

GROWING OLD IN TIBET – TRADITION, FAMILY AND CHANGE*

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1. INTRODUCTION

The family in the Developing World has traditionally been seen as the primary caregiver for the elderly and the source of their well-being and security (Cattell 1992; Cowgill 1986; Gibson 1984; Hashimoto and Kendig 1992; Kendig, Hashimoto and Coppard 1992; Kosberg 1992; Linsk et al. 1992; Tout 1989; Tracy 1991). The 1982 World Assembly on Aging, in fact, argued that governmental efforts to assist the growing numbers of Third World elderly should concentrate on strengthening the integrity of the extended family and specifically recommended that, "any improvement of the general well-being of the aging must begin within the context of the family."

Today's elderly, however, live in a rapidly evolving world where a host of changes involving new sources of income and employment, new political and social ideologies, and new patterns of urban migration and residence are altering the social environments in which aging occurs, and consequently the situation of the elderly. While change in and of itself need not be detrimental to the elderly,¹ it is widely held that modernization has had a negative impact on the elderly in many if not most areas of the world, at least in its initial stages (Cowgill 1986; Palmore and Manton 1974). Consequently it is not surprising that recent research has challenged the "family security" view propounded by the 1982 World Assembly on Aging, contending that in today's rapidly changing world, even when elderly co-reside with children, their well-being and security is not ensured

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¹ For example, in Samoa (Holmes and Rhoads 1983).

(Adamchak and Wilson 1991; Caldwell 1982; Goldstein and Beall 1981, 1982, 1986; Goldstein, Ku and Ikels 1990; Goldstein and Ku 1993; Goldstein, Schuler and Ross 1983; Harlan 1968; Hashimoto and Kendig 1992; Kendig, Hashimoto and Coppard 1992; Tout 1989; Tracy 1991). Some scholars like Tout (1989), in fact, now argue that the position of Third World elderly has become so precarious that there is a need for formal government support that fosters not co-residence with and dependence on children, but rather independence.

This discourse has raised important theoretical and empirical issues regarding how and when different kinds of changes affect the situation of the elderly at both the inter- and intra-societal levels, and has stimulated an increasing number of relevant studies. In Asia, in particular, there has been a tremendous increase of detailed and sophisticated data on these issues. One area of Asia, however, where this has not occurred, is Tibet. With the exception of a single brief article written in 1980 (Ekvall 1980), there is no literature on the aging process or the status of the elderly in either the traditional society or the present that is based on firsthand research.² This paper will attempt to begin to fill this gap. It will present an overview of the position of the elderly in Tibet during three periods – 1) the pre-communist, traditional era (pre 1959); 2) the era following the imposition of socialist institutions in Tibet (1959–1978); and 3) the current era that began with Xiaoping Deng's social and market reforms in 1978.

The data presented in this paper derive primarily from the authors' own field research, particularly from a study of nomadic pastoralists in the Tibet Autonomous Region (TAR) of the People's Republic of China. The TAR is equivalent to the Tibet that was ruled by the Dalai Lamas. The site of this research, Phala, is located on Tibet's Northern Plateau about 300 miles NW of Lhasa at altitudes between 4,850 and 5,450 m (16,000–18,000'). This community of about 250 people was organized into approximately 50 households ranging from 1 to 14 members, the average household size being 5.2 persons.³ They subsist by rearing animals (yak, sheep, goats and horses), which they move from pasture to pasture several times a

² Several articles based on textual and secondary sources deal (at least in part) with Tibetan elderly (Maxwell and Silverman 1970, Silverman and Maxwell 1982, and Sperling 1979). The first two of these deal with ethnic Tibetans outside of Tibet proper in Ladakh, a part of India's Kashmir Province, and present a very inaccurate (and negative) picture of aging there. Their shortcomings reveal the danger of trying to assess complex social phenomena at a distance from bits and pieces mentioned in passing in books not based on research on aging.

³ The terms family and household are used interchangeably in this paper.

year. Fieldwork there was begun in 1986, with follow-up expeditions in 1987–88, 1990 and 1993. A total of 22 months was spent in the locality conducting social and physical anthropological research on a number of topics including ecology, economics, kinship, family and aging. The data collected by the project derive primarily from household censuses, local records, in-depth interviews, informal discussions, and participant observation.

Information on aging in traditional Tibetan society also was collected during two other projects conducted by Goldstein – a 1965–66 study in a community of Tibetan refugees living in South India, and a 1974 and 1976 project conducted in a community of indigenous Tibetans residing in Humla in North-West Nepal.

