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# “GOING FOR INCOME” IN VILLAGE TIBET

## *A Longitudinal Analysis of Change and Adaptation, 1997–2007*

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===== Puchung Wangdui

### Abstract

Rural Tibet is in the throes of a major paradigm shift from a predominately subsistence agricultural economy to a new mixed economy in which non-farm income plays a dominant role. This paper examines this change, comparing longitudinal data collected through direct fieldwork in rural Tibet in 1997–98 and 2006–07.

Keywords: Tibet, China, modernization, rural change, migrant labor

### Introduction

The speed and magnitude of China’s overall development are one of the great economic success stories of the past three decades. This success, however, has not been uniform and many areas have lagged behind, prompting the Chinese government to initiate a major development program in 2000 to help the regions of the relatively impoverished west such as the Tibet Autonomous Region (TAR, or Tibet) to catch up with the more affluent east. Called the “Develop the West” campaign, this

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program included a series of policies for rapid development including more investment, preferential tax rates, as well as huge expenditures for infrastructure. In 2003 alone, for example, China invested about 200 billion yuan (\$24.3 billion) in large projects in the western regions.

In Tibet, most of the initial money was used for large infrastructure projects such as highways, buildings, and the new railway to Lhasa. The Chinese government also implemented projects to bolster the quality of life of rural Tibetans, such as improving the road system, rebuilding rural townships (*xiang*) and schools, expanding electrification in villages, and improving the health care system through a new program of health insurance. Wen Jiabao, China's premier, pointedly emphasized at a State Council work conference in 2004 that major projects should include programs that increase farmers' incomes and step up agricultural and rural development.<sup>1</sup> In keeping with this, over the past three years the Central Committee has moved actively to implement major new programs that seek to improve the life of farmers all over China, including Tibet.<sup>2</sup>

Chinese sources regularly hail the success of these development programs in Tibet, asserting that they have impacted rural communities and resulted in an increased rural standard of living there. A recent report, for example, quotes Zhang Qingli, secretary of Tibet's regional Communist Party committee, saying that per capita net income for farmers and herders in 2006 will average 2,350 yuan (\$309),<sup>3</sup> an increase of 13.1% over the previous year.<sup>4</sup>

Many outside of China, however, have challenged China's development policy in Tibet, asserting that it is ineffectual in some spheres and counterproductive in others. A report published in 2004 by the Tibetan Government in Exile (in the journal of the Central Tibetan Administration of H. H. The Dalai Lama) presents the essence of these criticisms:

Fundamental to the Western Development strategy is investment in hard infrastructure such as highways, railways, pipelines, mineral extraction, dams, power stations, and irrigation facilities. Limited priority is given to soft infrastructure such as health, education, and local human capacity-building that would enable

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1. *China Daily*, Beijing, <[http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/english/doc/2004-03/22/content\\_316800.htm](http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/english/doc/2004-03/22/content_316800.htm)>, March 22, 2004.

2. In our research area, these include subsidies for a range of micro projects such as building new houses, starting chicken and sheep fattening businesses, and building greenhouses. These will be examined in a separate paper.

3. In this paper, we use the 2007 conversion rate for the yuan into U.S. dollars (7.6 yuan = 1 US\$).

4. Xinhua News Agency, "Tibet's Economic Growth in 2006 Breaks Record," December 26, 2006.

more local employment and participation in the modernization process. The Western Development strategy gives little priority to investment in local agriculture and livestock, although the majority of the western population, especially non-Chinese ethnic populations experiencing most acute poverty, are in these two sectors. . . . It is evident that the selection of priority infrastructure investment projects under the Western Development strategy does not correspond with the priority needs of the poorest populations in the traditional agricultural and livestock sectors. . . . The only Tibetans prospering as a result of China's leap-style intensive investment in Tibet is the small group of Tibetan salaried workers in government departments and state enterprises. . . . Based on the above findings of widespread poverty, social exclusion, and marginalization of the Tibetan population, the *State economic development efforts so far have not affected the Tibetans, particularly the rural areas in Tibet, in a positive way. Hence, it cannot be assumed that rural Tibet is progressing or that development is inevitable.*<sup>5</sup> (emphasis added)

The view that rural Tibet, which comprises approximately 80% of Tibet's population, has been bypassed by development is also often encountered in the mainstream media. Anthony Kuhn, the respected Beijing correspondent for National Public Radio, for example, reported in 2006 on China's plan to expand its new Tibetan railway toward the Indian border, commenting: "It's hard to tell now what will happen when tourists and *modernity finally reach* Tibet's remote interior and its inhabitants."<sup>6</sup> (emphasis added)

Rural Tibet, however, has not been insulated from the tremendous changes inland China and urban Tibet have experienced. As in the rest of rural China, decollectivization (at the start of the 1980s) brought the return of the traditional household system of production and the freedom for rural households to participate in the new "socialist" market economy under Deng Xiaoping's call for all to "get rich."<sup>7</sup> This led to almost immediate improvement over the commune era in the amount and quality of food

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5. "China's Western Development Strategy: Infrastructure Inappropriate to Tibetan Needs," *Tibetan Bulletin Online* 8:1 (January-February 2004), p. 1, <<http://www.tibet.net/en/tibbul/2004/0102/focus1.html>>. For a detailed look at the issue of underdevelopment in Tibet, see also Wang Xiaoli and Bai Nanfeng, *The Poverty of Plenty* (N. Y.: St. Martin's Press, 1991); and more recently, the work of Andrew Martin Fisher, *State Growth and Social Exclusion in Tibet: Challenges of Recent Growth* (Copenhagen: Nordic Institute of Asian Studies Press, 2005).

