Feminization of Poverty and Women's Negotiations over Land Rights on the Tibetan Plateau, China[1]

การแบกรับความยากจนโดยผู้หญิงและการต่อรองสิทธิในที่ดินของผู้หญิงบนที่ราบสูงทิเบต ประเทศจีน

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Abstract

This study examines land privatization in Ser Tang village, where overlapping herders' land rights and competing powers of exclusion have emerged due to limited land and natural resources. Drawing on access theory, the paper investigates Tibetan herders' formal and informal access rights to rangeland, with a particular focus on how women negotiate informal rights to gain, control, and maintain access to these resources. The findings reveal that Tibetan women face gendered power inequalities and exclusionary practices within their community, contributing to the feminization of poverty. However, women are not passive, they actively negotiate their rights with various actors, strategically utilizing their marginalized position. The access theory offers a robust framework for analyzing these dynamics, highlighting the interplay of power, gender, and resource access.

Keywords: Tibetan Women, Rangeland, Privatization, Access Rights

บทคัดย่อ

งานวิจัยฉบับนี้ศึกษาการเปลี่ยนที่ดินเป็นของเอกชนในหมู่บ้านเซ่อถัง ซึ่งเกิดสิทธิทับซ้อนของผู้เลี้ยงสัตว์บนที่ดินและอำนาจในการกีดกันที่แข่งขันกัน เนื่องมาจากที่ดินและทรัพยากรธรรมชาติที่มีจำกัด โดยอาศัยทฤษฎีการเข้าถึง งานวิจัยนี้ได้สำรวจสิทธิการเข้าถึงทุ่งหญ้าของชนเผ่าทิเบต ทั้งในรูปแบบทางการและไม่เป็นทางการ โดยเน้นเฉพาะบทบาทของผู้หญิงในการเจรจาต่อรองสิทธิไม่เป็นทางการ เพื่อให้ได้มา ควบคุม และรักษาการเข้าถึงทรัพยากรเหล่านี้ ผลการวิจัยพบว่า ผู้หญิงทิเบตประสบกับความไม่เท่าเทียมทางอำนาจตามเพศภาวะและการปฏิบัติที่กีดกันภายในชุมชนของตน ซึ่งส่งผลให้เกิดการทำให้ความยากจนตกเป็นภาระของผู้หญิงมากยิ่งขึ้น อย่างไรก็ตาม ผู้หญิงไม่ได้เป็นเพียงผู้ถูกกระทำอย่างเฉื่อยชา แต่ยังเจรจาต่อรองสิทธิของตนอย่างแข็งขันกับผู้กระทำการหลากหลายกลุ่ม โดยใช้สถานะชายขอบของตนอย่างมีกลยุทธ์ ทฤษฎีการเข้าถึงจึงเป็นกรอบวิเคราะห์ที่เข้มแข็งในการทำความเข้าใจพลวัตเหล่านี้ โดยเน้นให้เห็นปฏิสัมพันธ์ระหว่างอำนาจ เพศ และการเข้าถึงทรัพยากร

คำสำคัญ: ผู้หญิงทิเบต, ทุ่งหญ้า, การแปรรูปที่ดิน, สิทธิการเข้าถึง

1. Introduction

With the advent of globalization, Tibetan herders have been confronted with numerous challenges, including livelihood transformation, privatization and commercialization of land, and increasing market forces. These dynamics have intensified unequal gendered power relations, particularly in the Ser Tang Village of Qinghai Province, China. Tibetan herders face land scarcity issues such as the grazing ban policy, unequal land distribution, and land commercialization. These transformations pose significant challenges to the traditional communal grazing practices of local Tibetan herders. For women herders—particularly married, widowed, and divorced women—the ability to inherit land or gain access to land through their husband's family, parents, or siblings is severely limited. Without access to land and natural resources, women are unable to engage in herding, produce traditional food, or generate income for their families.