2. TRADITIONAL TIBET

The elderly in traditional Tibetan society shared many of the characteristics we associate with more well known East Asian societies.⁴ Tibetan social organization exhibited a patriarchal orientation with parents exercising high levels of control over their children and families. The core kinship unit was the family which functioned as the basic unit of production and consumption. It typically consisted of parents, their unmarried children, and/or one or more married children, ideally a son and his spouse.

Intergenerational relations between parents and children were defined by the Tibetan equivalent of "filial piety," i.e., by a deeply felt moral/ethical value that held that children should respect, assist and obey their parents. Tibetans verbalized this as a reciprocal relationship – children owe gratitude to their parents for the hardship their parents underwent in raising them.⁵ The ethic of filial piety in Tibet, however, was not writ large to encompass elderly in general. It was limited, rather, to one's parents. An American missionary who lived among Tibetans in Western China in the 1930's conveyed this aptly, saying, "old ones are not valued for being old

⁴ Differences between major sub-cultural areas in "Tibet" have not been adequately studied (e.g. Amdo, Kham) in the literature, so the patterns discussed in this paper are restricted to Central and Western Tibet (*dbus-gtsang-stod*), in other words, political Tibet in contrast to ethnic Tibet.

⁵ Tibetans most commonly articulated this as: *pha ma la bka' drin gsob dgos* ("one must show gratitude to one's parents"). An extension of the filial piety ethic was the expectation that daughters-in-law would show the equivalent of filial piety toward their in-laws, especially their mothers-in-law.

sui generis, but are valued and honored for discretion, know-how, and wisdom . . ." (Ekvall 1980:434).

Filial obedience in Tibet encompassed all aspects of life including ongoing day-to-day work tasks and major life cycle decisions such as marriage or entering the monastery. Tibetan elderly ideally could expect to exercise tremendous authority over the lives of their children, and children reciprocally could expect to defer to the wishes of their parents – show filial piety – while their parents were alive. Even when elderly parents became frail and physically dependent on children for assistance in carrying out the tasks of daily living, their dependence was a "positive" dependence in the sense that it was more analogous to the dependence of a resource-owning lord on the work of subordinates more than the "subservient dependence" of a beggar on hand-outs.⁶

The ethic of filial piety was reinforced by a system of complementary social and political norms that supported the authority of parents, particularly the male head of families.

The Tibetan father ideally retained his position as household head until death, although he normally relegated increasing control of day-to-day activities to his co-resident children as he grew older. However, the father retained legal rights over economic resources and was the ultimate decision-maker in matters of family property disposition. Tibetans expressed this in the saying: "Authority is carried to the graveyard" (*Dbang cha dur khrod la 'khyer song*). Despite the verbalized filial imperative, intergenerational conflict between parents and children (usually sons) was not uncommon in traditional Tibet. However, family fission was inhibited because the options of the unhappy sons were severely limited. Parents (mainly the father) could decide how much inheritance to give a son who wanted to leave the household, and in cases where a son insisted on leaving against the wishes of his parents, he typically would be given only a very small share of family resources – one that was inadequate to achieve economic self-sufficiency. Because of this, intergenerational conflict often did not result in fission – the son instead simply deferring to the will of his father.

The experience of two nomad brothers in Phala illustrates the power of parents in such situations. The two brothers were wed by their parents in a

⁶ The converse of this, ritual dependence on sons by parents, was absent in Tibet. Tibetans practiced no ancestor worship such as found in China, so sons were not necessary for conducting annual rites after one's death, and unlike India, sons had no special religious importance in performing their parents' death rituals. Consequently, parental motivation to produce a surviving son in Tibetan society was far less institutionalized than in other parts of Asia.

polyandrous marriage together with their elder brother (i.e., the three jointly took a bride). The two younger brothers were opposed to this, and after a short time, informed their parents they wanted to leave the marriage and set up their own households. Their father bitterly objected to this, but the sons insisted, so finally the father agreed but penalized them by giving each virtually nothing as their inheritance share. Despite the family being very wealthy with many hundreds of head of livestock, each brother received only a rifle, a set of clothing and a single yak. The brothers, consequently, were forced to work for other rich nomads as herders, and were among the poorest when the Chinese communists took over administration in Tibet in 1959. Litigation by the sons against their father in cases such as this, moreover, was not common because the legal system traditionally supported the father vis-à-vis the children despite ideals that favored a more equal division of family property. This pattern was common throughout Tibet in both pastoral and agricultural communities. Consequently, parents were able to dominate children not only because of the deep-seated emphasis placed on children acting filial, but also because children knew that the price of disobedience and rebellion was enormous economically.

