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On the Road to the Slaughterhouse

Maria Coma-Santasusana

A long truck rolls away from Tserang's winter house in Jamkhur Valley of Sogpo County, at the edge of the Tibetan Plateau.[1] The sheer size of the vehicle makes its movement slow and difficult on the narrow mountain road. It is late November 2018, and at this time of the year most of Jamkhur's pastoralists have returned from the autumn camps to their winter houses. Deba, Tserang's aunt and neighbour, is feeding the racehorses in their corral. At the sight of the truck, she whispers "*Om mani, om mani*" and blows softly in the direction of the vehicle, holding her open palm under her chin.[2] I understand from her gesture, and from the discomfort manifest in her face, that the truck is transporting livestock for slaughter. Deba explains that the truck carries the yaks which Tserang sold a few days ago. As a matter of fact, I was at Tserang's house when a couple of Hui men arrived in a black sedan car with tinted windows.[3] They came from the city of Linxia, in China's northwest Gansu Province, some two hundred kilometers away. Over tea and deep-fried bread, Tserang and his trade partners negotiated the price.

[1] All personal names are pseudonyms. Tibetan names and words are given in simplified pronunciation.
[2] The first three syllables of the Tibetan Buddhist mantra *Om mani padme hum*. Herders in Sogpo are Buddhist.
[3] Hui (Chinese-speaking Muslims) are important players in the livestock trade, acting as middlemen and slaughterhouse operators.

The dirt road leading to Jamkhur Valley on which the long, livestock-loaded truck maneuvered that morning had been renovated in summer, just few months before. Its new layer of compacted gravel had flattened out the bumps and holes that until then made the steep and tortuous trip to the valley a difficult journey, especially after heavy rain or snow. Concrete milestones with numbers painted in bright red now dotted the roadside, marking the integration of this road into a wider transport network. Lying in China's Qinghai Province, at an average altitude of 3,475 meters above sea level, Jamkhur is home to a little over twenty families of nomadic pastoralists who make a living raising yaks, sheep and horses.[4] Upgrading of the dirt road answered longstanding calls for better road conditions by the valley's inhabitants, who frequently travel to the nearby township seat and county town. However, new roads such as this have also become unsettling spaces which force pastoralists to confront the moral dilemmas of engagement with the market.

[4] Sogpo has the status of a Mongolian Autonomous County. On the unique Tibeto-Mongolian identity of the Sogpo population see Diemberger 2007 and Roche 2016.

Flock of sheep walking on a road in Sogpo County. Photo: Maria Coma-Santasusana, 2018.

The renovation of Jamkhur's 28km road to the nearby township seat is a rather humble intervention into the local transport network. After all, the road has not even been asphalted. But this is only one among many projects of road construction or renovation implemented in Sogpo County in recent years. For the past two decades, China's efforts to develop its western regions economically have strongly focused on built infrastructure. As part of state-led programs such as the Open Up the West campaign announced in 1999 or the Belt and Road Initiative which followed in 2013, China has invested massively in the development of transport and telecommunications in its western borderlands. In these ethnic minority-populated regions, roads are as much a state instrument of territorial consolidation as they are a promise of connectivity and economic development.

A herder prepares to capture the yaks to be sold after a driver arrives in his truck.
Photo: Maria Coma-Santasusana, 2018.

Roads allow pastoralists to pursue their herding activities while staying connected to township seats and county towns, which are important spaces for economic and social exchange, as well as for the provision of public services (Iselin 2014). Humans, though, are not the only travelers on these high-altitude roads. Yaks and sheep are also, more than ever before, being transported along them. Each year at the end of August, as the lush summer pastures start turning golden and the days become shorter, the plateau's roads grow busy with trucks heading to slaughterhouses in Tibetan county towns or, further away, Chinese cities. After summer's abundance, animals now reach their peak weight and fetch the highest prices. The livestock sale season commences in earnest and continues until the end of November.