Garret Hardin's (1968) "tragedy of the commons" thesis significantly influenced public perceptions of pastoralism, particularly in the context of global famine and land degradation. Common land pastoralism was framed as "open access," lacking restrictions or customary laws to manage land. This led to a perception of pastoralism as inherently mismanaged, resulting in overstocking, desertification, and resource destruction (Fratkin, 1997). Such interpretations fueled arguments for land privatization as a means to address these perceived inefficiencies. However, as Tsing (2005) argues, privatization often exacerbates gender inequalities in land rights, particularly in patriarchal societies where women have limited access to formal land ownership. When communal or state land is privatized, legal systems tend to prioritize formal ownership structures that favor male household heads, sidelining women who rely on customary rights. This process not only diminishes women's access to critical economic resources but also increases their

vulnerability to land dispossession and displacement, as they are frequently excluded from decision-making processes.

In Agrawal's work (1994), she applies the terms 'effective rights' and 'independent rights' to see gendered land issues. The effective rights indicate the 'management rights' and 'control rights over land'. In South Asia, women do not have effective land rights. This not only affects women's livelihoods, but also affects women's sexuality, economic position, bargaining position, economic equality, empowerment, self-confidence, political power, knowledge, and preventing domestic violence and sexual abuses. Based on Ribot and Peluso (2003), property and access are different, and they argue that property and access are different in multiple ways, as 'rights' refer to property while 'ability' refers to access. In their notion, access 'is the ability to benefit from things' and those benefits can be redistributed when social relations are changed. Law, custom and convention acknowledge property, and people can enjoy certain kinds of social power. There are eight types of mechanisms of access: technology, capital, markets, labor, knowledge, authority, identities and social relations, can identify how actors gain, control and maintain specific benefits. In this sense, access analysis calls attention to property, illicit actions, relations of production, entitlement relations, power relations and history. In this paper, I apply Ribot and Peluso's access framework to examine how women mobilize these mechanisms to gain, control and maintain specific benefits, especially within contexts where formal ownership is out of reach. Since the 1980s, the implementation of the hukou (household registration) system in China has aimed to promote individual rights, particularly within the broader context of land privatization reforms. However, in pastoral communities such as Ser Tang village, land privatization has resulted in marked economic differentiation and social stratification among herders. Vulnerable groups such as divorced women and single mothers have experienced remarginalization due to unequal land allocation and inequitable access to shared resources. These women often face "intimate exclusions" within their

marital villages, which further restricts their ability to claim land rights and benefit from local development. This dynamic contributes to the "feminization of poverty," as gendered norms and institutional biases continue to undermine women's socioeconomic security in rural areas. The term "feminization of poverty," originally coined by Diana Pearce in 1976, captures this gendered dynamic. Pearce used the term to describe the decline in women's economic status driven by their gendered position within society. From a feminist perspective, the feminization of poverty is rooted in patriarchal systems that impose traditional gender roles, restrict women's access to economic power, and limit their ability to claim shared family resources such as housing and land. In this case study, Tibetan women herders exemplify the feminization of poverty, as they face persistent gender-based disparities in access to land, livestock, and institutional support. These structural inequalities undermine their economic independence and increase their reliance on household and community networks. Consequently, a gendered cycle of poverty is sustained, reflecting broader patterns of marginalization rooted in unequal power relations.

1.1 Research Site

In 1955, the local government established the Ser Tang State-owned Farm in Ser Tang area, which belonged to the Government of Hainan Prefecture. Ser Tang State-owned Farm had five teams, mainly the horse team, sheep team, yak team, deer team and agricultural team. During that time, the farm leaders hired herders from both inside and outside Xinghai county to work for the state farm. After the state-owned farm dismantled, the Ser Tang became an administrative 'village' in 2002. It is located in the southeast edge of Xinghai County, 70-80 kilometers from the county town, and its average attitude is 4000 meters. Ser Tang Village has three seasonal rangelands which are winter, fall and summer rangelands. The winter rangeland's average attitude is 3000 meters, the spring and fall and summer rangelands

are around 4000 meters above sea level. Ser Tang Village has 630000 mu of land. 415900mu is productive grazing land and 5700mu is agricultural land. Ser Tang Village has 569 households with 2186 people. 98% of people are Tibetan and a few of them are Mongolian and Han Chinese and is one of the country's biggest pastures.