6. National Public Radio, *All Things Considered*, September 20, 2006.

7. Melvyn C. Goldstein, "Change and Continuity in Nomadic Pastoralism on the Western Tibetan Plateau," *Nomadic Peoples* 28:1 (1991), pp. 105–23; Melvyn C. Goldstein and Cynthia M. Beall, "The Impact of China's Reform Policy on the Nomads of Western Tibet," *Asian Survey* 29:6 (June 1989), pp. 619–41; Melvyn C. Goldstein, "Change, Conflict and Continuity among a Community of Nomadic Pastoralists in Western Tibet, 1950–1990," in *Resistance and Reform in Tibet*, eds. R. Barnett and S. Akinar (London: C. Hurst and Co., 1994).

consumed, because households were now working hard for themselves on their own land. But these improvements were only modest until about a decade later in the mid-1990s, when the scope, rate, and direction of rural modernization and economic development began to accelerate.<sup>8</sup> Since then, change in the rural economy has expanded so rapidly that Tibetan farmers today can be said to be in the throes of a major paradigm shift from a predominately subsistence agricultural economy with some supplementary non-farm income to a new mixed agriculture/non-farm income economy. This paper will examine the large and expanding involvement of rural Tibetans in non-farm labor, especially the dominant strategy that Tibetans call “going for income” (Tibetan: *yongbab la dro* or *yongbab saga dro*).<sup>9</sup>

### Research Sites and Methodology

This article is based on longitudinal data collected in two villages in 1997–98 and 2006–07 in Shigatse Prefecture, one of the TAR’s largest and most important areas and the home of Tibet’s second largest city, Shigatse. The first set of data was collected in 1997–98<sup>10</sup> during a study on change in rural farming communities conducted by Goldstein, Beall, and Ben Jiao in collaboration with the Tibet Academy of Social Sciences. Thirteen farming villages from four rural townships in the two main cultural divisions in central Tibet (Tibetan: *Ü* and *Tsang*) were chosen to represent rural areas with different exposure to development and modernization. Half of these rural townships were located adjacent to county seats and main roads and so were exposed to better facilities and opportunities, while the other half were located farther from towns and cities and were less impacted by development. All inhabitants in the study villages were ethnic Tibetans and all households were engaged primarily in farming. There were no Han Chinese living and farming in any of the villages. Tibetan was the language of communication for both the villagers and the local officials. The study methodology included a detailed socioeconomic household survey, a large fertility survey of over 1,700 women, in-depth interviews, focus groups, participant observation, and the collecting of local records. There was no interference from the government in the design or analysis of queries and

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8. Melvyn C. Goldstein, Ben Jiao, Cynthia M. Beall, and Phuntsog Tsering, “Fertility and Family Planning in Rural Tibet,” *China Journal* 47 (January 2002), pp. 19–40; and Melvyn C. Goldstein, Ben Jiao, Cynthia M. Beall, and Phuntsog Tsering, “Development and Change in Rural Tibet: Problems and Adaptations,” *Asian Survey* 43:5 (September/October 2003), pp. 758–79.

9. This is analogous to the phenomenon of the “floating population” (Chinese: *liudong renkou*) or “farmer workers” (Chinese: *nongmin gong*) in the rest of China.

10. A few inconsistencies in the original data were rechecked on a field visit in 2000 and corrected in the data set.

the researchers were free to visit households whenever they wished, day or night.

The second set of data was collected in 2006–07 as part of a second research study conducted by Goldstein, Childs, Beall, and Puchung Wangdui, also in collaboration with the Tibet Academy of Social Sciences. It focused on modernization and changing patterns of intergenerational relations. Three rural villages were investigated, representing a continuum from relatively wealthy to relatively poor and from more to less impacted by development. Two of these farming villages (Sogang and Norgyong) were part of the 1997–98 study. Sogang, the least impacted, is located in the upper (mountain) part of a tributary river valley, while Norgyong, the intermediate site, is situated immediately beside Panam, a county seat.<sup>11</sup> A third site, Betsag, is also located in Shigatse Prefecture only 10 kilometers from Shigatse city. Betsag was included to represent a wealthy farming village that was more heavily impacted by mechanized agriculture and government development programs since the early to mid 1990s. For example, comparing purchases of tractors, by the year 2000 Betsag households had bought 64 small and 25 large tractors, whereas Norgyong households had bought 44 small and three large tractors, and Sogang households had bought only nine small and no large tractors. However, despite these differences, the three villages are geographically close, all within a three-hour drive of each other, and they are part of the same Tibetan sub-ethnic (Tibetan: *Tsang*) cultural and linguistic dialect zone.

As in the 1997 study, the 2006 study utilized quantitative and qualitative data through direct fieldwork, including a parallel socioeconomic household survey and in-depth, semi-structured interviews, focus groups, and participant observation. Table 1 provides a demographic snapshot of the three villages. Norgyong is slightly larger in population, but all are characterized by large families (around seven members per household). The most striking difference among the three is the average amount of land (in *mu*)<sup>12</sup> per household in 2006. Betsag is a large, surplus-producing agricultural area with 177% more land per household than Sogang, while Norgyong is intermediate, with 58% less than Betsag but 75% more land than Sogang.

The 1997–98 study in Sogang and Norgyong found that although the standard of living had clearly increased since decollectivization, households believed that they could not sustain or improve their standard of living by farming alone. Five factors influenced their views: (1) Farmland is

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11. Panam County was the site of a large European Union project from 1998 to 2005, but none of its programs impacted these two villages. Within Shigatse Prefecture, Panam ranked sixth of 18 counties in 2006 in per capita income.