This societal reinforcement of parental authority derived as much from economic pragmatism as from the emotional emphasis on filial obedience. The Tibetan feudal economy organized the subject peasantry into manorial-like estates that consisted of demesne land and tenement land. The latter was used by the peasant household for their own subsistence and the former was the lord's land that was worked by peasants hereditarily bound to the estate as a corvée tax with the entire yield going to the lord. Production, therefore, was based on peasant corvée labor, and subject (serf) households typically had to provide one worker to their lord daily, and two or even three workers during peak agricultural seasons. The management strategy of lords, consequently, emphasized maintaining a competent, stable peasant labor force. Lords, therefore, sought to maintain viable extended family units since these contained a high concentration of labor that allowed them to serve the lord's labor needs yet still have enough labor to provide a decent living for themselves. From the lord's point of view, this protected their profit by reducing the likelihood that a labor-short household would drift deeper and deeper into debt and ultimately run away to escape their debts. In other words, it functioned to preserve the critical labor force of bound subjects (serfs) lords needed to convert their land resources into products. Consequently, strategic thinking among lords favored fostering a concentration of resources in the main family in cases

of fission, and this reinforced the authority and power of the parents vis-à-vis children.

Other aspects of Tibet's distinctive social and religious systems also favored parents, giving them considerable flexibility in managing their human resources – their children – via marriage and institutionalized religion. Parents characteristically tried to maximize the likelihood that they would reside with a child in their later years who would, on the one hand, be obedient and respectful, and on the other, be hard working and competent.

The ideal family structure in Tibet was a patrilocal stem family – parents, a married child and his/her children. The linking child was normally a son, but could also be a daughter or a set of polyandrously marrying brothers.

Marriage in traditional Tibet was structured around a “mono-marital” principle that permitted a range of marriage options so long as only one wife and one set of heirs (children) was produced on each generation (Goldstein 1971). This was meant to reduce the risk that sons in a family would marry monogamously and precipitate a division of the family land between each of their nuclear families. Sons, therefore, were typically organized into fraternal polyandrous marriages. Thus, a household with three sons would typically bring in a bride for all three jointly since this had the consequence of producing only one set of heirs – the children from the one wife – and thus reduced the risk of fission (in their view) (Goldstein 1987).

Tibetan parents, however, did not apply this marital preference rotely to all their children, but rather typically assessed the character of each child with regard to how he/she would act toward other siblings and toward them. Consequently, it was not unusual for parents to decide, for example, that two of their three sons were likely to be disobedient and/or lazy, and opt to keep only the one they felt was “good” and arrange a monogamous marriage for him, the bride joining their family. The other two would be “socially eliminated” by one of several mechanisms. For example, one son might be sent as a matrilocal groom to live in his bride's household, and another might be sent to a monastery to become a lifelong celibate monk. Since Tibetan children were made monks when they were very young (normally from 6–12 years of age), parents made this decision without regard to the wishes of the child.⁷ And despite the ideal that a son

⁷ Parents, of course, also made their sons monks as an act of religious faith and devotion, and for economic reasons.

should be kept in the natal family, Tibetan parents could and did decide to keep a daughter instead of their son(s) if they felt it was in their long-term welfare. In such cases, an in-marrying bridegroom for the girl would be arranged.

Tibetan parents, therefore, had considerable flexibility in managing their household's human resources in ways they considered to be their best interests (although this was typically couched in terms of the best interest of the household). Children who disobeyed such decisions could separate and set up their own household, but as was discussed, only at a price – they could expect to get virtually no inheritance from their natal family. Tibetan elderly, therefore, not only were part of an ethical system that inculcated deep respect and obedience toward parents, but also a flexible social system that gave parents various options for organizing their human resources to their advantage and a political/legal system that generally backed their decisions in conflicts with children. Thus, while the elderly qua elderly had no special high status in Tibetan society, Tibetan parents demanded obedience and normally received it, and even when illness and frailty made them physically dependent on their children, they still held dominant political, legal and economic positions.

Offsetting this parental autocracy, however, was another powerful ideological value – Buddhism. It provided the ontological fabric for Tibetans to understand the aging process, teaching that life is a cycle of birth and rebirth that continues over eons until an individual achieves enlightenment. Consequently, no matter how rich or how powerful a person is, or how pleasant his/her present life may be, it is impermanent. Illness, death and rebirth are inescapable, and depending on one's action in this life, one's next life may be characterized by joy or horrific misery and suffering. Consequently, a critical concern for all elderly (and many younger Tibetans) was how to secure not just a satisfactory old age, but more importantly, a rich and rewarding next life. This quest tended to divert the attention of the elderly away from the day-to-day operation of the household.

