaching the county authorities, Samdrup informed them about this collaboration and explained that our purpose for the stay was a study of the local history and culture and especially the work of women in low-ranked families, as this was the main topic of the research permit issued by Tibet University. After looking through all the paperwork – permits, agreements and letters of recommendations from Lhasa – the county leader asked me if Norway was part of the European Union. This puzzled me for a moment, but as I answered that ‘No, we are not’ and saw the satisfied smile on his face, I realised that there might have been some controversy concerning a large EU development programme that had been running in parts of Panam in the years preceding.³ Norway’s non-membership in the EU seems to have settled the question, and the county leader made his phone call to the township centre, informing them about our arrival and making sure that they would provide us with all necessities.

Driving on the dirt road from the county seat to Kyiling Township, we passed farming villages with people inspecting the ripe fields of barley and wheat. It was the beginning of harvest, and the valley seemed a fertile and relatively prosperous place. After some thirty minutes driving, we passed a

larger village with the famous Sachung monastery rising above, one of the few that had remained intact during the political upheavals of the 1960s and 1970s. After Sachung, driving slowly, we passed a small village where a group of older people were sitting by the stupa, chatting and spinning wool. The place had a special feel to it, and Samdrup and I agreed that it looked welcoming.

Arriving in the township, three local leaders greeted us. Researchers had stayed in the area before, both Tibetans (Ben Jiao) and foreigners (Goldstein, Childs and Beall),⁴ and they had also spent some of their time in the villages. Wöser, one of the township leaders, suggested that, due to my interest in blacksmiths and local history, we could stay in the monastery in Sachung, the village known for its many blacksmith households. Happy to be able to live outside the township centre, I agreed. However, while driving back up the bumpy road, I worried that by staying in a monastery we would be at a distance from lay families, who were intended to be the main participants in my study. When we reached the small village that we had passed earlier, people were still sitting by the stupa. Wöser explained that in this village there were many old people with knowledge of history, and he also noted that they had a very good village leader. Still hoping to be able to stay in a household, I asked: ‘How about this place – would it be possible for us to stay here?’ The driver slowed down, and Wöser, looking a little confused, said that he did not know if there was a proper house for us but that if we wanted we could stay in the public house (*chikhang*). The small village was Sharlung, the main location of this book – an average village in the heart of the grain producing plains of Tsang; it was the perfect place to learn about ordinary lives of farmers in Central Tibet.

Accepting the invitation of the village leader’s daughter, we moved into the Takrab house. As we waved farewell to our driver, neighbours and other villagers came to help carry our things from the *chikhang*. Inside the new house, the *nama* (the in-married wife of the household) and the *achung* (her youngest husband) were busy cleaning and preparing our room by sweeping the dirt floor, sprinkling some water and blowing the smoke of incense into all corners. By the evening, we had settled in; Mingzom, my daughter and myself in one of the bedrooms, while Samdrup, with a humble thrill, accepted the offer to stay in the *chökhang*, the room where the house shrine and religious objects were kept and that is otherwise reserved for visiting monks and nuns. As Samdrup is a scholar of Buddhist philosophy, Tashi, the household and village leader, thought this to be the most suitable for him. This arrangement was ideal for all of us, and it became the start of an intense learning experience. Sharing a house with a woman and her three husbands, her in-laws and her children, learning about their daily interactions, their chores, as well as their expectations and concerns, tilted my

research interest towards intimate relations, to polyandry and to the ways in which changes in marriage practices and preferences might help us not only unpack relatedness but also inform new perspectives on the constitution of Tibetan kinship. Having read Ben Jiao's excellent PhD dissertation 'Socio-Economic and Cultural Factors Underlying the Contemporary Revival of Fraternal Polyandry' (2001), describing that polyandry had again become a common form of marriage in Panam, I was already curious about the inner worlds and workings of polyandrous marriages. Despite spending considerable time visiting blacksmiths, butchers, *baru* (those handling dead bodies) and beggars, the issues of hierarchy, stigma and social exclusion proved hard to investigate in-depth in the time available. As Ben Jiao's study focused primarily on socio-economic aspects, I found my position within the Takrab house ideal for taking the return of polyandry as a lens through which I could explore in detail relationality and sociality, among and beyond humans and within and between houses in this farming community.

