

CONCLUSION



This historical ethnography of marriage and kinship in Sharlung is a snapshot of Tibetan lives, notions and practices in a farming community at the beginning of the 2000s. It is written in past tense, with a commitment to avoid the timelessness that so easily permeates anthropological texts. Yet, maintaining a temporal sensibility is hard, for the reader and the author, and even in the simple act of putting something into words, we give passing events longer lives. For sure, Sharlung must be a different place now, after eighteen years have passed. A new generation have become adults, women and men have married, and they have formed a range of close relations through which they participate in each other's lives, in the environment of the village and beyond. The Chinese state has again made itself strongly present in the village, not only via new social and economic campaigns but also through an increasingly authoritarian form of governance, in which rural lives, including domestic affairs, are closely monitored, also informing, we can assume, how the villagers shape close relations and networks.

Time also alters perspectives, shifts positions and makes larger arguments smaller and smaller arguments larger. Time allows some nuances to shine and some to blur, but a temporal sensibility also broadens the position from where, and the frame within which, we develop ethnography, as it often comes with more distance. With time, this historical ethnography has also become a case study, describing some examples of the ways that intimate relations, marriage, relatedness and domestic life played out in rural Central Tibet before 2005. Already at the beginning of the 2000s, Ben Jiao (2001)

had described the surprising revival of fraternal polyandry in Panam and had explained the many economic advantages of this type of plural marriage in the particular context of village life in the decades that followed the national decollectivisation in the 1980s. These economic advantages remained long after his study ended. Diversification of the local economy and the new possibilities to gain income from outside the farm have again and again confirmed that polyandry, wealth and prosperity are closely intertwined. Large households maintain the potential of a flexible economy in Tibetan communities. The evidence of the benefits of polyandry in Panam is overwhelming, and part of this is the socio-economic effects that polyandry has on the households. Polyandrous households are *vital*; they prosper in people, in material and immaterial wealth, but also in networks, in architecture, in social standing, and they open up possibilities for the future. But they are also sensitive to time passing and they do not always last. When they split, they morph into smaller new monogamous units or, occasionally, other forms of polygamous constellations and start new social trajectories.

Spending time with people in Panam at the beginning of the 2000s, they were eager to talk about the named, corporate polyandrous household as a cultural ideal; as households they had managed to establish, to maintain and to perpetuate over decades and generations, or as a household constellation they hoped to have the good fortune to achieve in the future. During these conversations, drinking tea in so many different farmhouses, I got a sense that these households were somehow precious – they were entangled with social and cultural values of the interior and exterior of the physical houses too, with their social histories, and with their architectural and cosmological manifestations.¹ The embarrassment, even hostility, often associated with polyandry among younger Tibetans in Lhasa did not enter into these conversations; rather, the polyandrous house was a social institution of some pride.

Houses and Beyond

The sociocultural connections and expressions of the farmers' corporate households and the networks connecting them, the widespread discrepancies between patrilineal ideology and actual practice, and the general importance of residence and territory for various forms of belonging among Tibetans, has led me and other anthropologists working in the region to explore 'the house' as an analytic and to think about the potential of seeing Tibet as a 'house society'.² This analytical approach also reflects the time passed in the anthropology of kinship and the ambitions of the so-called 'new kinship studies' to see beyond rules, (descent) ideologies and grand models and explore practices and lived lives. A focus on discrepancies between kinship ideologies and

practices has proven to be very productive for these purposes. As I have shown in the previous chapters, in Panam, as many places in Central Tibet, people did not talk about the numerous disruptions and discontinuities of patrilineages as something problematic; rather, these were solved in matter-of-fact, culturally acceptable ways that enabled continuation of a household. The patrilineages might be discursively activated to legitimate this continuity, but they were not constitutive of the unit itself.