Tibetan Buddhism teaches that each person is responsible for his current and future lives through the mechanism of reincarnation determined by one's karma. The type of rebirth one obtains is determined automatically by the weighing of good and bad karma – in essence by the balance of moral and immoral actions. Living a moral life in accordance with Buddhist dogmas, therefore, is the way to accumulate good merit and tilt the karmic odds in one's favor at the time of death and reincarnation. Consequently, working to achieve a good next life was and is the active goal of Tibetan elderly. It consumes their energy, and often their wealth, and pulls

them away from the day-to-day issues of family management. Many, in fact, formally turn over household management to their son in order to devote full-time to this. Tibetans convey this in the saying: "The future life is more important (literally longer) than this life (*Tshe 'di las phyi ma shul thag ring*)."

Life is seen by Tibetans in terms of stages. Parents have to devote most of their time and effort to subsistence and their family when they are young, so it is only when their children become adults that they can begin to think of the needs of their next life and start to actively work for themselves – work to secure themselves a good rebirth. To do this they must perform religious acts that generate merit. In a society like Tibet that had no Western medicine, death could strike quickly among adults in the 40's, 50's and 60's, so there was an urgency to getting started with the serious work of achieving a successful rebirth. Let alone merely waiting aimlessly for death, Tibetan elderly typically feel pressed for time, commonly worrying that old age is too short to adequately amass the good karma they need for a wonderful rebirth.

The accumulation of merit or "good karma" was facilitated by the existence of a routinized complex of merit-producing activities that did not require special knowledge of Buddhist philosophy. It could be done daily by anyone to produce copious merit. The key activities were prayer/faith and offerings/alms. Tibetan elderly typically intoned various prayers such as "*o mani pad me hum*" hundreds of times every day, carefully marking them off on a rosary. They also turned "prayer wheels" – cylinders that contained thousands of prayers written on a scroll that turned as the wheel was turned – the prayers being activated with each turn. And the elderly also showed their devotion to religion by doing prostrations and circumambulations, typically combining these with prayers. Virtually all nomad campsites in Phala, for example, had "mani-walls" – a short wall topped with carved prayer stones – and elderly nomads normally circumambulated these for varying lengths of time every day. And for those with money or who controlled the wealth of their households, religious offerings were common. These ranged from the modest daily lighting of a butter lamp on the family altar, to giving alms to monks or nuns or beggars who passed by their camps, to visits to monasteries and temples where substantial alms might be given. Such large-scale donations included gifts of money or animals to sponsor rituals or to endow funds for monastic prayer sessions. Many elderly Tibetans also renounced "sinful" activities like hunting or slaughtering livestock, and some carried this to extremes, basically becoming semi-monks (or nuns), and even by taking formal ordination.

These religious acts had great importance because Tibetans believed that quantity was important – that the number of these meritorious activities was directly related to the goal of securing a good rebirth since they directly influenced the karmic account in their favor, counterbalancing past demerit (bad karma). Elders in Tibet, therefore, typically devoted increasing amounts of time and energy to such activities. In general, this usually began when individuals are in their early 50's, and then intensified as they aged. Although nomad elderly continued to do some tasks in the camp such as spinning wool or helping with milking or collecting dung, so pronounced was this syndrome that Tibetans linguistically had a term for it – "elderly religion" (*Rgan chos*).

Tibetan elderly, therefore, did not sit around waiting for death. They actively engaged in activities they considered critically important and meaningful, i.e. in work that they believed would directly influence their future life and lives. Somewhat analogous to Westerners trying to enhance the quality of their later years by exercising during middle age, Tibetan elderly "did religion" to improve their next life. This was, in fact, the most serious work in their lifetime. It provided extraordinary psychological solace since it gave the elderly a meaningful focus for old age and operationalized this through critically important activities over which they held full control – i.e., via activities that did not depend on wealth, health or family condition.

It should be noted, however, that the system of extended families with parental domination of children was the ideal for families that possessed land (or livestock). There were, however, other less fortunate segments of Tibetan society that were landless or animal-less. These typically included serfs who had run away from their home area due to debts or conflicts, or sons and daughters who had left their natal families with little or no resources. They often worked as servants for rich families, receiving their food and shelter from their masters. Since there were no family economic resources to perpetuate, if they married and had children, they commonly did not live in extended stem families, each child typically separating off at marriage. A number of these elderly ended up unmarried, without children or their own families. With no governmental welfare system present in traditional Tibet, the livelihood of these elderly as they became too old or infirm to work was problematic. In the best of cases, those who had worked as servants for a master were provided food by the master. In other cases, these elders turned to brothers and sisters or other relatives who typically took them in as dependents – this, of course, being considered a major merit producing action for the person providing sustenance. The

same was true for divorced or widowed women who ended up living alone – it was common for them to move in with sons or daughters when they became unable to manage on their own.

