

PHA YUL: AN ANALYSIS OF GRASSLAND MANAGEMENT POLICIES IN AMDO-QINGHAI

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Abstract

This article does not aim to reconstruct the semantic evolution of *pha yul*. Rather, it seeks to retrace the evolution of the land management policies implemented by the Chinese government, through the study of the current polysemy of this concept. I will study the word *pha yul* analysing its multiple meanings, the different ways in which it is used and the articulation of these different meanings in light of recent political transformations and grassland management policies. This paper is based on data collected during ethnographic fieldwork between 2009 and 2010. I base the analysis on the example of two families of Tibetan herders relocated in a new settlement in the Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture of mTsho lho (Chinese: Hainan) in Qinghai province. In the first part of the article, their life trajectories and survival strategies since the 1980s are discussed in relation to an analysis of transformations in land management policies and the concept of phayul. In the last part of the article, I will retrace the history of a number of heterogeneous land management policies – ranging from environmental protection to economic development – which have been implemented since the 1980s. Their succession and overlapping has deeply influenced herders' pastoral activities and their ways of exploiting regional resources. To a certain degree, these policies started social and economic transformations which actually met (and continue to meet) political, as well as environmental and economic aims of the Chinese government. Certain current uses of the word *pha yul* underline this trend. Nevertheless, others uses of this word highlight another kind of transformation, briefly analysed in the last part of the article: the rhetoric of Tibetan nationalism also uses the word *pha yul* to indicate the 'fatherland' of all Tibetans, claiming that it is big as or even greater than the entire Tibetan Plateau.

KEYWORDS: phayul, new settlements, grassland management.

Tibetan pastoralists living in Amdo (Qinghai Province, People's Republic of China, PRC) use the word *pha yul* to designate concepts which are semantically distant, but still maintain some common characteristics. The definition of *pha yul* found in the dictionary is 'one's birthplace'.¹ Yet this notion of

1. 'pha yul ni rang skyes pa'i yul' (*dGa yig gsar bsgrigs [New Tibetan Dictionary]*), 1989: 481).

one's place of origin has important political implications for both the PRC government and Tibetan pastoralists using this word. In Amdo-Qinghai, the different ways of using this term are interlinked with issues of grassland management. Through an analysis of different uses of the term *pha yul*, this article will reconstruct the evolution of land management policies in the context of the rapid economic changes of the last few decades, culminating in the recent relocation of Tibetan pastoralists to new settlements. I will study the impact of these policies on pastoral activities and, in turn, Tibetans' representations of the grasslands. I focus in particular on two questions: (1) What can the different uses of *pha yul* tell us about the current political context of Amdo-Qinghai and grassland management practices? (2) To what extent does this stem from the impacts of land management policies on the pastoral activities in Amdo-Qinghai over the last thirty years?

This article does not aim to reconstruct the semantic evolution of *pha yul*. Rather, it seeks to trace the evolution of the PRC government's land management policies by studying the different contemporary uses of this word. The multiple meanings of *pha yul* are thus analysed in terms of the different ways in which the term is used and the articulation of these different meanings in light of recent political transformations and grassland management policies. This paper is based on data collected during ethnographic fieldwork between 2009 and 2010.² The analysis is based on fieldwork among Tibetan pastoralists relocated in a new settlement within the Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture of *mTsho lho* (Chinese: *Hainan*), Qinghai Province. In the first part of the article, the life trajectories and survival strategies of two families are discussed in relation to transformations in land management policies and the concept of *pha yul* since the 1980s. In the latter part of the article, I outline the history of a number of heterogeneous land management policies since the 1980s – ranging from environmental protection to economic development – which have deeply influenced pastoral activities and resource exploitation. To a certain degree, these policies precipitated the social, economic and environmental transformations sought by the PRC government. Certain current uses of the word *pha yul* reflect these changes. Nevertheless, others uses of this word highlight another kind of transformation, namely its use to emphasise Tibetan nationalism by linking land, lineage and legitimacy. The rhetoric of Tibetan nationalism, in fact, uses the word *pha yul* to indicate the 'fatherland' of all Tibetans, claiming an area as large or even greater than the entire Tibetan Plateau.

2. The Tibetan names of herders are pseudonyms. I have spelled names as they are pronounced in Amdo-Tibetan.

Pha Yul: Political declinations of a concept

In September 2010, I returned to the new settlement where I had lived for several months in 2009. I visited a household of pastoralists with whom I had developed close relationships, because I had lived in their house during my first stay in the settlement. The household consists of four people: a couple with two children attending the school in the nearby county town. That day I found only the father at home, Jigdo, a man of about forty years old.³ We chatted while we waited for his wife to come home. Some months earlier, he had seriously injured his right hand and was no longer able to work on the construction sites where he had previously been employed. He was thus spending his time at home sewing clothes and taking care of his niece since Jigdo's younger sister had started to work on a construction site adjacent to the settlement. Employing a recurrent expression in this region, I asked him if he did want to return to his *pha yul* now that he could no longer work in construction. Jigdo's astonished reply was: 'No, now I like living here. My *pha yul* is both there [on the grassland] and here, too!'

This answer is emblematic of the different meanings and uses of the term *pha yul*. As it is, the dictionary definition of *pha yul* does not correspond to its contemporary usage. Jigdo did not associate the word with the region where he was born, but rather with the place he considered to be his 'home'.⁴ According to the contexts in which it is used, the meaning that Tibetan pastoralists give to *pha yul* changes considerably, albeit staying within a relatively close semantic frame.⁵ Moreover, these multiple and shifting uses have political implications that dynamically reflect the articulation and implementation of government strategies with respect to grassland management in Amdo-Qinghai.