What is so useful about the house as a heuristic device – as compared to ‘the household’ – is that it expands the temporal orientation and the frame within which we analyse the domestic unit and brings family, economy, kinship, social hierarchies, architecture, cosmology and religion into conversation. It opens up the analysis of the social and connects household viability – a classic concerns in Tibet and Himalayan studies – to wider cultural processes. The house concept encompasses seemingly contradictory kinship principles – such as descent, residence and alliance, and patrilineal or bilateral organisation, exogamy and endogamy – and enables us to see lineage disruptions not as exceptions but as inherent parts of broader processes of social organisation. This resonates very well with Tibetan kinship. Too many times in the history of anthropology have practices that do not conform to established models been classified as deviances and exceptions. This is particularly evident in studies of kinship and gender, often informed by the persistent interest in patrilineal ideals and ideologies. Tibetan medical history can serve as an example, as Theresia Hofer and I explored in a special issue of *Asian Medicine* (2011) and that Hofer describes in more detail in her beautiful monograph *Medicine and Memory in Tibet* (2018). Lineages (*gyü*) in general, and medical lineages (*men gyi gyü*) in particular, have been (and continue to be) essential for the transmission of medical knowledge and skills, shared both among monastics and, in the lay population, among relatives. A common pattern has been that Tibetan medicine was taught to men, either monks or male heirs. Both the theory of procreation and formation of the body – the flesh and bone – and kinship ideology described in Chapter 2 and the gender models and hierarchies described in Chapter 4 can help explain these patterns. When people put discursive emphasis on the patrilineage and the fact that daughters most often move out from their natal home upon marriage, it is not surprising that there is a strong sense of the continuation of the medical lineage being safer if the knowledge and skills are transmitted to sons. Indeed, when talking with Tibetan lineage doctors, most see training a daughter instead of a son as something unfortunate, reflecting also the gender models described earlier. When looking back in history, though, there are substantial examples of female doctors who were trained by their male relatives; some of these were daughters with no brothers, some were wives of medical doctors and some were trained alongside their brothers

(Tashi Tsering, 2005; Fjeld and Hofer 2011; Hofer 2018). These can easily be described as exceptions in Tibetan medical history, reproducing the idea of patrilineal organisation. However, if we return to the concept of the house, the training of daughters is perhaps not exceptional but an inherent potential in house-based kinship orientations. In some cases, the medical lineages were in fact found in what was called *mendrong*, which directly translates as ‘medical house’ (*smān* means ‘medicine’ and *grong* means ‘house’), such as the famous Sakya Mendrong and the lesser-known Lhünding Mendrong (Hofer 2018). Membership trajectories into these houses are the same as I described in Chapter 2; filiation, marriage and adoption.³ Hence, both sons and daughters (as well as *makpa*), and their sons and daughters, are potential apprentices in the medical house. We know that houses consist of material and immaterial wealth, and in the case of medical houses, this includes medical texts, substances and equipment, and knowledge, skills and social reputation and capital. An analytic emphasis on (medical) houses rather than (medical) (patri)lineages enables us to see the examples of female practitioners not merely as exceptions but as a nexus around which an estate of material and immaterial (medical) wealth can accumulate and continue. As such, a house perspective opens for interpretations that allow for a better understanding of daughters, and others in the periphery of normative kinship ideology.

My theoretical excitement for the house concept is not general; it comes from an engagement with a particular place and time: Panam after the decollectivisation of land in 1981. As we have seen, the sociocultural constitution of the corporate household, the *drongpa* or *khyimtsang* – and we can add the aristocratic houses in Lhasa (Travers 2008) – resonates very well with all of Lévi-Strauss’s criteria of a house as a ‘moral person’, and in addition, residence and territory (in)forms belonging and social identity. Moreover, external relations and moral obligations across generations are house-based, the physical houses themselves are socio-symbolic spaces of particular cultural meaning and the houses are ranked – all supporting the argument of Tibet being a *société à maison*. However, such classification carries with it many of the problems from the previous lineage theories. The pursuit of a total model such as that of a ‘house society’ – a kinship typology like the unilinear paradigm once was – has been exhausted as an analytical approach to kinship for several reasons. These formal typologies are reminiscent of early attempts to sort human societies into large, encompassing categories of kinship systems, such as Morgan’s classification of Omaha, Iroquois or Crow systems in the late nineteenth century, which leave little room for nuanced understandings of real-life everyday practices. Moreover, the concept of *société à maison* was introduced by Lévi-Strauss to solve the theoretical puzzle not of lineage organisation but of cognatic kinship, a characteristic different from the earlier

descriptions of Tibetan societies. Lastly, broad typologies – such as Omaha or *société à maison* – conceal regional and social differences; they diminish our ability to identify nuances and change, and, as lineage theories did, often leave us with a broad category of ‘exceptions’ that easily remains analytically blackboxed and thus rendered invisible. The value of a house perspective is rather an encouragement to explore Tibetan domestic lives, marriage, kinship and relatedness, where and when it is analytically productive.