We were able to stay in the Takrab house from August to December in 2002, and then again in July 2004. Considering the restrictions on interaction between Tibetans and foreigners today, this seems rather remarkable. Indeed, it would be unthinkable in the current political climate in the TAR. It was during these five months that most of the data for the book was produced. For years after 2004, I tried to return to Panam, applying for travel or research permits but with no luck. The conditions had changed. At the very beginning of March 2008, only days before the protests that turned into riots, I was in Lhasa to negotiate a permit for a new project in the TAR. Since 2008, the year of more than a hundred demonstrations against Chinese rule and policies across Tibetan areas (Yeh 2013: x), the TAR has been transformed into a closely controlled space, where Tibetans live under extremely strict regulations and where access for foreign researchers is rigorously restrained, and most often denied. In 2010, the wrath that the PRC government launched towards anything Norwegian after the Nobel peace prize was given to the Chinese democracy activist Liu Xiaobo meant that access to research in the TAR became impossible for me.

I call this book a historical ethnography. As all ethnographies, it describes people and practices in a particular time and place. While the place is Sharlung village, the historical period of the book is the first half of the 2000s – that is, after the initiation of the Open up the West (Ch: *xibu da kaifu*) campaign in 2000 up to the protests in 2008 and the hardliner policies that have since been put into place. Guo Jinlong was the party secretary in the TAR from 2000–2004, and his leadership at the time was interpreted as a positive shift from the strict rule of his predecessor, Chen Kuiyuan, whose regime had focused on control and repression. Guo's emphasis was on economic development, and he was more open to foreign collaboration; the beginning of the 2000s was a

time of some international cooperation in development and business and in education and research. Although it felt restrictive also then, it was a period with a certain hopeful atmosphere.⁵ The beginning of the 2000s was the starting point for an intensification of policies to bolster economic development in the TAR, focusing on economic growth, investment and consumption (Yeh 2013: 3). These policies primarily had an effect in the urban and peri-urban areas, continuing and strengthening a heavily subsidised economy and feeding large-scale construction and infrastructure projects, such as the Qinghai-Tibet railway, which opened in 2006, and the real estate projects on the outskirts of Lhasa and Shigatse. Creating an economic boom, this also increased the (already ongoing) in-migration of Han Chinese skilled and unskilled labourers (Fisher 2014). For the vast majority living in the rural areas – that is, 85 per cent of Tibetans in TAR, according to the 2000 census – these subsidies only slowly trickled down, with increased economic activity most visible towards the end of the decade (Fisher 2015). These economic policies and initiatives had little direct effect on Sharlung lives during my fieldwork there. People in the village found themselves on the periphery of state development; they were primarily subsistence farmers, some without access to electricity and running water, most without phone coverage. The local primary schools were only partly open, and few children were sent to boarding schools outside the county. There were no Han Chinese in the villages – no farmers, vendors, no cadres or leaders. Yet, the beginning of the 2000s was clearly also a period of transitions. The booming construction industry outside Panam offered new possibilities for work, and many of the farmers had started to send their sons to ‘go for income’, changing the economy from subsistence to a ‘new mixed agriculture/non-farm income economy’ (Goldstein, Childs and Wangdui 2008: 517). Although the extensive rural development projects of the 2000s were yet to be implemented in Sharlung, there was an awareness among township leaders of the importance of economic growth – their leaders assessed them based on the economic reports they produced from their township. This had consequences for, and partly explains, the relatively lenient approach local leaders had towards sociocultural practices that were both in disagreement with state laws and policy regulations and associated with beneficial economic outcome, such as polyandrous marriages.

Ending in 2004, this historical ethnography is thus situated in the years just before a new period with very comprehensive social and political schemes, in which the state again made itself strongly present in rural communities across the TAR. First, as part of the national goal to construct the New Socialist Countryside, in 2006 the TAR government launched a large-scale project aiming to provide new housing to the rural population. Through what was called the Comfortable Housing Project – a programme combining state and local subsidies, savings and private and bank loans – many farmers