12. A *mu* is a unit of land measurement used in China equivalent to 0.067 hectares.

TABLE 1 *Demographic Summary of Fieldwork Sites, 1997 and 2006*

		<i>Households</i>	<i>Population</i>	<i>Mean Household Size</i>	<i># Mu Per Household</i>	<i># Mu Per Capita</i>
Sogang	1997	90	656	7.3	11.8	1.7
	2006	92	665	7.2	9.3	1.3
Norgyong	1997	109	839	7.6	20.9	2.8
	2006	124	853	6.9	16.3	2.4
Betsag	2006	93	712	7.7	25.8	3.4

SOURCE: Goldstein, Childs, Beall and Puchung, Socioeconomic Household Survey, 2006. NOTE: All data on household composition and household possessions refer to the time when the households were visited (1998 and 2006), whereas data on income and farming activities refer to the previous calendar year (1997 and 2005).

“owned” by the state, not the households, and so it cannot be bought or sold. Individuals, in essence, have long-term leases. Consequently, households that are successful in farming cannot increase their yields and profits by purchasing land to expand production. (2) In addition, since decollectivization there had been the above mentioned decrease in farmland (*mu*) per capita because of population increase, the loss of farmland to lots for new houses, the application of eminent domain for road construction, and intermittent loss of fields to flooding. (3) Prices in Tibet have increased 4.2 times (323%) between 1985 and 2005, but the prices for farmers’ main products, barley and wheat, have not increased in tandem. For example, although barley rose in price from 0.7 yuan (\$0.09) in 1982 to 0.87 yuan (\$0.11) per *jin* (1 *jin* = 1.1 lbs.) in 2006, the 2006 price would have had to be 2.96 yuan (\$0.39) to keep pace with inflation.<sup>13</sup> (4) The introduction of a more market-based economy in China resulted in a drastic reduction of government subsidies and the imposition of new fees by local governments for services that had been free or heavily subsidized during the commune era, e.g., fees for health care, schooling, and salaries for local officials. (5) Raising yields was not feasible because villagers were already using new high yield strains of winter wheat and heavy applications of chemical fertilizers and insecticides and there was virtually no “virgin” land that could be opened to increase production.

At the same time, consumer demand was increasing: China’s manufacturing boom was providing a wide range of attractive products, and households

13. The inflation conversion figures were obtained in a personal communication from Andrew Martin Fisher, 2007.

were eager to rebuild or renovate their houses as well as upgrade furnishings. Consequently, by the mid to late 1990s, farm families had started to seek non-farm income by going outside the village to secure temporary wage-paying jobs.<sup>14</sup> Historically, the use of non-farm income in the study area is not entirely new; it has antecedents in the old society, where, for example, many of the richer households sent teams of donkeys to work in the transport trade between India and Lhasa and where there were always some skilled craftsmen who worked in their own and neighboring villages. Still, the scale, scope, and significance of the modern phenomenon represent an exponential shift and are transforming the overall standard of living in farming areas and the strategic outlook of Tibetan farmers, creating, as mentioned above, a new rural economic paradigm.<sup>15</sup>

### The New Paradigm: “Going for Income”

Going for income is technically part of a larger category of non-farm income that includes both income earned in one’s own village and income earned by going to work outside the village. In contemporary-farming Tibet, the overwhelming proportion of non-farm laborers (84%) and non-farm income (79%) derives from going outside the village for income; that is the focus of this paper.

There are many patterns of “going for income,” and the length of time spent outside the village depends on factors such as a family’s internal labor situation, the size of its fields, and the location and type of work its members do. Some villagers go for four to five months between the planting and harvest seasons, whereas others working as drivers will often spend 10 or 11 months outside the village. At the other extreme, some manual laborers living near cities or county seats may bicycle into work daily. Normally, however, those going out for income stay for months at a time but almost always return to their families at least once annually for the New Year celebration.

Villagers generally engage in three broad types of “going for income.” The largest and least lucrative category consists of various types of unskilled manual labor jobs, mainly as construction laborers who carry loads, mix cement, and so forth. In 2007, these workers were earning about 20–25 yuan/day (\$2.63–\$3.29). A second major category was skilled jobs, for example, carpenters, masons, and drivers. These were earning about 40–50 yuan/day (\$5.26–\$6.57). A third, and growing, category includes entrepreneurial activities such as minibus, taxi, and truck owners, as well as contractors

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14. Goldstein, Jiao, Beall, and Tsering, “Development and Change in Rural Tibet.”

15. This paradigm does not apply to the pastoral nomadic segment of rural Tibet, which will be discussed in a separate paper.

and subcontractors on construction projects. The profits from this type of work can be relatively high: for example, the owner of a large dump truck can earn 50,000–100,000 yuan (\$6,579–\$13,158) in a year working on large construction projects. This represents a quantitative leap over day wage labor but also entails risks and debts, because the capital required to buy a large truck is huge—roughly 220,000 yuan (\$26,315).

In addition to these, there are several non-farm income-producing jobs done in the village, including salaried government employees such as the local village heads and village health workers. Small amounts of income are also irregularly earned locally through tailoring, weaving, wool work, carpentry, masonry, and so forth. A few families also have small stores in the villages, and in the richest village, Betsag, many households make thousands of mud bricks in their own fields and then sell them to construction sites in Shigatse city.