Writing this book, I developed the chapters with a sense of movement; into, and out of, the house. I started with ways to enter a house, then explored marital and sibling relations among people who live together, before turning the focus on the space they share and the physical structures within which they reside, and ending with relations between houses. In the remaining part of the Conclusion, my interests are broader, as I take the return of polyandry in rural Tsang as a case to illustrate a type of sociality – kinship of potentiality – that is shared, I argue, across the Tibetan ethnographic region.

A Landscape of Possibilities

Already in 1978, Aziz wrote that ‘Tibet probably exhibits a greater variety of marriage types than any other society’ (1978a: 134). This heterogeneity has prevailed in Tibet, albeit to different degrees. Marriage is planned and formed in relation to the state – within the frames of laws and regulations, in response to social and economic reforms and interventions, state narratives about family, love, modernity and care – but also in relation to governmentality, more broadly. Perhaps because marriage has a long history as a secular matter in Tibetan history, outside the realm of the religious authorities, the regulation of these unions has been lenient, if not non-existent. Also during the Ganden Podrang government – the Tibetan state from the seventeenth century to the Chinese invasion – which was based on the ruling principle of union between religion and state (*chösi zungdrel*), religion did not regulate marriage to any significant extent, and many different local practices coexisted. Yet, the tax obligations and land tenure system of the Ganden Podrang, including corvée taxes and monk levies, directly formed household composition, and marriage was a core element in the handling of these obligations.⁴ Perhaps because the different marriage forms were potentially good responses to different state obligations, the heterogeneity that Aziz and many others have noted in the past remained. Such external factors and forces take part in the shaping of local marriage preferences and practices. At the same time, marriages are constituted, based or perhaps anchored in, ontologies and cultural values – what we might call epistemologies of kinship, resulting in local communities responding in differing ways to the same external factors.

The broad variety of potential ways for marriage to be enacted is a central and continuous part of Tibetan kin making.

A comparison between Chinese and Tibetan polyandry, and particularly the rise and fall of polyandry in China, can serve as an example. In his wonderful and comprehensive book entitled *Polyandry and Wife-Selling in Qing Dynasty China* (2015), Matthew Sommer uses legal cases from the Qing courts to investigate polyandry and other forms sexual relations between woman and several men.⁵ He argues that polyandrous marriages were widespread among the poorest Chinese farmers throughout this period (1644–1912), both in number and in geographic distribution. In situations of extreme poverty and/or illness, a married man could arrange what was called ‘getting a husband to support a husband’ (2015: 23–54). This arrangement implied that an additional man was incorporated into the household as a husband and contributed economically with labour and income. In return, as Sommer writes, he would get sexual access to the shared wife. These incorporations were often formalised by verbal or written contracts but were only rarely planned as lifelong marriages. Although accepted as a ‘marriage’ in the local communities (although prohibited by Qing law), ‘getting a husband to support the husband’ was also associated with shame, secrecy and ridicule. As described by Sommer, Chinese polyandry during the Qing was a desperate action taken in order for the married couple and their family to survive – it was an ad hoc solution to an acute crisis. This marriage form was enabled by, on the one hand, a skewed population, where, in some rural communities, one fifth of all men remained unmarried owing to a shortage of women, and, on the other, the pervasive market for women’s sexual and reproductive labour (2015: 23–85).

It seems Chinese polyandry ended with the establishment of the People’s Republic of China, helped by the new 1950 Marriage Law of the PRC that prohibited polygamy and concubinage in strong language and force, one of the first legislations of the new Communist leadership. The emancipation of women was an explicit part of Mao’s political project, and plural marriage (and concubinage and sex work) were at odds with the new ideology of the new People’s republic. Indeed, I have not been able to find any records of a continued practice of polyandry among Han Chinese after the 1950s,⁶ and this marriage form has for a long time been ridiculed in public and social media.⁷ Why do we see a rapid decrease in Chinese polyandry and a persistence – and even, in some areas, increase – in Tibetan polyandry under the same state? On a macro level, Tibetans and Chinese were all part of the same newly established PRC, exposed to similar economic and social reforms and laws (although implemented in different ways) – they experienced collectivisation and decollectivisation and were exposed to the same state ideals, such as the modern family as the independent monogamous couple.⁸ Yet, these external

factors shaped the preferences for and practices of polyandry in very different ways. While the socio-economic context in which polyandry is found meaningful is clearly important, in addition, and this is the reason why this serves as an illustration of kinship epistemologies, the relationship between polyandry and kinship ideologies differs among Tibetans and Chinese.