Pha yul consists of two syllables: the first, *pha*, means 'father' or 'ancestor'; the second, *yul*, means 'region' or 'place'. Nevertheless, *yul* in Amdo dialect

3. The meaning of 'home' attributed to *pha yul* should not be understood as the 'territoire d'attache' (IRAM, 2009). The meaning of 'home' attributed to *pha yul* is relatively recent. Moreover, the kind of pastoralism practiced by the Tibetan herders of this region is based on three regular migrations each year between three different pastures. Consequently, referring to the *pha yul* as the 'territoire d'attache' in the case of the Tibetan herders of this region is not suitable.
4. In my use of the phrase 'Tibetan herders', I refer to the Tibetan women and men whom I personally met during ethnographic fieldwork.
5. The use of the term 'clan' or 'tribe' is not a suitable translation for the terms *tsho ba* and *sde ba*, the political organisations of the Tibetan herders. To avoid any confusion, in this article I use the word *tsho ba* as it is pronounced, i.e. *tsowa*, rather than the word 'clan' or 'tribe'. For an analysis of the sociopolitical organisation of Tibetan herders, see Clarke (1989).

also has other meanings. Pastoralists used it to designate their 'home' (*yul la e 'gro*: 'are you going home?'). It was also employed in some composite words, such as 'domestic work' (*yul las*). At the same time, *yul* can have the meaning of 'hometown' in the following combinations: local dialect (*yul skad*), custom (*yul srol*), territorial deity (*yul bdag/yul lha*) and native (*yul myi*). *Pha yul* is thus the territory of the ancestors and the father, the family home and one's hometown. It evokes semantic variations on the same theme (i.e. the place where the pastoralist lives), which range from one's private 'home' to the public and politically complex concept of 'hometown'. When pastoralists used it in the latter sense, *pha yul* took on different nuances depending on whether they were talking about their grassland, their hometown or their *sde ba*'s territory.⁶

The most common use of *pha yul* refers to the plot of grassland used by the pastoralists since the 1990s, i.e. it corresponds with the territory shared between the members of one family. Another common use describes the pastoralist's hometown, i.e. the region where the individual was born or where her family came from. Tibetan pastoralists living in the new settlements also employed this concept to designate the place where they currently live, both the grasslands and their house in the new settlement. Moreover, *pha yul* also designated the territory of the *sde ba* before the arrival of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) in the region. This points to an additional meaning of the term: *pha yul* can also be used with a larger and politically more charged meaning, i.e. 'fatherland'. Tibetan pastoralists used *pha yul* more frequently than 'nation' (*rgyal khab*). For example, they used *pha yul* when they asked me 'when will you go back in your country?' or 'where is your country?' One of the few times that they used the word nation (*rgyal khab*) was on formal occasions, i.e. in presence of government officials, or when I did not understand what they were saying. This final use of *pha yul*, as I will show in the last part of the article, has had an important impact upon the current political environment in Tibetan regions.

With these semantic variations of *pha yul* in mind, the next section analyses the political context in which the term is used and addresses its mutability in PRC land management policies over the last three decades.

From the grasslands to the new settlements

Pastoralism has changed considerably in Amdo-Qinghai since the 1980s. When the People's Communes were disbanded (late 1970s, early 1980s), pastoralists

6. The family of Apa Kere is composed of fourteen members: Apa Kere; his wife; an older son (29 years old) with his wife and three children; an older daughter (27 years old) with her husband and two children; a younger daughter (25 years old) with her child; and a younger son (22 years old).

in Amdo-Qinghai once again became owners of their livestock and managers of their allocated grassland. The effects of these changes can be observed in the experiences of one family.

I met Apa Kere and his family for the first time in 2009.⁷ He lived in a new settlement with his wife and younger daughter, the single mother of a baby which was only a few months old. The older son lived with his household on the family's grassland while the older daughter lived with her household in her husband's hometown. The younger son was a monk living in a monastery in Gansu Province. The dispersal of this family started only during the 1990s. Why did this family fragment into smaller units? What did *pha yul* mean to them?

This family's hometown (one of the meanings of *pha yul*) was in a rural area of *mTsho lho* Prefecture, previously belonging to the *tsho ba* of *Nya nag*, which is part of the *sde ba* of *dGon gong ma*. The family of Apa Kere, together with the other families composing their *ru skor*, exploited three pastures between which they moved according to the season and the altitude of the grassland.⁸ The locations of encampments were decided in advance by the chief (*dpon po*) or the elders' assembly of the *tsho ba*, and then later by the local authorities of the PRC government. Nevertheless, pastoralists were not obliged to establish their encampment in the same place each year. If they considered another place in the assigned area to be more suitable, they could camp there.

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7. The Tibetan word of *rukor* (*ru skor*) is defined as 'the name of a big family of herders which camp in the same circle' (*New Tibetan Dictionary*, 1989) and is usually translated as 'encampment'. The two syllables composing this word describe the basic features of this 'encampment'. The word *ru* is closely linked to the pastoral activities and is defined as the 'place of the herders' or the 'village of the herders'. Nevertheless, the origin of this word is uncertain; Clarke (1989) asserts that this word derives from the Mongol military division of 'banners'. The second syllable, *skor*, means simply 'circle' and is linked to the shape of these encampments. Tents are arranged in a circle, and one's family's links are spatially represented by the proximity of tents. To protect them at night, livestock are placed in the middle of this circle of tents. The *rukor* represented the smallest unit of Tibetan herders' social organisation, with only the tent (i.e. the household) under this level. The *rukor* continued to exist during the collectivisation period, becoming units under the production teams (Clarke, 1989). The *rukor* generally comprised a few families distributed in several tents/households, which expanded as a family grew until they divided into another tent/household. Pastoral labour linked the members of the *rukor* together. Herders in a *rukor* reciprocated labour, and moved between seasonal camps together.
8. The older sister explained to me that, if she had taken her part of the livestock, the herd would have been insufficient to fulfil her household needs. At the same time, she would have reduced the livestock herds of her brothers and sister, preventing them from meeting their household needs, too. Moreover, her husband had not received pastures, leaving them no place to herd livestock, so they would have been obliged to sell them.

