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WITNESS TO CHANGE: A TIBETAN WOMAN RECALLS HER LIFE

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INTRODUCTION

Women play a critical role in rural Tibetan households. As youths and adults, they engage in labor-intensive chores, including farming, herding, fetching water, cooking, tailoring, cleaning, collecting fuel, and child care. In their old age, most Tibetan women dedicate themselves to chanting, prostrating, going on pilgrimage, and meditating. Prior to the early twenty-first century, in such areas as Mang ra County in A mdo,1 women seldom traveled away from their family and community for work, though nomadic women seasonally traveled long distances between summer and winter camps with their family's livestock. Farming and herding have sustained life on the Tibetan Plateau for millennia. These traditional lifestyles have been changing in most Tibetan communities today in China's rapidly urbanizing society. Despite the massive transformations that have taken place in A mdo over the last sixty years, much continuity remains in how Tibetan women in A mdo spend their time. In 2015, average women in their forties and above are still actively engaged in such religious practices as chanting, prostrating, going on pilgrimage, and meditating. This paper presents the life-story of an elder Tibetan woman, Lha mtsho (b. 1946). Similar to many other Tibetan women born in the late 1940s, she was witness to the chaos of 1958, the Great Leap Forward (1958-1961), the Cultural Revolution (1966-1976), and also saw China's economic reform and development from the late 1970s up until today.

Lha mtsho is from a Tibetan Village in A mdo, and has six daughters and two sons. All her children have married, although her two daughters later divorced. She and her husband live with their youngest son. Her knowledge of local history, folktales, songs, riddles, speeches, and proverbs had a deep impact on some of her children.

1 One of three Tibetan regions that encompasses much of Mtsho sngon [Qinghai] and Gansu provinces
and continues to fascinate them, as do her relentless energy and seemingly endless traditional knowledge. Some of her family's younger children were unable to live with her all the time, due to the demands of schooling, and the distance this created made her children and grandchildren realize how valuable she is. They have, therefore, recorded her memories, songs, and stories. In 2012, Lha mtsho's enthusiasm for religious practice and past experiences led her to become a nun. This article is based on interviews that focus on her personal life and memories that her family recorded with her over the years. The ethnographic approach taken in this article is largely inspired by Dr. Kevin Stuart's tremendous ethnographic work and collection.

The rapidly growing economy and shift from subsistence to mass manufacturing and service industries, has brought inevitable waves of changes across the country. Tibetan communities in China have been inescapable parts of these historical changes. Lha mtsho's life account illustrates the experiences, traditional and modern family structures, religious practices, and changing patterns of livelihood in a Tibetan village.

There are many elderly men and women in A mdo who experienced the same historical events as Lha mtsho, but many are reluctant to talk about such things, and do not encourage others to learn about them. Publications on the events of 1958 and the Cultural Revolution, written by Tibetan scholars such as Naktsang Nulo (2014, first published in Tibetan in 2007) are rare, and recent publications by laymen and monks are no longer publically available. Until recently, the events of 1958 in A mdo have been a lesser-known and little-studied aspect of modern Tibetan history in both English and Tibetan literature. However, a corpus of recent studies has begun to explore 1958 and the following Great Famine. Nonetheless, such studies have only begun to scratch the surface of the events in A mdo and their impacts.2

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From the 1950s to the mid-1980s, it was also a challenging task for foreign researchers to gain direct access to the Tibetan Plateau. Most western scholars undertook their anthropological and ethnographic studies on Tibet from outside the Tibetan Plateau, a practice that Rinzin Thargyal and Huber (2007:4) call "ethnography at a distance". Meanwhile, the Chinese government implemented ethnological surveys as part of its national ethnic classification program, which Chinese and Tibetan scholars reevaluated in the late 1970s (Rinzin Thargyal and Huber 2007).

With the emergence of new generations, the historical events of the year 1958 are less discussed and traditional knowledge is less commonly learned. A generational gap has increasingly grown between today’s elders and youths. Meanwhile, the original local knowledge and practices have largely gone ignored, unrecorded, and unarchived. Although essays, papers, and speeches were published in school, private, and government journals, many early publications have seldom focused on the original stories and knowledge of farmers and herdsmen. These publications can no longer be found either in print or online, because of a lack of archives. The loss of traditional cultures has been increasingly noticed across the Tibetan region since the late 1970s and early 1980s, following the Cultural Revolution. According to Grags pa rgya mtsho (1981:6), there were about four journals of Tibetan art and literature in Tibetan areas in 1981. These publications seem to be formal periodicals that the government approved of and promoted.

In Tibetan areas, the widespread publication of Tibetan folk art and literature journals capturing people’s knowledge and practices started in the late 1970s and 1980s under local government cultural bodies. The main publications were: Blo bzang rdo rje and Zla ba bzang po (1988), Bod ljongs rig rtsal mthun thogs (1980), Bsod nams dbang ldan (1989), Dkar mdzes khul rig slob cu'u (1981), Grags pa rgya mtsho (1981), Kan lho’i rtsom rig sgyu rtsal mnyam 'brel lhan tshogs (1982), Krung go’i bod kyi shes rig rtsom sgrig khang (1988), Lho kha’i rtsom rig sgyu rtsal bod yig rtsom sgrig khang (1984), (2003). Among these studies, Erhard (2013:108) deals with two previous Tibetan publications on 1958, both from an area nearby where Lha mtsho comes from.
Mtsho sngon Education Bureau (1979), Mtsho sngon tang gi slob grwa (1984), Mtsho sngon zhing chen rig gnas khang (1985), Sde chen sgrol dkar and Tshe rdor (1988), and Tshe brtan rdo rje (1989). Additionally, some ethnographic studies are found in communal and regional history publications created since the 1980s.

Most of the above journals are published today under the same government bodies and many of them are focused on general literature and contain small sections focusing on local folk art. Most of them are archived in searchable formats at the Tibetan Buddhist Resource Center (www.tbrc.org).