During the Qing Empire, the common marriage forms were monogamy among peasants and polygyny among the gentry. Polyandry, on the other hand, was part of a larger field of practices whereby people who could not buy into the normative marriage forms would share what Sommer calls 'unorthodox households' (2015: 13). These households were unorthodox also in terms of kin formation and relations. As patrilineal descent was the normative principle for group formation, rights and obligations, the sharing of a wife between two unrelated men complicated succession of the patrilineage, as it obscured the issue of paternity. Polyandry in Tibet, as we have seen, does not challenge the kinship epistemologies but is rather part of a wide range of potential possibilities that reproduce social life in culturally, socially and morally acceptable ways. Hence, the responses to external factors, such as new Marriage laws in 1950, 1980 and the amendments in 2001, also differed among Tibetans and Chinese. Polyandry in Tibet is not a strategy to deal with one particular problem, it is not a source of shame and secrecy, and polyandrous households are not 'unorthodox households'. Chinese polyandry, on the other hand, was an ad hoc solution – a response to a desperate economic situation – rather than a practice anchored in kinship idioms and ideologies. It was associated with prostitution and other sexual relations deemed immoral and exploitative, and only to a limited degree formed long-lasting kin relations – it challenged ideas about continuity in kin relations. It is not surprising, then, that its practice easily disappeared following changes in state laws and economic reforms.

This is a marked difference from Tibet and its borderlands, where polyandry remains a valuable marriage form in certain contexts. While the preference for and practice of a particular marriage form, such as polyandry, may vary across the Tibetan ethnographic region, there is a (more or less) shared pool of acceptable and cherished possibilities from which marriage forms will emerge in certain places, at certain times, in connection with specific political, economic and social factors. These possibilities do not challenge Tibetan kinship epistemologies; on the contrary, this pool of possibilities – the availability of a broad range of socially and culturally accepted marriage forms – constitutes a potentiality of relations that is informed by a sociality with flexibility and pragmatism as core elements.

An emphasis on kinship flexibility has roots, explicit or implicit, in Bourdieu's practice theory and what he called practical kinship/kinship in practice ('parenté pratique', 1990), where he aimed to look beyond kinship as

rules and rather focus on ‘a set of practices that play with the rules’ (Trémon 2017: 43). Such an approach is at the core of ‘new’ kinship studies in anthropology, post-Schneider’s critique, given direction by Carsten’s edited volume on relatedness, and with the speed, urgency and new theoretical vitality of reproductive technologies and their associated practices. At the same time, increase in (all levels of) mobility and migration – and, with that, dispersed families – has brought the inherent flexibility of kinship to the foreground in transnational studies.⁹ The notion of flexible kinship has different connotations; it is both the activation of kin relations in flexible (and often strategic) ways in new settings, such as relocation settings (Trémon 2017), and the flexible ways in which kin relations are formed and defined at a given time and place. While both are relevant to explore also for Tibetan kinship, it is the latter meaning of flexibility that has been my concern here.¹⁰ New kinship studies have brought the many creative ways to form families towards the centre of anthropological discourse, such as same-sex constellations and marriage relations through gamete donations and surrogacy, and friendships, work companions and other relations that matter. These studies also involved an empirical shift towards Europe and North America, as they often followed biomedical technology and queer movements. The inherent flexibility of gendered relations in the Tibetan ethnographic region – what can be seen as alterations between a broad range of socially recognised formalised relations between males and females, including marriage – brings examples of creative family and kin making from outside Europe, from a part of the world often described in opposition to ‘the modern world’. The pragmatism and flexibility seen in the ways to live together, to form lives and livelihoods together in settings that are often rapidly changing, make Tibetan kinship an interesting case for anthropological explorations of social and cultural life.