Buddhism also played an important role for the aged who were unable to secure assistance from children or relatives. Because of its institutionalization of alms-giving to strangers, elderly who became destitute always had as a last resort the option of going to a monastery, temple, or holy pilgrimage site and begging. Since one of the best ways for Tibetans to collect merit was to give alms to monks and the needy, this was normally a viable strategy.

Traditionally, therefore, Tibetan society exhibited a positive and supportive cultural and social context in which to grow old. Elderly persons could expect respect and obedience from their children, and economically could expect to have the authority to use the resources they owned as positive or negative sanctions. Psychologically, they perceived aging and impending death in a positive light, as an important time when they could take charge of their future. They worried about experiencing a long, painful and lingering illness, but saw old age as the beginning of a new, and better, time – albeit in their next life. And although there were important differences between the poor and the better-off, in general this system prevailed until the mid-1960s.

3. SOCIALIST TRANSFORMATION – THE FIRST CHANGES

China gained effective control over Tibet in 1951, but for reasons too complex to discuss here, did not make major changes in the socio-economic system until after the abortive Tibetan uprising in 1959. However, in the decade following that rebellion, all land was collectivized, paralleling the socio-economic transformation that had already occurred in the rest of China a decade earlier.

During this period, the elderly saw their powerful authority position undercut. Their domination over children was explicitly rejected by the state as exploitative, and they lost control over their most valuable economic resource – land – since it was turned over to the commune. Thus, when intergenerational conflict erupted, the elderly found themselves no longer able to use their control of land and their expectation of support from the political/legal system to enforce their decisions. However, these changes did not make a great impact on parents during the commune era since households had little of anything to fight over, and because the new rural structure also afforded the elderly considerable security.

While the autocracy of the elderly was, on the one hand, decried, the general notion of filial piety was, on the other hand, maintained, and the new socialist system stipulated that children were legally responsible for looking after their parents in old age. Commune leaders could, and sometimes did, transfer income (work points) from children to parents in cases of non-compliance with this obligation. Furthermore, communes assisted the elderly economically by giving them jobs that involved little physical exertion and by guaranteeing that they would receive a minimum level of food.⁸ In cases where members could not pay for their subsistence necessities, the commune typically either provided welfare payments such as those to the five-guarantee households (childless elderly) or to hardship-households, or simply allowed the elderly to run up debts to the collective. Consequently, while parents no longer controlled productive resources – land and livestock – and saw their authority over their children and household severely diminished, their basic livelihood was relatively secure. However, these changes impacted the elderly differently in accordance with their economic situation before the commune. Elderly from middle-income and wealthy families saw their living standard decline since the overall economic situation dropped dramatically after collectivization, while those from the poorest stratum found themselves better off in terms of subsistence and security.

From another perspective, however, the commune era was a nightmare for all elderly in that it destroyed the most important part of old age – religion. During the Cultural Revolution, radical campaigns attacked traditional culture and prohibited all Buddhist practices. This left the elderly bitter and frustrated since they were no longer able to influence their coming rebirth. The most important part of their life had been taken away from them, with nothing put in its place. Many nomad elderly told us that they still felt great sadness when they thought about their relatives and friends who died during this period without religion.

4. CONTEMPORARY TIBET

In 1978, China implemented dramatic economic and cultural reforms that created a new set of conditions to which the elderly are in the process of adapting.

The new reforms ended the rural communes and replaced them with a kind of modified enterprise system known as the “responsibility system.”

⁸ Communes guaranteed this for all members, not just the elderly.

Communes divided their assets among members, including the elderly, and households again became resource owning units of production that were permitted to sell a substantial portion of their production on the open market and to engage in petty capitalism. Each household succeeded or failed depending on its own production and marketing skills. The new policy also encouraged the development of rural industry and allowed rural residents greater freedom in moving to urban areas in search of wage labor.

Some observers such as Yuan (1987) have suggested that the new "responsibility" system is advantageous to the elderly since the return of the family as the unit of production "brings the potential of the aged into full play and thereby increases income."

Other observers, however, are less sanguine (Davis-Friedmann 1991; Goldstein and Ku 1993; Goldstein, Ku and Ikels 1990; Sankar 1989). They view these changes as also weakening intergenerational interdependence and favoring the young by providing new opportunities for out-migration and factory work that they are monopolizing. Moreover, communal egalitarianism and anti-materialism have been turned topsy-turvy with consumerism and conspicuous consumption creating a new emphasis on material possessions and individualism, particularly for the young, who increasingly see ownership of items such as radios, tape recorders, televisions, and refrigerators as integral to their social status. Consequently, wage earning sons now control wealth and have to weigh whether to allocate scarce income to their parents in accordance with the ethics of filial piety or use it for themselves and their wife and children. On top of this, the communal provision of free health services has ended because local governments no longer own resources to fund such services. In many ways, therefore, this view sees these changes as making the Chinese elderly highly dependent on their children just at a time when their children's materialistic values are competing with filial piety.

