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## PHOTO ESSAY: TIBETAN WOMEN MAKE BUTTER AND CHEESE IN SUMMER

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### ABSTRACT

This photo essay is based on a documentary film<sup>1</sup> of a woman's daily life in a herding area in G.yang shar (Yaxiu) Village, G.yu dkar 'om lung (Yikewulan) Township, Rkang tsha (Gangcha) County, Mtsho byang (Haibei) Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture, Mtsho sngon (Qinghai) Province, PR China. The photos feature milking yaks and making and selling butter and cheese.

### KEYWORDS

pastoral Tibetan women, Tibetan women dairy, G.yang shar

### INTRODUCTION.

This photo essay focuses on milking yaks and making butter and cheese in G.yang shar (Yaxiu) Village, G.yu dkar 'om lung (Yikewulan) Township, Rkang tsha (Gangcha) County, Mtsho Byang (Haibei) Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture, Mtsho sngon (Qinghai) Province, PR China. Rkang tsha is located three hours by bus northeast of Zi ling (Xining) City, the capital of Mtsho sngon Province. In Rkang tsha County, the population of 29,000 is seventy percent Tibetan. There are also Han, Mongolian, Hui, Dongxiang, and other ethnic residents.<sup>2</sup>

Mtsho sngon po is the largest saline lake in China and is sacred to many Tibetans. It is a popular tourist destination, boosting the tourism industry in surrounding areas, including Rkang tsha County, which must be passed through when circumambulating Mtsho sngon po.

G.yang shar Village is a herding area where people raise yaks, sheep, and horses. Most locals have three separate pastures – winter, summer, and spring-autumn. Many young people attend

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<sup>1</sup> <https://archive.org/details/dolmas-film> 27 April 2023.

<sup>2</sup> <https://bit.ly/3KTlopQ> 27 April 2023.

government schools, which has led many locals to move to the county or township towns. While most sell their livestock to earn income, men also work on construction sites, and women work in Chinese and Muslim restaurants.

Local life is changing rapidly. Young people are increasingly distant from pastoral life. Tshe mdo's daily life is an example of local women's life in G.yang Shar (Yaxiu) Village, G.yu dkar 'om lung (Yikewulan) Township, Rkang tsha (Gangcha) County, Mtsho byang (Haibei) Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture, Mtsho sngon (Qinghai) Province in 2023.

FIG 1. Fences divide autumn pastures between families. Locals use *rna skud*<sup>1</sup> 'ear tags' to distinguish their yaks. My family uses red wool ear tags to ensure our yaks can be easily identified and separated when they mix with other families' yaks. Every yak and calf has *ske thug*<sup>2</sup> with *cha ru*<sup>3</sup> that can tie them to '*dogs thag*,<sup>4</sup> which tie on *rdang*.<sup>5</sup> The two *rdang* ends are tied with *phur ba*.<sup>6</sup> Female yaks and calves are tied separately to ensure the calves don't nurse their mothers.

Rdo b+he (b. 2015) is a primary school student. He untied every calf for his mother, Tshe mdo. After a calf had nursed for a short time, he pulled it away and tied it to the tether rope so his mother could milk the milk yak. This is a daily morning task that Rdo b+he does during the summer holiday. Many children from herding areas live in cities and experience different lives.

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<sup>1</sup> *Rna skud* are ear tags locals make with colorful wool to distinguish yaks. Family yaks have ear tags of various color and sizes.

<sup>2</sup> A *ske thug* is a soft rope made from sheep wool and yak hair tied around a yak's neck.

<sup>3</sup> A *cha ru* is a small, short stick connected to a *ske thug*. A knot is easily tied to the '*dogs thag*.

<sup>4</sup> A '*dogs thag* is a short rope that ties yaks to a *rdang*.

<sup>5</sup> A *rdang* is a rope. Its length depends on the number of yaks. Many '*dogs thag* are tied to *rdang*. Adult yaks and calves are tied with *rdang* separately. *Rdang* for calves are *be'u rdang*. *Rdang* for adult yaks are *nor rdang*.

<sup>6</sup> A *phur ba* is a wooden stick in the earth. They support the *rdang*.



