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# Home on the Range: Case Study of Kham Nomadic Peoples and the Litang Region

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Home on the Range:  
Case Study of Kham Nomadic Peoples and the Litang Region

By: Katelyn Ransom  
December 1, 2006.

### **Litang Introduction:**

Elderly men and women patiently spin their prayer wheels amongst crowds of sun-kissed faces. Tibetan life booms in the town of Litang, located in the Kham region of Tibet. Litang, itself, is a valley engrossed by endless amounts of grassland, pure blue skies, and snow capped mountains. Located at an elevation of over 4,000 feet, I felt the sun's rays and crisp, clean mountain air more so than anywhere else I had traveled to in Sichuan province. The town is home to more than 50,000 people, the overwhelming majority being *zang zu*, or Tibetan minority. The streets are lined with everything from Tibetan Buddhist prayer flags to bronze-crafted horse saddles. Nearly everywhere you turn you can see a yak roaming the streets. Venturing outside of the town, however, provides you with an alternative atmosphere. The surrounding grassland fosters a rather different sort of population, whom has no permanent home. This group of people lives a life quite different from any ordinary townspeople. The grassland is where they work, spend time with family, enjoy the company of friends, and sleep at night. These people are the Kham nomads. Before now, they were as unfamiliar to me as I was to them. It was indeed this very idea of unfamiliarity and interest that gave me a desire to learn more.

I spent roughly three weeks in and around the town of Litang, studying anything that was relevant to nomadic way of life. Most of my research was conducted in rather informal ways, be that through participant observation, or interviews during conversation. I met several people during my stay who I shared endless conversations with. Regretfully, I did not learn all of their names. In order to discover what it means to be a Kham nomad, I tried to use several different methods to acquire material. Luck came my way during my second day in Litang; I met Michie, a Japanese woman who had just arrived in Litang from traveling in Lhasa, Tibet. She spoke some Tibetan language (although was only familiar with Lhasan dialect), and she was going to attend a nomad festival. Initially, the thought of going along to attend a nomad festival made me apprehensive. I was worried that ticket prices would be involved, and perhaps the entire event would be a tourist scheme. My conscience got the best of me, however, when I realized passing up such an opportunity to attend any sort of nomad gathering would limit my research abilities. Half of me was filled with anxiety and interest, while the other half remained skeptical. Needless to say, that day was the first of several that I would venture out into the grasslands for the nomad festival.

### **The Nomad Festival:**

After a bumpy minibus ride thirty or so kilometers outside of town, we came upon the site of the nomad festival. Rather than the expected balloons, ticket entry, and tourist vans that I had expected to arrive upon, the scene was incredibly low-key. I stepped out of the van and was immediately surrounded by hundreds of tents in all directions of the road. The moment Michie and I were spotted, we became the instant center of attention. I felt out of place and guilty because we had, at least temporarily, diverted attention away from the most significant spectacle: the monks. Approximately 700 monks sat underneath a huge red tent, directly in the center and foreground of the festival site. A calm buzz hummed around them as they collectively recited mantras. I had not anticipated the experience to be so authentic, and have such a spiritual significance. That first day at the festival I was able to use Michie as a key resource in aiding me with translation. Michie spoke little English, and some Tibetan; with this, I was able to engage in casual inquiring about the purpose of the festival, and the meaning behind it all. We met a man who spoke the same Lhasan dialect that Michie was familiar with. This man answered several of my questions regarding family structure, schooling, and Kham's natural environment. It was at

this point that my introduction to the personal lives of nomads began.

The festival was part of a twenty-odd day long religious gathering and celebration. The scene was reminiscent of a church service in the United States. Although this service was held outdoors, and was not merely restricted to Sundays, everyone was gathered for the same religious purpose. I didn't meet a single nomad during my stay in Litang who was not a devout Tibetan Buddhist. Many nomads sat at the festival, spinning their prayer wheels, or talking with family and friends. I could never quite get an accurate estimate regarding the number of nomad tents that surrounded us, but I found many people who said there were "many."

During my first two days at the festival, I spent most of my time observing, and attempting interviews. The nomads couldn't quite understand my purpose for being there, and because I was unfamiliar with "proper festival etiquette" (including the chanting of mantras, etc), it was plainly obvious that I was not a practicing Tibetan Buddhist. Nevertheless, passing around bagfuls of apples and showing them the pictures I had taken on my camera, proved to be quite popular. After getting over the initial awkward stage of my visit, most of the people were very friendly.

A nomad's physical appearance is different from that of an ordinary Litang towns person. The constant exposure to sun at 4,000 plus meter high elevation has left their skin darker than most other Tibetans. The cold temperatures, too, have aged their faces. Nearly all of the women have long hair, kept back in a single braid, or occasionally wrapped in a traditional Tibetan headdress. It's also very common for the men to have long hair. From what I noticed at the festival, it was the children's physical appearance that looked the most unkempt. Knots, resembling dreadlocks, had formed in their hair, and their faces and hands were covered in dirt. Despite the appearance of personal hygiene abandonment, they were still some of the most adorable children I'd seen yet.