Deng's reforms were also implemented in Tibet, and reached Phala in the winter of 1980-81 when the commune was dissolved and the animals divided equally on a per capita basis.

In 1986, when we began research in Phala, there were 17 elderly nomads aged 60-84 years of age in the population. These comprised 7% of the total population. As Table 1 illustrates, 71% (12) of these elderly were female, and 29% (5) were male. Just 29% (5) of the elderly had living spouses; the rest were widows, widowers, or individuals who have never married.

The mean age of this cohort was 71, with 47% (8) falling between the age of 60-69, 41% (7) between 70-79 and 12% (2) age 80 or over. Life

Table 1 Age Breakdown of Phala Elderly Age 60+ in 1986

| Age | Number | | % |
|-------|---------|----------|-----|
| | Male | Female | |
| 60-69 | 3 | 5 | 47 |
| 70-79 | 2 | 5 | 41 |
| 80-89 | 0 | 2 | 12 |
| Total | 5 (29%) | 12 (71%) | 100 |

expectancy data for these nomads are not available, but our demographic surveys indicate that mortality is high throughout the adult portions of the life cycle. This is not surprising since Phala had virtually no access to "Western" medicine. While almost as many elderly were in their seventies as their sixties, very few lived beyond the mid-seventies. For example, of the elderly who were age 60 or over in 1986, 65% had died by 1993 - and of those who were 65 years or over in 1986, all had died by 1993.

The Phala elderly lived in a variety of household situations. Traditionally, and still today, the ideal residential situation was an extended stem family consisting of the adult couple with unmarried children and/or a married child, ideally a son. Table 2 reveals, however, that in reality only

Table 2 Household Composition of Elderly in Phala in 1986

| Household Type | N | % |
|-----------------------------------------------------|----|------|
| living with a married son | 2 | 12 |
| living with a married daughter | 2 | 12 |
| living with a spouse and unmarried child(ren) | 4 | 24 |
| living with an unmarried or divorced adult daughter | 3 | 18 |
| living with their spouse and a friend/neighbor | 2 | 12 |
| living with a relative or friend/neighbor | 2 | 12 |
| living alone | 2 | 12 |
| TOTALS | 17 | 102* |

* Reflects rounding error.

12% (2) actually did so. As many elderly lived with a married daughter as with a married son, and more than twice as many elderly (5 = 29%) were living with an adult daughter (married or unmarried/divorced) as with an adult son. Another 12% of the elderly were living with relatives or friends. Nevertheless, although an overwhelming majority of Phala elderly (88%) were co-residing with someone other than a married son, 65% (11) were actually living with children, although these children were not always married. Moreover, one of the two elderly women living alone was sharing a house with her epileptic, unmarried, adult son who assisted her with strenuous tasks such as carrying water, even though they kept separate budgets. Such diversity in household composition was also characteristic of the traditional society and was considered "normal" by the nomads.

In the economic sphere, although every household in Phala began with an equal number of animals at the time of decollectivization in 1980,⁹ by 1986 a substantial differentiation in herd size (and overall wealth) had occurred. 65% (11) of the elderly (i.e., their households) had resources that placed them in the middle or higher wealth brackets by nomad standards. Of the 35% (6) of elderly who were now poor or very poor, many received welfare in grain from the county-level government.

The authority status of the elderly in 1986 in some ways paralleled that of the traditional society while in other ways diverged significantly. Among the five elderly males in Phala, 60% (3) were the real heads of their household, controlling decision-making and finances as in the traditional society. Of the two who were not household heads, one had never married and lived in a household with a friend and her husband. Consequently, there was no question of his being household head. The other was a widower who was almost totally deaf and somewhat impaired psychologically. His son was the functional household head, although the elderly father continued to be "formally" listed as household head on official records. Both of these situations were congruent with patterns in the traditional era.

Among the ten females living in households with others, only four were the expected household head for the female sphere of activities. The other six were individuals who had been living alone as widows or divorcees before they moved to join their current household. Tibetan traditional

⁹ There actually were slight differences in the initial per capita number of livestock due to differences in the number of private animals households held at the end of the commune era, but these need not concern us here.

norms hold that mothers in such instances do not assume the role of female head in their child's household.

The most important change for the elderly in the post-1978 era was the new policy regarding religion. After decollectivization, nomads were again permitted to practice Buddhism as they wished, with a few exceptions. This new religious freedom included both individual religious practices – the "elderly religion" mentioned earlier – and also institutional religion in the form of monasteries and nunneries. Monasteries were rebuilt and reopened with a mix of ex-monks from the old society and new child monks. The various nomad camps quickly rebuilt their prayer walls, and individual nomads engaged in religious practices in accordance with their faith and values.