All of this is happening spontaneously. There are no organized government or private programs to help rural villagers find work, so each household has to arrange its own jobs. This is commonly done through friends, relatives, subcontractors, and contacts from previous job sites. An important recent innovation in this process has been the rapid spread of land-line and mobile phones in rural Tibet. In the richer and more developed villages sites (Betsag and Norgyong), many drivers and carpenters now commonly arrange work by phone, and even in the mountain village Sogang, where there are still few phones, villagers use the local store's phone for calling and receiving messages. As of 2006, 79% of households had phones in Betsag, 66% in Norgyong, and 13% in Sogang, most being purchased within the past half-decade.

The geographic distribution of villagers going for income is diverse, since people go where they can find jobs. Because very few speak even poor Chinese, going for income is in essence limited to Tibet. As Table 2 shows, in 2005 about half of non-farm laborers in all three villages worked in nearby city and county towns (Shigatse and Panam) but an equal proportion worked in other, more remote areas. For example, in 2007, a large contingent from Sogang went to work building homes in Nagchuka, the capital of Nagchu Prefecture in Northern Tibet, and a number of workers from Betsag went to a remote county in Ngari Prefecture in Far Western Tibet when a Betsag entrepreneur received an 822,000 yuan (\$108,157) contract from that county's government to build 30 houses designed to help alleviate poverty. The entrepreneur brought a large team of local craftsmen and workers with him. Other Tibetans get sub-contracts from Chinese contractors, and some Tibetans work directly for Chinese contractors. In one village, several Tibetans who spoke Chinese worked with Chinese contractors to find Tibetan laborers. These labor organizers brought the type of



TABLE 2 *Percentage of Income Goers by Work Location, 2005*

	<i>Shigatse City</i>	<i>Lhasa City</i>	<i>Panam County Seat</i>	<i>Other Destinations</i>
Sogang (n = 157)	38.9	7.0	1.3	52.9
Norgyong (n = 168)	3.6	3.6	44.6	48.2
Betsag (n = 133)	44.4	11.3	0.8	43.6

SOURCE: Ibid. to Table 1.

TABLE 3 *Percentage of Households with at Least One Non-farm Wage Earner*

		<i>% of Households with at Least One Income Earner</i>
Sogang	1997	57.8
	2005	90.2
	% change	+ 56.1%
Norgyong	1997	43.1
	2005	90.3
	% change	+ 109.5%
Betsag	2005	92.4

SOURCE: Ibid. to Table 2.

workers needed to the construction site and explained to them the work they were expected to do.

Table 3 shows the change in the number of households earning non-farm wages in our three research sites. In Sogang, the more remote and poorer village, 90% of households were engaged in some form of non-farm work by the end of 2005, compared to 58% in 1997–98. This represented a 56% increase. In Norgyong, the intermediate village in terms of development and wealth, the number of households with at least one member earning income grew from 43% in 1997 to 90% in 2005, an increase of 110%. In Betsag, the new site, 92% of households were earning income from non-farm work by the end of 2005.

Table 4 further reveals that the number of households with more than one person earning income had also increased, and almost half of all households had at least two members earning income. In Sogang, this

TABLE 4 *Percentage of Households by Number of Income Earners*

		0	1	2	3	4+	% 2+
Sogang	1997	42.2	51.1	5.6	1.1	0.0	6.7
	2005	9.8	25.0	43.5	14.1	7.6	65.2
Norgyong	1997	56.9	31.2	11.0	0.9	0.0	11.9
	2005	9.7	42.7	31.5	8.1	8.1	47.6
Betsag	2005	7.5	41.9	30.1	12.9	7.5	50.5

SOURCE: Ibid. to Table 3.

TABLE 5 *Percentage Earning Income by Age Category and Village*

		<i>Males</i>		<i>Females</i>	
		1997	2005	1997	2005
Sogang	15–19	4.8	30.2	8.3	23.7
	20–29	18.0	69.2	7.4	31.9
	30–39	25.5	71.7	2.1	16.7
	40–49	40.9	38.3	7.7	6.7
Norgyong	15–19	14.9	23.9	2.2	3.9
	20–29	28.4	63.7	2.5	28.0
	30–39	29.3	63.5	6.8	28.3
	40–49	35.5	59.2	0.0	16.0
Betsag	15–19		42.1		6.5
	20–29		63.3		13.6
	30–39		70.8		22.0
	40–49		46.7		10.9

SOURCE: Ibid. to Table 4.

increased from only 7% in 1997 to 65% in 2005, and in Norgyong, from 12% to 48%. Table 4 also shows that while only 1% of households in Sogang dispatched three or more workers in 1997, 22% did so in 2005. In Norgyong, there was an increase from less than 1% to 16%.

Table 5 also highlights the dominance of the new paradigm by showing changes in the proportion of people working for non-farm income by age and sex. In Sogang, the proportion of males aged 20–29 increased by 284% (from 18% in 1997 to 69.2% in 2005), while for males aged 30–39, it increased 179% (from 25.5% to 71.7%). In Norgyong the increases were less

dramatic but still impressive, 124% for males 20–29 and 117% for males 30–39. Nowadays, families consider it appropriate to send children as young as 15 to garner income, so for males 15–19, the increase in Sogang was 529% and for Norgyong it was 60%. The only age categories that experienced a decrease were males and females in Sogang ages 40–49, and this was slight. Overall, a remarkable 67% of all males ages 20–39 in the three study sites were earning non-farm income in 2005.

Table 5 reveals also the substantial increase in the number of females being sent. In interviews in 1997, many villagers expressed reluctance about sending young unmarried females for income, but by 2005, the drive to increase household income had overcome those fears.<sup>16</sup> In Sogang, for example, the number of females going for income in the 15–19, 20–29, and 30–39 year age categories increased 186%, 331%, and 695%, respectively. For Norgyong, the increases were 77%, 1,020%, and 316%, respectively. Proportionately, however, females were still far fewer than males.