Although Tibet and the broader Tibetan ethnographic region is vast and diverse, communities are interconnected in myriads of ways across this land, from the west to the east, north to south. Through centuries of direct or indirect interactions – and through (partly) shared Tibetan language and Buddhism, shared experiences of high-altitude ecologies, relations to land, and ontological orientations – these communities, despite being scattered throughout a vast landscape, share deep sociocultural commonalities. Included in these sociocultural commonalities are also, I argue, approaches to marriage, and particularly inherently flexible and pragmatic enactments of kinship. Marriage and kinship ideology and practice vary across Tibetan and borderland communities, yet shared idioms, vernaculars, sensibilities and rationalities find resonance across these variations, and practices, assemblages and patterns of relatedness are formed through a shared pragmatic sensibility and flexible approach to social organisation.

From Ladakh and southern Himalayas to the west, to Gyarong and other borderlands to the east, we see a range of socioculturally accepted marriage forms overlapping. Monogamy, polyandry, polygyny and intergenerational combinations of these, as well as post-marital neolocal, patrilocal, matrilocality residence are possibilities with different potentials at the disposal of individuals, households and communities to consider when thinking about the future generations. Throughout Tibet and its borderlands, the coexistence of marriage and residence forms has been normative, informed by the different potentials associated with the various ways to assemble people. Across these diverse areas, we see a dynamic foregrounding and backgrounding of marriage preferences and practices, of residence patterns, dialectically formed through interconnections with wider relations to social networks and to the state, and processes such as intergenerational changes, urbanisation and migration. The alternation between these socially recognised ways of living together is – only partly but significantly – shared across these communities, despite being separated by huge distances.

In a similar way, for kinship and relatedness more broadly, there are socially and culturally accepted and meaningful ways to form relations that matter that are overlapping across the Tibetan ethnographic region. The idiom of flesh/blood and bone for the constitution of a child and personhood, patrilineal ideology, bilaterality and residence, as well as the range of networks of mutual aid are all social possibilities with different potentials that in various ways form sociality in these diverse communities. I have argued for a house orientation in Central Tibet, which is also relevant in Ladakh and, although concerning larger networks, in Amdo. In the southern borderlands, however, such as Humla, Mugu, Dolpo, Mustang and Khumbu, the patrilineages play more important roles for village life, combined with the importance of residence and territory.¹¹ In these more patrioriented communities, or as Langelaar calls it ‘dogmatically patrilineal settings’, the stronger emphasis on the patrilineage come into sight, for example, in the context of *makpa* marriages, where the household might switch lineage identity and the couple’s ‘future offspring and heirs will belong to the father’s descent group, rather than the mother’s’ (Langelaar 2017: 161). This is not common in Central Tibet, where the *makpa*’s patrilineage is irrelevant, particularly after marriage. Despite these differences in emphasis on descent or residence, the normative status of *makpa* marriages is shared as part of a larger landscape of marriage and residence possibilities.

Flexible practices are per definition easily adaptable to change in the form of social and political reform, land tenure systems or shifting economic policies, leading to dynamic processes within households, village tent encampments or other communal organisations. In a recent paper, Levine (2021) shows how pastoralists in eastern Tibet have adapted to decades of changing

grassland organisation by adjusting decisions about residence, succession and inheritance based on practical concerns. For example, during the shared grassland system in the 1990s, both patrilocal and matrilocal residence was common along with siblings sharing camps and friends residing together. Following the household land contracts, the pastoralists chose new strategies, sometimes leading to conglomerate households (multiple generations and two or more married siblings), alternating residence patterns and again a closer cooperation between siblings. These interesting shifts of kinship practices, based on practical concerns about grassland, pastoral economy and resettlement, are based in and draw on, Levine argues, 'longstanding expectations for mutual aid between siblings' (2021: 94) but are enacted in new ways in response to changing environments. Levine's examples can also serve to illustrate the flexible approaches to kinship in Tibetans communities and show how practices and patterns alternate with time, in a dynamic process of foregrounding and backgrounding, drawn from the range of socially recognised possible lines of connections and relations, all with varying potentials for vitality, prosperity and mutuality. This is part of a broader pattern whereby, in close interconnection with external factors of social and economic change, particular Tibetan kinship and marriage forms gain more or less prominence, emerging from this plethora of possibilities that are socially and culturally available. Part of such kinship of potentiality, polyandry in Panam was not merely a reminiscence of the past but a favourable marriage form through which farmers, at that particular time, consolidated their estates as socio-symbolic, meaningful houses that served to provide individuals and groups with the relations that mattered most – to people, to nonhumans and to the wider community.

