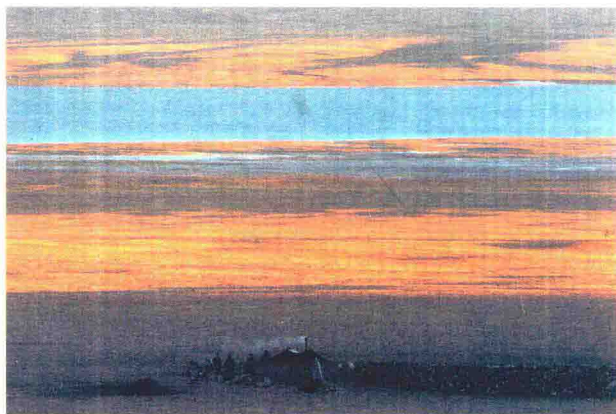


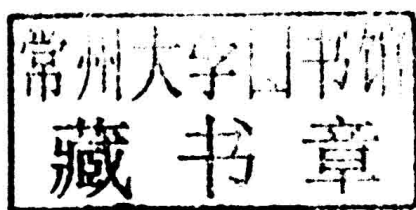
Polyandrous Marital Status in Rural Tibet

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PREFACE ONE

One Spring afternoon in 1985, I received a phone call from the U. S. National Academy of Science's Committee for Scholarly Exchange with the People's Republic of China, the office that was handling America's academic exchanges with the People's Republic of China. My application had been approved by the American side three years earlier, but the Committee for Scholarly Exchange had been unable to secure permission from the Chinese side for me to begin a research project in the Tibet Autonomous Region (TAR). Now I was told that Beijing had approved my research proposal and I should come quickly. So as soon as Spring Semester ended, I made my way to Lhasa to conduct a short study on changing language use in the TAR.

My host organization, the Lhasa-based Tibet Academy of Social Sciences (TASS), was gracious and friendly, and my first field study in Tibet went well. Toward the end of my two month stay, TASS told me I was free to take a trip anywhere so that I could get to see more of Tibet. I jumped at the chance and said I would like to go to the Mt. Kailas region in Far West Tibet. I chose that area because in the 1970's, before the TAR opened up to foreigners, I

had conducted a study of ethnic Tibetans in Nepal who lived right on the border with the TAR opposite Kailash. TASS gave me one of their drivers and he and I and my son Andre, who had flown in to join me for the journey from Beijing, where he was a student at Renda University, set off across western Tibet in an old Beijing jeep.

The trip was exciting because for four days we crossed vast areas inhabited exclusively by pastoral nomads and had the opportunity to frequently stop along the way at nomad camp sites and talk with them. I was genuinely surprised to see that the way of life of Tibet's famous nomads seemed intact, so when I returned to Lhasa, immediately raised the idea of starting a major collaborative study with TASS the following year on change and continuity among the nomads in western Tibet. TASS agreed and I returned to Cleveland to secure permission from my university's dean and provost to sign an agreement of collaboration with TASS that would involve the university sponsoring a series of Tibetan researchers from TASS to study at Case Western Reserve University.

Initially, TASS did not have researchers with enough academic background and knowledge of English to enter a graduate degree program in anthropology, so the first four TASS scholars who came to Case Western Reserve University studied English and worked with me on Anthropology issues on a tutorial basis. Then, in 1991, TASS told me that one of their new young Tibetan researchers, Ben Jiao, had received a B. A. degree from the Central Nationalities University in Beijing and would be able to come to join a degree program. He was accepted in the

anthropology department's M. A. program and arrived in Cleveland in Fall 1991, eager to start classes. He was the first Tibetan from the PRC to study anthropology abroad.

Although his English was shaky at first, Ben Jiao was a wonderfully bright and energetic student who worked hard to learn the new anthropological jargon and master the M. A. course materials. At the end of the coursework, our department gives a department set, anonymously graded, comprehensive M. A. exam, which is the gate-keeper for entrance into the Ph. D. program. Ben Jiao received a high-pass on this exam and moved on to start Ph. D. course work in 1994. As Ben Jiao began to explore options for his Ph. D. dissertation project, we discussed a number of alternatives, but then he made a perfect choice by deciding to study one of the most famous and complex anthropological institutions, Tibetan fraternal polyandry—several brother sharing a wife.