So entrenched has this paradigm become that by 2005 virtually the only households not sending at least one member for income were small ones with no surplus labor, for example, couples with young children, single old men and women, and old couples living alone. In Sogang, this accounted for eight of the nine households that did not send anyone for income; the ninth household was one that decided to keep its teenage son at home longer to learn farming better. The head of the household had been trying to supplement his farm production by rearing and selling cattle, but in 2007 finally succumbed and for the first time sent his son for income.

### The Income Explosion

The tremendous increase in the number of villagers going for income has produced an explosion in cash income and a concomitant major improvement in the standard of living. Everyone we interviewed, old, middle aged, and young, commented that material conditions have improved markedly in the past decade. A poignant illustration of this was the comment of an elderly woman in Sogang who bemoaned how unlucky she was because when she was young and healthy, the standard of living was terrible, so she could not enjoy life, but now that life is materially so good, she is too old and feeble to enjoy it.

Table 6, column 3, shows the amount of income earned in 2005 in the study villages. Sogang and Norgyong, respectively, earned 657,469 and 2,326,318 yuan (\$86,509 and \$306,095). Betsag, the richest village, earned 2,215,633 yuan (\$291,531) despite having 33% fewer households than

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16. The widespread knowledge and easy availability of contraception, particularly the Pill, which can be obtained discreetly over-the-counter, has helped facilitate this.

TABLE 6 *Net Income from Non-farm Work, 1997 and 2005* (in yuan and US\$)

		<i>Per Village</i>	<i>Per Household</i>	<i>Per Capita</i>
Sogang	1997	103,692 (\$13,644)	1,152 (\$152)	158 (\$17)
	2005	657,469 (\$86,509)	7,146 (\$940)	923 (\$121)
Norgyong	1997	188,950 (\$24,861)	1,733 (\$228)	225 (\$30)
	2005	2,326,318 (\$306,095)	18,761 (\$2,469)	2,727 (\$359)
Betsag	2005	2,215,633 (\$291,531)	23,824 (\$3,135)	3,332 (\$438)

SOURCE: Ibid. to Table 5.

NOTE: Net income refers to the income individuals actually turned in to their households, and so does not include the amount of wages they spent on food, housing, etc.

Norgyong.<sup>17</sup> Table 6, columns 4 and 5, also compares longitudinally the household and per capita income earned. In Norgyong, mean household income increased from 1,733 yuan (\$228) in 1997 to 18,761 yuan (\$2,469) in 2005, an increase of 983%. In Sogang, the income increased 520% from a mean of 1,152 yuan (\$152) per household to 7,146 yuan (\$940). Correcting for inflation, Sogang's and Norgyong's 1997 mean household earned income still increased 903% in Norgyong and 475% in Sogang.

As predicted in the study design, Table 6 reveals large inter-village variations in the amounts that households and individuals earned. Betsag and Norgyong, the more developed villages, earned the most income, while Sogang, the least impacted, earned the least. This gap between the villages is widening. Whereas Norgyong households earned roughly 50% more than Sogang households in 1997, in 2005 that difference had increased to about 160%.

To a large extent this reflects an important trend now underway. As village Tibetans get more experience and knowledge going for income, they have begun to shift into better paying jobs. Table 7, for example, shows that whereas 36.1% of workers in Betsag were drivers or entrepreneurs (columns c, d, f, and g, which include contractors and self-employed owners of trucks and tractor-trailer rigs), the percentage for Sogang was only 4.7%.

Table 8 illustrates the relationship between non-farm and farm income. All three village research sites are still farming communities in which every household secures most or all of its staple grain needs from its own fields.

17. Some migrant workers, in addition, used a small part of their wages to buy and bring home foodstuffs like barley and flour, but we have not quantified this.

TABLE 7 *Percentage of Workers by Job Category and Village, 2005*

<i>Job Category</i>	<i>Mean</i>	<i>Sogang</i>	<i>Norgyong</i>	<i>Betsag</i>
a Manual labor	2,509	67.8	47.0	29.8
b Skilled labor	4,505	22.8	19.8	25.5
c Driver for others	7,198	0.0	3.5	8.7
d Drive own tractor	10,883	0.6	3.0	3.1
e Government job	20,810	4.7	5.0	8.7
f Business	22,058	2.9	9.4	7.5
g Drive own vehicle	43,253	1.2	12.4	16.8
% in top three earning categories (e, f, and g)		8.8	26.7	32.9

SOURCE: Ibid. to Table 6.

TABLE 8 *Mean Income Per Household by Income Sources, 2005 (in yuan)*

	<i>Sogang</i>		<i>Norgyong</i>		<i>Betsag</i>
	<i>1997</i>	<i>2005</i>	<i>1997</i>	<i>2005</i>	<i>2005</i>
a Animal product income*	57	734	11	595	2,396
b Animal sales income	3	406	25	343	2,079
c Grain income**	185	89	2,533	912	2,247
d Grain value***	2,440	1,957	3,785	3,501	5,257
e Total farm income (a + b + c + d)	2,686	3,186	6,354	5,351	11,978
f Total non-farm income	1,152	7,146	1,733	18,761	23,824
g Total income (e + f)	3,838	10,332	8,087	24,112	35,802
h % farm income (e/g)	70.0	30.8	78.6	22.2	33.5
i % non-farm income (f/g)	30.0	69.2	21.4	77.8	66.5

SOURCE: Ibid. to Table 7.

\* Mainly butter, cheese, and yogurt.