Nomad family size can be very small, consisting of four people. However, it is much more common for families to be large, seeing as how the more manual help a family can have the better. From my understanding, the mother's role in the family is vital, if not the single most important figure in the family's structure. A mother's jobs are often tedious and can be overwhelming. Michie, who lived with a Tibetan nomad family for three months, said that the mother is the first to wake up in the morning and work. A typical day in the life of a nomad, according to Michie's personal account and experience, is the following:

When the sun rises in the morning, the mother wakes up and makes a fire in the stove. Not long after that, the children wake up and begin their day. With the children's help, they start tending to the animals. An important task is milking the yak early in the morning. During the early morning, the father is still asleep. After tea is made, the father wakes up for breakfast with the family. A Tibetan nomad breakfast primarily consists of tsampa. (I, myself, ate this nearly every morning during my stay with a Tibetan family in Litang. Tsampa is made of barley, flour, yak butter tea, and occasionally sugar is added. It's served in a small bowl; I often had a hard time getting mine down.) After breakfast, the family herds the animals onto the mountainside. Often times, it's just the older children that are responsible for doing so. The children also help with making food, such as butter and cheese, and assist with collecting yak dung which they burn to keep the fire going. Lunchtime is viewed as the most important meal of the day, and also the best tasting. The family feasts on bread, rice, and yak meat. A majority of the rest of the day is spent herding the animals, and bringing them back home before dark. The family rises and sleeps according to the hours of daylight. The mother, according to Michie, never has a wasted moment during the day. She is constantly filled with work and chores to occupy her time.

Well over three-quarters of nomad's food come from the animals. The most common foods that nomads consume, such as meat, cheese, and butter, all come from the animals the family herds; the most specific animal being the yak. The yak is the single most important animal to a Kham nomad. Among other things, the yak serves as a prime source of income, as well as a means for shelter, and food.

Over 3,000 years ago yaks were domesticated on the Tibetan plateau. Some 85% of the world's yak population lives on this plateau. Yaks have three times more blood cells than cows, making them more able to endure harsh environments (KhamAid.com). The capability of enduring harsh environments is absolutely necessary in order to compete and survive in freezing Tibet winters. During this time, the ability to find sufficient amounts of grass for the yaks to eat becomes very difficult. Many Tibetan nomads informed me that the winter is by far the hardest and most stressful time of the year. It's important to move from place to place frequently enough so that the yaks can find enough grass to survive through the winter.

I used Daniel Miller's article on "The Decline and Re-Emergence of Nomadicism: Tibetan Pastoralists Revive a Nomadic Way of Life" as a key example of how important the grassland is for nomadic families. Daniel Miller is an expert on Tibetan nomadic pastoralism, and has written several articles about nomads. According to Miller, having enough available rangeland space is important for both nomad migration and animal herding. Miller has spent several years studying various grazing practices, and is familiar with nomadic herders themselves, as well as specifics regarding grassland ecology. I don't believe that the specifics regarding how various pastoral systems are designed is completely relevant (although related) for this particular paper; however, it's important to note that such nomadic herding systems are far from simple. In fact, the ways in which the animals are herded and the amount of land area covered require complex decision-making. A crucial component of animal herding, specifically during the winter months, is to assess the risk factor of losing animals. Although yaks have adapted to harsh environments more easily than other animals, there is still always the risk of animals dying in the winter. The ground is so dry in the winter that much of the grass dies. Families do what they can to search for adequate rangeland with sufficient amounts of grass, but this can be very difficult. As its reputation precedes it, the Tibetan plateau has been called the "world's harshest pastoral area."

#### **Environment:**

If several animals die during the winter, this can mean that the family has trouble surviving throughout the rest of the year. Strong winds and excessive snow can put a strain on herding processes, so it's helpful during this time to move closer to the nearest town. Winter forces the nomads to lower elevations, where perhaps such difficult climates will be easier to tolerate. According to KhamAid, an organization whose mission is to provide economic support to the people of Kham, there are only two or three frost-free months a year in the Kham region. Keeping the animals and the nomads, themselves, alive during the winter is essential to maintaining their way of life. Another common factor that affects herd sizes is disease. It's very common for families to lose animals due to disease. Although herd sizes can be very large, with several hundred animals, it is still devastating to a family if a number of animals die. In any case, having extra large herds can be a nomad's "insurance policy" against disaster. Despite the hardships endured due to harsh winters and disease, areas around Litang are still viewed by nomads as ideal places to live. Compared with other areas of Tibet, there is plenty of plant life and vegetation around the area (winter months being the exception). Especially in areas of Western Tibet, where the ground is very dry and vegetation poor, Litang's environment provides

adequate living conditions.