Government restrictions have regularly been imposed on informal publications. However, hundreds of private periodicals and newspapers on general Tibetan literature, art, and culture have proliferated. Almost every monastery, school, and village had a newspaper or a journal published with writings by Tibetans themselves. Such publications still continue today in many parts of Amdo, such as Mtsho lho and Rma lho prefectures. However, these independent print publications have constantly been lost and current and future publications are endangered due to the lack of systematic and searchable archives that are accessible and linguistically appropriate to the publishers and writers.

The focused initiatives in ethnographic studies on ordinary farmers and herders, both by academics and independent scholars in Tibetan within China, have only been undertaken since the late 1990s. One example of this is the editorial focus transition of Mtsho sngon Tibetan Folk Art and Literature from general literature to folk art, and its compiling of focused and selected publications on ethnography (Mtsho sngon zhing chen rig gnas khang 2009). The publications of Gcan tsha bkra b+ho (2008, 2011) were pioneering in providing theoretical perspectives, guidance, and research methods in Tibetan ethnographic studies focusing on ordinary herders and farmers. In contrast to conventional descriptive Tibetan ethnographic studies, the work of Mkhar rtse rgyal (2009) and Samten G Karmay (2010) featured analytical interpretations of ritual practices, histories, symbols, and other cultural practices in Tibetan communities. The latter's essays were originally written in English and later translated into Tibetan. In 2015, a growing number of Tibetan university
students' graduation papers focus on cultural practices and experiences of people in villages, rather than the traditional focus of religious, historical, social-economic literatures, and monastic polities. Large gaps still exist between the research subjects of general university intellectuals and the knowledge of ordinary men and women in rural communities.

With the introduction of television, DVD players, and cameras, audio and video publications have increasingly been made of ritual performances, songs, ceremonies, and speeches. However, the same issue of lacking archives meant that these publications disappeared almost instantly from the public record, and are not available for younger generations.

Although some awareness of ethnography is emerging among Tibetans, an endurable and accessible archive has not been made. The availability of the Internet in the region in the early 2000s allowed young Tibetans to upload and archive certain audio and videos on such sites as Youku or Tudou. However, these have largely been modern music and performance. Chinese Internet servers have constantly rejected visual and audio recordings of traditional rituals and knowledge, especially if they lack Chinese subtitles. Some digital archiving projects have been implemented by local NGOs, foreign universities, and independent researchers and have created archives on foreign websites (e.g., TBRC, YouTube, archive.org, www.oralliterature.org) and university library archive sites. Unfortunately, NGOs and outside researchers are often hampered by uncertainties and difficulties in retrieving and archiving much of the knowledge and practices from rural community members. The loss of traditional knowledge and practices that elders hold has become increasingly widespread and extensive recording and archiving are urgently needed.

What follows is Lha mtsho's story. Her life is just one example of the rich knowledge and experiences that contemporary Tibetan elders possess, a knowledge which is going largely unrecorded and unarchived and may be lost to the future were it not for concerted effort.
LHA MTSHO'S EARLY LIFE

I was born into the tribal leader's home in an agro-pastoral village not far from the sacred salt lake of Mtsho sngon po (Kokonor).

"This child is going to be a special person," a lama told my family before I was born. "They will bring great fortune to the family if the child is born a boy. In order to let it be born a boy, family members should avoid killing animals and eating fresh meat during the childbearing period."

One day, my uncle Rdo rje's family killed a sheep and brought some meat to my family for dinner. We were living in a black tent at that time. My family members believed that it was because of this meat that my mother started to feel a churning pain in her womb, and then gave birth to me later that night. And, I was born a girl instead of a boy. Grandmother Skar mtsho, her cousin Klu mtsho, and a relative, A ma Kho le, helped my mother to give birth.

My father was absent from home when I was born, because he had traveled to some other communities to chant. People considered him to be like a lama. He had been a monk in the past, though he had disrobed in the early 1930s.

"Wrap up the infant in one of my robes as soon as he is born," Father had told Mother and the others before he left. However, grandmother and her cousin forgot to wrap me in his robe after I was born. They were surprised that I was born with a caul – a thin and translucent skin tissue that I was entirely enclosed in – which was considered unusual and unique.

A ma 'Brug mo, a local woman, recalls that when she was herding one day, A ma Kho le's daughter told her that Gdugs dkar skyid (~1925-2012), my mother, had given birth to a baby girl.

"I did not know that. How did you know?" she asked.

"I heard it from my mother," A ma Kho le's daughter replied. "Someone came and asked for help with birthing a girl last night. Then she told me everything this morning. The child was born covered in a caul. Although such things are very rare, Mother said that she'd had a rough idea of how to handle such a unique situation, because she had heard about something similar from
some elders long ago. She opened the skin tissue at the top of the head, and found it was a girl."

According to Grandmother, my two maternal uncles were both unmarried at that time. Mother's sister, Bde skyid, was at home doing chores. She made tea in another tent so the child and mother could avoid smoke.

"Bde kyid, make sure you use enough fuel to make the tea," one of my uncles commanded, while brandishing a stick at her. "The stove sounds very empty – you obviously still haven't learnt how to boil tea properly!"

"I'm working on it," Bde kyid said nervously.

Mother later told me that she and the other women overheard such conversations from the next tent.

