

Special Section Research Article

Meeting Lhamo

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Abstract

This story describes a snapshot of a Tibetan nomadic woman who later became a construction worker after moving to a settlement town. It highlights some of the challenges her family faces as they move away from herding life and embrace a new way of life.

Keywords

Flash ethnography; Tibetan nomads; relocations; Lapa; construction work

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Spectral rays heat the concrete road of Yangden.¹ This is a new town still in the making for the more than three hundred families that relocated from their grassland dwellings in 2015. Some relocated from far away and some are from nearby. This government relocation is promised to resolve rangeland degradation and economic poverty on the Tibetan plateau. This is one story.

It is a ཅད་ནག (tsé nak) day, a day of “black heat.” The explosive roars of rusty bulldozers, road rollers, and excavators provided a soundtrack for my walk.

I pass rows of identical houses. I gaze at billboards promising an imagined prosperous town. I am looking for Lhamo, a fifty-year-old mother of three children. Once a nomad, she is now a construction worker. She mixes cement and sand with water and unloads bricks.

I search for Lhamo in the town because her phone is out of service. Her neighbor has suggested I will find her among the construction workers on the main road. I have not seen her for years. She did not know I was coming to see her.

Is that Lhamo? I wonder as I see a familiar-looking woman in the back of a three-wheeled blue truck. She sits amidst other workers, the truck exploding with sound as it passes me. Such trucks are common, used for transporting sand, cement, and mud. Locals call them ཀང་གཞུམ། (*kang sum*) “three legs.”

“LHAMO!” I run after the speeding vehicle, hoping she will hear me. After a while, the truck stops. Workers jump down, dirty shovels in hand. They are getting ready for lunch.

Finally, Lhamo sees me. “It’s you?” She asks. “When did you get back from foreign?” She runs toward me, then stops. “Wait there. Let me clean myself first.”

Lhamo turns back. She takes off her ripped gloves; then, using them as a duster, she starts to hit her jacket and pants. Clouds of dust burst into the air, covering her in a fog that slowly evaporates into the blue sky.

I notice Lhamo struggling with her helmet. I move forward. “Let me help you with that.” I try to unbuckle the tight strap around her neck.

As I do so, she mumbles, “This helmet is so uncomfortable.” The strap is tangled with her Tibetan necklace, a chunk of coral and turquoise on a cord.

Lhamo offers, “Do you know this is what many nomads do nowadays? They become others’ ལཱ་པ། (*lapa*).” This word means doing work for others to make a living. It is a negative term, used for people who have to obey other people’s commands due to their destitution or incompetency. To call oneself a *lapa* is a lament.

Seeing Lhamo in this way, hearing her speak about herself in this way, is new for me. I have never seen Lhamo wearing bright yellow construction worker’s clothes. I have known her since I was a child. In my memory, she wears a Tibetan robe.

I remove her helmet.

Lhamo takes me to her house for lunch. I contemplate how I should ask about her new life and work without embarrassing her. After all, in the past, nomads worked for themselves and only rarely for others.

After relocating to the town, Lhamo’s family sold their livestock. Her husband works construction in another town. Their three children attend boarding school in yet a different town, a two-hour drive from Yangden.

Lhamo unlocks a big green metal door and together we enter her house. She turns on an electric kettle and slices some homemade bread. The boiling water breaks the silence.

Lhamo asks me, “Are you done with school? I hope my two sons will also study hard like you, so they don’t need to work like I do.” She pauses. “So far, they are doing well in school.”

Lhamo’s elder son is fourteen. His school awards are displayed on the walls of their house. Lhamo hopes that he studies hard and becomes a ལཱ་ཤེས་པ། (*lé jé pa*), “a government employee” so that her son could have a highly respected and secured job.

But her son dreams of becoming a famous pool player, which Lhamo thinks is a bad

fantasy. Lhamo and her son have heated quarrels on this matter. He says, “I want to follow my passion.” He complains that his mother does not understand his world.

Lhamo’s younger son is twelve and doing fine in school but misses the grasslands. He would rather herd livestock than go to school. Lhamo’s daughter is ten—an “obedient girl” who helps with chores when she comes home during school breaks. Lhamo hopes that her daughter will stay home after high school and get married. “Girls are most helpful to their mothers.”

Endnotes

1. The names of the people and places in this story are pseudonyms.

Sanggay Tashi is a Phd candidate in Anthropology at the University of Colorado Boulder. His research focuses on Tibetan herding culture, music, and recent changes, including resettlement projects, infrastructure development, bureaucracy, mobility, social media, and local community initiative works on reviving and promoting Tibetan cultural practices.