**Income:**

I was surprised to learn that very few nomads sell their animals. Seeing as how this appears to be the only way to earn a living, I was under the impression that nomads who had hundreds of animals would sell a number of their herd. However, I discovered from several folks at the festival that in fact, the opposite is true. Yaks are more useful than cash; therefore, there is rarely an incentive to sell them. A nomad will very rarely sell an animal, unless the family desperately needs to make money. What is more common is for a family to sell the animal products, such as butter and cheese. The monthly butter output of one family's 8 yaks is roughly 60 Yuan for that entire month. Other examples of monetary worth of a nomad's animal products are the following: Sheep skin is worth 5 Yuan, butter is worth 16 Yuan, and cheese is worth 13 Yuan. If a family wishes to sell a yak in good condition, they can earn between 2,000-3,000 Yuan. On the contrary, the average income of a nomad family who does not sell their animals is roughly 200-300 Yuan/year. This figure as it stands alone does not sound nearly sufficient enough for an entire family to survive on. However, it's important to take into consideration how self-sustaining nomadic life is.

Once again, as mentioned before, the nomad's animals provide them with the necessary means for shelter, fuel, and food. Most families very rarely make trips into town, and there are a few different reasons for this. First, many families live hours outside of the nearest town or village, and transportation is not easy to come by. Additionally, the ingredients that can only be found in town, such as barley and flour, are bought in bulk so that trips to town can be as infrequent as possible.

(\*Note: Transportation has improved, however. In recent years, China has pushed to expand and improve highways, making transportation more convenient. As of now, almost all national roadways in Kham have been paved in the last five years (*KhamAid.org*).

Moving to a lower elevation in the winter is necessary, but is not the only time a nomad's family moves during the year. Some families move more often than others; the size of a herd is one factor that can impact how often a family will move from one location to another. On average, families move between 3 and 5 times a year. During the summer, families move to higher elevations, where the grass is long and vegetation abundant. During autumn months, a family will begin to move downwards towards lower elevations in preparation for the winter. Typically again, as mentioned before, winter months mean finding the lowest nearby elevation to move to, and possibly stay for several months. No single nomad family operates identically with the next, so the moves are very much dependent on the type of environmental conditions present. Anyone who has moved in their life knows how tedious and time-consuming moving houses can be. However, the average person isn't accustomed to literally picking up their home, and carrying it away. Moving is hard work, and involves all of the family's help and cooperation. A nomad's entire tent is folded up and packed onto the animals (yaks can carry the strongest load). The same goes for all of the materials inside the tent, including bulk food packages and bedding. With everyone's help, it can take around 3-4 hours to pack the entire house up. Many families will walk at least 2-3 hours to their next destination; one nomad told me the furthest he would walk in between moves would be 5 hours.

## **Interviews with Dol Kar:**

One of the first connections I made in Litang was with a woman named Tsering Dolkar. My academic director is friends with Dolkar's older brother, Tenzin. I was given her name and phone number, and told that her native language was Tibetan, but she was also able to speak some Chinese and English. The only other information I knew about her was that she was from a nomadic family, and was living in the Litang area. I hoped that her personal experiences and familiarity with nomadic lifestyle would help me to understand more about nomad life. Once I met her, I spent the next couple weeks creating a strong friendship with this young woman; I couldn't have asked to meet someone more insightful and informative.

Dolkar was a nomad for roughly her entire life. Her whole childhood and teenage years were spent living in a tent in the grasslands surrounding Litang. Now, at 28 years old, Dolkar is living in Litang with her younger brother. Dolkar has never received a typical education. When she was a child, she dreamed of going to school and studying Chinese. She did attend school briefly, when she was six years old; however, one year later, she returned back to the grasslands to be with her family and has never gone back to school since. She comes from a family of seven children in total: two older sisters, one older brother, two younger brothers, and another sister who has since passed away. She describes a nomad's life as being incredibly difficult, and at times, she regrets the way she grew up. At times, her family owned between 120-150 animals in total, including horses, sheep, yaks, and goats. Her childhood was spent milking yaks, herding them, and collecting them from the mountainside in the afternoon. Far from having a typical childhood lifestyle, she often looks back at her life with unpleasant feelings.