Tibetan Fraternal polyandry is one of the rarest forms of marriage in the anthropological literature, yet one of the most interesting and important. However, despite its worldwide rareness, it is a common form of marriage and family in Tibetan societies not only in Tibet, but also in Ladakh and the Himalayas. Although not exclusive to Tibetan society in the anthropological record, Tibetan fraternal polyandry is the clearly the most famous and significant example of this institution.

Brothers sharing a wife is a puzzling institution for non-Tibetans so early writers on Tibetan society invented explanations of it. Some suggested that fraternal polyandry existed because of a shortage of females due to female infanticide, while others suggested it was

due to such extreme poverty in Tibetan society that brothers could not afford to marry separately. More recently, anthropological research has shown that these were both incorrect, and that in fact it was usually richer households who practiced this form of marriage. And rather than a shortage of females, there was actually an excess of unmarried adult women as a result of two, three and four brothers together taking a wife. Explanations for this institution in the modern literature fall into one of two approaches. On the one hand, the dominant view focuses on a complex of materialistic issues such as preventing the division of family land and the concentration of labor resources in families. Another view focuses rather on cultural issues such as a value for brothers to stay together.

Ironically, all of the literature on Tibetan fraternal polyandry derives from research conducted with Tibetan groups living outside of Tibet. Despite its fame in the anthropological literature, there has actually never been an anthropological field study of Tibetan fraternal polyandry in Tibet *per se*, so we have not been able to investigate how polyandry is practiced in the heartland of this institution—Tibet. Dr. Ben Jiao's dissertation proposal, therefore, was a significant step forward as it set out to fill this glaring gap in the anthropological literature by producing the first in-depth ethnographic study of polyandry in rural Tibet.

Dr. Ben Jiao, with funding from the New York-based Wenner-Gren Institute for Anthropological Research, a private foundation that competitively funds anthropological research throughout the world, conducted a classic anthropological fieldwork dissertation that combined living in the community and collecting qualitative

data (participant observation and in-depth interviews) together with extensive quantitative data collected through household surveys and government records. As his dissertation advisor, I followed his research progress closely and am still amazed at the thoroughness and insightfulness of his research. He collected careful, detailed and rich information about polyandry from the wives, husbands and other family members and has linked that interview data to the social and economic situation in the village. The quality and quantity of his data are impressive and give credence to his findings and conclusions, which show clearly that polyandry is primarily utilized for materialistic reasons. This is a major contribution to our theoretical understanding of polyandry in anthropology as well as to Tibetan studies.

The publication of Dr. Ben Jiao's dissertation in China, therefore, is a welcome addition to the growing literature in China about Tibetan culture and society as well as an excellent example of how anthropological approaches and frameworks can bring penetrating analyses to our understanding of complex social institutions. And, of course, it is especially fitting that the first Tibetan to receive a Ph. D in the West has conducted the first study of Tibetan fraternal polyandry in Tibet-and that his study is a major contribution to the field of anthropology and Tibetan studies.

Melvyn C. Goldstein

August 13, 2008

PREFACE TWO

The research of Dr. Ben Jiao, a young Tibetan scholar from China, was completed on the basis of his own extensive fieldwork and under the guidance of the reputed American Tibetologist Melvyn Goldstein. Professor Goldstein has been a familiar friend to the circle of China's Tibetological studies for many years and his research on the modern history of Tibet has had a significant impact on the international Tibetology circle. One of his volumes, titled "*The Demise of the Lamaist State*," has been published in China. Fluent in the Tibetan language, Professor Goldstein has conducted fieldwork in local Tibetan communities for many years and has long served as the Chairman of the Department of Anthropology and the Director of the Center for Research on Tibet at Case Western Reserve University in the United States. As a senior scholar known for his rigor in research and wide range of knowledge related to issues concerning Tibet, Professor Goldstein has been active in cultivating young Tibetan scholars from China. Under the mentorship of Professor Goldstein, Dr. Ben Jiao has built up exceptionally solid foundations for his academic research.