They stayed for the longest period at the winter grassland (*dgun sa*), which was located at the lowest altitude of the three assigned grazing areas. Pastoralists arrived at the beginning of autumn, generally in September, and lived there for about seven months. At the end of winter (April), the pastoralists left for the summer grassland (*dbyar sa*), located at the highest altitude, where they stayed for four months. When autumn arrived, they first moved to an intermediate grassland (*bar sa*). They remained on this pasture only one month, generally during August, and then moved back to the winter grassland. The migrations were usually carried out by all members of the *ru skor* together, though they were not obligated to do so: a household could move earlier or later than others without causing any problem if they received permission from the chief and elders' assembly.

According to Tibetan pastoralists, these practices generally continued after the arrival of the CCP until livestock and production tools were collectivised in 1958. In fact, the administrative divisions introduced by the new PRC government usually kept the previous social and territorial divisions of *ru skor*, *tsho ba* and *sde ba*, which corresponded to the 'production teams' (Chinese: *xiaodui*), 'production brigade' (Chinese: *dadui*) and 'commune' (Chinese: *gongshe*). When the People's Communes were disbanded, Apa Kere's family once again had control over their livestock, but they initially continued to move with the other members of their *ru skor* between the three pastures in their *pha yul*. Apparently, the situation reverted to that which preceded collectivisation. The grasslands, however, were then divided into plots and redistributed between households. This division profoundly changed both pastoral and political practices. Prior to the collectivisation, Tibetan pastoralists in Amdo owned their livestock, which effectively constituted family wealth, but they did not possess grasslands. They exploited the land together with the members of their *ru skor*; but land was under the jurisdiction of local powers, i.e. monasteries, Mongol and Tibetan nobility, and the Hui warlord of family Ma.

After the People's Communes were disbanded, pastoralists initially ignored government instructions to exploit only their assigned plot of grassland; they continued to move as before. The joint ownership of the grasslands not only corresponded to the traditional pastoral production system, but was also linked to a pre-1950s political model in which local monasteries and nobility controlled land resources. The division of this territory (their *pha yul*) to the household level not only triggered transformations in Tibetan nomads' systems of production, but also catalysed political changes and frictions.⁹

During the 1980s, the family of Apa Kere received 235 *mu* (15.66 hectares)

9. Houses in the new settlement could be bought only by herders living in the region involved in the government's relocation project.

of grassland located in their traditional summer pastures. Nevertheless, they kept moving between their three pastures until the 1990s, when fencing was widely implemented. At this point, they finally built a brick shelter and a shed for their livestock in the assigned pasture. They also began to fence their pasture and to cultivate fodder in a small plot of 35 *mu* (2.33 hectares) on their land. These plots of land slowly became 'home' for Apa Kere and his family, their 'new' *pha yul*.

Since Apa Kere's land comprised only summer pastures, it was not suitable for the livestock to graze on throughout the year. When Apa Kere's family settled on this pasture, they considerably reduced the size of their herd: the pasture was not large enough to support a herd as large as they once managed. Apa Kere affirmed that, had they not made this decision, not only would the livestock have eventually starved, but the grass would not have recovered, resulting in the overexploitation of the soil. Apa Kere's family also had to devise new strategies for exploiting this pasture. They not only fenced the external borders but, reproducing the division between winter and summer pastures, they divided their plot of grassland in two. The north side of mountains usually became the summer grassland and the south side, exposed longer to the sun, was exploited during the winter, while the other half rested.

Nevertheless, when Apa Kere's family reduced the size of their herd, they quickly understood that their animals could no longer fulfil their family's needs and that they needed to find new resources. Another consequence of this reduction in herd size was that the number of people needed for pastoral activities was considerably reduced. The family thus divided into several small units. These units were engaged in different tasks while continuing to share in both pastoral products and cash incomes. Those family members who remained on the grassland – i.e. the household of the older son – furnished the other members with milk products, meat, wool and dung for fuel. The household of the older daughter moved to the hometown of her husband, located halfway between their grassland and the township. They did not find employment in this village, nor did her husband own livestock. He occasionally found temporary work or helped his wife and brother-in-law in pastoral activities on the family's grassland. When his family split, Apa Kere divided his wealth – the livestock – between his children, but this division has never been effective. In reality, the older son alone cares for the livestock, assisted by his sister and her husband.¹⁰ Other members of the family no longer directly occupied with pastoral activities moved according to the employment opportunities available in their county's construction sites, and regularly returned to help the older son on the grassland.

10. The new administrative divisions also lost the traditional Tibetan names used by local people to refer to these territories (see Yeh, 2003).

Apa Kere habitually received visits from his children, who brought him their incomes. He redistributed the money between all of the households in the family. The only member of the family who did not work was the younger son. At a very young age, he was sent to the monastery where their family lama (*bla ma*) lived. Apa Kere was very proud of having a son who is a monk and the family kept a picture of this young man on the home's altar, together with their holy images. The younger daughter, Karantso, spent her childhood on the grassland. Nevertheless, in 2000, when she was fifteen years old, her parents decided to send her to look for a work in the township. Karantso found employment as a waitress in a Tibetan restaurant. She earned a small salary and the restaurant owner covered her food and accommodation expenses: she could eat the restaurant food and sleep on a sofa in the restaurant. Shortly after Karantso moved to the township, her parents also decided to move there in order to look for work. They rented a small room (sixty yuan per month), but the rent was too expensive for them. When the district government invited the herders from their original township to buy a house in the new settlement at a very advantageous price, Apa Kere decided to invest. He sold a portion of his herd, took a loan from the bank and bought two new houses in the settlement. He then moved there with his wife and, shortly afterwards, Karantso also moved into her parents' house. The older sister's household did not use the other house even though they officially declared they would do so when they bought it.¹¹ Instead, it was rented to a county town household, allowing Apa Kere's family to earn some income.