Dolkar's family never had a lot of money. They wouldn't sell their animals unless they absolutely had to. The majority of times they found themselves needing money was during the winter, when they could lose animals to disease. Four or five days could go by without the snow melting, and therefore, there was no grass for the yaks to eat. When this circumstance occurs, the animals are weak because they haven't received any nourishment to give them energy. To earn extra money after such harsh winters, it's common practice for nomad families to collect mushrooms and caterpillar fungus. Caterpillar fungus has medicinal properties and can be sold in nearby towns for profit. Apparently, the fungus is worth quite a lot. Finding the caterpillar fungus and mushrooms, however, is not an easy task. Sometimes Dolkar and her brother would go into the mountains for an extended period of time searching for both, and would often return unsuccessful. In any case, spring is the best time to go picking, because the mushrooms and fungus are plentiful. It's best to allow two months for picking. According to Dolkar, one caterpillar can be worth between 20-30 Yuan. Her most memorable (and successful) time was when she was able to collect 105 caterpillars. She was very happy because she was immediately able to sell them to people in Litang, and made enough money to get her by for several months.

Moving from one place to another was one of the most strenuous experiences she can recall as a nomad. Moves required intense amounts of energy and would leave the family exhausted. Another difficulty was the absence of substantial health care growing up. Disease and sickness were aspects of nomadic life that I knew nothing about, and was confused as to how such problems would be faced in lives of (almost complete) isolation. It appears as though Dolkar's family was lucky in the sense that disease and severe sickness never affected any of them. However, minor sicknesses would occasionally happen, and when they did, they weren't cured by a doctor's visit. If someone got sick, whether it was a cold, bad cough, or flu, the family would take it upon themselves to prescribe a treatment. Often such "treatments" included changing a child's clothes, or simply resting. When Dolkar and the rest of her siblings were born,

they were all delivered inside the tent by another family member. It was not uncommon, as Dolkar recounts, for women to have complicated pregnancies. When she was younger, she had heard of women dying during childbirth. Another common health problem among nomads is rheumatism. Because of the constant manual labor and harsh conditions, many adults and elderly people have sore joints.

Dolkar, herself, now seems to be in good health. She is currently living in a small home in Litang. She has been unemployed ever since she moved to town, although she has hopes to be a Litang tour guide. She's been living in Litang since she was 19, when her family decided to pack up their things and move to town. Such a decision was not easy for her family, and it's still not entirely clear to me what the final deciding factor was. As Dolkar explains it, her family finally realized that nomadic life out on the grassland was simply too difficult, and they dreamed of having a "normal" life in town. In order to afford such a drastic transition of lifestyle, the family sold every one of their animals. Selling the animals allowed them to buy a house, and initially pay for food and clothing. After moving into town, Dolkar made 13 Yuan/day by helping build houses. Any money that she and her brother have made since then has been from picking both mushrooms and caterpillar fungus.

Many nomad families do not have the chance to move to town, and leave their nomadic lifestyles behind. For one, most realize that they will not have opportunities to survive after they move. Being a nomad means that they are nearly completely self-sufficient. They need very little money, and their chances of survival aren't limited by an education. Although this wasn't always the case, I met several nomads who seemed very proud of their lifestyle, and had no desire to move and be like any other ordinary townspeople. On the other hand, there were some families who did dream of such an opportunity, but did not foresee such as being realistic. Having knowledge of Chinese language, at the very least, is the first step to finding a successful job once moving into town. None of the nomads I met could speak anything other than their own Kham Tibetan dialect. Many of the parents can't write or read, and once they've reached adulthood, the chance to begin studying is less appealing. Dolkar's family was like many others I met, in that their families had seen generations of nomads. Dolkar's older brother was the first in several generations to attend school, so this was more than just a privilege; it was a luxury.

When Dolkar was a child, her parents never even considered the idea of sending their children to school. Her parents had never been to school, and the same was true for her grandparents. The only thing they knew was to live the nomadic life. Any alternative to such would be a dream, and not a viable option. The only job her family had involved tending to their animals, and taking care of the family. Dolkar mentioned once that it wasn't until the entire family moved to Litang, that her parents finally regretted not sending all the children to school. Unfortunately, by this point in time it was too late. Many of the children were grown, and had no money to attend school. Other nomad families that I spoke with mentioned, in so many words, that the reason for not sending their children to school was more of a political one. This wasn't necessarily the most prevalent reason, but some nomads attribute education and schooling to be Chinese traits. School life might be seen as being too Chinese for what their family was used to or perhaps, comfortable with. Since most available and affordable education is provided by the Chinese government, and therefore, officially designed to teach Chinese-style education, some Tibetan nomads take issue with this. On the whole, though, I would argue that this was not the most common reason dictating whether or not children could go to school. Location and economics are certainly the biggest factors.