FIG 2. Tshe mdo (right) began milking when she was fourteen and never attended school. Local neighbor women have a strong sense of helping each other. Especially in summer, they help each other milk the yaks, Tshe mdo milks about forty yaks, which takes about four hours when she milks by herself. She usually gets up at five AM if nobody helps her. If there is a helper, only two hours are required. Some strong female yaks give birth at the beginning of Spring. Most give birth in late Spring or early summer.



FIG 3. A neighbor, Dar skyid, hobbles a yak's forelegs to ensure the

yak is easier and safer to milk. Some yaks require both the hindlegs and forelegs to be hobbled, while others only need either their forelegs or hindlegs hobbled. Hobbling prevents yaks from kicking, which may spill the milk in a bucket. This is especially true for milking *thul ma* 'female yak that experienced a first birth'. Locals say the quantity of a *thul ma*'s milk depends on who milked it the first time. Ideally, the milker should be an experienced woman with good milking skills. Such a woman can teach *thul ma* good habits. For example, the *thul ma* will not require hobbling later. We also tie sheep wool to a *thul ma*'s tail, hoping the *thul ma* will have more milk.



FIG 4. Tshe mdo unties the yak's hobble after milking it.





FIG 5. The yak nurses twin calves. Usually, we don't milk mother yaks with twin calves because the milk produced by the mother yak is not enough to feed both calves if we milk it every day. Locals believe it is a good sign for a family's prosperity when their livestock gives birth to twin calves.



FIG 6. After milking, we untied all the yaks with their calves. Before we milked yaks in the morning and at night during the summer, we separated calves from their mothers. Local kids herded calves all day to keep them away from their mothers. This changed around 2020, with locals milking yaks once a day. That also made it easier for most children who don't need to herd calves during the day.



FIG 7. Tshe mdo helps Rdo b+he tether a calf after it nurses its

mother. Some calves are stronger than Rdo+be, making it difficult for him to tie them by himself. Calves might choke while nursing if their neck ropes are pulled too strongly.



FIG 8. Tshe mdo milks a yak. Sometimes her husband helps her tether calves if he is free, which saves a lot of time when she is milking.





FIG 9. Tshe mdo pours milk into a white bucket. After she milks all the yaks, there are more than two buckets of milk. Part of the milk was used for milk tea and to make butter and cheese.



FIG 10A. Rdo b+he waits to untie the next calf while Dar skyid milks.



FIG 10B. After milking, Tshe mdo pours milk into a pot that will be heated, the first process in making butter and cheese. This is her daily summer work. The boiling process takes about one hour.



FIG 11. Tshe mdo stirs the milk as it boils to ensure it does not scorch.





FIG 12 After boiling the milk, hot milk is poured into the milk separator to ensure that unclean particles do not mix with milk, such as yak hair or yak dung. A piece of gauze is usually placed on top of the milk separator; milk is usually poured into the milk separator with a water scoop. The white part pours from the milk separator is buttermilk; the yellow is butter. It takes about one hour to separate buttermilk and butter.



FIG 13. Tshe mdo pours hot milk into the milk separator.



FIG 14. The milk separator separates buttermilk and butter.



IG 15. Tshe mdo squeezes buttermilk from the butter and puts the butter into another pot with cold water, preventing the butter from melting.



FIG 16. Tshe mdo kneads the butter.



FIG 17. Tshe mdo slaps the butter with her right palm. She uses her left hand to take turns to be sure she slaps every side of the butter to ensure less water is in the butter.





FIG 18. Tshe mdo separates the butter in the pot with cold water. The basin (right) has two globs of butter with water slapped out.



FIG 19. Tshe mdo washes the milk separator daily.





FIG 20. To release the water from the butter, Tshe mdo holds a slab of butter bigger than her fist in her left palm and slaps it with her right hand, making sure she slaps every side of the butter. She slaps the butter until there is no more water in the butter.



FIG 21. Tshe mdo stirs the buttermilk.



FIG 22. After boiling the buttermilk, Tshe mdo pours it through a filter.



FIG 23. After straining out the whey, she pours cheese into a pot.



FIG 24. Tshe mdo dries cheese the same day she removes it from the buttermilk. It spoils if kept in a tent or house. If the weather cooperates (high enough temperatures), the cheese needs only two days to dry.