As a consequence of the grassland management policies introduced since the 1980s, Apa Kere's family had few choices other than moving to the urban centres and looking for work to fulfil the household's needs. The family's division into several units was also precipitated by these policies. The ways in which Apa Kere's family used the word *pha yul* illustrate these transformations. They rarely employed *pha yul* to refer to their hometown. Instead, they used it to refer to their pasture, which was located in the territory from which they came but, more importantly, it was considered to be 'their' pasture, their home.

Grassland management policies and the transformation of pastoralism since the 1980S

The trajectory followed by the family of Apa Kere serves as a microcosm of the transformations of pastoralism in Amdo-Qinghai since the 1980s. Over the

11. The southeastern part of Qinghai Province has seen a number of territorial conflicts precipitated by the grassland divisions of the 1980s (see Yeh, 2003; Pirie, 2005).

last thirty years, the government has implemented a series of land use policies, but I focus here only on those that have catalysed major changes in grassland management practices of Tibetan pastoralists in Qinghai Province.

The end of collectivisation produced important transformations at both the administrative level and at the level of local grasslands – the *pha yul* of the herders. The People's Communes were eliminated by 1983, and the provincial government replaced them with the current administrative divisions of the village/hamlet (*cun*) and township (*xiang*). This entailed the reconfiguration of previous territorial divisions. The *cun* and *xiang* did not correspond with the ancient territorial divisions known by the pastoralists, which were typically maintained during the collectivisation period. These had constituted a blend of territories either belonging to different political entities or being exploited by different political entities at different times of the year. No border concretely delimited these divisions, but pastoralists knew the extent of their *sde ba* territory. The new administrative divisions did not respect these ancient borders, provoking several conflicts during the 1980s and 1990s between the pastoralists of different *sde ba* (Pirie, 2005).¹²

These conflicts raised the question of the legitimacy of *sde ba* over certain territories. During the administrative land reorganisation, for example, a portion of a territory previously belonging to a *sde ba* whose members were living in a certain district was assigned to the jurisdiction of the neighbouring district, where the members of another *sde ba* lived. The immediate consequence of this was that, having lost their land, it became impossible for the pastoralists of the first district to support their livestock. The pastoralists of the second district, who did not previously have exclusive grazing rights in this territory, were able, in turn, to exploit the first district's erstwhile pastures. In implementing this kind of territorial division, the Chinese authorities were not fully aware of the political import of these local organisational dynamics (or they simply ignored it). An old Tibetan man, the CCP Secretary (Chinese: *shuji*) of one new settlement, summed up these conflicts by saying:

More than twenty people have died. Here in our district, twelve people died and nine people in the other district ... And why have all these people died? Why did all these conflicts happen? Because the government has not established clear borders between the districts. This has provoked these events.

Locally, the government's division and allocation of pastoralists' *pha yul* was considered to be directly responsible for these land-related conflicts. Moreover, the pastoralists blamed the government for the persistence of these quarrels.

12. Fixed quotas for agro-pastoral production have been increased by 20% while quotas for agro-pastoral production have been increased by 50% (see Deng et al., 1996).

Specifically, the government was accused of not intervening at the right moment to quell the situation. However, the pastoralists also recognised that they were not inclined to turn to the Chinese authorities to settle this kind of conflicts: they preferred to turn to the descendants of *sde ba* and *tsho ba* chiefs, local influential people or lamas to resolve these conflicts.¹³

These administrative reorganisations have coincided with economic restructuring, which has transformed the pastoral production system and the use of grasslands. With the end of collectivisation and the implementation of private plots and rural markets in 1978, the central government augmented the quantity of fixed quotas.¹⁴ These measures were similar to those implemented at the beginning of the 1960s to address the economic crisis created by the Great Leap Forward, one of the consequences of which was serious economic losses for local economies. Trying to avoid these kinds of losses, the central government implemented a key political reform that heralded the return to private property: the Household Responsibility System (HRS). The household became the unit for the calculation of production and taxation and henceforth had a certain degree of autonomy vis-à-vis agricultural and pastoral co-operatives. Family units also became responsible for land management as well as their own production tools and products. Households still had to sell a part of the production to the State according to fixed prices, but they could autonomously decide how to allocate the surplus (if there was one). For example, the household could decide to keep the surplus income to meet the family's needs or to sell additional products in the market.

Each province decided how to implement the HRS. Local governments made decisions according to the kind of land within their jurisdiction – agricultural or pastoral. In Qinghai Province, the HRS was officially introduced in 1984, but the process of socioeconomic reorganisation had already started in 1979. Between 1979 and 1980, centrally-planned production in the People's Communes was interrupted, and each production team was permitted to autonomously manage production. While continuing to collect fixed quotas of production, local governments adopted two methods to cede pastoral management back to the pastoralists. Once the fixed quota was paid, pastoralists could decide how to use the surplus of their production and, in the case of livestock loss, could still be indemnified by the State. Pastoralists could choose to be completely autonomous

13. In June 1982, 95.7% of production teams in Qinghai Province adopted this system for managing production. Likewise, households in agricultural regions once again assumed responsibility for the integrity of the production cycle after 1983 (Deng et al., 1996).