The Time Passed

The twenty years that have passed from when I first arrived in Panam have brought immense changes to the Tibet Autonomous Region, but because one of these changes is the termination of international cooperation and the persistent restriction of access for foreign researchers, journalists, diplomats and others, the details of these changes are hard to decipher. The new form of the state's presence in and surveillance of the rural areas and the changing citizen–state relations have formed new sociopolitical contexts and subjectivities with which the pragmatic and flexible kinship sensibility somehow must continue to coexist. Kinship is formed in interaction with the workings of the state, not only in totalitarian states such as PRC. Michael Lambek argues that it is 'a fact of modernity that kinship is partially encapsulated in and by the state'. Modern states, he continues, are constituted by the very making of

citizens, by providing birth and death certificates, claiming taxes, registering land ownership across generations and ‘producing and authorising the means by which people are related to one another as parents, offspring, siblings, spouses and the like’ (2013: 257). The way such biopower has been exercised by the Chinese state on rural lives has changed many times and in many ways since 1950, in phases shifting from totalitarian interventions to more lenient approaches and to a form of governance, in the last decade, has been based on close monitoring of and potential interventions in everyday lives. The Chinese state in Tibet is fragmented and works in complex ways on different scales and dimensions in different domains of life, and the workings of the state – as exercised by state agents and local leaders – has directly influenced domestic lives in general, and the plurality of marriage forms in particular.

Despite the political restrictions in many other fields, the beginning of the 2000s was a period when the local government agents had a lenient approach towards regulating marriage in rural areas of Tsang.¹² Family issues and household constellations were of little interest to the local state in Panam. In conversations with township leaders, themselves Tibetans from the area or its vicinity, it was clear that they did not see the nature of polyandry and the illegal status of plural marriage to be important or relevant. ‘We register the marriage in the household to be between the eldest brother and the wife’, one leader told me, and continued ‘then his brothers also live in the house’. The main concern of the township leaders at that point in time was economic development and reportable outcome, and the economic benefits of polyandrous households were obvious.¹³

A range of policies introduced after 2005 has again brought the state into the villages and into the houses, leading rural changes, including more mobility from rural to urban areas. The 11th Five-Year plan (2006–2011) introduced a major shift from previous policies in TAR as it explicitly called for ‘allocation of huge financial resources for projects that reach *directly* to village households in order to improve rural quality of life’ (Goldstein et al. 2010: 59, original italics). This first led to the policies to construct the New Socialist Countryside, and with the Comfortable Housing Project (CHP) starting in 2006 the state directly intervened in the domestic domain in Panam, transforming not only the houses through subsidies and loans but also, as Yeh has convincingly argued, subjectivities and citizen–state relations.¹⁴ The CHP added another layer to the Sharlung houses – a layer of debt and loyalty, and expected gratitude to the state. How this new layer of meaning intersects with the social and ontological space and the close relations formed and enacted in these spaces is difficult to know. The more recent policy, applied in 2011 and ongoing, involves sending ‘village-based cadre teams’ (Ch. *zhucun gongzuodui*) to live in villages (for 2–3 months initially and later expanding to 12 months). This has the greatest potential to interfere

directly in local marriage and kinship practices. A response to the protests across Tibet from 2008, the village teams' main focus is the powerful combination of political surveillance and economic assistance. But reports have also mentioned other tasks, such as 'screening and mediating social disputes', 'inculcating "core socialist values" and discouraging "bad old traditions"'.¹⁵ These are all efforts that we can imagine have consequences for polyandry, with villagers subjected to direct intervention and their sheer exposure to numerous cadre and Communist Party eyes. Both of these policies, and the totalitarian turn they represent, have challenged the lenient approach township leaders had towards local cultural practices, including marriage and kinship.