We found in Phala, therefore, a situation that was well within the parameters of traditional norms and expectations. The majority of the elderly males were living in situations where they controlled resources and decision-making in their households, and those without such control were being taken care of and treated well, receiving, for example, a fair share of the calories and the favored foods. As in the past, filial piety continued to be the verbalized ideal for intergenerational interactions between parents and children.

Parents also, we found, benefited by the renewed importance of their pastoral knowledge and experience. The reinstatement of the household as the basic unit of production had created a situation where individual decisions regarding livestock management were again a critical component of household economic success, so the skills and knowledge of the elderly were not only not out-dated, but were superior to those of their children who grew up during the collective period when such decisions were typically made by commune leaders.

Nevertheless, important changes in the situation of the elderly were well underway to the detriment of the elderly. As in the rest of China, the new reforms created options for wage-labor in the urban arena, and in villages near urban centers youths have begun to work there. Because of Phala's remoteness, this out-migration has not occurred, but new patterns of trade are having a similar impact, transferring important household financial activities into the hands of sons.

Traditionally, the nomad's trading cycle involved a two-month long trip to farming areas where the nomads bartered their wool, livestock, skins and salt for the farmer's barley. After the start of the "responsibility system," trade with towns became a more lucrative strategy since the nomads received all the barley they needed from the government. The nomads were

required to sell a fixed quota of their wool to the government which paid them for this with grain, trucking it right into nomad country. Surplus production over and above these quotas, was now taken to towns where the nomads could convert it into other manufactured items that they needed. This shift involved the nomads in the new commodity economy. The nomads sold animals (and other pastoral products such as skins and cashmere) to urban merchants for cash, and then used this to purchase the commodities they wanted from stores. Some nomads even became traders themselves, buying manufactured goods in town and reselling these to other nomads in their area. This new trade entailed a two or three day journey in the back of a truck to Shigatse, Tibet's second largest town, or to Lhatse, a large county seat, and quickly came to be defined as work for younger men. Thus, in households where the father was in his fifties, his son typically took on this task, becoming experienced in going to the city and handling the important new cash trade. Although the son still might not control the household budget, his importance in the household increased dramatically as a result of this.

An equally striking change concerned the traditional control of the elderly over the marriage, inheritance and separation of their children. Traditionally, as was indicated earlier, parents controlled their household's resources and wealth, and dictated the time and manner of separation of their children. During the commune era, the rights of children were formalized, but this did not have a great impact on day-to-day life since households were not units of production. Setting up a neolocal household was easy for children since they were paid for their work with "points" which they received whether or not they remained in a household with their parents, and there was generally no reason to fight over dividing resources since there were virtually none.

The post-1978 reform period changed this by once again giving households substantial wealth in the form of livestock. Parents have responded by reverting to their traditional management strategy of emphasizing the centrality of the root family and the conservation of its resources and wealth. Thus, in many cases we investigated, parents chose not to give a departing son or daughter an equal share of the household's animals, despite the fact that legally each household member had a claim to an equal share of the household's animals, and could demand that share if he or she left. Local officials were informally permitting parents to do this so long as the departing child did not protest, and in general, filial piety was still strongly felt so most children accepted their parents' decision. However, when a dispute occurred between parents and a child, the local offi-

cials invariably supported the child and forced parents to give him or her an equal share. Thus, although intergenerational conflict was never absent in traditional Tibet, in the past parents had the odds stacked in their favor so could either prevent fission by making it economically painful to do so, or could allow fission, but give up only a small portion of the household wealth. Nowadays, in the same type of disputatious intergenerational situations, the child normally can do as he or she likes since the rules support his or her independence. The same holds true for marriage. Parents are today less able to compel their children to marry in accordance with their wishes, since the new legal system clearly supports the rights of the children. The case of 63-year-old Dorje Tsering¹⁰ illustrates poignantly the way the changes inherent in the new system are playing out for some elderly parents.