\*\* Mainly barley and wheat sold directly for cash or exchanged for goods.

\*\*\* The amount of grain each household produced was calculated by using the estimated average grain yield per *mu* (by village) and the percent of fields planted with each grain. The amount of grain that was sold or exchanged (most commonly for meat, rice, and salt) was then subtracted from that amount to get the amount households kept (consumed/stored). This was converted into a monetary value using the average selling price of the grain (0.76 in 1997 and 0.80 yuan per *jin* in 2005 for barley; 0.80 in 1997 and .70 yuan per *jin* in 2005 for wheat).

However, over the eight-year interval between studies, the amount of non-farm income earned has increased to dwarf that generated from the traditional sources—farming and animal husbandry. For example, whereas the mean total value of farm products sold and consumed per household exceeded non-farm income in 1997 (columns e and f), by the end of 2005 this was no longer the case. In fact, the percentages of income derived from farm and non-farm sources had reversed. Households in Sogang and Norgyong in 1997 obtained 70.0% and 78.6%, respectively, of their income through farming and animal husbandry, whereas in 2005 they obtained 69.2% and 77.8% through non-farm activities.

However, notwithstanding the large increases in income flowing into villages, it has not been distributed equally, and there are still many poor households. In 1998, according to self-reported economic status, 44.7% and 29.4% of households in Sogang and Norgyong, respectively, said they were poor. These proportions had decreased by 2006 but were still high—24.2% and 17.7%, respectively. The situation in Betsag, the richest village, was better with only 9.7% reporting themselves poor in 2006. Income disparity, moreover, appears to be increasing. For example in Sogang, the poorest village site, the top 20% of households in 1997 averaged 7,861 yuan (\$1,034) in total income (total income includes both non-farm and farm incomes, column g of Table 8), while the lowest 20% averaged 1,020 yuan (\$134). By 2006, the total income of the top 20% of households had increased by over 200% to 25,174 yuan (\$3,299), whereas the lowest 20% had increased only about 100% to 2,151 yuan (\$283). In Betsag, the top 20% of households in 2006 averaged 85,706 yuan (\$11,277) in total income whereas the bottom 20% averaged only 6,942 yuan (\$913).

The two most important factors underlying household poverty were low agricultural production due to possession of only a small number of fields or fields of poor quality, and little or no access to non-farm income because of either having no one to send for income or having the person sent fritter away the earnings, bringing back almost nothing to the household. Poor households that cannot meet their own subsistence needs are dependent on government welfare. Such welfare, however, is not generous. For example, in Sogang in 2006, the 10 households (11%) that were given supplemental welfare received only 60 *jin* of grain per person as well as some additional gifts at New Year. That amount would suffice for about 2.5 months.

However, despite the persistence of a sizable proportion of households being poor and a widening income gap, at this stage in the process of economic modernization, there is considerable mobility along the economic spectrum. Not all households that were relatively poor in 1997 remained so in 2005, whereas some that were relatively affluent in 1997 have seen their fortunes reversed. In the new paradigm, poor households with no

one to go for income can see their fortunes shift quickly as soon as one child becomes old enough to go for income. Similarly, the standard of living for a household with one or two income earners can drop precipitously if they become unable to continue doing so. One case study of such rapid upward mobility is a household in Sogang that rose from a ranking of 66th in total income earned in 1997 to 20th in 2005, with annual income increasing from 178 yuan (\$23.4) to 9,141 yuan (\$1,202).

In 2005 this household consisted of eight members (ages in parentheses), two brothers (43, 38) married polyandrously to a wife (40), their elderly mother (74), three sons (19, 15, 13), and one daughter (17). In 1997 nobody from this household left the village to work and all their cash income came from selling grain to the government. Today, both the younger brother and the eldest son work six to nine months each year on construction sites in the city of Shigatse. Initially, the younger brother worked as an unskilled manual laborer, but he soon decided to go into the transportation business for himself. He recalled,

I used to do construction and build roads for income. [In 2002] laborers received 18–20 yuan [about \$2.40] per day. I thought that with a tractor-trailer I could earn more income. I speak pretty good Chinese [learned while working with a Chinese labor crew] and can negotiate my own salary. In 2002, I took a bank loan, bought a tractor, and repaid the loan with my earnings. Now, when I get work, I average 75 yuan [\$9.88] per day. I pay about 25 yuan [\$3.29] per day in gas, so my net profit is 50 yuan [\$6.58] per day.<sup>18</sup>

This household not only invested in buying its own tractor but also recognized that skilled laborers earn higher wages, and so sent the eldest son to apprentice as a carpenter once he had completed primary school. Today, both the younger brother and son are able to go for income, while the elder brother remains home with the wife and elderly mother to manage all the farming and animals. As a result, the household now has two reliable sources of income and has risen in economic standing within the village. The household will improve their economic condition further when the second son (now age 15) also begins to go for income.

For the overwhelming majority of households, the large influx of income has markedly improved the standard of living. This standard will be discussed in more detail in a separate paper but involves a wide range of products and activities including consumption of both traditional quality foods and new modern foods, more elaborate rituals at marriage and death, better houses, furnishings and clothing, and of course “luxury” consumer products like televisions, blenders, and phones. For example, in

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18. Authors' interview, Shigatse Prefecture, TAR, November 2006.

TABLE 9 *Change in Percentage of Households Owning Vehicles between 1997 and 2006*

		<i>Car, Minibus, or Truck</i>	<i>Small Tractor</i>
Sogang	1997	0.0	10.0
	2006	3.3	55.4
Norgyong	1997	9.1	22.9
	2006	23.6	67.4
Betsag	2006	27.6	86.7

SOURCE: Ibid. to Table 8.