Already noted by Goldstein and colleagues through a series of articles,¹⁶ economic development in Panam since the 2000s has had a major impact on rural lives. Their research has shown creative strategies of economic diversification, including extensive engagement in income-generating activities both on and off the farm, making entrepreneurial investments and taking up a range of roles in the booming construction industry. At the time of my fieldworks, most people in Sharlung and the neighbouring villages were still primarily engaged in subsistence farming, although 'going for income' outside the farm was not uncommon and was an aspiration for many. With time, Goldstein, Childs, Wangdui and colleagues' description of changing economic strategies has become increasingly relevant also for Sharlung. The possibility of accessing cash income, from construction work, transportation or skilled work such as carpentry or masonry, has led more people to travel out of the village for longer periods of the year. Mandatory schooling until ninth grade and the extensive use of boarding schools has also led more and young people to leave. In the early 2000s, household leaders were trying to send only an eldest son to take up work outside the farm, as they considered his sense of belonging and moral obligation to the house to be stronger. With more people leaving the village, including younger sons and daughters, the internal household dynamics also change. Both younger husbands and unmarried daughters, two positions I have described as peripheral to the order of things in a polyandrous house, are given more central roles, as their income is becoming highly valued. Yet, their willingness to remain part of the household was a collective concern. The question remains: for how long will household members continue to return to the village to bring income back home and anchor their lives in their natal households?

Close encounters with powerful nation states and economic development tend to alter marriage forms that are non-normative to the majority. Yet, the rural economic development in Tsang has so far encouraged a diversified household economy, for which polyandry is clearly valuable. But the fertility decline among Tibetans in the TAR, as documented by Childs (2008),¹⁷

increases the vulnerability of a polyandrous household – fewer people implies less flexibility and the increased chance of a household split. Previous writings about polyandry often ends with speculations about its future. As such, the futures of polyandry have many pasts, to use Koselleck's words (2004),¹⁸ and these past futures have often involved a notion of demise and disappearance. It is as if time works against these marriages. The narratives of a future where polyandry has disappeared are evident in Chinese reports from the 1950s and anthropological publications from the 1980s onwards, as well as journalistic pieces and accounts from Lhasa in all these periods. Because this book is set at the beginning of the 2000s, our current present is the future of that time. Then, Tibetan communities were divided in how they imagined the future of polyandry. In Lhasa, and among exiled Tibetans in India, there was the expectation that when more young people leave to study and work outside the villages they will be exposed to city life and find new partners there; filial obligations will weaken and after some time polyandry will decrease in number and perhaps even vanish. In Panam, on the other hand, although some were concerned about young people not returning from work and school outside the village, the past future of polyandry was marked by expectations of vitality and prosperity. Polyandry would continue to improve life, economically and socially, keep parents and children together, enable siblings to maintain close relations and help each other. I am reluctant to end this book with my own speculations about the future of household composition, marriage and kinship in rural Panam. From my observations in the Takrab house and among their neighbours, I learned that polyandry was not merely an adaptable socio-economic strategy in an environment with limited land resources but also a dynamic marriage form that has room for love and affection and for care within and across generations, even if these emotions and their enactments can be unevenly distributed. I hope that this book can help show the complexity involved in these marriages and the kinship they form and are formed by, and to give a glimpse of Tibetan rural lives in a period where the Chinese state was less intrusive in the everyday life of these villages than it is today. This case of Tibetan kinship and marriage, with its inherent flexibility and focus on potentiality, can also serve to illustrate the wondrous world of relatedness. When I left Sharlung in 2004, I imagined a future of revisits, of continuous relations, of long-term friendships and a way to maintain a sense of mutuality of being, as Sahlin (2013) would say. As we now know, that future did not come.