A lags Thos pa, a lama, foretold that I was the reincarnation of a former much-respected tribal leader, who brought peace and prosperity to the community. Family members recognized me as the reincarnation of Dpon po Yon tan, a former leader of my community, who lived several generations before I was born. This made my family members and relatives take special care of me. Many family members carried me around and rarely allowed anyone to put me down. When I turned three, several other tribes in the village that were related to the tribal leader's clan invited me to their households, as an auspicious sign, to stay for a day and two. A lot of food was made. I never ate meat from an animal that had been slaughtered that day, because doing so was considered more sinful than eating it the next day. Eating the fresh meat of livestock that had been killed on the same day was considered more sinful than eating it the next day. My family often set aside the best cuts of mutton for me to eat: breast meat and the meat from tail joints. Such delicious morsels were usually reserved for the most beloved and important people. I was constantly taken to many other families when I was still about six and seven. Gifts of meat, tea bricks, candies, and clothes were given to me each time I left a family. My family members gave me good-looking and strong animals as gifts. A mare once gave birth to a pony and a camel gave birth to a little camel at home. Both were recognized as gifts for me and nobody was allowed to use or sell them.
My family once had dozens of camels that belonged to an official from Khri ka. These camels were later taken back by the official, but he left a couple of them with my family. I rode these camels whenever my family moved back and forth between the winter and summer pastures. We were able to pack a lot of things on the camels. My parents would use a sheepskin to make a comfortable seat for me on top of everything we had packed. They always piled the back higher than the front, which meant there was something for me to lean back against, and I could go to sleep while the camels walked. Like many other things, those two camels disappeared in 1958.

My father left home when I was eight. It was not clear why he left. He was always traveling to many places. The last time I saw him, I was standing on a hill behind our home, and watched him leave by horse. He gave one last look back over his shoulder just before he disappeared into the distance. I missed him day and night after that, and frequently asked mother when he would return home. Unfortunately, he never did. I was then raised by my uncles, my mother, and Uncle Phag go's wife Skar mtsho, who I also called 'Mother'. They gave me many robes and silver jewelry and I passed the jewelry on to my own children.

When I was around ten, as before, relatives showered me with gifts – the finest things that were available. Uncle Phag go gave me a tame, fast-walking mare. A thick and comfortable rug was placed on the mare for me. Everyone had a horse to ride at that time. I received the best horse and saddle. Mother often cooked mutton and soup for me. Noodles were considered a low-quality food, so I was given meat instead of noodles. Mutton dumplings and bread were baked under hot ashes. Black sugar with butter was sandwiched in warm bread and given to me. In our family, my mother had been cared for in the same way. She was a much-cherished woman in the family. Relatives often worked harder, herding and doing chores, to lessen her workload. She often dressed up in luxurious robes with colorful ornaments

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3 Khri ka was an important farming region about two days' travel by horse from Lha mtsho's village. It was home to several important temples, monasteries, and government officials.
and rode strong horses and raced across the grassland. As a cherished woman from the tribal leader's home, she seldom needed to do chores. My uncle's wife often took care of me and I called her mother. It took me until about ten to realize who my real mother was.

Uncle Phag go taught me the Tibetan alphabet in his spare time. He was the village leader at that time and emphasized the importance of learning Tibetan to many people. He brought many books for my mother and me whenever he returned from meetings in the local township and county towns. Later, many other villagers were encouraged to learn Tibetan. The first school in the village was set up in a tent. A group of locals was organized to study in the tent for a few days, and then the tent and teachers moved and another group studied in a different location on the grassland. Tshe brtan, a former monk, was appointed to be the school headmaster.

"Why would you let a girl learn Tibetan?" many people asked Uncle.

"You don't understand. There will be a time when learning Tibetan will be important for everyone," Uncle often replied. Many local elders still remember the way he encouraged people to pursue education.

My family household was located at Chu wa dbol in Bon po'i zhing kha at that time. Uncle Phag go was the head of the village and also the vice-president of the People's Bank in Mang ra County at that time. Whenever he returned home, he talked about his official trips to other counties and cities in China. He also met many lamas, such as Tshe brtan zhab drung, the Dga' ldan gser khri, and Rdo sbis dge bshes Shes rab rgya mtsho when he travelled to Beijing. Two Han Chinese assistants always accompanied him when he traveled. I remember clearly one time when he scolded one of his assistants for pissing on his horse while riding on a rainy day.

5 A scholar, 1884-1968.
In 1958, I was twelve and my brother Bstan pa was seven. One day, early in that year, several local county officials had come to the village's farmlands and held a meeting. Officials warned locals to not participate in any riots, because several other villages in the area had recently risen up against the government. Afterwards, they also collected all the weapons that locals owned. Rifles were common in the village that time, so they collected a big pile of them from the villagers.

Uncle Phag go emphasized the importance of maintaining peace in the village and warned people not to cause any disputes with the officials, and then he left for Mang ra County town for work. However, in the following months, an argument started with several Chinese officials who frequently visited the village. The argument escalated and the officials were killed and buried. Villagers managed to keep it a secret for some time, and two to three months later, Uncle Phag go returned home by horse from a business trip to Chab cha. He was terribly sick, suffering from gall balder infection and a flu. We took good care of him at home, treating his problems with Tibetan medicine. Even after a few days of medical treatment, he still hadn't heard what had happened. Then, one day he heard that two of our villagers had been murdered by Chinese militiamen. One of them was a monk. Uncle was furious to hear this news and did not quite understand why it had happened.

"Why should such innocent people be killed? I can't see any reason why those militiamen would shoot them. There must be some devils in the village. I told them hundreds of times to be peaceful," Uncle said, coughing.

Soon, he was told about the killing of the officials in the village. He became outraged, coughed more, and complained, "Why should these local officials have been killed? They are no different from us. They were merely doing their job – they had no choice."

In the following days, everyone discussed whether the army was going to come and attack the village, and if so, when.
Some people began preparing to leave the village for Kye pur Mountain, which they considered a good place to hide out. However, Uncle asked the villagers not to leave, as it would cause more fights and escalate what was already a bad situation. He was still bedridden and couldn't walk. Many villagers were determined to go, and came to see Uncle, bringing *kha btags*6 with them.

"Please listen to me," Uncle said. "Going to Kye pur will mean losing many lives. I don't want to see any innocent people die just because of some devils' thoughts and bad advice. Please listen to me and just stay in the village. But if you won't, I will leave the village and go back to my workplace in Mang ra County town."