1997 there were no televisions in Sogang, as there was no electricity. This changed in the winter of 2004–05 when the government provided a solar electricity system that could cover the entire village. By the end of 2005, 71% of households had purchased televisions. In Norgyong, which had electricity in 1997, the number of residents who owned televisions increased from 26.6% in 1997 to 93.1% in 2005. In Betsag, only three of the 93 households did not own a television in 2005.

Our data, as the above case illustrated, show that villagers are beginning to try to move beyond unskilled manual labor by buying tractors and trucks and becoming self-employed business people and/or by learning craft skills such as carpentry and stone masonry. It is interesting to note that in the 1997–98 survey, nobody in either Sogang or Norgyong responded to the question, “What is the best way to become rich?” by answering, “Buy a truck” (they simply said “go for income”), whereas in a 2007 survey, 4.4% and 16.8%, respectively, of surveyed households in Sogang and Norgyong said that buying a truck was the best or quickest way to become wealthy. In Betsag, which was not surveyed in 1997–98, 35.9% gave this answer on the 2007 survey. This shift in thinking toward more capital-intensive means for improving one’s economic standing is illustrated in Table 9, which shows both the increase in ownership of vehicles in all villages and the much larger ownership in Norgyong and Betsag. This trend is being facilitated by the Agricultural Bank of China (ABC), which is providing households with easy credit for capital investments as well as private improvement projects such as building new homes or renovating old houses. Many households now have ABC lines of credit that allow them to get loans quickly and without guarantors. A “gold line of credit” allows a household to get 30,000 yuan (\$3,947).



## The Role of Government Programs

What has been the role of the government in these developments? Non-farm income has been encouraged by the government since decollectivization, and over the years there has been a variety of programs to foster this. For example, in Betsag the first two tractors/trailor rigs were bought under a 1984 program in which the government provided three-year interest-free loans of 25,000 yuan (\$3,289) and arranged transportation for farmers to go to Golmud, in Qinghai Province, to purchase the new tractors. However, notwithstanding such directives and intermittent programs, most of the billions spent in Tibet on development have been targeted at large-scale infrastructure projects. Rural Tibetans, therefore, neither got nor get government help finding jobs, nor do they receive special preference through laws mandating set-aside jobs for ethnic Tibetans, so the new village economic paradigm was not the *direct* result of any government programs. Indirectly, however, the government's economic policy of encouraging non-farm income created an ideological matrix in which Tibetan farmers felt comfortable going for income as an adaptation to the not too promising future of subsistence agriculture.

However, that is not to say that the government's massive development programs have been irrelevant, for they have not. Going for income is obviously dependent on the availability of jobs, which in Tibet is the result of the increased size and scope of government development projects, particularly those since 2000. Most of the contracts for these projects, to be sure, go to ethnic Chinese from outside Tibet, but the trickle-down effect is substantial and is fueling the villagers' success in finding work both as manual laborers and increasingly as subcontractors and skilled craftsmen. When asked whether it was easier to find work now than 10 years ago, 93% said it was and gave as the reason either that more Chinese contractors (sub-contractors) were looking for workers or the boom in subsidized housing construction, both of which derive from government funding. The role of the central government in development in Tibet, moreover, is especially important because, unlike the rest of China, where the need for migrant labor was and is still driven predominately by the development of industry and manufacturing, in Tibet it is almost entirely dependent on government investment. The new paradigm, therefore, in this sense has clearly been made possible by China's large program of developing Tibet.

## Conclusion

This paper has examined the rapid shift from a predominately agricultural economic system to a system where earning non-farm income has become the dominant economic strategy. Using longitudinal data collected through

fieldwork conducted eight years apart in 1997–98 and 2006–07, the paper has shown that by the end of 2005, nine in 10 households and 67% of all males ages 20–39 were earning non-farm income. In Sogang, the poorest village, this represented a 56% increase in households sending a member for income during the eight-year interval, and in the middle village, Norgyong, a 110% increase. Rural Tibet today, therefore, is anything but static. Tibetan households believe, correctly we suggest, that they are now immersed in a complex and difficult market economy in which agriculture alone cannot produce the income they need to achieve the increasingly high standard of living they aspire to. They have responded by adopting a new paradigm in which non-farm income is seen as essential for improving their standard of living and are sending family members in unprecedented numbers to earn income. The farming households that became independent production units at decollectivization in the 1980s and focused their attention on securing higher yields from the fields they had just received, now still work hard to manage their fields but must also decide which members to send for income. These families must also make decisions about whether to try to secure better-paying jobs by making capital investments, e.g., by taking loans to buy trucks, minibuses, and so forth. Household management, therefore, has become much more complex than it was right after decollectivization because household heads must now manage members scattered in different areas, working at different jobs and staying away from the village for varying amounts of time, and in many cases sizable loans.

The adoption of the new paradigm saw substantial increases in our study villages in non-farm income between 1997–2006. By the end of 2005, non-farm income had become the largest proportion of overall household income. Small rural villages like the ones discussed in this paper now were earning between 650,000 yuan (\$85,800) and 2.3 million yuan (\$302,600) (see Table 6) from non-farm income. For the overwhelming majority of villagers, economic mobility achieved through going for income has never been so open and material life has never been so good, although to be sure many households still struggle to subsist.

