

# Introduction

It was winter in the highlands of Nepal, the time of year when the yak herds are down out of the alpine meadows and being herded around the villages, and as my porters and I walked around a bend in the trail on the way to the Langtang Valley, we ran right into a yak. It was the first yak I had ever seen. It was a big, black bull yak with tremendous horns that curved out, up, and then swept back again. The yak had long tresses of hair hanging from its belly that brushed the ground, making him appear even more burly and imposing. Judging from the number of ropes that a bunch of long-haired, wild-looking men had tied on him, and the fact that he was standing in the middle of the trail shaking his massive, horned head and waving his bushy tail in the air, this was one yak with which you did not want to argue. My lowland porters quickly dropped their loads and scrambled to safety in the rocks above the trail, and I promptly followed their evasive course of action. Laughing and shouting, sanguine of what they were doing, the bunch of audacious yak herders urged the big bull yak past us and on down the trail, yanking on the ropes every once in a while to prevent the yak from running away.

As we collected our loads, I asked my porters who these people were and where were they from? *"They are bhotia(s), Tibetan-speaking yak herders, and they live way up in the mountains, in the pastures with their herds of yaks. They have brought this yak bull down to sell to Tamang farmers to breed hill cows to produce chauri, yak-cattle hybrid crosses."* Thus, on a mountain path in Nepal, 23 years ago, I received my first lessons about yaks and Tibetan nomadic pastoralism.

Nomadic pastoralism has been described as one of the great advances in the evolution of human civilisation. It is an adaptation by human groups to grassland areas of the world where extensive livestock production is more supportive of human culture than cultivated agriculture. When people specialise in animal husbandry that requires periodic movement of their herds, they are known as nomadic pastoralists, or, simply nomads. Nomadic pastoralism originated about 9,000 years ago in the mountainous Zagros region of Southwest Asia (Northeast Iraq and Northwest Iran), with the domestication of goats and sheep. Concomitant with cereal cultivation, which began somewhat earlier in the same general area, animal husbandry quickly dispersed from this centre of origin northwards and eastwards. With the domestication of the horse about 6,000 years ago, in the fertile steppes of south-western Russia, nomadic pastoralism as a way of life really started to expand throughout Central Asia.

Although there is evidence that strongly suggests cultivated agriculture began about 9,000 years ago in the Upper Yellow River basin of northern China independently of influences from Southwest Asia, the development of nomadic pastoralism on the Tibetan Plateau was most certainly shaped by nomads radiating into the Tibetan grasslands from Central Asia to the west and north. These early Central Asian nomads would have brought goats, sheep, horses, and many pastoral technologies with them. The Tibetan black, yak-hair tent, for example, is strikingly similar to the black, goat-hair tents of nomad tribes in Afghanistan, Iran, and Iraq. Nomads, believed to have originated from the Kurgan Culture of southern Russia, expanded into the Indian subcontinent about 3,500 years ago, bringing with them not only the practice of nomadic pastoralism but also the Indo-European languages that they spoke. Groups of these nomads would undoubtedly also have penetrated into the Western Himalayas, where alpine meadows would have provided good grazing for their livestock.

Other Central Asian nomads moved into the north-eastern Tibetan grazing lands. The *Yuezhi*, an Indo-European speaking nomadic tribe, was known to reside in the Qilian Mountains and Gansu Corridor region on the north-eastern edge of the Tibetan Plateau in the second millennium B.C. They must have moved into the region long before, probably following trails into the Tibetan frontier region that later became the famous Silk Route. In the second half of the third century B.C., early Mongol nomadic tribes, known as the *Xiongnu*, coalesced into a powerful steppe empire in the Ordos region, not far from the north-eastern edge of the Tibetan Plateau. The *Xiongnu* would have had influence in the Tibetan grasslands, as they were often allied with various *Qiang* tribes against *Han* Chinese military forces pushing into what is now the Gansu Corridor.

The *Qiang*, nomadic tribes believed to be the ancestors of the modern Tibetans, were known to the Chinese in the Hsia dynasty (2205-1766 BC). They were numerous and widespread throughout the grasslands of the north-eastern Tibetan Plateau, in what are now the eastern Qinghai and western Gansu Provinces. It is believed that the *Qiang* originated from tribes of the Neolithic *Yangshao* culture, based in the Wei Valley of the Upper Yellow River basin, who moved west into the Tibetan highlands in the fourth millennium B.C. and took up a mixed hunting-gathering, herding, and agricultural way of life.

Although sheep, goats, and horses were probably brought into Tibetan grazing lands from the west, the domestication of the yak undoubtedly first took place in the highlands of the Tibetan Plateau, most likely through the skills of some very daring *Qiang* hunters. Chinese scholars claim yak husbandry is about 4,000 years old. Whenever it began, the domestication of the yak was the single most important factor in the evolution of nomadic pastoralism on the Tibetan Plateau. Domesticated yaks enabled mankind to really start exploiting Tibetan grazing lands and to earn a livelihood on the grasslands. Although Tibetan nomads also raise other animals, they place so much value on the yak that the Tibetan term for yak, *nor*, is also translated as 'wealth'. The yak, in many ways, defines nomadic pastoralism throughout most of the Tibetan Plateau and in the Himalayas.

