

# The Traditional Wealth Concept Change and Cultural Adjustment of Herdsmen in Northern Tibet

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**Abstract:** Due to the long history and cultural tradition, there is a special economic phenomenon in the pasturing area of northern Tibet, that is, "sparing killing and sparing selling" of yaks. The herdsmen in northern Tibet regard the yak as a totem symbol, generally respect and worship the yak, and are unwilling to "kill" and "sell" the yak. In recent years, the concept and behavior of herdsmen are changing, and the behavior of "killing" and "selling" of yaks is gradually increasing. The changing process of nomads' ideas in northern Tibet is actually a process of cultural change influenced by many factors.

**Keywords:** Herdsmen in northern Tibet, Market economy, Concept of wealth, Cultural adaptation

## 1. Introduction

Under the market economy, the pastoral areas in northern Tibet are experiencing a cultural lag from tradition to modernity. Yak, which used to be a symbol of wealth, is now circulating in the market as a commodity. The change of this concept of wealth is a century-old change in the traditional cultural concept of herdsmen. Based on abundant field investigation data, this paper aims to explore the formation and change process of traditional values of herdsmen from the perspectives of their social, economic life and environmental changes, and then reveal the changes of local religious factors, the renewal of ideas, the progress of science and culture, and the external catalysis of market economy, as well as how herdsmen in northern Tibet adjust to adapt.

## 2. Herdsmen's traditional concept of wealth

### 2.1. "Sparing killing" and "sparing selling"

In the past, herdsmen only obtained milk from the yaks to meet their needs, collected cow dung for heating fires, collected yak hair to make fabrics or tents, but rarely killed yaks. Although some herdsmen rarely kill cows, but they are reluctant to kill them. According to field interviews, the main reason why herdsmen kill cattle is because of yak disease, and herdsmen are forced to slaughter sick cattle in order to prevent the spread and protect more healthy yaks, but this situation is not what herdsmen prefer to see. When the yak suffers from some kind of disease, or is seriously injured from falling down from the mountain or fighting, it cannot take care of itself in life, and the labor force in the herdsmen's family is limited, and the medical conditions in the pasture are also very poor, so the yak is left at home without the means and ability to take care of it, and it is forced to slaughter. Some herders are more inclined to let old cattle die naturally, even if they are very old, they are not willing to take the initiative to slaughter. There are also herdsmen who kill yaks for their own consumption at the end of the year, and basically will not sell yaks to others. The herdsmen are less likely to send yaks to the market for sale. Under the influence of many factors such as market economy, this traditional concept is weakening, but its internal influence is still far-reaching. The tradition of "sparing sale" and the concept of "sparing killing" of herdsmen are in the same line, both out of respect and worship for yaks. However, in recent years, this traditional concept of herdsmen has changed rapidly.

### 2.2. The changing concept of wealth

In recent years, the traditional concept of wealth of the herdsmen in northern Tibet has been changing constantly. Although the herdsmen are still reluctant to slaughter yaks, they still kill yaks for yak meat in real life, and the slaughter and sale of yaks are increasing. In recent years, the herdsmen's demand for

meat is rising, and they eat very little meat because of religious factors. However, in recent years, with the change of ideas and the understanding of the concept of nutrition and other factors, the harsh climate in northern Tibet makes herdsman prefer to eat yak meat, and the diet structure has changed. Most of the yaks the herders eat come from the once-a-year slaughter of their own yaks, most of which is for old yaks. At the same time, some herdsman also sell yaks, and only a small part of the reason for killing yaks for meat is due to changes in diet structure, and most of the reasons are driven by external forces such as pressure or difficulties in family economic conditions. When it comes to selling yaks, herdsman have a kind of self-justification psychology, that is, they emphasize that they only sell yaks and do not participate in the slaughter. Through this thought, the herdsman constantly achieve the effect of matching the yak selling behavior with the local traditional concept of respecting cattle, so as to reduce their psychological burden, which also reflects the stability of the traditional concept and the difficulty and complexity of the change process.