When we first arrived in Phala in 1986, Dorje's household consisted of five members – he and his wife, an unmarried daughter in her late teens, and two sons, one 20 and one 8. When Dorje's wife died in 1987, he started thinking seriously about how to organize his human resources to maximize his well-being in old age. His daughter was obedient, considerate, respectful and hard-working – an ideal filial child – while his oldest son was disobedient, disrespectful, lazy and reckless. It was too early to assess the character of the eight-year-old son, who in any case was too young to take on major work responsibilities. Dorje, therefore, decided to keep his daughter in the main household with him and arrange to find a husband for her who would come and live with them, i.e., become part of their family. His elder son would then be sent out of the family, either to establish his own household or marry into another. Dorje tried for several years to arrange this marriage for his daughter, but for reasons too complicated to cite here, failed. In the meantime, the eldest son began an extramarital relationship with an older single woman in a nearby nomad camp, and eventually fathered a child by her. The local government intervened in accordance with its anti-promiscuity laws, and threatened to fine him heavily – 1,000 *yuan* or roughly 25 sheep – if he did not marry her. Dorje was not poor, but was also not wealthy and did not want to pay the fine so agreed to accept the woman as his son's wife and have her come to live in their household.

His daughter, in the meantime, became frustrated by her father's failure to find an in-marrying bridegroom, and began an affair with a nomad who had a reputation as an unreliable womanizer. Dorje was furious with this

¹⁰ All names mentioned are pseudonyms.

turn of events, and refused to give his daughter in marriage when the man asked for her hand. However, because Dorje continued to be unable to arrange a live-in husband for his daughter, events began to unravel.

Dorje's daughter and her lover ran away to his camp and secretly went to the local government to request permission to marry. They argued that since they were both single, there was no legal reason why they should not be granted a marriage license and allowed to set up a new household. The government interviewed them both in detail and agreed with their interpretation, granting them permission despite her father's objections. However, the local government also said that the couple should look after her father (Dorje) and allow him to live with them if he so desired, since they understood that Dorje's son was unlikely to look after his aging father well. Dorje, at first, planned to move and live with his daughter and son-in-law at their camp, but then decided it would be emotionally unbearable since he disliked his son-in-law so much. He, therefore, did not go. In the meantime, his relationship with his married son deteriorated. They argued frequently over finances and management decisions since his son often sold family animals without first asking his father's permission, keeping the money himself. Dorje could not control his son and eventually the litany of accusations and recriminations reached the local government leaders who decreed that since Dorje could not live on his own (he was then 70 years old), he should remain in an extended family with his son and daughter-in-law who had to take care of him, but that control of the household should be given over to the new generation – to Dorje's son. Consequently, Dorje ended up with his ideal daughter marrying-out against his will, and his deplorable son marrying-in and taking control of the household against his wishes. He was sad and angry over his bad luck. The balance of power between generations had now shifted.¹¹

5. CONCLUSION

Although many aspects of the contemporary situation in Phala parallel that of the traditional era, fundamental changes have occurred that are changing the traditional domination of parents over children to the detriment of the elderly. The current system was considered by all the elderly as a major improvement over the communal period both because of the substantial increase in the standard of living and the revitalization of religion, but the relationship between generations – between parents and chil-

¹¹ Dorje consoled himself by devoting almost all his time to religion.

dren – was forcing them to develop new strategies for dealing with their human resources – their children.

Parents in Phala no longer can dictate the division of household property with impunity, and no longer can expect to maintain control over their households' wealth until they die. While the government urges children to respect and look after their aging parents, institutionally it regularly supports the rights of the children vis-à-vis the parents. Thus, while children are still required to look after their elderly parents, how they do so is changing. The essential nature of a child's "filial" obligation is shifting away from a maximalist one that includes respect, deference and obedience, to a minimalist one that involves providing them subsistence food and shelter. The dependence of the elderly, therefore, appears to be shifting from the "positive" dependency of the old society to a more "subservient" dependency mentioned earlier.

The implications of this shift are clear. The social context of aging is changing even in remote highlands of the Tibetan plateau, and with it the security of the elderly. Traditional values such as filial piety are not being totally discarded, but rather are being redefined and delimited. As Tibet gets drawn more and more into the modern economy, the trends already present in Phala are likely to increase, making the period of old age more and more problematic. Some elderly are avoiding conflict by adapting and giving their children more responsibility and authority, while some are successfully continuing to impose their will because their children still exhibit traditional filial piety. Others, however, are experiencing unpleasant inter-generational conflict that leaves them vulnerable, despite living in extended families. The institution of "elderly religion" in Tibet cushions the impact of this considerably, but dissonance between filial expectations and filial performance is beginning to change the nature of growing old in Tibet, even in remote nomad areas like Phala.

In closing, as a paradigmatic example of the situation of the elderly in the Third World, the events in Phala reflect the manner in which "modernizing" changes are negatively affecting the status and security of the elderly, even when they co-reside in an extended family with a son. Questions such as which elderly experience this, and for what reasons, must become the focus of research in the coming decade. We can no longer facilely assume, as the World Assembly on Aging did a little over a decade ago, that elderly are leading secure and satisfying lives by virtue of co-residing with children – we must now examine carefully the quality of life within such family units and the forces that interact to produce positive and negative situations.

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