Dolkar's parents and one of her older sisters have since passed away. One of her brothers

is now a monk studying in India. I met with a lama at the nomad festival who informed me that the Litang monastery sponsors nomad children to send them to school in Dharamsala, India. This is exactly how Dolkar's brother was able to move to India and become a monk. She has two siblings who live in Litang, neither of whom have jobs. They all work together to mushroom pick for money when their budget becomes too tight. Officially, none of her family is still nomadic, with the exception of her eldest sister. This sister is still living the nomadic life, three hours outside of town. I asked Dolkar why her sister would wish to remain a nomad after seeing the lives Dolkar and her siblings are now living in the town. She said that the decision is more of her sister's husband, who is very proud of their lifestyle and wishes to not be interrupted by modernity, money, and materials. Although nomadic life is difficult in general, he does not want to worry about being able to afford things if he moved to town. As of right now, his family needs very little money. When they need rice, flour, or barley, they will come into town. Because of this, Dolkar sees them only about once a year. The husband's family, as with many nomads, is able to stay optimistic by living for certain seasons that are easier to get by than others. The spring, in particular, brings nomads happiness and a sense of tranquility. I've been told that during the spring, the earth is warm and the scenery beautiful. It is because of this that nomads can have something to look forward to.

#### **Education:**

Because of nomad's remote location in the grasslands, getting children to school can be nearly impossible. The man I interviewed during my first day at the nomad festival said that very few nomad children end up in school. The Litang monastery sponsors children whom wish to become monks and study in India, so this is a possible option for some children. Also, there is a government run school in the town of Litang that many nomad children go to. There are a few different primary schools in Litang, a couple of which have nomad children enrolled. The school that I spent the most time with, though, was a primary school with a large Tibetan nomad population. The school's Chinese name is "Mu Qu Shuang Yu Ji Su Zher Shi Fan Xiao Xue." The school is nearly brand new, having just opened up in the fall of 2002. The following information is based on interviews I had with Lobsang, a math teacher, and Balsang, the Tibetan teacher.

In total, there are 1,035 students who attend the school, 400 of whom are nomads. The children range from 6-15 years of age. All of the students are Tibetan. Some of the courses taught are Tibetan language, Chinese language, mathematics, morality, drawing, music, sports, science and health. At the end of the week, a "class meeting" is held. This entails summarizing what has been learned and accomplished throughout the week. I noticed that history is not taught in school, most likely to avoid confrontational issues. The school allots 10 hours a week to study Chinese language, and 9 hours a week to study Tibetan. I asked why the discrepancy and was told that the teachers have no say; the Chinese government dictates how much time can be spent on each. Also, one hour a week is spent on studying English. The 3<sup>rd</sup>-6<sup>th</sup> graders are the ones who can learn English; the younger children don't study until this time. Before coming to school, nomads cannot read or write. The only exception to this is that occasionally, the boys can read because they were taught by monks. Nomad girls, on the other hand, have never been taught prior to school. Additionally, before coming to school, the only language the children are familiar with is Tibetan. When I asked a few nomad children what they wanted to do when they grew up, most of the boys were interested in becoming monks. As for the girls, they were more concerned with finding a good job in Litang.

In the past, the school cost money to attend. As of 2006, however, the school is nearly

entirely free. Accommodations are provided if the students need to access such, and the government provides all of the school with books. In total, the school costs each family 10 Yuan/month. It was unclear to me what specifically the 10 Yuan went to each month, but I would presume this helped with accommodation and food fees. The Chinese government gives the school 120 Yuan a month to help cover employment and maintenance costs. The teachers are paid relatively well in comparison to other local jobs. Younger teacher staff makes approximately 1,400 Yuan/month, while the older, more experienced staff can earn up to 2,100 Yuan/month.

Well over half of the students live at school; Lobsang said the figure is currently about 700 students. Before school, nomad children and Litang children have different levels of learning experience. After being in school for a short period of time, though, the nomad children have equal academic standing with the other students. Also, as well as physical interaction goes, there is apparently no difference in the way each child behaves, be that a nomad or non-nomad child. Some nomads have families that live very near the Litang area, within a 5 kilometer radius. The furthest nomad family lives over 100 kilometers away. Obviously, the closer a student's family lives to Litang, the more frequently that student can visit with his/her family. If a student's family lives very far away, the only time they can see them is over the long spring holiday, for about 4 months. If the family lives nearby, visits can occur up to one time per week. During short holidays, if a student is unable to travel back home, it's not uncommon for a student from Litang to bring a friend home with them.

The class sizes are fairly large, sometimes having 50 students: 1 teacher ratio. Although the primary school is virtually free, further education costs money. I was curious as to where most of the nomad students end up after finishing primary school; when I inquired, I was met with uncertainty. It appears as though many of the nomad students' return back home to their families after finishing primary school. The middle school in town only permits 50 students, so admittance is competitive. As in any educational system, the harder the student studies, the more opportunities that student will have. However, a likely scenario is that the nomad student will study very hard in school, and still not have enough money to pay for middle school, let alone high school and college. It is unfortunate that chances for upward economic mobility are limited by income. The typical nomad family does not have enough economic surplus to buy a house near Litang, send their children to college, afford adequate transportation, or pay for hospital bills (KhamAid).