### **3. Herdsman's "behavior logic"**

#### ***3.1. Religious factor***

Religion plays an important role in the long-term accumulation of culture in northern Tibet. Most herdsman in northern Tibet have religious beliefs, and religion has penetrated into every aspect of herdsman's life. The herdsman pay attention to the equality of all sentient beings and do not kill. They believe that yaks and humans are equal in life and will not be inferior because they are livestock, so there should be no trading and killing. The herdsman not only do not "kill" or "sell" their yaks, but they even pray for good luck by chanting sutras for the yaks. The reason for the herdsman's "sell" behavior is largely to avoid the yaks being treated badly by others and even slaughtered after they leave them. From the point of view of compassion, no more slaughter of yaks will reduce their suffering. Starting from the idea that herdsman do not kill animals, the behavior of herdsman is directly related to their cause-and-effect reincarnation, which emphasizes the reciprocation of cause and effect, making local herdsman afraid. There are even many herdsman who do not eat meat, or do not eat meat from other people's families, thinking that it is unclean. This kind of thought has an important influence on the formation of the traditional wealth view of herdsman, and has a strong constraint on herdsman's behavior, while the declining influence of religious factors has also weakened the constraint on herdsman's behavior. As a result, the resistance in the hearts of local herdsman caused by their killing behavior gradually decreased, and the restraint effect on the killing behavior jointly constructed by the concept of compassion and the thought of abdicating killing began to fail.

#### ***3.2. Herdsman's survival wisdom***

Due to the long growth cycle and large number of yaks, and the lack of scientific management and protection of grasslands, many grasslands in northern Tibet have been degraded or even deserted to varying degrees. Yaks no longer have enough food, and the contradiction between forage and livestock has become increasingly prominent. Grassland pastoral areas face considerable uncertainty, and we may well be in a critical period before this change.<sup>[1]</sup> In northern Tibet, every herdsman's family is very large, almost every family has six children, and some even have more than ten. In contrast, families in rural areas of Tibet generally have only 2-4 children per family. With the increase of population, yak has increasingly become the main food and production means that people rely on for survival, and the number of demands is also increasing. The growth cycle of yak in northern Tibet is generally longer than that of cattle in low altitude areas, usually taking many years. In the face of the reality of long livestock feeding cycle and increasing population, the pursuit of yak number is the survival instinct of herdsman. The living environment in the pastoral areas of northern Tibet is harsh, and extreme weather conditions such as snow disasters occur from time to time. According to the book "Herdsman in Northern Tibet", a snow disaster in 1985 killed 1,036 of the original 1,053 yaks in the second village of Dolma Township. Of the original 1433 goats, 1167 died; The original 140 horses died 129.<sup>[2]</sup> In the face of frequent natural disasters in northern Tibet, the more livestock there are, the more people who survive after disasters will be relatively large. Herdsman with few yaks will have few left after disasters, making life difficult. The herders with a large number of yaks have also suffered disasters, but their herds will soon grow again.

#### ***3.3. Renewal of ideas***

Under the new social environment and ideological background, herdsman have accepted the new

cultural influence and put it into practice in life, touching and accepting materialism imperceptibly. Materialism is the denial of some religious ideas, and the ideas advocated in faith such as reincarnation and karma are not the categories of rationalism. It cannot stand firmly under the materialist philosophical position that emphasizes that matter determines consciousness. Thus, the traditional belief of herdsmen was shaken, and the non-killing in the Buddhist sense was transformed into the emotional level of pity, thus untying the behavior of "selling" and "killing". They prefer to spend money on faith, but pay little attention to the accumulation of property and investment in production. Money-hungry merchants were a despised class in nomadic tribal society.<sup>[3]</sup> Corresponding to the marketization, is the weakening of religious ideas. The secularization of Tibetan Buddhism, that is, these new changes in organizational forms, religious personnel, activity procedures, ritual patterns and lifestyles, have diluted the sanctity of Tibetan Buddhism and enhanced its secularism and modernity. Today this process of secularization is involuntary and spontaneous. It should be noted that the secularization of religion is not derogatory, in the sense that it refers to the degree of adaptation of religion to modern society.<sup>[4]</sup>