and herders have either (been) resettled or renovated or built new houses, reshaping parts of the rural land. The extent of the effect of this project varies across the TAR, and the government's claim that all rural residents had new housing by 2010 is clearly an exaggeration (Robin 2009; Goldstein et al. 2010; Yeh 2013: 253). Yet, the Comfortable Housing Project has had major consequences for rural life, not only changing the physical environments but also, as Yeh convincingly argues, transforming rural Tibetans into consuming subjects enmeshed in a market economy of indebtedness on the one hand, and in a complex gift economy of expected gratitude with the state on the other (Yeh 2013). Some years later, the state again came closer to farmers' lives, following the start of Chen Quanguo's period as TAR party secretary in 2011. As part of his strictly imposing control regime, 'village-based cadre teams' of four or more people were sent to live in the villages of TAR, serving a double purpose of 'improving services and material conditions' and monitoring and maintaining 'social stability', as Human Rights Watch writes.⁶ Their presence was a new form of close surveillance of, and state involvement in, rural lives, and marks a distinct difference from the historical period covered in this book. Generally, the state's approach to rural lives since 2008 is very different from what I could observe in Panam in 2002 and 2004. State efforts to transform farmers and pastoralists into wage labourers have taken new forms in recent years, although these aims were mentioned already in the 11th Five-Year plan (2006–2011). In 2019–2020, the TAR government introduced a large-scale training and job matching scheme that was to be rolled out across the region, and in which 500,000 so-called 'rural surplus labourers' had participated by the first seven months of 2020 (Zenz 2020: 7). This was based on President Xi Jinping's stated goal to 'eradicate absolute poverty' (measured in cash income) by the end of 2020. This has put pressure on farmers and pastoralists to change their livelihood so they can report a measurable income and thus be declared 'poverty free' (Zenz 2020: 8).

How these changes over the last fifteen years have affected life in general and kinship and marriage in particular in Sharlung and its neighbouring villages is difficult to know. From anecdotal information garnered through occasional conversations with people from Panam and with people who have visited the area, as well as from surprisingly detailed satellite images provided by Google Earth, parts of the lives I describe seem to continue, but these are only assumptions. My aim with this book cannot be to reanalyse the ethnography within a contemporary context – being positioned outside the TAR and not being able to engage in relations with the participants is too disabling for such an attempt to make sense. My main motivation for writing this historical ethnography now, despite the time that has passed and the changes that have happened, is the dearth of research available from Central Tibet and the bleak prospects of future openings for new studies.

With the exception of the excellent monographs by Emily Yeh, *Taming Tibet: Landscape Transformation and the Gift of Chinese Development* (2013), and Theresia Hofer, *Medicine and Memory in Tibet: Amchi Physicians in an Age of Reform* (2018), as well as Goldstein and colleagues' numerous and important articles – which are all based on fieldwork primarily done before 2008 – very little research describing rural lives in Central Tibet has been published in the last decades.⁷ With the years that has passed since fieldwork, I encourage a temporal sensitivity when reading this historical ethnography and hope *The Return of Polyandry* can provide an insight into everyday rural lives that have again been closed to eyes from the outside but that nevertheless constitute the majority of Central Tibetan lives.

Notes

1. All place names within Panam have been anonymised.
2. *Sa chung mgar ba'i mgar tshang yin Bar gang bshas ba'i bshas tshang yin*.
3. The EU-funded Panam Integrated Rural Development Project was aimed at increasing commercialisation of livestock and dairy production, amongst other things. I learned later that their approach to changing the local subsistence economy and scaling up production was controversial among some of the farmers, who were worried both about decrease in the quality of the products and about their ability to compete in commercial markets.
4. Melvyn Goldstein led a large project on the impact that rapid development has had on intergenerational relations in Panam, working together with the Tibetan Academy of Social Sciences.
5. See International Campaign for Tibet, 'New TAR Party Chief in Leadership Reshuffle', 12 May 2003. Retrieved January 2021 from <http://www.savetibet.org/new-tar-party-chief-in-leadership-reshuffle/#sthash.zfbeURah.dpuf>.
6. Official Chinese media have reported five duties of the village teams: 'building up Party and other organizations in the village, "maintaining social stability," and carrying out "Feeling the Party's kindness" education with villagers', as well as 'promoting economic development and providing "practical benefit" to the villagers'. Human Rights Watch, 'No End to Tibet Surveillance Program', 18 January 2016. Retrieved January 2021 from <https://www.hrw.org/news/2016/01/18/china-no-end-tibet-surveillance-program>.
7. Sienna Craig's monograph *Healing Elements: Efficacy and Social Ecologies of Tibetan Medicine* (2012) also includes ethnography from rural areas, but the parts from the TAR primarily describe Lhasa.