#### **“Serena’s” Family: Visits to Nomad Tents**

After interviewing some of the teacher staff at school, I was offered to visit a nomad student's family, about 15 kilometers outside of Litang. The invitation seemed like a good idea to personally meet a nomad family who had managed to send a child to school, so I decided to go along. When we arrived at the tent, I had been expecting a grand reunion of sorts between the family and Serena (the student's English name); what I found, however, was more of a typical atmosphere between parents and their 10 year old daughter...nothing particularly exciting or eventful. Apparently Serena had just seen her parents two weeks before. The teachers and I were asked to sit down inside the tent, and were immediately served hot tea. Not long after, we were given dried yak meat and Tibetan-style bread. After I felt more comfortable, I pulled out my notebook and began to ask questions.

I think it's important to explain the layout of the tent, since before stepping foot inside, the tent was a mystery to me. Upon entering, I was immediately surprised at the size. Considering their entire home is inside a tent, it seemed rather spacious. There is a wooden stove towards the entrance of the tent. The fires are fueled by using yak dung and wood. All around the

perimeter of the tent were big square sacks. I was told that each sack was filled with different staple ingredients, such as barley, rice, and flour. The surrounding two walls of the tent were covered with blankets on the floor, which served as beds. Occasionally a thicker padding was used for comfort but more often than not, piles of sheep or yak skin blankets acted as bedding material. Resting along the back wall, directly in the center, was a type of Buddhist shrine. Shrine may or may not be the appropriate word, but this is what it resembled to me. Beautifully colored scarves and prayer flags decorated the shrine, with a giant picture of the Dalai Lama centered between it all. Offerings, such as crackers and sodas, rested on all sides of the picture. The Dalai Lama's presence at the center of the tent reflects the significance of Tibetan Buddhism in the Kham region.

This particular family had 12 children, and I quickly learned that Serena was one of four children in school. Three of their other children were in India, and the rest were tending to the yaks on the mountainside. The oldest child is 20 years old and has never been to school. The youngest is just 2 years old. When the family is living near Litang, they're able to see their children in school every 1-2 weeks. When the family moves further away, however, the visits occur about every 3 months. They have no car, but have a motorcycle for transportation. Judging by the size of the tent, and the number of children they have in school, I'd say that the family is pretty well off. However, they don't have enough money to afford further schooling for their children after they finish primary school. The family told me that the Dalai Lama has paid for their three children to go to India and study. They move four times a year; when there is no grass for the yaks to eat, they move closer to the back side of the mountain. They own more than 100 animals in total, 70 of which are yaks.

I asked whether the family wished for the students to return to live with them after their schooling is through, or if they'd rather their children find jobs in town. According to these particular parents, such a future would be determined by how hard the child studies. If the child studies very hard and does well in school, he/she is then capable of helping him/herself. Most parents would wish for their children to have the best life possible; if the child can eat on his/her own and make money, then that is what the parent would want. On the other hand, if the children don't do well in school, they will return back to the family and resume their nomadic lifestyle. As to their thoughts on Chinese education, the parents thought that any chance at an education was a privilege. They mentioned that other families disapprove of the idea of sending their Tibetan children to Chinese schools, but they disagree. In the ideal situation, it would be best if their children could find a job and learn to help other people, much as how they grew up helping their family when they were young. The family has often thought about life if they moved to Litang, but they most likely wouldn't be able to find any sort of business or job to support them after they moved there.

The family doesn't ever sell their animals, but they do sell the animal products. They occasionally make money from selling sheep's wool, butter, yogurt, and cheese. Their trips to Litang are infrequent, and as with other nomads, only go when they need to stock up on rice, barley, and flour. Unlike Dolkar's family, this family says that when their child is sick, they do make visits to the doctor. I'm not sure about how expensive doctor visits are, but I feel it's safe to assume that such a visit would only occur under severe circumstances. The family eats their own animals for nutrition, but according to the Buddhism they believe in, they're not allowed to slaughter their own animals. I'm still confused as to who actually kills the animals. Caterpillar fungus was again mentioned in this conversation; if the family finds "several" caterpillars, they can make 2,000 yuan in one year.

### **Government Involvement (Policies, Attitudes, and Influence):**

A few years ago, the Chinese government underwent a massive campaign to encourage nomads to move to permanent houses. In Kham specifically, giant housing projects have been constructed in various winter grazing lands. The government is also attempting to establish fencing policies. Although on many occasions, nomads fence in their own pastures, the Chinese government argues that the practice isn't as prevalent as it should be. Fencing in grassland areas is done mostly for environmental concerns. Fencing a pasture allows nomads to control the movement of the herd animals, and also allow the grassland to recover (KhamAid). Neither environmentalists nor government officials know what the long-term impacts will be of large-animal herding on grassland. As Daniel Miller discusses in his *Nomadic Pastoralists* article, grassland ecology is constantly changing, so conclusive research is hard to acquire.