#### **4. The change of traditional concept of wealth**

##### ***4.1. Development of science, education, culture and health***

The development of science, education, culture and health is the most direct and effective way for herdsmen to accept new ideas. Many herdsmen of middle age and above have a low cultural level and do not know much about the introduction of new technologies and new ideas from the outside world. Every year, the government organizes various propaganda, skills training and cultural activities to strengthen and enrich the cultural education of herdsmen. Education in northern Tibet also has corresponding policy support, although the herdsmen's cultural level is not high, but generally hope that their children can get a good education, can go to the outside world through reading. In the relatively closed traditional livelihood options in northern Tibet, education appears to be optional, and some parents will even let their children participate in herding at an early age. This idea of gradually attaching importance to education is also closely related to the development of modernization and market economy. Most of the children in northern Tibet also have expectations for receiving education, and some go to the county, urban areas and even Lhasa to study, and some parents who attach great importance to education will also rent a house near the school to accompany them to study. Life outside is much more comfortable and rich than life in the pastoral area, which also comes from the willingness to get rid of the harsh natural environment and economic status quo in the pastoral area. While receiving education, herdsmen's children will also re-spread the knowledge and new ideas they have learned to other members of the family, realizing the re-spread and diffusion of new ideas and concepts, thus playing a role of re-education.

##### ***4.2. The impact of the market economy***

Although most herdsmen still follow the self-sufficient production mode in the past, after the reform and opening up, they continue to have demand for markets and commodities. The emergence of market economy gives herdsmen more and more opportunities to contact the market and participate in Commodity Exchange, replacing the barter exchange with monetary economy. With the increasing dependence of herdsmen on the market and the rise of commodity economy, some commodities have replaced the original self-sufficiency, and yaks have been transformed from property into commodities, providing motivation and market needs for killing and selling yaks. Under the traditional natural economic conditions, the daily necessities and food of the herdsmen in northern Tibet are basically obtained by their own strength, or by trading with other herdsmen. Their main sources of livelihood are their yaks and sheep, and nomadism is their main way of production and life.<sup>[5]</sup>

The pure herdsmen only operate animal husbandry, the production structure is single, and will be subject to many constraints such as history, culture, language, ecology, social organization, etc., the operation rigidity is very strong, most of them are in the survival economic state.<sup>[6]</sup> Herdsmen are forced to participate in the market economy, and the increase in income is the most desirable thing for herdsmen. In the case of improved transportation conditions, herders have changed from having goods but no market to actively participating in the market. This changes the property of yak again, from the wealth at the disposal of herdsmen to commodities, which requires the herdsmen to use more money to meet the consumption needs from the most basic survival materials to the most advanced development materials and enjoyment materials. With the gradual improvement of the market economy, herdsmen are participating more and more in the market, and yak is an important capital for herdsmen to participate in production and life, and the frequency of selling, killing and taking meat shows an increasing trend. As

a capital element, yak is more closely integrated into the production and life of herdsmen. Herdsmen generally feel that there is a lack of market exchange environment, and it is difficult for herdsmen to sell their livestock, which may be an important factor in the low rate of livestock production in Tibetan pastoral areas.<sup>[7]</sup>

#### **4.3. Increased demand for development materials**

In recent years, the herdsmen in northern Tibet pay more and more attention to consumption, among which the development of consumption is the most important. In the development of consumption, children's education is the main, and with the continuous attention of herdsmen to education, the consumption of education is also increasing year by year. It costs a lot to support children to go to school. If you do not enter the university and do not engage in special work, the cultural level of junior high school or even primary school has basically satisfied the grazing production activities. Herding has a high demand for physical labor, and each herding household has a certain demand for labor force. Therefore, after considering the academic performance of their children, their working ability and career planning, some families either stop supporting their children to study and directly engage in labor, or support their children to study in high school and directly study to the university stage. Herdsmen have more demand for the existing development consumption, but they stop at the actual economic situation of the family. Only by selling yaks to increase income can they solve the economic difficulties, so as to realize the demand for development consumption based on education. Economic development is the material basis of social development. Without economic development, social development will fail. But social development is the ultimate destination of leapfrog development.<sup>[8]</sup>