14. In 1984, 428 People's Communes in Qinghai Province had been reconstituted as townships and, by 1985, 77.1% of the People's Communes had distributed livestock to herder households (Deng et al., 1996).

and not pay any quota to the State but, in the case of livestock loss, they would not receive any indemnity.¹⁵ Between 1984 and 1985, pastoralists were also supposed to assume responsibility for the entire cycle of pastoral production. The Qinghai government decided that the implementation of the HRS in pastoral areas implied the distribution of the grassland between the pastoralists' households. The grassland was thus divided at the level of the production team and later further subdivided between households.¹⁶ In this way, pastoral households became the managers of their own pasture lots based on long-term (thirty-year) leases. This also implied that the pastoralists were obliged to stay on their assigned plot of grassland and to cease migrating seasonally.

Two national laws addressing the management of the environment followed the introduction of the HRS: the Forestry Law (1984) and the Grassland Law (1985). These laws established an administrative framework to regulate the exploitation of land and natural resources in China as well as environmental protection guidelines (see Clarke, 1989; Yeh, 2005; Gruschke, 2008). Grassland division was not fully implemented during the first decade. The grasslands were assigned to households, but the pastoralists continued sharing them with other households belonging to their *ru skor*.¹⁷ Local authorities proceeded with the distribution of the grasslands, but they did not ask the pastoralists to transform their cycle of production or to stop migrating seasonally. Nevertheless, the land that was assigned to them during the 1980s Reforms has progressively become pastoralists' *pha yul*.

At the beginning of the 1990s, the PRC's government introduced a new programme, 'Four that form a complete set' (Chinese: *Sipeitao*), which aimed to improve the livelihood of pastoralists by financing improvements at the

15. For a summary of laws introduced since the 1980s concerning the grasslands of the Tibetan Plateau, see Bauer and Nyima (2010).

16. The first article of the Grassland Law states: 'This Law is enacted with a view to protecting, developing, and making rational use of grasslands; improving the ecological environment; maintaining the diversity of living things; modernizing animal husbandry; and promoting the sustainable development of the economy and society' (*Zhonghua Renmin Gongheguo Caoyuan fa*, 2002: Article 1). At the same time, the first article of the Forestry Law states: 'This Law is enacted with a view to protecting, cultivating and rationally exploiting forest resources; accelerating territorial afforestation; and making use of forests in water storage and soil conservation, climate regulation, environmental improvement and supply of forest products to meet the requirements of socialist construction and people's livelihood' (*Zhonghua Renmin Gongheguo Senlin fa*, 1998: Article 1).

17. Since the division of grasslands, disputes between herders' households have erupted frequently over disagreements about the borders of assigned grasslands (see Yeh, 2003).

household level.¹⁸ To access these funds, pastoralists had to fulfil the grassland management conditions established by the HRS and the *Sipeitao*. The pastoralists thus progressively settled on their assigned plots of grassland and implemented the measures demanded by the *Sipeitao*. They built sheds and houses, fenced the borders of their plots and cultivated fodder on their parcel. It was at this time that Apa Kere's family built their house and shed, and fenced their pasture.

The application of *Sipeitao* caused two major changes linked to pastoral practices. The policy aimed to progressively substitute the pastoralists' subsistence economy with a system of production that meets the needs of the market economy. The construction of houses and sheds, as well as the fencing and farming of pastures, promoted a kind of pastoralism grounded in market logic and intensification. The other transformation concerned social organisation. If the pastoralist economic system was based on the cyclic exploitation of the pastures, its social organisation was mainly based on the unit of the *ru skor*. The division of grasslands effectively ended this social unit, which had survived the previous collectivisation period. The division of the grasslands implied that each household was henceforth separated from the others, so that the pastoralists stopped relying on the forms of mutual aid entailed by membership in their *ru skor*. On the contrary, they had to base their survival solely upon the work of their family members. This was facilitated through the release of household labour with the end of seasonal migrations, which allowed family members to move to urban centres to look for other kinds of employment.

The division of the grassland also brought political changes. The division of the territories previously exploited by the *ru skor* meant that the territorial units of the *sde ba* once shared by households were no longer relevant. As such, households not only had to face the challenges of pastoral production on their own, but they were also, in effect, pitted against one another over the division of grasslands.¹⁹ The assignation of plots of grassland to single households thus isolated them from each other and contributed to the fragmentation of these ancient political organisations.

The HRS and the *Sipeitao* aimed to restructure property relations, giving pastoralists individual responsibility for the exploitation of their grasslands. Regardless, the Chinese authorities claimed that the grasslands of Amdo-Qinghai were increasingly being degraded (see Han et al., 2008). The government claimed that the division of the grassland would prevent overexploitation as well as address environmental problems (see Harris, 2010). According to some Chinese scientists, the natural conditions of the Tibetan Plateau contributed to grassland

18. On the difficulty of scientifically establishing the degree and extent of environmental problems on the Tibetan Plateau, see Harris (2010).

19. According to official data, 90% of Chinese grasslands are degraded and these areas are expanding at a rate of two hundred square kilometres per year (Harris, 2010).

degradation (see Wang, 2002; Tu et al., 2008). Yet, these ‘extreme’ natural conditions are not, *per se*, a new feature of the environment of the Tibetan Plateau. As such, the rise in pika populations – which is frequently cited by the government as a measure of degradation – is arguably a *consequence* rather than a *cause* of grassland degradation (Han et al., 2008: 235).