After several days, the villagers managed to force Uncle to leave the village with them for Kye pur Mountain. He was placed on a horse, although he was still ill and could barely ride. All our relatives followed. The militiamen soon gave chase and reached Kye pur a few days after us. Many different communities had gathered in Kye pur, and when the militiamen arrived, they continued their uprising. It was chaos. Terrible killings occurred, as there was no surrendering to the militiamen. Most Tibetans were unarmed, because their weapons had been collected, but still the militiamen shot them. Many villagers lost their lives. Some escaped further into the mountains and hid there. All the local lamas, tribal leaders, and wealthy people were imprisoned. However, Uncle Rdo rje took my uncle Phag go and hid deep in the mountains, and so they were not arrested.

After about two months, the militiamen asked the remaining villagers to return home. After a few more months, harvest time arrived, and most villagers returned to Bon po'i zhing kha, our village's farmlands. My uncles didn't come back until 1959. The local government informed us that all the people still in hiding would be granted pardons upon their return. My uncles finally came back and surrendered but were imprisoned anyway. Uncle Phag go passed away in prison, suffering from his illness, and Uncle Rdo rje was released later. Most people were wrongly

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6 Auspicious silk strips thought to embody purity and good fortune given to guests, religious personages, and others, to show respect
arrested and the government apologized to these people, including my uncles, in September 1981, with a written letter and reparations of about 500RMB. I used to be able to recognize Uncle's bank in Mang ra County town, but now it is difficult to find it today with all the new buildings around.

Locals began occasionally shouting slogans after 1958, for example, "Defeat the evil masters of capitalism and feudalism." One day in 1959, when I was playing with my brother, some children said, "Is the evil master of capitalism and feudalism here?" pointing at me, and then my brother. Sometimes they even bullied him, since we were from the traditional leader's family. As a girl, I seldom got hurt.

The 1958 chaos left my mother, Uncle Phag go's wife, brother, and me in the family. I later realized that my father was also in prison and could not return home. In 1960, some villagers from two neighboring villages murdered Uncle Phag go's wife in a dispute. To this day, this crime has never been clearly acknowledged or redressed.

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According to the official records of the Guinan County Annals (1996:19):

From 17 June to 20 August 1958, over 7,587 people in Mang ra rebelled against the government. The local army cracked down by executing seventy-one people and injuring, forcing the surrender, and arresting 1,616 others. Additionally, seventy-two officials lost their lives, including a Mang ra County leader. In this process, local officials also made 'aggravating' mistakes. Apologies were offered in late 1958 for the killing of eighty-six innocent people, whose reputations were restored, and subsidies were given to their surviving relatives. Over 780 people who were falsely arrested and sentenced for committing crimes were rechecked and their cases corrected.
Starting in 1960, there was nothing to eat. It was the same everywhere. There was no rtsam pa or other food. Most villagers, including me, ate roasted wild plant seeds mixed with wheat husks and water. We ate it like rtsam pa, but of course there was no butter or cheese. It was very spicy and hard to eat. I did not eat it often and could endure hunger for a couple of days without eating anything. Locals were not allowed to have adequate portions of food, nor could we cook at home. If someone saw a family who seemed to have more food than others, they immediately reported it to local authorities. Rule-breakers were punished, forfeiting everything their family owned. Nonetheless, my mother brought a bag of flour from somewhere and buried it in a pile of sheep dung by the stove. Every couple of days, my family secretly made tiny pieces of bread and soup with bits of noodles at home. Most other villagers went to a communal canteen for food, but none of my family members were allowed to do this, because we were descendants of the leader's family.

After 1958, families that were identified as rich or who had been traditional leaders were considered criminals. Many starved to death. I personally saw more than ten people starve to death. Families with no men or strong young men were particularly likely to starve and die, whereas families with men ultimately survived, because men secretly hunted and stole livestock.

During this extreme famine, people ate all sorts of animals that we’d normally never consider as food. Some ate the flesh of camels that had died, while others stole and killed camels to eat. Once, some people who stole a camel were later discovered by the Village Committee and beaten. Some ate a dead wild ass, and some ate donkey meat, cats, or birds. I only ate camel and wild ass meat when the bag of flour at my home ran out. Locals’ farmland and livestock were confiscated by the state. Locals could not own a single sheep or piece of farmland. Instead, the state created nine 'Production Teams' in the village. Villagers worked together and

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7 Nangchukja (2015).
earned food from the communal canteen. Daily labor was monitored strictly and 'Work Points' were awarded to each person based on the amount of work they did, and food was rationed out accordingly.

My family members went barefoot and only had enough sheepskins to cover half our bodies. We had no roof, because local officials had destroyed our house in the village. Tents and yurts were either destroyed or abandoned during 1958 and lost afterward. Eventually, my family was able to pitch a simple cloth tent to live in.

**THE CULTURAL REVOLUTION**

From 1966 to 1976, descendants of traditional leaders and rich families were assigned extra work and were subjected to criticism. During the struggle sessions, I had to wear a paper hat, signifying that I was guilty of crimes. Those labeled guilty of causing or participating in the events of 1958 were made to stand the whole day in the fields while wearing white paper hats. Uncle Mgon po, who had some sort of leader's position at the county level, was the only person from our family who was considered innocent. Village Committee officials frequently organized locals to shout such slogans as, "Defeat Deities and Demons!" and "Defeat the Four Kinds of Bad People!" in gatherings and meetings together.

I don't know who organized it, but during this time, the temple of the local deity, called Yul lha, as well as the mountain altar of the deity, were both burnt to the ground.

Spies among locals reported to the local government. Nobody was allowed to practice any form of religious activity, including chanting or any form of worship. Engaging in any form of religious activity was punishable by extra labor and beatings.

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8 Nangchukja (2015).
When I turned fifteen, Uncle Mgon po took me to his family home to stay, leaving my mother and brother alone. Uncle wanted my brother to continue the tribal leader's family line. While I lived with my Uncle, I found that he and his wife frequently quarreled about trivial things, and I soon realized that it was because of my presence in their family. At seventeen, I escaped from my uncle's family to Mgon lo's family, the neighbor of my original home. Finally, I went to my natal home, where my mother and brother lived. Uncle Mgon po came for me many times, but I refused to return to his home.

