Lives, Experiences and Expectations

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Skya rgya* is a farming village in A mdo, the Tibetan name by which the northwest of the Tibetan Plateau is known. Rolling grasslands dominate much of the highlands, most of which lie at over 3,500 meters and are home to nomadic pastoralists with large herds of yaks and sheep. To the north and east the tributaries of the Yellow River cut deep valleys into the Plateau; their slopes are terraced, irrigated and planted with barley, wheat, rapeseed and vegetables. These areas are more densely populated by farming communities, who send their animals up to the adjoining pastures during the summer months. The climate is milder here than on the grasslands, where the winter winds whip up clouds of dust as the livestock seek out the meagre remnants of the summer vegetation. But even for the farming communities, at altitudes of close to 3,000 meters, the winters are harsh and life has always been physically demanding.

As the traveler descends one of these valleys the Tibetan communities gradually give way to villages of Hui Muslims and eventually to towns where the majority of the faces in the streets are those of Han Chinese. This corner of A mdo is the borderland of ethnographic Tibet, a place of ethnic interaction between Tibetans, Hui and Salar Muslims and Han Chinese. The Hui farm the villages in the lower reaches of these valleys and dominate the lowland areas, interspersed with pockets of Monguor (Tu). The Muslims have, for long, been traders, bringing grain, tea, cloth, alcohol, household and, now, consumer goods into the trading centers. Formerly they were exchanged for the Tibetans' livestock but now cash is central to the local economy. The Han Chinese dominate the businesses and administration of the urban centers and it is their language that is most commonly heard on the streets. It was in one of these Tibetan farming villages that the author was born and in one of these towns that he received his education.

A mdo has had a turbulent history. Originally part of the Tibetan Empire, the populations of A mdo were likely exposed to Buddhism in the seventh to ninth centuries. After the collapse of that empire the area dissolved into a series of small kingdoms, princedoms and independent tribes and tribal confederacies, amongst which Buddhist monasteries came to exercise considerable political influence. Mongol forces dominated the area for several centuries and the Lhasa administration never came to exercise any significant control in A mdo. Eventually, in the early eighteenth century, the Qing (Manchu) Dynasty (1644–1911) in China established Xining as their political base in

* Tibetan is Romanized in various ways. In the prefaces, we use the spellings provided by the authors.

A mdo, and this has now become the capital of the modern province of Mtsho sngon (Qinghai). In the interim, however, a Muslim warlord, Ma Bufang,[1] rose to power in the region, and is remembered for his harsh taxes and forced conversions to Islam.

The reforms of Deng Xiaoping (1904-1997) reached A mdo in the early 1980s and its populations were gradually allowed to re-establish a measure of independence in their farming and herding activities. Since then, China's economic development program has had a dramatic effect in the area. Schools and healthcare are now provided, a vast network of roads has been built and new towns and townships have been established as administrative, trade and service centres. Consumer goods are trucked in, markets have been brought closer to the villages and opportunities for business and employment have multiplied. These developments have been accelerated since the 'Develop the West' campaign, initiated by Jiang Zemin (b. 1926) in 2000. There are increasing opportunities for education, travel and employment and new outlooks on life. Tibetans, who long struggled within the education system, are gradually rising to senior positions within the ranks of the governmental administration. These economic developments are reflected in the changing patterns of dress, new forms of music, new eating habits, modern conveniences and more comfortable lifestyles. This particularly affects those living in the towns, but is also evident on the grasslands and in the remoter villages. The Tibetan populations still devoutly patronize their monasteries, a number of which have been largely rebuilt in major population centers, and their pilgrimages are also opportunities to participate in the glamour and glitz of modernity that issue from the surrounding shops, restaurants and discos.

While Tibetans largely welcome the material benefits that have been brought to them by the march of modernity, it is also inevitable that many of their older traditions have come to be seen as outdated. Among the saddest casualties are the songs, tales and myths with which the Tibetans sustained their harsh lives on the Plateau and which structured and gave meaning to their lifecycle rituals. Marriage is, of course, among the most important of these. The author of this book, under the guidance of his tutor, Charles Kevin Stuart, at Qinghai Normal University in Xining, has undertaken an invaluable exercise in recording, transcribing and translating many such songs and tales from his native village. By juxtaposing voices from earlier periods with those that reflect contemporary experiences, he has provided us with a fascinating window onto the processes of change and development, as they are being experienced by Tibetans in this area.

This book provides a rich resource for all those interested in the history and culture of the region, as the author carefully describes the marriage practices with which the

[1] Ma Bufang (1902–1973) was once chairman of the Qinghai Provincial Government. During his rule in the 1930s and 1940s, there was much bloody conflict with Tibetans in Skya rgya and Do rgya villages as well as elsewhere. An elderly villager reported that he commissioned soldiers on horseback who forced villagers to lead their (the soldiers') horses to their fields, which were subsequently precisely measured. Afterwards, he demanded taxes of wheat, silver coins and livestock that depleted the property of local people. He also forced locals to give him guns as a tax. Skya rgya and neighboring Tibetan villages rose against him but failed with the result that, according to an aged villager, most male villagers were killed and then most females, young and old, were raped by soldiers and thrown, naked, off cliffs. By 1949, the Communist Army had arrived and Ma Bufang had fled to Taiwan.

songs are associated. But his narratives are also fascinating in their own right, giving us a direct and vivid insight into the lives, experiences and expectations of members of his home community. By letting four of his informants speak to us directly he allows us to enter into the joys and pains, hopes and fears of these Tibetans, old and young. We have a rare chance to observe how the dilemmas and celebrations that characterized an early era have persisted or evolved as local society is propelled into the modern world of twenty-first century China.