The Chinese authorities date the onset of grassland degradation to the 1960s, and attribute declining conditions to unsuitable exploitation practices. Degradation is rarely attributed to the disastrous Cultural Revolution-era initiatives that sought to increase farming lands by converting grasslands. Instead, the principal causes of grassland degradation are typically blamed on Tibetan pastoralists who use ‘backward’ (Chinese: *luohou*) practices in herding livestock. Pastoralists are thus seen as responsible for overexploiting and damaging the ecology because of their lack of skills and the fact that their pastoral activities are linked to religious practices that limit the optimal exploitation of the grassland (Han et al., 2008). Regardless, the Chinese authorities claimed that grassland degradation exponentially increased during the 1990s. According to official Qinghai Province data, the percentage of grasslands estimated to be degraded grew from seventeen per cent in 1990 to 39 per cent in 1999.²⁰ Though Qinghai’s grasslands were not considered to be overexploited at the beginning of the 1990s, by the end of this decade, thirty-one per cent of grasslands were described as ‘overexploited’ (see Guowuyuan bangongting, 2003; Zhongguo falü xinxiwang, 2008).

Once again, the responsibility for this degradation was attributed to the Tibetan pastoralists’ lack of skills. Pastoralists, however, think differently about this problem: they rarely talk about grassland degradation and, if they do, they use specific terms such as *brlag* (something that has been corrupted) or *btshog* (dirty), which they attribute to mining and its tailings, which have appeared during the last few decades. The pastoralists also notice that the grass grows slower than before, but according to them, the overexploitation was not caused by their inexperience or ‘backward’ pastoral practices. Instead, they believe that, current grassland problems have been caused by the difficulty of moving between different pastures since the fencing of their grasslands and by the fixing of production quotas. The pastoralists talked about ‘degradation’ of the grassland only when they discussed the presence of seasonal migrants, who come from the east regions of China to harvest the yartsa. According to them, these migrants damage the soil because they do not know how to collect this fungus.

20. This fungus is found only on the Tibetan Plateau and in the neighbouring Himalayas, and is known in Tibetan as *dbyar rtswa dgum* ‘bu (*dong chong xiao cao* in Chinese), which means ‘summer grass winter worm’. This fungus, usually called *yartsa* (*dyar rtswa*) or *bu* (‘*bu*) by Tibetans has the shape of a worm from which emerges a grass-like sporing structure (see Winkler, 2010).

Pastoralists have fenced their grasslands – now seen as their *pha yul* – and divided them into two kinds of pastures; they built houses and sheds on their land, and they have drastically reduced the size of their herds. In a word, they have become the responsible land managers envisioned by the government. Nevertheless, by the end of the 1990s, the Qinghai government reported that the Tibetan Plateau was experiencing increasing environmental problems, especially grassland degradation. In response, it created the Three Rivers' Sources Nature Reserve (Tibetan: *gTsang gsum mgo khungs*; Chinese: *Sanjiangyun*), subsequently followed by the 'converting pastures to grasslands' (Chinese: *tuimu huancao*) programme, which was applied not only in Qinghai, but also in Inner Mongolia, Gansu, Ningxia, Yunnan, Sichuan and Xinjiang (see Guowuyuan bangongting, 2003). Under this five-year programme, local governments were to determine target areas for 'converting pastures to grasslands' according to certain criteria meant to characterise the 'health' of the grassland. Local governments had to establish the size of the herd authorised on a given section of pasture, and forbid any kind of overexploitation. Local authorities could choose different methods to implement the programme, but the fencing of the grasslands was required to be finally completed. Then, according to the degree of grassland degradation, the local authorities were to designate certain areas as forbidden or as resting areas, or to establish a rotational scheme for grassland exploitation.²¹ The provincial government was also invited to delegate responsibility for the implementation of the programme to the lower ranks of the government.²² Moreover, the government committed itself to delivering financial compensation to pastoralists whose pastures were in areas affected by the grazing ban.²³ Even though the *tuimu huancao* gave local authorities responsibility for determining which pastures should be protected, the central government decided *a priori* that globally one hundred million *mu* of land would fall under the remit of the project (see Clarke, 1989). For the pastoralists whose grasslands were covered by the grazing ban, the Qinghai

21. In Qinghai Province, the government determined that, for each *mu* of confiscated land, it would give two and half kilograms of fodder and wheat annually to the herders affected by the ban. For fencing, the government established that, for each *mu* of fenced grassland, the cost was of about twenty yuan; 70% of this cost would be supported by the government (Guowuyuan bangongting, 2003).
22. In Qinghai, this project covered 15.4 million *mu* of land divided into three kinds of territory: (1) enclosures where grazing was completely forbidden; (2) grassland that would be rested for three to ten years; (3) grasslands where grazing was permitted, but pastures could be used only periodically and were to be rested during some periods of the year (Guowuyuan bangongting, 2003).
23. On the tactics adopted by individuals opposed to the strategies of the existing system of power, see De Certeau (1990: 50-67).

government implemented the 'Ecological Migration' project. New settlements were required to be built in the buffer zone of the nature reserve, in areas where grazing was only periodically banned, or in proximity to urban centres. By the end of the 1990s, the Qinghai government had abandoned the policy promoting household management of individual plots, shifting instead towards policies designed to move pastoralists away from the grasslands completely.

By drawing upon the experiences of the family of Apa Kere to reflect on the politics of changing land management in Amdo-Qinghai over the past 30 years, it becomes clear that there is a significant gap between the intention of governmental projects and their effective implementation. Regardless, the impact of these projects on pastoral activities, including their effects on social and political dynamics, was powerful. As discussed below, the use of *pha yul* took on two different antonymic meanings, which speak to these changes in grassland management. For Apa Kere's family, the obligation to remain in the assigned pasture entailed the adaptation of their pastoral activities, and when they talk about their *pha yul* these days, they refer to their household plot of grassland. As we have seen, government policies have also triggered a reduction in the size of Apa Kere's herd and the departure of family members to urban centres. In this context, then, what is the *pha yul* for pastoralists currently living in the new settlements?

