

Change in Rural Tibet: Progress and Problems

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INTRODUCTION

Like the rest of rural China, rural Tibet has experienced a dramatic change in the past 25 years. In the early 1980s, the system of communal production in Tibet was replaced by the current quasi-market system called the 'responsibility system' (Tib. 'gan gtsang; ch. cheng bao'), and, in almost all areas, the commune's land and animals were divided among its members on a one-time basis. From then on, the household became the basic unit of production as it had been in the Old Society and in the years from democratic reforms in 1959 until collectivisation in the late 1960s. A new economic era, therefore, began in the early 1980s.

Although Tibet is still a relatively poor area in China, it is also clear that, in the two decades since 1980, the standard of living in rural Tibet has improved a great deal. Tibet has a long way to go, but it is important to understand how far it has come and what problems it faces moving forward.

My comments today are based on my own longitudinal research in rural Tibet in collaboration with the Tibet Academy of Social Sciences. It began in 1986, first with pastoral nomads, and then with farmers. In particular, this talk is based on data from a large field study begun in 1998 in collaboration with Dr. Cynthia Beall, the Tibet Academy of Social Sciences, and Dr. Ben Jiao, an anthropologist who is a research scholar in the Tibet Academy. This study, which is of 780 households in 13 farming villages in three counties, is based primarily on firsthand data collected through field work in rural villages where the researchers lived in the villages and revisited the areas a number of times. Both systematic household surveys, focus groups, in-depth life history interviews, and participant observation were used. The farming villages studied are in Shigatse Prefecture and the Lhasa Municipal area, and include a range of economic types from poor to well-off.

The 13 study villages contained 780 households all of whom were included in the study. Forty-nine point eight per cent of the villagers were male and 50.2% were female. The median age of the sample was 22 and 63.7% of respondents 18 years and older were married, 4.9% were widowed, and less than 1% were divorced. Household sizes were high, the average household containing 7.1 persons, and ranging from 1-15 people.

All 5,590 individuals in the 13 villages were ethnic Tibetans. There were no Han or Hui Chinese living there either as residents or temporary workers. Also, there were no ethnic Chinese working in the four study rural 'xiang' centres, as either officials or shopkeepers. The villages were entirely Tibetan in language and culture.

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

Religion is an important part of the life of rural society. In terms of formal practitioners, 3.6% of all males were monks and 2.6% of females were nuns; and 16.3% of households had one of its members living as either a monk or nun.

A breakdown of the composition of the population by age and sex reveals an expansive triangular shape with 34% of the population under the age of 15. This is intermediary between adjacent Third World countries, such as Nepal and Bhutan, that have 43% of their population under the age of 15 and China as a whole that has 26%. The age-dependency ratio—the proportion of the population in the dependent ages (under 15 and 65+) relative to those in the productive ages (15-64)—was 63.6. This also was intermediate between Nepal/Bhutan (which respectively were 88.7/85.2) and China as a whole (which was 47.1%)(PRB 1999).

Almost all the rural farmers we studied had a favourable opinion of the new responsibility system, and 94% indicated that their livelihoods had improved since de-collectivisation in 1980. Similarly, when respondents were asked whether they thought they had a better life than their parents, 85.5% responded positively. Only 8.6% said they were worse off. As Table 1 illustrates, even older villagers in the age category from 60-79 held

this view—and their parents would have been adults at the end of the traditional society, i.e., they would have been between 40-60 years of age when the socialist period began in 1959.

Table 1: Responses to the query: "Do you have a better life now than your parents did?"

Current Age	Better	Worse	Same
60-69 (N=111)	87.4%	6.3	6.3
70-79 (N=39)	92.3	5.1	2.6

Moreover, focus group discussions were held to discuss in detail the grain situation of every household in each village. These discussions revealed a consensus that 77% of households produced either enough grain or a surplus of grain. Direct survey questioning of each household revealed a similar result—67% said they had one or more year's grain stored away and another 21% said they had six months to a year's grain in storage. Using our own locally-constructed index of economic status, we determined that overall only 14% were poor in the sense that they did not have enough grain from either their own fields or purchased from earned income, whereas 58% were rich or middle level in economic status.