At nineteen, I married Pad ma. Uncle Mgon po did not agree to my marriage. Several matchmakers repeatedly made negotiations. I remember one such conversation during that time.

"Lha mtsho's father told us that she should not be given to anyone for marriage," Uncle said.

"You have no choice if the couple obtained a marriage certificate," some matchmakers said.

"I don't care. She is the only person in our family who will take care of us, and she is our most cherished child. I will go to whatever courts I need to, to get my girl back," Uncle insisted.

Dozens of negotiations took place, and eventually Uncle Rdo rje and 'Phags pa decided to allow me to marry Pad ma, although Uncle Mgon po disagreed.

At twenty-one, I gave birth to my first child, and the second one came when I was twenty-five. Eventually, I gave birth to a total of nine children, and one died at birth among them, before the fourth daughter. All my children got married, but two of them divorced. My children are: Don grub (b. 1967), Mtsho mo (b. 1969), Gnam skyid (b. 1971), Bkra shis sgrol ma (b. 1976), Tshe skyid (b. 1978), Tshe bzung (b. 1979), Gser mtsho (b. 1981), and Kun dga' (b. 1983).

When I was in my early thirties, my husband spent most of his time away from home. He abandoned the children and me, and went to stay in his girlfriend's home in the same village. During his absence, my children and I went through so much incredible
hardship. The laborers from my family were my eldest son and me. My son was about ten years old at that time. We carried sheep and cow dung for the Production Team on a daily basis. A head of the team secretly supported us by giving us a couple of extra Work Points. One sack of dung was counted as one ticket. This credit was accumulated and exchanged for food at the end of each year. I bought goat hair from the Production Team, then I took the fine wool out of the coarse hair and sold the wool back to the team. I used the coarse goat hair to make strings and ropes. My son and I used the ropes to bind bundles of wood that we collected on the mountains. I used strings to make woven fabric and sold it to farmers in the neighboring farming villages. They mostly used such fabric to make sacks. There were paper banknotes at that time. Money earned from such trade was then used to purchase salt, tea, and clothes for my children. I bought sheepskins from the Production Team, which I made into robes with colorful decorations lining the hems, and my children and I wore them in winter. These earnings also allowed me to purchase sashes and shoes.

After some years, we were allowed to herd our own goats, so we had plenty of goat hair, and I sold much goat hair fabric to local farmers. I got up very early in the morning without having breakfast and set out to herd livestock. Soon, my family livestock had dramatically increased and locals began to admire me. I sold a goat for several sacks of wheat flour, so we had enough food for some time. My elder daughter was at my natal home, assisting my mother and brother to herd and do chores.

One day, I planned to build a small house for my family. I took my son with a yak and donkey to a lush forest by a wide river, to log some trees. The forest was logged by the state and so there was a forestry station there. It had already been there for some time, but that year, locals were saying that it would be closed. Trees were logged quickly and moved out of the area. Many truckloads of logs were transported out of the forest, day and night. Workers there were prisoners, and were closely monitored. When we reached the forest, my son kept look out for militiamen or guards, while I cut some small trees. A couple who lived near the
forest and guarded the fields from wild animals had given me an axe and a trowel. I got several bundles of timber and transported them back home by yak and donkey. I did this several times with my son and never got caught.

To make our new home, I first dug a big hole with a spade. My son assisted me in all the labor, even though he was very young. Within a month, we had dug a spacious room and roofed it with the timber we had gathered in the forest. We used the trowel to spread soil mud that was mixed with straw to make the wall surface. Sheep stomachs were the only containers we had at that time for fetching water. Straw was placed underneath carpets on the floor for a bed. It was a nice and warm small room to live in. Beside, we also built a sheep pen out of wood beside the house for livestock. Locals found the sheep pen to be a great model and I made another one for my brother's family.

At times, we ran out of meat, because nobody in our family could kill a sheep. Women did not kill a sheep, and though my son had tried to do it several times, he couldn’t manage it until he was thirteen. Before that, he had used a sash to tie a sheep, but the sheep was stronger than him and dragged him around the pen. However, by the age of thirteen, he was strong enough. Before that, my brother occasionally came to help us.

After a year, a farmer woman who had married a Han Chinese man who herded for the forestry station, said, "The forestry station will be closed. I will leave with them. You may move up to the house where I lived. It is in good condition."

She also kindly offered me other items. I found that it was a nice location, but the house had been cobbled together from many different materials. There was not only wood and mud, but pieces of clothes also covered cracks in the walls, and pieces of glass were wedged into the wall. I found the strange construction a bit annoying, so I used the good-quality wood from the house to build a new house beside the site of the old one. Fetching water with a sheep stomach was the challenging part. Luckily, I got a plastic container that could carry twenty-five liters, from the local store-keeper, Tshe thar, who was one of my husband's relatives and took pity on me.
"Tshe thar, can I please buy a water container? I have no money now, but I will reimburse you in the summer. I have been fetching water in a sheep's stomach all these years," I asked Tshe thar.

"Didn't Pad ma buy one for you? Is he still not coming back home?" he asked.

"No," I replied.

"He is so evil. He should be dead. I can't believe he didn't even buy you such a basic thing. I am very concerned about your difficulties and I'm worried about your children." He went on and on scolding my husband, and eventually said, "The container costs thirteen RMB, but you can take one for free."

"Thank you so much, but I will give you the money later," I said.

"Please take it for free. I refuse to take any money from you," he insisted. Nonetheless, after several months, I returned the money to him.

The water container was very convenient and allowed me to fetch water to use for building the new house. I did most of the work to build our house, and let my son and daughter go herding. The house was made of both mud and wood. All the walls, inside and out, were covered with mud mixed with wheat and bean straw, which made everything very sturdy. I also built an adobe stove and adobe sleeping platform in the room.