Another concern of environmentalists in particular is what's known as the "black beach" phenomenon. This occurs when nearly all the grass is gone, and the earth is left with only dirt. Possible causes of this can be from overgrazing, or simply natural ecological evolution (KhamAid). Although there are environmental concerns with overgrazing, many people would argue that nomads should be viewed as the experts regarding how to cope with these situations. Nomads, themselves, have gone ahead and fenced in pastures, without the government's insistence that they do so. On occasion, nomads will fence their own rangeland to preserve pastures for winter and spring grazing. Once again, nomads have been herding on the Tibetan plateau for thousands of years, so their conditioned expertise should not be overlooked (Miller).

According to the June 29<sup>th</sup> 2006 edition of *Beijing Review*, Tibetan farming is viewed as an "outdated mindset" by many Chinese. The idea that nomadic lifestyles are very much primitive and backward reflects some of the current policies that the Chinese government has infringed upon nomads. Compulsory Chinese education is merely one example where I see this idea replicated. The fact that mandatory schooling is regulated (all children must attend school) ignores, perhaps, certain cultural traditions of Tibetan nomads. If a family has been nomadic for generations, and lived a completely self-sustained life, Chinese education may simply not be a necessary component of their daily lives. The debate of whether or not Tibetan nomads should be made to go to school is still being discussed today. I would argue that although education is most definitely important for the average person to succeed in life, it is not a necessary means of survival.

### **Difficulties I encountered:**

I feel as though I accomplished more than I originally intended to during my research. I was given the chance to attend a series of "nomad festivals," experience nomadic home life, and visit the schools that so few nomad children have the privilege of attending. My biggest regret, however, was that I was not able to effectively communicate with the people I met. The language barrier hindered me from establishing a genuine personal relationship with the nomad people, and I am sure that this very aspect of my studying prevented me from reaching the potential I could have. The conversations and interviews I had were mere introductions into the lives of nomadic people, and it's a shame those experiences couldn't have been extended further.

I never anticipated having such a difficult time finding someone in the town of Litang who could speak English. Perhaps if I had allowed myself more time to prepare for my arrival, I would have established more connections. In any case, I did meet a select few people who could speak some English; unfortunately, their English capabilities were rarely good enough for me to conduct an in-depth, thorough interview. Besides the occasional encounter with poor English, my Chinese language skills are also at fault. I am not nearly an advanced enough Chinese speaker,

and in any case, it was Tibetan that would have really been useful for me. The difficulties with language were endless...it seemed as though everyone I met spoke a different Tibetan dialect.

I knew before going to Litang that there was a large Tibetan population, but hoped that many could speak some Chinese. This wasn't exactly the case (every Tibetan family I lived with could only speak Tibetan). I had briefly considered the idea of hiring a translator, but took issue with this idea as well. Having a translator along with me during my travels would have made the whole experience much more formalized that I was comfortable with. Although it would have been helpful, and would have allowed me to learn more from the nomad people themselves, I feel that on most occasions it would have been inappropriate.

There is something incredibly peaceful about sitting inside a nomad tent, surrounded by people whose lives are completely different than yours, and not being able to speak a word. Everything from the way we had spent our childhoods, to our faces and dress were almost complete opposites. Sitting, often times in silence, with the nomads, made me realize how often I take my ability to observe for granted. Not being able to speak the same language forced me to search for other methods to familiarize myself with these people. It wasn't long before I began acquainting myself with their lifestyle, to the best of my ability, through what I saw and understood.

#### **Conclusions:**

It's not easy to summarize my three week experience with nomad people into one conclusion. The lives these Kham nomads live involve complicated amounts of work and hardships, and yet the very essence of the nomad people appears very simple and genuine. They are an incredibly hard-working and friendly group of people. Although I knew they must have been busy when I would swing through their tent, I was always invited to sit down and have some tea. Even yak meat, which is more of a luxury, was offered to me in nearly every tent I went in. The hospitality I received was endless, and my appreciation seemed well received.

I'm still not quite sure what drove me to want to learn about Kham nomads. The townspeople and nomads, both, seemed very unclear as to what my reasoning was behind my studies. Perhaps it was the thought that nomad lifestyles are "exotic" and foreign to me that drove me to Litang. I had a strange curiosity towards nomadic peoples, and often wondered how it is still possible in modern times to live such a bizarre life. Now, however, my perceptions have changed in the sense that I no longer think of nomadic life as bizarre, but quite practical and inspiring. I envy nomadic people because of their ability to live self-sustaining lives. In the year 2006, a large portion of the world has already been launched into "modern times," and the international community is more interconnected than ever before. China, especially, is constantly perpetuating its modern reforms, be that through economic or educational policies. Nomadic peoples are behind in the sense of modernization; particularly in areas of education and literacy, nomads are far below average compared to the rest of China's population. I suppose these are some of the reasons that I find nomad life so fascinating; despite such a hard life, they can still smile because they know spring will eventually come.