Despite the overall positive impact of the new paradigm, the concomitant dependence on the income it has created raises important concerns about the long-term viability of this approach. Since the availability of jobs is the result of expensive large-scale government development projects (and not the growth of an independent Tibet manufacturing and industrial sector), a major question is whether the Chinese government will continue to fund Tibet at this level in the years ahead. Almost all the villagers we spoke with felt this would continue and they are probably correct, for two reasons. The substantial gain in income and material well-being represents a

striking success for the government's development priority of improving the rural standard of living in Tibet; this gain is also politically significant because it directly links the lives and well-being of rural Tibetans to the overall economy and society of China. However, it is also clear that a shift in priorities in Beijing could cause the bottom to quickly fall out from under the new rural economy.

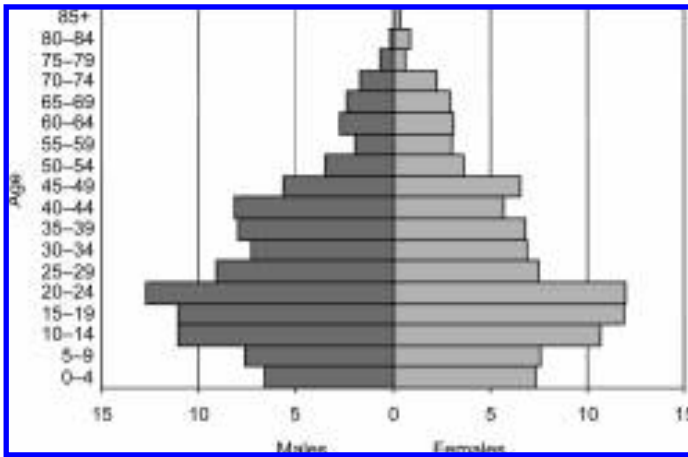
A second major concern is whether the exposure of large numbers of villagers to life outside of their village is having a negative impact on adherence to Tibetan traditions and customs. At present, our data suggest not. Although most villagers agree that the young who go for income are somewhat less respectful and more independent than today's elderly were when they were young, and although there are clearly important changes in intergenerational relations within extended families (this will be examined in a separate paper), our interviews also revealed that young and old villagers still had deep respect for and pride in their own social, cultural, linguistic, and religious traditions. The key rituals of social life such as marriage, the summer agricultural festival (Tibetan: *wongor*), visiting monasteries (Tibetan: *chönje*), inviting monks to do rituals and prayers in one's household, and the propitiation of local deities (Tibetan: *lhapsö*) in fact are becoming more elaborate because villager households now have more money to spend for such non-subsistence activities. Virtually no one we interviewed thought that this trend would change in the coming decades or that Tibetan culture would not be continued by the next generation. Given the changes villagers are experiencing, this continuity with traditional customs was striking.

Another potential future concern is the consequences of declining fertility. Rural Tibet is in the midst of a demographic transition, with the Total Fertility Rate<sup>19</sup> dropping from about five in 1980 to around two at present and with the majority of this change occurring over the past 10 years as contraceptive use became widely adopted. As Figure 1 shows, the result of this lower fertility has been a marked decrease in size of the youngest two age categories.<sup>20</sup> In the next decade, as these smaller cohorts become adults, this will begin to reduce household sizes and effective labor forces, creating a situation where heads of households will have fewer working age members to manage. This will exacerbate the current farm labor shortages caused

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19. The total fertility rate is a standardized measure of the average number of children that would be born to each woman in a population if age-specific fertility rates remain constant over time. It is used widely in demography to assess current levels of childbearing and to compare fertility across space and time.

20. Geoff Childs, Melvyn C. Goldstein, Ben Jiao, and Cynthia M. Beall, "Tibetan Fertility Transitions in China and South Asia," *Population and Development Review* 31:2 (2005), pp. 337-49.

FIGURE 1 *Age-Sex Composition in Sogang, Norgyong, and Betsag, 2006*

SOURCE: Goldstein, Childs, Beall, and Puchung, Socioeconomic Household Survey, 2006.

by so many young adults going out for income, creating difficult decisions for parents. For example, today it is common for families to have three children at home and be able to choose one or two sons to send for income and another son to stay at home to farm. However, in the not so distant future, parents may find themselves having to choose between keeping their only son at home to farm or sending him for income. This demographically generated labor squeeze is likely to be exacerbated because mandatory education is allowing some children to go on to junior and senior high school and attain lives off the farm. For example, for youths aged 15–20 in Norgyong and Sogang, 60% and 49.5%, respectively, had more than six years of education (junior high school or higher) in 2006, compared to just 14.3% and 6.7% in 1997. Similarly, others who go out for income are deciding they do not want to return to a life in the village. Both of these trends have begun, and by 2006, roughly 15% of males ages 25–39 had separated from their households.

The villagers we studied understand that this is a new world and there is no going back. For them, the future, on the one hand, means adapting further to the new rural paradigm by enhancing skills to secure better paying jobs while on the other hand developing social mechanisms to organize families more effectively under changing circumstances. The farmers in our study villages, old and young alike, have experienced tremendous

changes but have adapted well to these and now feel confident that *if* government policies concerning economic development and the practice of Tibetan culture/religion are continued, they can both compete successfully in today's economy for non-farm income and maintain their traditional cultural values and customs.<sup>21</sup> And, of course, if government policies changed in a positive sense and actively gave job/contract preference to rural Tibetans through set-aside programs, the level of economic success and standard of living would rise exponentially. It is too early to say how all this will play out in the future, but it seems likely that the coming decade will see changes as dramatic as those we have shown for the past decade.

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21. Although current religious policy allows Tibetans to practice religion as they wish as individuals, there are still government limitations on the size and organization of monasteries and nunneries as well as on public displays of photos of the Dalai Lama.