It is difficult to meaningfully measure quality of life in rural areas using household income figures, so we interviewed every household about their diets because there is a clear consensus on what a high-quality Tibetan diet should be.

The three main high quality or luxury traditional foods are locally brewed barley beer (*chang*), butter, and meat. We found that all were being widely consumed. Three quarters of the households said they now make and drink barley beer regularly rather than just on special occasions, and the majority of families reported that they ate meat or fat either daily or several times a week; and 91% reported they drank butter tea every day. On average, households reported using approximately 416 kg of barley per year for making beer. That amount of grain is roughly equivalent to the output of three mu of land which, in turn, is roughly equivalent to the share of land one person received at the time of de-collectivisation. Thus, conditions are such that most households are able to divert substantial amounts of the main staple crop to the production of a luxury food.

Another empirical indicator of improved livelihood and quality of life is housing. Fifty-five per cent (430) of households reported that they had either built a new house or expanded their old house since de-

collectivisation. The average reported cost of these improvements was 5,078 yuan (median=3,000 yuan). Even in Medrogongkar, the poorest area, 42.4% of households reported they had either built a new house or expanded their old house.

The material possessions of village households is another useful empirical way to assess standards of living, so we asked households about their ownership of a range of durable consumer goods that went beyond the 'basics'. The results are interesting: 71% of households owned a pressure cooker, 60% had a Tibetan carpet set, 57% had a metal stove, and 53% a bicycle, but only 30% had a sewing machine.

What accounts for these gains: first and foremost the new economic framework. The responsibility system allowed households to keep the fruits of their labour. In farming, this allowed households to intensify the care with which they planted their own fields and resulted in most households quickly experiencing increases in production. These increased yields were further amplified by the government's new policy in the 1980s of exempting rural Tibetans from taxes.

Productivity in animal husbandry was especially impressive in these farming areas. Domestic animals increased 82% after de-collectivisation, and this would have been even more if chickens and pigs had been counted. And with regard to female cows and 'dzo' that provide the essential milk that every rural household needs to make the butter for tea, these have increased by an amazing 668%.

Finally, the new economic structure also has allowed and encouraged rural households to engage in non-farm income-generating activities, and, as we shall see, many did so.

Despite these improvements, Tibet has a long way to go vis á vis inland China. For example, as of 2002, none of the 13 villages we studied had running water in the houses and only the village immediately adjacent to a county seat (xian) had a water tap and electricity. None of the areas had improved dirt roads, let alone paved roads.

There is still a great deal of poverty. Despite starting off equally in 1980 14% of sample households were poor by our criteria¹ and another 28.5% fell into the category of lower-middle households (which we defined

¹ After extensive discussions with local officials, individual villagers, and focus groups, we defined a household as poor if it did not have sufficient grain either from its own fields or from income earned in work and had to borrow or get welfare to meet its needs. In borderline cases, other factors such as the quality of the house and the number of possessions in the house and the number of animals were also considered.

to mean that they had a difficult time meeting their basic subsistence needs). The poorest two 'xiang'—Medrogongkar and Panam²— had roughly one third of their households poor (37 and 31% respectively), and in the poorest of these, Medrogongkar, 47.2% of the households reported they were not producing enough grain from their land for their own subsistence. In contrast, government statistics for China as a whole report that less than 5% of the rural population was below the poverty line (World Bank 2000). Thus, while progress in rural Tibet in some ways has been impressive, many families have faltered and are in need of assistance.

Although the Responsibility System is still in operation, the situation in rural Tibet is not static and there are fundamental changes going on that need to be mentioned since these raise serious questions about whether the overall increases of the past 20 years can be sustained, let alone improved over, say, the next 20 years, and especially whether the 40% of rural households who are poor or almost poor can raise their standards of living.