I am interested to see how nomadic lifestyles continue to compete with modernization and globalization in the future. Nomadic herdsman have been surviving for thousands of years, and it seems as though as every new year begins, they are facing more challenges to retain their traditional ways of grazing and herding. From what I have learned thus far, I believe the most important factor that should be taken into consideration is that their herding practices remain sustainable. If the nomads have adequate access to health care when need be, and the children have transportation to attend school if they so desire, then perhaps nomadic life will become

easier over time. In general, though, I feel that it's necessary that nomads be at the forefront of the decision-making processes that affect their lives. Simply having government officials dictate where the nomads can graze, how much land they can own, who must go to school, etc., are not effective solutions.

### Resource List:

People contacted/interviewed:

-**Tsering Dolkar**: Dolkar was very helpful in teaching me more about what it means to be a nomad. As a result of her sharing her personal experiences about nomadic life, I was able to gain a wealth of information. Also, her familiarity with the Litang area aided me in finding resources I needed to.

-**Michie Matsuda**: Michie was extremely helpful in translating interviews for me, as well as sharing her personal experiences while living with a nomad family for three months. She was able to speak some Tibetan, so she translated for me at the nomad festival, as well as helped me get around town/contacting people.

-**Lobsang and Balsang**: These were two teachers at the government-run school for nomadic children. They both provided me with information regarding the school (various statistics, etc) and gave me the opportunity to visit a student's tent.

-**Adup Ripoché**: He was a lama (high monk) that I met at the nomad festival. He answered some questions about nomadic life and the festival. We were able to communicate in Chinese.

-**Daniel Miller**: I felt Miller was a credible and scholarly reference to cite in my paper. I used two of his online articles. According to one article's site, "Miller is a rangeland and livestock specialist who has been working on the Tibetan plateau since 1988. He previously worked for many years on pastoral development programs in Nepal and Bhutan and on large cattle ranches in Montana, USA. Mr. Miller is an Honorary Professor in the Grassland Science Department, Gansu Agricultural University, Lanzhou, and is currently associated with the Institute of Land and Food Resources, University of Melbourne, Parkville, Victoria, Australia.

Miller, Daniel. "Tibetan Pastoralism: Hard Times on the Tibetan Plateau." TSIN October, 1998.

Miller, Daniel. "Decline and Re-Emergence of Tibetan Nomadism: Tibetan Pastoralists Revive a Nomadic Way of Life."

- **Melvyn Goldstein**: Goldstein has published several articles that refer to the Tibetan plateau. I referenced a couple of these such articles.

Goldstein, C. Melvyn. "Change and Continuity in Nomadic Pastoralism on the Western Tibetan Plateau." Nomadic Peoples. 28:105-23, 1991.

Goldstein, C. Melvyn. "Traditional Nomadic Pastoralism and Ecological Conservation on Tibet's Northern Plateau." National Geographic Research. 6(2): 139-56, 1990.

-**KhamAid**: [www.khamaid.org](http://www.khamaid.org) I referenced this website very often. The Kham Aid Foundation was established to help provide economic stability and resources to the Kham region of Tibet.

### Itinerary:

On November 2<sup>nd</sup>, I took a bus from Zhongdian to Xiangcheng. From Xiangcheng, I hopped on a minibus and was able to arrive in Litang late that same night. For the next few weeks, I stayed in the Litang area. I lived

with three different Tibetan families, and conducted all of my research here. The furthest I travelled outside of Litang to do research was roughly 30 kilometers outside of town. The nomad festivals were held here, and I spent several days attending them and conducting interviews. Money was not too big of an issue because I lived very cheaply at the houses I stayed with. Some of the families even insist that I not pay them, but I felt I should. On average, it cost me about 15 yuan/night to stay at the family's houses.

**Frustrations/Rewards, Etc.:**

I already mentioned in my paper my biggest frustrations. Language was, by far, the most frustrating aspect of my ISP that I encountered. Besides that, time and money were also hindrances that limited just how much research I could get done. My biggest reward, however, was definitely getting the experience to spend days with nomads, and learning anything I could about nomadic way of life. I was pleased to be well-received in the nomadic community, and am satisfied that I got such a rare chance and opportunity to experience a glimpse at nomadic life.

**Other Topics:**

A possible related topic that could be pursued would be for a student to actually live with a nomad family for a month at a time. I feel that the experience would be most rewarding if the student got to experience a move with a family from one location to another. Weather conditions definitely affect such an opportunity, so perhaps someone studying during the spring semester would have a good chance at experiencing such. Also, the idea of yak herding initially was of interest to me. This idea would take a lot of hard work and dedication to the subject material, but would again be an amazing experience.