The politics of land management in tibetan pastoralists' perception of *pha yul*

After the end of the People's Communes, the pastoralists of Amdo-Qinghai were once again owners of their livestock, but the government forced them onto small plots of grassland, which were not always suitable for grazing livestock (for example, Apa Kere's family received their traditional summer grazing grounds and Jigdo's family received their intermediate pastures). The pastoralists often had to sell significant numbers of their livestock, and finally they were obliged to leave the grassland, if their pastures fell within the zones designated as 'forbidden'. These changes had important consequences for their daily lives, pastoral activities, and livelihood strategies, as the case of Apa Kere's family underscores.

In addition to transforming grassland management, these new political programmes also had consequences at economic and sociopolitical levels, which can be traced in the uses and meanings attributed by pastoralists living in the new settlements to the concept of *pha yul*. Given the various meanings attributed to *pha yul* discussed thus far, for relocated pastoralists the word *pha yul* has two key antonymic meanings. The use of *pha yul* connoting 'home'

aligns with the objectives of governmental policies, i.e. the transformation of the grasslands into private ranches as well as the relocation and urbanisation of the pastoralists. Yet, the other meaning attributed to *pha yul* – ‘homeland’ – highlights something completely different and has important political connotations because of its affinity with the concept of ‘fatherland’.

Since the implementation of the HRS in the 1980s, *pha yul* with the meaning of ‘home’ refers to the grassland owned by the family group, a relatively new use of this term, which started with the changes to grassland management. The use of *pha yul* to denote the ‘family’s grassland’ reveals a semantic slippage of ‘homeland’ towards another meaning, that of *yul* (home), in Amdo Tibetan. The meaning has shifted from the grassland exploited by a family with a group of other families to the property of only one family. Grassland that previously belonged to the *sde ba* or monasteries has become atomised and individually managed by pastoral families. From the public domain of politics, grassland has entered into the private domain, which is linked to family strategies. This transformation has not been without consequences. The shift from the collective exploitation of pastures to family management of smaller private properties has catalysed the breakdown of traditional political organisations based on territorial sharing. This semantic evolution of *pha yul*, then, has responded to the government’s efforts to promote the exploitation of grassland as small property units and, concomitantly, the fragmentation of ancient local political units.

Household-level strategies, however, have acquired a new significance for pastoral families (see Agamben, 2005). As the importance of the *sde ba* decreased, the roles of the family expanded, especially in relation to conflicts over territorial divisions. This kind of conflict was quite common during the 1990s. Prior to the arrival of the CCP in Qinghai, families arranged marriages (whether uxrilocal or virilocal) with the aim of not dividing the family’s wealth (i.e. their livestock). When pastures also became a part of this patrimony, families had an interest in staying together so as not to divide either their livestock or land. Apa Kere officially divided the livestock between his children, but he left only his older son on his grassland, without actually dividing it, as this would have meant the loss of both land and livestock resources. The unity of the family had to be preserved in order to undertake new economic strategies, which included the relocation of some members into the new settlement. This quickly became another kind of *pha yul* (with the meaning of ‘home’) for the relocated pastoralists, even if they still kept a strong attachment to their grassland.

The majority of households in the new settlement where I conducted my fieldwork still owned their grassland, their old *pha yul*, where some members of their family have remained to look after the livestock. The most common strategy of these households was to relocate all the other family members to urban centres to look for work, investing in the purchase of a house in the new

settlement in order to enjoy state subsidies and proximity to schools. Their economic situation before the relocation helped determine their perspectives and strategies. Those households that had sold all their animals to buy a house in the new settlement generally lived under very unstable economic conditions. This continued in the settlement: they were completely dependent on state subsidies and took any kind of employment they could find. Moreover, since caterpillar fungus is not found in this region, they could not rely on this important alternative source of income. For members of these households, the return to the grasslands represented a dream of economic stability and self-sufficiency, as well as regrets over their decision to buy a house in the new settlement. For them, *pha yul* had become their house in the new settlement. The attitudes of those who still had family members living on the grassland with livestock differed according to their work skills beyond herding and their economic situation at the time of relocation. Those who did not have any technical skills could only find work as labourers. For them, returning to the grasslands is a quotidian need for basic products that provide for the family's subsistence in the new settlement. This was the case for the majority of the pastoralists I met during fieldwork. For those who still have some livestock on the grassland and who also have some technical skills, returning to the grassland was not such an urgent need. Rather, they either imagined it as a way to increase their social capital – their prestige and political role in the *sde ba* – or did not take it into account at all. In the latter case, family strategies focused on seeking relocation to the township proper, where living conditions were more comfortable than in the new settlement.

Those who moved regularly between two *pha yul* – the house in the new settlement and the grassland – represent the intermediate strata of pastoralists: those whose economic conditions were neither extremely precarious nor good enough to seriously consider abandoning animal husbandry. For these pastoralists, returning to the grasslands was first and foremost a need rather than a choice. The grassland remained the basis of their subsistence and in some way still constituted the family *pha yul*, understood as 'home'. For most of the relocated pastoralists in the new settlement, a definitive departure from the grassland was not possible, at least in the imminent future, with the exception of those who had achieved enough economic stability to allow them to think concretely about not returning to the grasslands.