Firstly, and most critically, is the serious decline in per capita landholdings. As a result of population growth and fixed land size, there has been an average decline of 20% in per capita landholdings, and this does not take into account land lost to new home building sites, floods, roads, and so on. Moreover, even though the Total Fertility Rate (TFR) is beginning to decline due to increasing contraceptive use in the rural areas, there is no question that Tibet's rural population will continue to grow during the next decade, so this process of decline in per capita landholdings will continue.

Secondly, the cost of living is increasing. In addition to general inflation, the price of key farm products, such as chemical fertilizers, has increased substantially, while at the same time there has been a decrease in government subsidies and an increase in local taxes.

Compensating for this by trying to increase yields will not be easy, because farmers are already using high levels of chemical fertilizers and improved seeds. And although there is some potential for increasing the amount of land under agricultural production by means of modern irrigation projects, these are enormously expensive and unlikely to create anywhere near enough new land to impact the above trends.

Similarly, it is difficult to find a market for Tibetan crops so that their value will increase and compensate for the changes. The market for Tibetan

crops is limited and declining. Tibetan barley and wheat have no export potential outside of Tibet because many ethnic groups do not eat barley and find the Tibetan wheat too coarse. Even in Tibet, the increasing consumption by Tibetans of rice, vegetables, and imported white flour, means they are consuming less barley and Tibetan wheat, and this is likely to increase.

Tibetan farmers are aware of these changes and challenges and they are trying to compensate in a variety of ways, for example, by traditional cultural strategies like fraternal polyandrous marriages in which two or more brothers take a wife since this concentrates labour in the household and avoids the need to divide the land the household received at the time of de-collectivisation between the brothers. Families are also increasingly using contraception to have fewer children and, most critically, are actively taking steps to secure non-farm income.

It is clear to rural villagers and their leaders that without a source of non-farm income households can not move from basic subsistence to a good standard of living, and in the future it may not even be possible for households who are now self-sufficient from their fields to remain so if they do not have some source of non-farm income. Nowadays, non-farm income is the single most important factor underlying a high standard of living in rural Tibet.

The rural villagers in our study were engaged in five basic types of non-farm work.

1. Migrant manual and low-skilled labour (usually construction)
2. Skilled and craft labour (usually carpentry, masonry, painting)
3. Private business (running a shop, trading, transportation)
4. Ritual work (such as 'ngagpa' mantra specialist)
5. Government employment (such as official, teacher, health aid)

The majority of rural Tibetans in our study who were engaged in non-farm labour were migrant manual labourers. Migrant labourers typically left the village for a four-month period beginning with the end of planting and returning at the start of harvesting. The different earning capacities of the various types of jobs are substantial. In 1997-98, the reported median income earned per worker engaged in manual labour was only 1,000 yuan net, while that of those engaged in skilled labour was 65% higher at 1,650 yuan net.

In 1998, 44% of all males between the ages of 20-34 in the 13 villages we studied were engaged in migrant labour for part of the year, and 49% of all households had at least one member so engaged.

Table 2 shows the relationship between non-farm labour and household economic status. Whereas 61.6% of rich families had one or more members engaged in non-farm income-producing activities, only 30.8% of the poorest did. And whereas 21.5% of rich households had two or more non-farm income earners, only 3.7% of poor households did.

Table 3 shows that for those households engaged in non-farm work, there was a big difference in the amount of earned income for rich and poor families. Whereas rich families had net incomes of 3,900 yuan per year, poor families netted only 700.

Table 2: Percentage of households having one or more non-farm labourers by economic status

Economic Status	% having 1 or more non-farm wage labourers	% of households having 2 or more non-farm wage labourers
Rich	61.6	21.5
Middle	54.6	15.4
Lower Middle	42.3	2.8
Poor	30.8	3.7

Table 3: Median income in yuan for households from non-farm work by economic status

	Median Income
Rich	3900
Middle	1500
Lower middle	1000
Poor	700

In rural Tibet, small amounts of earned income make a big difference in standards of living. For example, if we take the 1,280 yuan (the median income) earned on average by households who had a member engaged in non-farm work, that was equivalent to approximately 29% of the cash value of their total grain production.²