Since the 1950s, Tibetology has become an important area of

research in China, and the far-reaching changes Tibet has experienced in modern history have endowed Tibetan studies with special significance.

As an important member of the Chinese family, the Tibetan people have a long history of associating and integrating with the Han and other ethnic groups in China. In modern times the Chinese Empire fell into stagnation and suffered from repeated incursions and foreign imperialist and colonialist powers' attempts to carve it up. Peoples of all ethnic groups living within the territory of the Qing Dynasty shared a common destiny in their struggle against foreign powers. As Professor Fei Xiaotong has described, in the struggle against imperialism and colonialism after the "Opium War," the Chinese, a national community characterized by "diversity in unity," transformed from a spontaneous nation into a conscious nation, and made great efforts to accept international generic political concepts and to build up a modern "nation-state" on the basis of the Qing Dynasty. In other words, in the late Qing and early Republican period, China began to transform from a traditional "tribal empire," a "Celestial Dynasty" (*tianchao*) with the core idea of "a perception that everything is under heaven (*tianxia guan*)," to a modern political "nation-state."

It should be noted that various constituencies in China were exposed to and participated in the transformation process in different ways. The intelligentsia in the major Eastern coastal cities started to discuss how to create a modern state system even before the "May Fourth Movement," as overseas graduates returned from abroad and as foreign literature on political science and sociology was

translated and disseminated. Yet distant places such as Tibet in the Western highlands were rather isolated from inland China after the *Xinhai* Revolution of 1911. The arrival of the People's Liberation Army in Tibet in 1951 did not result in any changes to the original "theocratic" ruling system. The Tibetan people thus only began their exposure to the ideas of a modern state administrative system and "nation-state" in 1959. Shortly afterwards the storm of the "Cultural Revolution" shocked traditional culture and social customs in Tibetan communities. The traditional household management system resumed and trade was reopened during the period of "Bringing Order out of Chaos" (*boluan fanzhen*). Thus, in just over a decade, the Tibetan people experienced political and cultural changes which had progressed for nearly a century in Han areas and for over 200 years in European countries (assuming the French Revolution as the starting point). In this context, it is not difficult to understand the confusion, contradictions, and instability among Tibetan people's perceptions of notions such as traditional religious faith, political opinion, state system, and nation.

What was Tibetan society like prior to 1959? What changes have occurred in Tibetan society in the wake of the Central Government's takeover in 1959? Two polarized conclusions have emerged regarding these questions. The Chinese government has portrayed Tibetan society under the rule of the Dalai Lama before 1959 as a dark society characterized by medieval "theocratic" divine power and serfdom without any personal freedom. On the other hand, Tibetans in exile and the Western media have depicted the same society as a utopia filled with a mysterious religious atmosphere

and composed of devout Buddhists. The Chinese government maintains that the abolition of serfdom in 1959 marked a step of progress toward democracy, and that rapid social, economic and cultural developments in Tibet have been achieved with financial support from the Central Government. However, Tibetans in exile and the Western media have described how the Chinese Central Government has practiced religious persecution, repression of human rights, and exploitation of natural resources. Tightly aligned with Western politicians, the media and the silver screen industry during the "Cold War," Tibetans in exile have persevered in expressing their resentments and accusations for half a century. They have successfully spread the image of a "communist tyranny" among Western communities, and won widespread moral sympathy toward the Tibetans. The above polarized stereotypes describe the reality we have to face today.

Given the confrontation between such polarized stereotypes, it is critical that a scholar not start from the existing documents and declarations stemming from the different parties, but rather stride on his/her own feet to the grassroots Tibetan communities, and try to understand what Tibetans think in their hearts, how they live their daily lives, what they hope and expect, how they perceive the current government, and what sense the notions of "state" and "nation" make to them, through posing a number of fundamental and simple questions. In fact, large abstract notions of political opinion, state system, and nationhood are probably quite distant from the daily lives of most Tibetan farmers and herdsmen, who are occupied by their own livelihoods every day. For them the

polarization of the “Tibet Issue” in the media and diplomatic exchanges may not truly exist. The true Tibetan society is most accurately reflected in their daily lives and hard work as well as in their simple joys and sorrows.