FIG 25. Tshe mdo sold butter and cheese to a county store in late autumn. She kept some butter and cheese for her family's daily consumption of milk tea, and yogurt. Selling forty kilograms of butter and fifty kilograms of cheese meant she earned 10,000 RMB in 2023.



When I was about seven, my maternal grandmother, Rta b+ho, said, "Women's house chores are never done; even if you finish them all today, you will have to start over tomorrow." I didn't understand this until I got older and did house chores alone.

I asked Grandmother questions while she was doing house chores, especially while she was making butter, e.g., "Why are we making butter and cheese in summer, not in winter?"

This was a favorite question because she would respond with a story:

Long ago, there was only summer. Livestock had enough grass to eat, the grass never turned yellow, water never froze, women made butter and cheese daily, and people ate yogurt and drank milk daily. People were satisfied because they had a continuous supply of food. But then two groups of women fought, hitting each other with butter. The local mountain deity noticed this and punished those people with four seasons to educate them to cherish butter and cheese. Consequently, we make as much butter and cheese as possible in summer. If we don't work hard in summer, we won't have enough butter and cheese in winter.



Grandmother also said her first mother was her biological mother, and her second mothers were the female yaks she milked because she drank endless milk.

Grandmother was busy every summer milking twenty yaks from five to seven AM, boiling the milk, and then making butter and cheese, which might have required a whole afternoon.

I also had the daily duty of tying and untying calves while Grandmother was milking. After we untied the milk yaks, I herded them to the mountain. The calves remained tied until I herded their mothers to the other side of the mountain to ensure they wouldn't return quickly to nurse their calves.

Some yaks were strongly attracted to their calves and didn't want to be separated. Sometimes when I herded them to the middle of the mountain, they ran back to the yak enclosure, looking for their calves, especially some yaks that had recently given birth. I spent a lot of energy chasing them and sometimes angrily threw pebbles at them. Grandmother scolded me when she saw this.

When I returned home, Grandmother boiled milk, gave me bread, and poured a bowl of milk for me. I dipped my right index finger in the milk, spread a little on my forehead, and enjoyed thinking it was the most delicious food in the world. I dared not waste even a little because Grandmother said milk was precious to those calves who shared the milk with us.

I played with neighbor kids who were also herding calves after I herded calves to the opposite side of the mountain. Sometimes I focused on playing and didn't immediately notice some female yaks return to nurse their calves. When I saw them, I ran as quickly as I could, chasing those yaks with their calves, but they ran here and there, and sometimes I could not separate them. When Grandmother milked yaks in the evening, she noticed that some female yaks had very little milk and then scolded me.

## CONCLUSION

Many things have value at a particular time for certain people. Some young people today with family roots in herding life may question the worth of this photo essay as they now value cars, houses, and

money and do not depend on the livelihood earned from herding and making animal products such as butter and cheese. Some of my childhood peers are unlikely to return to herding because of social pressure. Furthermore, many youths who attend school and go on to seek careers in towns and cities may not participate in the life this essay portrays and, therefore, may have a limited understanding of their elders' lives.

In recording these details, I present the herding life of a local woman in 2022 and encourage others to do the same to record these disappearing stories of Tibetan pastoral life.

## TIBETAN TERMS

'dogs thag འདོགས་ཐག

be'u rdang བེའུ་རང་།

cha ru ཇ་རུ།

dar skyid དར་སྒྱིད།

g.yang shar གཡང་ཤར།

g.yu dkar 'om lung

གཡུ་དཀར་འོམ་ལུང་།

mtsho byang མཚོ་བྱང་།

mtsho sngon མཚོ་སྒོན།

mtsho sngon po མཚོ་སྒོན་པོ།

nor rdang རྩོད་རང་།

phur ba ཕུར་བ།

rdang རང་།

rdo b+he རྩོ་ཐེ།

rkang tsha རྩང་ཇ།

rna skud རྩ་སུད།

rta b+ho རྩ་ཐོ།

ske thug སྐེ་ཐུག

thul ma ཐུལ་མ།

tshe mdo ཇེ་མདོ།

## CHINESE TERMS

Dongxiang 东乡

Gangcha 刚察

Haibei 海北

Han 汉

Hui 回

Qinghai 青海

Yaxiu 压秀

Yikewulan 伊克乌兰