### **5. Cultural adjustment of herdsmen**

Nomads in northern Tibet have traditionally treated yaks with respect as part of their cultural system. Such traditional ideas are mainly formed under the influence of religious factors, and although they are changed by external factors, they still occur within the culture. This traditional concept exists in the herdsmen's internal cultural system, and the religious factor is at the core of the system. The cultural system in northern Tibet has been shaken in the process of its integration, which has a huge impact on the whole cultural system. The change of ideas is only a part of the cultural system of herdsmen in northern Tibet.

The change of social and economic conditions has had a certain impact on the cultural system in northern Tibet, and this impact is a kind of compulsory, so the herdsmen can only passively adapt to it. Before herders changed their minds about yaks, their economic thinking, among other things, also changed. The new economic thinking and economic status brought about by consumption growth and low income have contributed to the change of herdsmen's cognition of yaks. The growing consumption demand of herdsmen for wealth and development, combined with their relatively simple livelihood, has gradually increased their economic pressure, which is also a main reason for the herdsmen to "kill" and "sell" yaks more frequently.

Herdsmen now pay more attention to and pursue real life, and put forward higher requirements for living standards. In the past, they were deeply influenced by traditional religious thoughts, observed the rules and regulations, and felt that money was a worldly thing, and neglected grazing in order to increase their own blessings, and most of their living conditions were relatively miserable. The herdsmen are worried about their afterlife life after reincarnation, so they avoid killing yaks to harm their own blessings and actively avoid things that harm their blessings. Now herdsmen are increasingly pursuing a high quality of life and paying more attention to this life. This pursuit of high quality of real life not only appears in the herdsmen's ideas and behavior, but also is a result of our market economy. This pursuit is a cultural adaptation process of the intersection of herdsmen's traditional culture and social culture under modernization. "Cultural adaptation" is bidirectional and non-linear. In one direction, consumers identify more with their own national culture in the process of "cultural adaptation"; in the other direction, they gradually identify with mainstream culture.<sup>[9]</sup>

In the process of pursuing real life, herdsmen focus their attention and foothold on personal life in the real world. This individualism is not only a simple cultural homogeneity, but also the awakening of individualism has a reverse effect on herdsmen. Under the premise of not violating laws and ethics, killing and selling yaks is no longer a heinous thing, but only exists as a way to improve the actual living standard. The pursuit of consumption of herdsmen is no longer satisfied with the basic needs of life, but the desire for high-end products and the corresponding change in living standards. With the improvement

of people's demand for higher levels and the continuous improvement of consumption level, this is the main reason for the increase of the number of herdsmen killing and selling yaks. It is an important driving force to promote the change of the traditional concept of "sparing killing and sparing selling", and finally accepted by some herdsmen, resulting in cultural changes.

## 6. Conclusions

The changing process of the attitude of the herdsmen to yaks in northern Tibet is a process of cultural change under the change and comprehensive effect of various factors, and finally manifested through the increasing behavior of "killing" and "selling" of yaks. The religious factor is the most basic component of the cultural system in northern Tibet, which is weakened by the impact of foreign ideas and materialistic thoughts. Science, education, culture and health continue to develop, transportation and other infrastructure continue to improve, cultural exchanges will become more frequent, cultural changes have not stopped. The economic environment of northern Tibet under the market economy is also changing, and the change of economic factors catalyzes this cognitive change from the perspective of the external environment, and has a continuous impact on the cultural system of local herdsmen. The change of attitude of herdsmen to yak is only an organic part of the change of cultural system in northern Tibet. From the herdsmen complex of "sparing killing and sparing selling", we can see the wealth concept of herdsmen in northern Tibet influenced by Buddhism. Therefore, the herdsmen's contradictory complex of "sparing killing and sparing selling" and its changes seem not difficult to understand, which is a rational choice in line with the social changes in northern Tibet and to meet the market economy.

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