What I have perceived from reading Dr. Ben Jiao’s book is a spirit of genuine, truth-seeking objectivity, and a distinguished academic accomplishment that discusses its subject matter on objective, neutral ground. In keeping with anthropological research norms, he selected an ordinary rural village in Shigatse, spent over a year conducting his fieldwork there, and collected abundant first-hand data from interviews and surveys on rural household finances. As a Tibetan scholar, Dr. Ben Jiao has great familiarity with the local history, language, and traditional culture, from which his interviews and fieldwork have benefitted greatly. This book was completed on the basis of the large amounts of survey and interview data he collected during his fieldwork.

“Polyandrous” marriage, an issue of great interest to researchers in the area of the family and marriage, is the theme of this book. Dr. Ben Jiao was neither interested in hunting for novelty, nor did he specifically depict the sexual relationship of the locals. Rather, through an examination of his interview data, he tried to determine why 40% of the married local women he examined indicated that they were in a polyandrous marriage. With a detailed review of the domestic and international research literature on polyandrous marriage in Tibet, Dr. Ben Jiao developed his own research ideas. Professor Goldstein, Dr. Ben Jiao’s mentor, once conducted an in-depth and insightful study on polyandrous marriage in Tibet. Not

surprisingly, Dr. Ben Jiao—to a large extent—utilized a similar analytic perspective on land inheritance and labor burden to understand why people chose polyandrous marriage. On the basis of substantive interview cases, Dr. Ben Jiao has eloquently shown that economic considerations were the most significant reasons for local people in choosing polyandrous marriage, whether prior to 1959 or in the 1990s. Earlier research literature had only provided the numbers and proportions of different types of marriage among residents in a community or a village. In addition, Dr. Ben Jiao also did detailed and in-depth analysis of the nominal “non-polyandrous” marriage. He pointed out that 46% of the married women in this village were in “monogamous” marriages, yet nearly 50% of the males categorized as monogamous were the only son of the family. Therefore, the proportion of polyandrous marriages probably would have been higher without this conditional restriction.

Among all the research papers on polyandry in Tibet written by scholars in China, I believe that this is the most distinguished one. Written originally in English, this book is undoubtedly a significant contribution to the literature on this particular type of marriage for both academia and other audiences in the West.

Owing to the recent unrest in Lhasa and the disturbances during the Olympic torch relay, the world’s attention once again has been attracted to China and, in particular, Tibet. Polarized remarks have once again emerged in the media and on the Internet. While reading this book, I feel it is particularly important to introduce this research to domestic and international readers. While specifically

focused on polyandrous marriage, this research paper provides detailed descriptions of the implementation of serfdom and the heavy burden on serfs in this community prior to 1959. Readers can see that the traditional manor serfdom system was certainly not an earthly “Shangri-la.” This paper also offers a very specific, detailed, and simple illustration of the changes in local economic life brought about by the household contract responsibility system since the early 1980s. Dr. Ben Jiao has introduced us to an ordinary Tibetan village where residents seemed to put their mind on work and lead traditional and normal lives. Villagers were not wealthy, yet they seem not to have been disturbed by political activities from the outside.

Through numerous cases, Dr. Ben Jiao describes how the reintroduction of the household contract responsibility system and the emergence of migrant work opportunities enabled families to improve household income. He also examines how rapid population growth reduced per capita arable land resources and brought pressures on local residents to develop household production. In these specific and concrete descriptions and analyses, we do not see any influence of the Han or the Han culture. Instead, we see how the grassroots government, while implementing the Central Government regulations and policies such as the Marriage Law and Family Planning policy, made modifications according to the actual situation in the village so that villagers could pursue their normal lifestyle without being affected.

From vivid descriptions of cases in the village, we learn that some families sent their daughters to a nunnery with the hope they