Yak and sheep sales in pastoral Tibet have increased in parallel to the market integration of animal husbandry, a result of economic reforms implemented in China since the

1980s (Manderscheid et al. 2004). Development policies in the past four decades have strongly pushed for a particular vision of modernity that is predicated on turning herders into market subjects and livestock into commodities (Gaerrang 2015). However, the commodification of livestock has not followed a straight path: as documented in other pastoral contexts (Ferguson 1994; Hutchinson 1996), Tibetan herders too have been reluctant to sell their livestock. Studies in the 1990s showed that, in contrast to the growing sales of medicinal herbs and dairy products, the commodification of livestock remained limited. Besides the lack of road infrastructure and the resulting difficulties of accessing markets, scholars point to herders' views of a large herd as being a form of insurance as well as their adherence to the Buddhist principles of compassion and avoidance of taking life as reasons behind the reticence to sell livestock (Levine 1999; Manderscheid 2001). The explosion of the caterpillar fungus economy in the 2000s provided many herders with an attractive cash income and allowed them to refrain from selling their livestock. This was also supported by the anti-slaughter campaign which originated at Larung Gar monastery. Concerned by the growing integration of Tibetan pastoralists into the Chinese market and state structures, Larung Gar's leaders pointed to the huge toll on animal lives that this process causes and urged herders to abstain from selling livestock for slaughter (Gaerrang 2015).

Fast forward to 2018 and livestock sales are one of the most important sources of cash income for pastoral households in areas such as Sogpo.[5] Cash has come to occupy a central place in pastoralists' economic life: they need to cover their children's school expenses, pay for medical care, equip their households with technical goods and fuel their vehicles. In this shift towards the market economy, where "everything costs money" (Sodnamkyid and Sułek 2017), the development of transport infrastructure plays a key role. Roads link often distant locations on the supply chain: pastures where yaks and sheep are raised and slaughterhouses where they are turned into meat for restaurants and butchers' countertops. Access to pasturelands through the expansion of a better quality road network has smoothed the way for big trucks to deliver livestock to Chinese markets.

[5] Other sources of income include: the caterpillar fungus economy, the sale of dairy products and medicinal plants, government subsidies and wage labour.

Yet, while herders in Sogpo do engage in the sale of livestock, they feel a deep ambivalence about it. On the one hand, livestock animals are considered to be repositories of fortune (*yang*) and so selling them comes with the risk of losing it, thus endangering the prosperity of the household.[6] On the other, pastoralists know very well what fate awaits the animals at the end of their journey, and slaughter brings bad karma to all those responsible, including herders. While the physical spaces of slaughter remain alien to the pastoralists' daily experience, livestock-loaded trucks are ubiquitous on the roads during sale season. Herders in Sogpo respond to the sight of a livestock-loaded truck in a similar way to how they would confront a dead, dying or suffering sentient being – be it human or nonhuman: by uttering the mantra *Om mani padme hum* and expressing ethical discomfort through bodily gestures. When slaughtering yaks or sheep at home, for the family's own consumption, pastoralists recite mantras, offer butter lamps and perform ritual gestures such as touching the animal's forehead with religious objects, pouring blessed water or placing sacred pills into its mouth. Selling livestock, too, comes with its share of prayers and ritual offerings: as Deba blows the yaks a last prayer before they leave Jamkhur and head to the slaughterhouse, butter lamps are still flickering on Tsewang's home altar.

[6] Before selling an animal, herders take some of its hair or wool and keep it at home as a way of preventing fortune from leaving the household.

A truck leaves for the county town slaughterhouse. Photo: Maria Coma-Santasusana, 2018.

Herders in Sogpo are no exception to the desire for roads and mobility described elsewhere (Dalakoglou 2010; Li 2014). However, as much as the renovation of Jamkhur's dirt road is welcomed by those eager to make their commute to township seats and county towns safer and faster, its smooth surface also opens to new perils and disruptions associated with engagement in the market. In processes of capitalist expansion, roads are often linked with danger and violence (Tsing 2005; Li 2018). The landscapes around logging roads, for example, are described by Anna Tsing as loci of "danger, urgency, and destruction" (2005: 67). In Tibetan pastoral regions, roads funnel livestock to distant slaughterhouses, thus facilitating a violence that happens many kilometers away. Witnessing the trucks transporting yaks and sheep prompts an emotional, embodied reaction in herders such as Deba. Like the stories Albanians tell about the Albanian–Greek cross-border highway, herders' responses to the sight of these trucks can be read as "vernacular expressions of anxiety and efforts to come to terms with the relatively new ethics of the market economy" (Dalakoglou 2010: 139). Their small, almost imperceptible gestures and utterances in the face of livestock-loaded trucks are indicative of their experience of roads as ambivalent, fraught spaces where the dilemmas of marketization are made tangible.

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