The Tibetan nomadic pastoral area encompasses a huge area. It includes the high-elevation areas of the Himalayas in Bhutan, Nepal, and India (including Ladakh) in the south and stretches north for almost 1,200 km across Tibet to the Kunlun and Qilian Mountains in the Qinghai and Gansu Provinces of China. In the east, it begins in the Songpan grasslands of north-western Sichuan Province and extends west for 2,600km to the far western part of the Tibetan Autonomous Region of China.

Nomadic pastoralism on the Tibetan Plateau and in the Himalayas is distinct ecologically from pastoralism in the semi-arid pastoral regions of Eurasia and Africa. There, it is normally aridity, or the lack of water, that separates cultivated agricultural areas from nomadic pastoral regions. Nomads in these semi-arid areas are pushed into the marginal grasslands where low and erratic rainfall precludes the growing of crops. The key ecological factor that sets Tibetan nomads apart from pastoral nomads in the rest of Eurasia and Africa is altitude, not lack of water. In Tibet and the Himalayas, at altitudes that generally lie above 3,500m and in environments so harsh that crop cultivation is impossible, expansive grazing grounds are found. Tibetan pastoralism has flourished because there has been no encroachment into the grasslands by farmers trying to plough up the land and plant crops. Here, across a vast area, nomadic pastoralism has been the primary human activity for thousands of years. Unlike the vast, open steppes of Eurasia, Tibetan grazing lands are divided by rugged mountain ranges, deep river valleys, and large lake basins that give rise to great diversity in topography, climate, vegetation, and pastoral production practices.

Across this vast, high-elevation plateau of Asia and in the neighbouring Himalayas, the nomads share many things in common. First, the landscape is strikingly similar. Whether it is on the alpine steppes near the headwaters of the Yangtze River in

south-western Qinghai Province or 1,000 km away in the marshes near the 'knee', the first great bend, of the Yellow River in north-western Sichuan Province, the landscape is comparable. It is a landscape battered by wind, frequent changes in the weather, severe storms, and remarkable temperature changes even during the course of a day. It is a high-elevation steppe environment inhospitable to most outsiders, especially those from the lowlands unaccustomed to high altitude and cold, wind-swept spaces. Secondly, pastoral production practices are very much alike, although the composition of herds varies over the breadth of the Tibetan Plateau. Almost all nomads have a base, usually the traditional winter area, and make established moves with their livestock from there to distant pastures throughout the year. Yak-hair tents are in common use throughout the region. All nomads also have strong economic links with agricultural communities outside the pastoral world. Thirdly, Tibetan speaking nomads throughout the region raise the same kind of animals: yaks, yak-cattle hybrids, sheep, goats, and horses. Livestock production plays an important role in local and regional economies. Fourthly, the nomads all share a similar language and culture. Across the Tibetan Plateau, nomads can usually communicate with each other in Tibetan, even though their local dialects may differ. Religious and cultural beliefs and practices are also similar throughout the whole region. Fifthly, the different nomadic populations across the region are facing rapid changes in their lives, brought on, for the most part, by the forces of economic development sweeping the region. Finally, nomads throughout the Tibetan Plateau and Himalayas are also addressing many similar challenges as they seek to maintain their pastoral production systems and way of life.

This book focusses on Tibetan-speaking nomads across the Tibetan Plateau and Himalayas by breaking the analysis of nomadic pastoralism into separate, but related, themes as described above: pastoral landscape, pastoral production, livestock, nomads, changes, and future challenges. This approach establishes a framework in which the important characteristics of Tibetan nomadic pastoralism in various pastoral areas can be viewed and compared. By using photographs, it provides portraits of pastoralists and pastoral production practices to help illustrate the common ground that exists in nomadic pastoralism across the Tibetan ranges.

The economic viability and environmental sustainability of nomadic pastoralism in the Tibetan Plateau and the Himalayas are under considerable scrutiny these days. Traditional pastoral production practices are often viewed as archaic by development planners and administrators. The structure of nomads' herds is often termed irrational and uneconomic by livestock specialists, and Tibetan nomads are frequently labelled backward. Nomads are widely perceived to have no system for managing their livestock's use of the grazing lands and it is thought they simply graze them on communal pasture, which leads to large, unproductive herds, overgrazing, and rangeland degradation. Heavy livestock losses experienced during harsh winters in recent years on the Tibetan Plateau are thought by many officials to be a result, for the most part, of the traditional pastoral systems that are still widely practised. Many authorities insist that, for development to be achieved in pastoral areas, nomads need to be settled, rangeland has to be privatised and fenced, livestock numbers need to be limited, and herds need to be restructured. The realities of nomadic pastoralism in the Tibetan Plateau and the Himalayas, as you will see, are much more complex.

Nomadic pastoralism across much of the Tibetan Plateau has good prospects for prospering in the future. Making the case for the economic viability and environmental sustainability of Tibetan pastoral production systems, however, requires pastoral research programmes that start acquiring long-term data on the condition of the rangelands, the changes in livestock numbers and productivity, and the adaptations that nomads have made and will continue to make.