One year, just before New Year, some time after I had built the house, Pad ma, my husband, came home by horse. My children (my son and four daughters) had missed him badly and ran out to him, and hugged him. They missed him so much that they even smelled his clothes in his absence. I did not say a word, even though I was very angry. He stayed in our home for a few days during the New Year celebrations. I had prepared everything I could for the children for New Year, making new clothes and even buying some for them. They visited many families during the New Year period. After a few days, Pad ma left home again and did not come back for months. I had an argument with him one time upon his return.
"Don't come back to my home again! You bring nothing to the family but trouble. You're torturing the children," I yelled at him. He said almost nothing – he just beat me. "Go to your other wife's home and stay there. We don't need you!" I said as he beat me. During such arguments, my son sometimes contradicted me, and begged his father to come home. "I will run away if Father isn't allowed to come home," my eldest son used to say.

Uncle Mgon po visited me many times and tried to take me back to my natal family. However, Pad ma's father had stopped my uncle and told us to wait until Pad ma realized his mistake.

One of the most challenging parts of life was moving between the summer pasture and the wintering site. On one occasion, my son and second daughter took care of the livestock and herded them by the Yellow River bank to the summer pasture. I packed our things on two camels and a horse. I had done this with my third and fourth daughters, who were very little, and they had to ride the camels and horse. The fifth daughter was very little, and I had to carry her all the way. It took an entire day to move from the winter house to the summer pasture. Traveling across steep mountains to the pastureland was very tiring. I did not bring water with me that day and was very thirsty. I almost fainted out under the hot sun. Finally, we made it to the summer pasture. My son and second daughter arrived first, as they had set out before us and taken a different route. They also brought some water in the plastic container and in an old inner tire of a vehicle.

Challenges continued. Pad ma seldom stayed at home, and rarely brought anything for the children, preferring to give gifts to his girlfriend instead. Although he spent most of his time with his girlfriend, he periodically returned home. We were periodically friendly with each other, but we also fought. In the following years, I gave birth to the fifth and sixth daughters, and the eighth child was a son. I had to carry such a big burden, but as my first son had already grown up, he was very helpful and worked very hard.
Village Resettlement

Some time in the early 1980s, the government started building a dam on a local river. The village's farming site needed to be relocated. Some people received small subsidies – I don't remember how much – but I didn't receive anything. My husband got a subsidy and occasionally brought some clothes and fabric home. One time, Pad ma took my son to Sku 'bum Monastery\(^9\) on pilgrimage. My son was fourteen years old at that time, and Pad ma bought some fabric in Sku 'bum to use for making robes for my son's future wife.

Starting in 1986, Pad ma and my eldest son occasionally went to the relocated farming site to cultivate cropland. Meanwhile, Pad ma and I started preparing clothes and ornaments for a wife for my son, who was then nineteen. I provided a silver and coral ornament that was shaped like a crescent moon above a sun, which hung from the belt at the right hip. I also gave hair ornaments I received from my mother, which were made of silver in the shape of bowls, and some similar ornaments were given by Pad ma from his father. Pad ma gave these to a silver smith in Khri kha to make new ornaments and earnings. My son and his fiancée, Sgrol ma, had been undergoing a trial period for some time, and my son finally abducted her. A matchmaker went to negotiate the marriage conditions with Sgrol ma's relatives, but they couldn't come to terms. My son and his fiancée planned to elope to A ma Bde skyid, my aunt's home in Stong rgya Village.\(^{10}\) Pad ma withdrew 300RMB from the local bank and gave it to my son for their travel expenses. 300RMB was a very large amount of money at that time. My son and his fiancée then traveled firstly to Sku 'bum and then to Khri kha.

After many unsuccessful negotiations, my brother and Pad ma's father went to Sgrol ma's home as matchmakers and they finally agreed to the marriage. I had prepared coral necklaces, fabric robes hemmed with otter pelts, and sheepskin robes. The sheepskin robe required many lambskins, and so some relatives

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\(^9\) A monastery in today's Hongzhong County, Zi ling (Xining) City.
\(^{10}\) Khri ka County.
helped provide lambskins as well. Lambs were never killed to make such robes, instead, we took skins from those that froze to death in winter. We prepared the best clothes and ornaments we could for the new bride.

As the marriage of my son got closer to a reality, Pad ma also frequently stayed at home with us and seldom went to his girlfriend's house. He lived with that woman for almost eight years, and they had three children together. The village invited Lama Byang chub\(^{11}\) and Pad ma was assigned to be one of the caretakers of local religious sites and activities, such as the Yul Iha Temple, mountain cairn, and village mani chanting hall. The lama also came to my home and stayed there many times. Later on, my husband's girlfriend married another man. All these things convinced him to stay at home and take care of the family.

My son and his wife lived in the resettled farming site while my husband and I stayed with the rest of the children in the herding site. Our herding livelihood continued until about 2002. The government divided the pasture in the early 2000s and each household was allotted a limited piece of pasture on which to live and raise their livestock. As my daughters got married into other villages and my husband and I grew older, my eldest son repeatedly requested us to move to the farming site with my son and his wife, and to give up herding. I was also diagnosed with hepatic echinococcosis, took more medicines from a Chinese doctor, and started feeling less energetic than before when I was doing chores. Eventually, we gave up herding. In 2002, we sold half of our 300 sheep to some local villagers and entrusted the other half to my elder daughter's family, so we could get mutton whenever needed. We rented the pasture to my elder daughter's family and neighbors. My husband and I moved to the farming site to live with my son and his wife afterwards.

Life was difficult without livestock. We started raising some cows and a female yak for milk at the farming site. The female yak has been one of our family's most precious animals. She lived to be over twenty years old and still provides milk for us

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\(^{11}\) A local lama who was often invited to chant at villagers' homes.
today. Besides, we occasionally received meat from my elder daughter's family from the herding site. However, this was stopped in about 2005 when my daughter's family gave up herding. Now, we must purchase meat from markets in local township town, which is about forty minutes away by car.