For pastoralists, *pha yul* has become the 'home' in the sense of private family space, whether this is the house in the new settlement and/or the family's grassland. This shows the efficacy of state economic and political policies, which have transformed the pastoralists' perception of the grasslands in fewer than thirty years. Another common use of *pha yul*, however, reveals a semantic slippage, in a direction that contradicts the government. *Pha yul* is still perceived not only as 'homeland', but also as the territory of the *sde ba*. In this case, the semantic

extension of *pha yul* reaches a wider meaning corresponding to the concept of 'fatherland'. This connotation is contrary to the government's interests, but is nevertheless widely used, not only by pastoralists in the region, but also among Tibetan intellectuals in China and in the Diaspora (for example, the website linked to the Tibetan government in exile is 'phayul.com'). A brief example illustrates this semantic extension of the word *pha yul*. Jigdo represents one of the more audacious family strategies employed by the relocated pastoralists with whom I have interacted. According to the Property Law, since 2007, the pastoralists have obtained usufruct rights for long periods (about thirty years) over the grassland assigned to them during the HRS in the 1980s. They were able to finally dispose of these lands as they wished: they could lease their usufruct permit or rent land from others. Jigdo's dream was to earn enough money through his skills as a tailor to expand his family's land. He wanted first to buy the usufruct rights to the grassland closest to his assigned plot. Ultimately, he aimed to gain usufruct rights over the lands of his previous *tsho ba*. This was a very ambitious objective, and indicates that Jigdo considers the grasslands to be more than an important source of wealth: it also had political resonance. Jigdo did not simply want to increase his lands. He wanted to reconstitute the territory of his *tsho ba*, the entity through which he could establish a pre-eminent social and political role in his group. In this context, *pha yul* finally means both 'homeland' and 'home'.

Conclusion

This study of *pha yul* was inspired by the observation that the term is so commonly used by the pastoralists of Amdo-Qinghai and, more generally, Tibetans. The analysis of *pha yul* therefore allows us to study a political concept which is particular to, and shared by, Tibetans.

The multiple meanings attributed to this word by pastoralists help us to understand the deep influence that government policies regarding the exploitation and management of Tibet's grasslands have had on pastoral practices. It also allows for the reconstruction of the evolution of these policies and their complex implementation in Amdo-Qinghai. Moreover, analysis of this term highlights the importance and political value of Tibetan pastoralists' most important natural resource: the grassland itself. By evaluating how people use a word in practice, we can consider the ways in which PRC's policies have changed in the eyes of Tibetans and how they use terms like *pha yul* not only to describe, but also to shape their world. This analysis of *pha yul* enables us to examine notions of territory and helps us to understand, for example, the motivations underlying Tibetan pastoralists' resistance to current relocation programmes, as well as the territorial conflicts that flared during the 1990s. Close scrutiny of the way Tibetans use

pha yul reveals how development in Amdo-Qinghai is a continuous process of articulation between the political as it is conceived by the PRC's authorities, and the political as it is concretely experienced *in loco* by the pastoralists.

The shifting meanings of *pha yul* illustrate some of the ways that pastoralists' perceptions of their own territory have been modified and subject to local political elaborations in response to changes in land management policies. During the first decade following the end of collectivisation and the introduction of the HRS, little changed at the level of grassland oversight, with the exception that the pastoralists resumed management of their livestock. Their *pha yul* was, as before, the 'homeland' of the pastoralists who exploited it collectively as a *sde ba*. As the privatisation of the HRS was implemented in Qinghai during the 1990s through the *Sipeitao* policy, pastoralists increasingly referred to their assigned plot of grassland as their *pha yul*, effectively reducing the size of the territory they perceived as theirs. Since the 2000s, new semantic connotations of *pha yul* emerged as pastoralists were relocated to new settlements and urban centres. Although the pastoralists continued to consider the family's grassland as their *pha yul*, the settlement house also became a household's *pha yul*. The reduction of the meaning of *pha yul* to that of a private house or household land corresponded to the government's political goals. The promotion of small grassland plots and the division of previous pastoral units were, in fact, the objectives of reforms in the 1980s. Nevertheless, *pha yul* also continued to be employed to designate one's birthplace and the territory of pastoralists' ancestors, and is thus charged with emotional and affective values linked to the displacement of pastoralists away from this 'homeland'. This brings us back to the definition of *pha yul* provided at the beginning of this article: the place where a person was born, where an individual's ancestors and family were also born, and (in particular) the territory previously owned by the *sde ba*. The land-related conflicts that have emerged over the last few decades underscore the fact that the *sde ba* still exerts an influence over pastoralists' sociopolitical organisation, which is inimical to the political hegemony of the PRC in this region.

If the word *pha yul* signifies the territory of the *sde ba*, its meaning runs counter to the term's alternate usage (*pha yul* as 'home'), thus diverging from the government's agenda. Moreover, this usage becomes even more radical if we take into account the use of *pha yul*, especially in the diaspora communities, for constructing ideas of Tibetan nationality and nationhood. Thinking of *pha yul* as the locus where an individual's place of origin and place of birth overlap – the intersection of 'the soil and the blood' – has serious political implications (and not only in Tibet). If *pha yul* refers to concepts of 'nation' and 'nationality,' it becomes a term that also denotes and expresses the idea of a place where the fundamental and essential characteristics of a nationality, according to the modern idea of 'nation-state', converge. It can thus advance claims for Tibetan citizenship based on two of the

criteria articulated in the Roman definition of citizenship, *ius soli* and *ius sanguinis* – that is, right of the soil and right of blood, respectively (see Agamben, 2005).

Since the end of collectivisation, the implementation of grassland management policies in Amdo-Qinghai has had important economic consequences: the pastoral production system has been reoriented towards the market-economic principles promoted by the government. These policies, however, have also produced radical social and political effects. The many uses of the term *pha yul* provides one example of these shifts. The changes and continuities in the uses and meanings of this word highlight the magnitude of the impacts that governmental policies have had in Amdo-Qinghai, as well as Tibetans' reactions to ongoing transformations in their lives.

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