² To obtain this estimated cash value of crops we multiplied the average number of mu / household (17.4) by the average seed sown for barley (30 jin) by an average yield of 11 times the seed sown to get the total yield in barley. The price for a jin of barley in 1998 was 0.78, so this was multiplied to get the cash value. This is a rough estimate since a portion of the crop is wheat and oil seed, but it suffices to give a general idea of the importance of this income

Non-farm labour, therefore, is clearly related to the socioeconomic status of farm households and, it is significant to note that, in the poorest area we studied, only 24% of households were engaged in non-farm labour.

Given the trends in per capita landholdings that are mentioned above, the problem, therefore, for most rural Tibetan households, is how to gain access to the world of non-farm income. Villagers commonly complained that there were not enough jobs for them and that, because their skill levels are low, most of the jobs they find pay poorly. There was widespread frustration about the difficulties villagers faced in finding jobs, let alone good jobs.

Rural Tibetan farmers now find themselves in competition for construction jobs with large numbers of more skilled and experienced workers from other areas of China, and this competition may well increase. How rural Tibetans will fare in the future, therefore, is less than clear. If they are able to increase access to income from non-farm labour, I think the majority of households will continue to improve their standards of living. However, if they are not, then there may be an overall decline in standard of living over the next decade unless measures are taken to prevent this.

The development strategy for rural Tibet should be seeking to foster the development of a mixed economic model that includes farming and non-farm labour components. What rural Tibetans really need at this point in time is a combination of short-term and long-term programmes that will develop new opportunities in farming (cash crops, new seeds, more irrigation, flood control, and setting up innovative self-sustaining programmes like the five-year revolving sheep and goat bank programme Dr. Ben Jiao and I established in Ngamring xian) as well as providing concrete programmes that will assist rural Tibetans to secure more non-farm work and, gradually, higher quality non-farm work.

I would like to suggest today that one such programme for the government to consider now is to implement a programme of what we call 'set aside' contracts/projects for Tibetans to ensure that they (Tibetans) are able to earn some off-farm income from government contracts and sub-contracts and are productively employed in government projects. This would infuse substantial income into the rural Tibetan economy and greatly enhance the standard of living. It would also give rural Tibetans greater motivation to pursue education and vocational training and could transform life in rural Tibet. Programmes like this are carried out in many parts of the world and are consistent with China's laws and regulations. The State Council's recent White Paper on Tibet, for example, reiterated that "the

Tibetan people have full decision-making power in economic and social development", so crafting a programme to specially assist Tibetans for some period of time—ten years—to secure jobs and contracts is not a problem legally. At the same time, it would be useful to experiment with a more focused Tibetan 'Job Corps' programme that would organise a government-funded education and vocational training scheme that helps young people from the ages of 16 through 30 to enroll in boarding programmes to learn a trade and other relevant subjects like the Chinese language, and then helps them to find work, e.g., in the set-aside programme projects. Such a development strategy would integrate rural Tibetans more completely into the wider economy and demonstrate to them that their needs at this time are being taken seriously and acted upon. It would be a popular win-win approach for all.

In closing, there are many things that rural Tibetan communities need, and different areas certainly have different circumstances that must be factored in, but, in general, because of the ongoing pressure of declining per capita landholdings, increasing inflation in necessary commodities, and escalating tax and health responsibilities, I think a major emphasis in Tibetan rural development must be to include programmes that address what rural Tibetans themselves primarily want and need—assistance in generating non-farm income.

Innovative programmes that facilitate rural Tibetans obtaining more non-farm income are the key to improving their standards of living in the coming decade. Intensifying food production will not be sufficient, particularly in the poorer upland village areas. What are needed are programmes to provide non-farm jobs to rural farm families (or to assist them to locate them) that are given as much priority as programmes to reduce flooding and improve seeds and crops. It would only take a fraction of the expenditure used on infrastructure to increase standards of living in rural Tibet and it would be well worth the money spent.