Starting in 2000, local government introduced the Returning Cropland to Forest Policy\textsuperscript{12} and most locals stopped farming. The government subsidized households with one hundred kilograms of wheat per \textit{mut}\textsuperscript{13} of cropland. My family also dedicated most of our cropland to this project and no longer farms. My grandchildren no longer engage in herding or farming. They are often away at school in distant places and stay less at home.

\textbf{Activities Later in Life}

Living in the farming site allowed me to chant more at home, participate in rituals, and turn prayer wheels at the local chanting hall. Recalling my cheerful childhood, and its tragic end with the loss of my father and uncle in the chaos of 1958 continued to make me fearful. Happy times are impermanent and dedicating myself to chanting the Dharma is the only way for me to be truly happy. The many sheep that my son and husband killed to provide for us continued to make me feel guilty. Such thoughts continued to give me a strong faith in practicing the Dharma.

I used to like listening to tape recordings of people singing the Ge sar\textsuperscript{14} Epic, including songs about A stag lha mo.\textsuperscript{15} I found them both educational and inspirational. I remember most of the stories told through those songs – how A stag lha mo died and was punished in Hell, but eventually made it to Heaven, and so on. I also used to sing some of the songs while herding, but have now forgotten them. In addition, I learned some proverbs, speeches, and folksongs from my uncles and other relatives.

\begin{footnotesize}
\begin{itemize}
\item\textsuperscript{12} Tuigenghuanlin.
\item\textsuperscript{13} A unit of area equivalent to 0.67 hectares
\item\textsuperscript{14} The legendary King of Gling.
\item\textsuperscript{15} A character in the Gling ge sar Epic.
\end{itemize}
\end{footnotesize}
With the knowledge of Tibetan that I received from Uncle, I could chant many Buddhist scriptures. Chanting and prostrating are the main activities of my daily life. With occasional instructions from local lamas and monks, I am able to chant a number of mantras and scriptures, and have memorized some of them too. Everyday at home, I chant Mka’ spyod ma, Sman bla, Gzungs spyod, Ltung bshags, Bla mchod, and Gcod one time each. I also chant a few pages of Rje rin po che’i Lam rim, Thar mdo, and I also chant Brgya rtsa many times. While circumambulating a stupa or walking on roads, I chant Dga’ ldan lha brgya ma 100 times, Skyabs ’gro 100 times, Sgron dkar seven times, Da re 5,000 times, Mani several hundred times, ’Od dpag med kyi mtshan several hundred times, and Yig brgya fifty times, which I have chanted 101,000 times so far.

It takes about twenty minutes for me to walk to the local chanting hall from my home. I attend the Mka’ spyod ma’i tshogs ritual on the tenth of every month from 9:00am to 4:00pm. The chanting hall provides lunch on this day.

I go on tantric retreat for seven days each year, in the ninth lunar month, during the Great Attainment ritual. Practitioners go to remote grasslands for this ritual, and meditate. I meditate in different locations each day and night during the ritual.

Furthermore, I practice Mka’ spyod ma’i bsnyen chen, a ritual for which I chant tantric mantras and other recitations 108 times, included Mandala practices, making and offering sacrificial items such as cones of rtsam pa dough, sometimes on a daily basis, and use water vases while chanting. Whenever I chant, I try to think of compassion, tolerance, and peace, and to pray for a better next life for all sentient beings.

Besides practicing and chanting the Dharma at home, pilgrimage is also important. I am occasionally ill and traveling long distances becomes a problem. However, I have traveled to Ü-Tsang16 twice with the help of my children. That’s the farthest I have ever traveled in my life. I also travel to such important

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16 Central Tibet.
pilgrimage sites as the Dgon chen bzhi, A myes rma chen, and nearby monasteries and temples whenever I find time. When I was not this old and ill, a pilgrimage to such monasteries as Sku 'bum in Zi ling and the Jo khang in Lha sa meant prostrating and circumambulating around those sites, which took a few days, or sometimes more than a week.

REALIZING A DREAM TO BECOME A NUN

Becoming a nun has been my dream since I started being immersed in the Dharma. However, it is both unacceptable and unusual for a woman with a husband to become a nun. Several women from my village have become nuns, but they are all widows. Since I first had the idea, I occasionally told my family of my wishes, but they disagreed, especially my husband. However, I insisted more strongly as I got older and became less useful around the house.

As my dreams grew, I even prepared robes and other things that a nun needs. It took several years to negotiate with my family members. In order to convince my husband and children, I asked other elderly relatives who supported my decision to talk to them. By early 2012, everyone had agreed with my decision, and then I took the holy vow to become a Buddhist nun at a monastery under the instruction of a lama.

A nun's life is different from a laywoman's life. Now, I no longer engage in family chores, but more in Buddhist practices at home and at the monastery, and go on pilgrimages. People respect

17 Four key monasteries in northeast A mdo: Bya khyung Monastery in Hualong (Ba yan) County, Haidong (Mtsho shar) District, Qinghai Province; Gser khog Monastery in Datong County, Xining (Zi ling) City; and Dgon lung and Chu bzang monasteries in Huzhu Tu Autonomous County, Haidong District in Qinghai Province.
18 A holy mountain and deity in Rma chen County, Mgo log Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture.
19 The capital city of Mtsho sngon (Qinghai).
20 Refers to Jowo, the image of Shakyamuni in the Jo khang Temple in Lhasa, the capital city of Central Tibet.
me more than before. I avoid gossiping, killing living beings, sexual intercourse, lying, stealing, drinking alcohol, smoking, and being angry, greedy, or jealous. These are the basic vows that allow me to practice the Dharma and to take the path to enlightenment. Chanting and meditation bring me peace and reduce the sin I accumulated earlier in life. Buddhist practices further give me confidence in approaching death, and reassure me that I will have a better next life.