Notes

1. I was struck by the paradox of polyandrous houses and the clear association of these with the category of farmers that had been called *genbo* (*trepa*) in the past. The *genbo* had provided work for landless labourers in the village but had been exploitive and brutal, although to different degrees. Some of the *genbo* had been 'struggled against' (*tamdzing*) during the Cultural Revolution; co-villagers participated in these public accusations and beatings and some of the *genpos* died. More than four decades later, relations with the *genbo* were still complicated and tense, and in the process of social organisation, the association with *genbo* had not seemed to shape the cultural values attached to polyandrous houses. Despite this, it seemed that the time that had passed had perhaps backgrounded any wounds and had thus moved these events from the domestic to the political domain in the remembrance of the past.
2. Particularly in Ladakh (see Phylactou 1989; Day 2015) but also Amdo (see Langelaar 2017, 2019), as well as in the eastern borderlands (see Wellens 2010; Wang 2013).
3. Medical houses (*mendrong*) were also found at the *labrang*, or corporate property holding houses of incarnate lamas (Fjeld and Hofer 2011).
4. See the Special Section of *Inner Asia* (2021), 'Kinship and the State in Tibet and its Borderlands', edited by Bingaman, Fjeld, Levine and Samuels.
5. Including prostitution and other less formalised sexual relations.
6. Wellens was also not been able to identify polyandry among Han Chinese (personal communication, Oslo, 2005).
7. As an example, in June 2020, a heated debate arose in Chinese media after a guest professor in economy at Fudan university suggested legalising polyandry and promoting polyandry as a way to solve China's skewed population problem. See J. Feng. 2020. 'Should Chinese Women have Multiple Husbands?', SupChina, 3 June. Retrieved January 2021 from <https://supchina.com/2020/06/03/should-chinese-women-have-multiple-husbands/>.
8. See Yan (2003).
9. Another trajectory to flexible kinship, particularly in transnational and migration studies, comes from Ong's notion of flexible citizenship, which points to a strategic use of kin relations in transnational capital accumulation, a useful perspective when exploring dispersed families in new settings (Trémon 2017).
10. See Craig (2020) for an ethnography of flexible kinship in a migration setting among people from Mustang, Nepal.
11. Mugum village in Mugu district, a community I have worked with the last few years, can serve as an example. In Mugum, a former market place five hours' walk away from the Tibetan border, social belonging, relationality and marriageability, on the one hand, and ritual obligations and maintenance, on the other hand, are organised through social classification into ten patrilineages (*rewa gyü*). Individuals, and houses, belong either to one of these ten patrilineages, or to the thirteen private monastic estates, or the fifteen blacksmith households. The number of patrilineages and private gompas are fixed, while the number of blacksmiths (here called *gara*, without the denigrating association we know from Central Tibet) fluctuate. Each patrilineage has a defined relation to one of the private gompas, whose members perform all rituals for the household.
12. The exception was reproduction, which in some Tibetan areas in and outside TAR were regulated through measures ranging from needing permission to have two or three children and fines in the case of more (through the One-Child Policy), to outright forced sterilisation.

13. This lenient approach to domestic and marriage intervention was a stark difference to the exercise of state power in the collective period, and particularly during the Cultural Revolution. The changing phases of state workings on domestic – and sexual – lives have been shared with other minority areas in the eastern borderlands. For example, Shih describes how state efforts – particularly during the Democratic reforms in 1956, and through the ‘One-Wife-One Husband’ movement in 1975–76 –were launched to stop the traditional Moso *tise* (walking back and forth) marriages and force them into formal monogamy. Shih calls this campaign ‘the most brutal government assault on Moso culture’ (2010: 191). The state changed approach in the 1980s, as Knödel (1995) has described, when government attempts to marry off Moso people ended. After that, processes internal to Moso communities, as well as economic development and tourism only directly associated with the state, have been drivers of the decline of *tise* (Shih 2010).
14. As Yeh notes: ‘The gift of a house is thus an exemplar of biopower as the fostering of life, and the improvement of the population associated with development’ (2013: xx).
15. See Human Rights Watch. 2016. ‘China: No End to Tibet Surveillance Program’, 18 January. Retrieved January 2021 from <https://www.hrw.org/news/2016/01/18/china-no-end-tib-et-surveillance-program>.
16. Goldstein et al. (2008, 2010); Childs et al. (2011, 2012, 2013).
17. Childs notes that regardless of the methodological critique, both of Chinese demographic statistics and of the relatively small sample size of his own data, in TAR ‘fertility was unmistakably on a downward trend throughout the 1990s. From an estimated TFR of 6.4 births per woman in 1986, the fertility rate dropped below 3.0 in 1997 and presumably even lower since then’ (2008: 201).
18. *Futures Past: On the Semantics of Historical Time* (2004).