CONCLUSION

Lha mtsho's vivid recollections of her life bear testimony to historical social changes that younger generations may no longer be aware of, both today and in the future. In particular, women's experiences and life accounts are seldom recorded and published, though there has been a plethora of publications by men and monks in the past decades on the Tibetan Plateau. Lha mtsho's encounters with tragedies in losing her father in early childhood, social chaos, hardships through famine and marriage, illuminate a life that was not uncommon for Tibetan women in that period. Although the status and visibility of women are increasing in Tibetan society, particularly through formal education, the unique voices of elder women still often go unheard.

Tibetan elders often describe themselves as "people of the old world and the new world" today. The traditional knowledge that was handed down from generations prior to modernization is now endangered. In 2015, Tibetan elders who are in their fifties and above still carry unique treasures of knowledge that, without the younger generation's efforts to maintain them, will become something precious that has gone forever on their death. Consequently, a line of identity, tradition, values, language, and knowledge will be fragmented and modernization may continue without a foundation of cultural value that was maintained for centuries.
NON-ENGLISH TERMS

'Od dpag med kyi mtshan འོད་དཔག་མེད་ཁྲི་མཚན། a Buddha
A lags Thos pa འལ་སྐོན་ཐོས་པ། a lama
A ma 'Brug mo འབྲུག་མོ། a person's name
A ma Kho le འཁོ་ལེ། a person's name
A mdo འབདོ་ི། one of three Tibetan regions that encompasses much of Mtsho sngon and Gansu provinces
A myes rma chen འབྲིས་རི་ཆེན། a holy mountain and deity in Rma chen (Maqin) County, Mgo log (Guoluo) Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture
A stag lha mo འབྲ་ལྷ་མོ། A character in the Gling ge sar Epic
Ba yan བ་ཡན། (Hualong 化隆) Hui Autonomous County
Bde skyid བདེ་སྟེན། a person's name
Bkra shis sgrol ma བཀྲ་ཤིས་ཞོལ་མ། a person's name
Bla mchod བླ་མཆོད། a Buddhist recitation
Bon po'i zhing kha བོན་པོའི་ཞིང་ཁ། a local place name
Brgya rtsa བརྒྱ་རིས། a Buddhist recitation
Bstan pa བསྟན་པ། a person's name
Bya khyung བྱ་ཁྱུང་། a monastery name
Byang chub བྱང་ཆུབ། a lama
Byang gi dgon chen bzhi བྱང་གི་དགོན་ཆེན་བཞི། four key monasteries in the North of A mdo
Chab cha སྟབ་ཆ། (Gonghe 共和) County
Chu bzang སྦྱང་། a monastery name
Chu wa dbol སྦྱ་བོལ་། a local place name
Datong 大通 County
dga' ldan gser khri དགའ་ལྟན་གསེར་ཁྲི། a lama
Dga' ldan lha brgya ma དགའ་ལྟན་ལྷ་བརྒྱ་མ། a Buddhist recitation
Dgon lung དགོན་ལོང་། a monastery name
Don grub དེན་གྲུབ། a person's name
Dpon po Yon tan a person's name
Gcod a Buddhist recitation
Gdugs dkar skyid a person's name
Ge sar the legendary King of Gling
Gling ge sar a person's name
Gnam skyid a person's name
Gser khog a monastery name
Gser mtsho a person's name
Gzungs spyod a Buddhist recitation
Huzhu Tu Autonomous County
Jo khang a name of temple in Lha sa
kha btags auspicious silk strips thought to embody purity
        and good fortune given to guests, religious personages, and
        others to show respect
Khri ka County, Mtsho lho Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture.
Klu mtsho a person's name
Kun dga' a person's name
Kye pur Mountain
Lha mtsho a person's name
Lha sa the capital city of Central Tibet
Ltung bshags a Buddhist recitation
Mang ra County
Mgon lo a person's name
Mgon po a person's name
Mka' spyod ma a Buddhist recitation
Mka' spyod ma'i bsnyen chen a ritual
Mka' spyod ma'i tshogs a ritual
Mtsho lho (Hainan Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture
Mtsho mo a person's name
Mtsho shar (Haidong District, Qinghai Province
Mtsho sngon Lake
Mtsho sngon (Qinghai) Province

$mu$ $a$ unit of area equivalent to 0.67 hectares

Pad ma $a$ person's name

Phag go $a$ person's name

Rdo rje $a$ person's name

Rdo sbis dge bshes shes rab rgya mtsho $a$ person's name

Rje rin po che'i lam rim $a$ Buddhist text published by Rje rin po che blo bzang grags pa

Rma lho (Huangnan) Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture

$rtsam$ pa $a$ staple food

Sgrol ma $a$ person's name

Sgron dkar $a$ deity

Skar mtsho $a$ person's name

Sku 'bum $a$ Monastery

Skyabs 'gro $a$ a Buddhist recitation

Sman bla $a$ a Buddhist recitation

Stong rgya $a$ Village, Khri ka County

Thar mdo $a$ a Buddhist recitation

Tshe brtan zhabs drung $a$ a lama

Tshe brtan $a$ person's name

Tshe bzung $a$ person's name

Tshe skyid $a$ a person's name

Tshe thar $a$ a person's name

Tuigenghuanlin $a$ a policy

Yig brgya $a$ a Buddhist recitation

Yul lha $Yul =$ 'place' 'designated place'; $lha =$ 'deity'.

Ziling (Xining) City


Bod ljongs rig rtsal mthun thogs བོད་ལྟོངས་རིག་ལ་མུན་ཚགས། 1980. Bod kyi rtsom rig sgyu rtsal བོད་ཀྱི་རིག་གནས་[Tibetan Literature and Art]. Lha sa བློ་: Bod ljongs shin hwa par 'debs bzo grwa བོད་ལྟོངས་ཤིན་པར་འདེབས་བཟོ། [Tibet Xinhua Press].

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