1.2 Research Methodology

Based on qualitative research methods, this study uses in-depth interviews, participant observation, and non-participant observation. The in-depth interviews explore herders past memories, women's life experiences, changes in gendered property rights, and the impacts of mining and conservation policies on pastoralism, as well as women's negotiations over land rights. Participant observation focuses on village activities and herders' seasonal mobility across different rangelands, while non-participant observation centers on herders' ecological movements and everyday conversations. By integrating the concept of the access, this paper contributes to a deeper understanding of Tibetan women herders' resilience and agency in navigating complex socio-economic and environmental transformations.

2. Land Privatization, Mining and Conservation

Prior to the 1980s, the land was under the collective system, herders maintained strong networks and connections with their tsowa. Under the tsowa system, they were not only able to manage their rangelands but also to solve conflicts of interest, as well as disputes within and between communities of tsowa herders. Miller (2008) demonstrates that Tibetan local knowledge has not only sustained herders' livelihoods, but has also protected biodiversity. Within this system of communal rangeland management, the tsowa played a vital role in herders' lives and in ensuring livestock mobility during different times and seasons. Herders move at least four times in accordance with the

seasons, spending six months on the winter rangeland, and the rest of the year on spring, summer and fall rangelands. Traditional herders' main income comes from products such as milk, cheese, meat, and butter, though they do often trade livestock products with Tibetan farmers for foodstuffs such as barley, wheat, and vegetables. The collective system also can facilitate equal access to natural resources and reduce environmental risks (Banks, 2003).

However, when land was privatized, it has had a big influence on Tibetan herders' pastoral mobility, subsistence economy, religion, and ecosystems since the 1980s. For example, Yeh (2003) stated that there was a well-developed sense of territorial rights embodied in 'tsowa,' and inter-household conflicts within 'tsowa' were uncommon. Land property rights in the Tibetan herders' context are related to their cultural practices and identity. Consequently, herders are facing inequality in accessing natural resources and difficulties in practicing their territorial identity within the private rangeland management system, with an increase in new conflicts and a decrease in flexibility around land use options. These social issues are directly related to environmental policies, which are based on simplistic ideas that negatively impact herders' traditional livelihoods (Harris, 2010). Levine (2015) also reports that fixed land contracts have created problems as herders have had to abandon pastoralism, and herders who were moved to towns have become more reliant on government subsidies.

By the 2000s, a number of conservation projects had been implemented in Qinghai Province. The conservation areas are divided into three different levels, including core zones, buffer zones and experimental zones. Each zone has different conservation policies, which create different impacts on local livelihoods as these policies have been implemented to fully or partially limit livestock numbers and herders' seasonal movements. In the core zone, human and livestock movement is fully restricted, and in the buffer and experimental zones movement it is restricted to assigned areas. In the protected areas, Herders' experiences and interpretations of this policy,

as well as their property rights and degree of access to natural resources vary based on location and protected area classification.

In Ser Tang village, herders' land and livestock was controlled by the state-owned farm from 1955 to 2002. The land was allocated to herders when the local government implemented a land reform policy in 2002. Ser Tang herders didn't get equal access to land based on family composition and livestock population. A rich family could keep more livestock and a poor family could not have more livestock when the state-owned farm ceased to exist. Before the farm ceased to exist, the farm distributed some of its livestock to workers and sold the other livestock to individual herders who wanted to buy them. A rich family who had their own livestock and the farm's livestock got more land when land was allocated to them. A poor family only had the farm's livestock, so they would get less land when land was allocated to them. The land reform policy in Ser Tang was based on family composition and livestock population, so this was one of the main factors that created an economic gap among the herders in the name of land privatization.

In 2002, the mining company came to Ser Tang Village when Ser Tang had not yet fully become a village, as the herders still considered themselves part of the state-owned farm. The state-owned farm took this opportunity to continue its leadership in Ser Tang, and they allocated land to the mining company. A few years later, the herders observed that their environment, livelihoods and health were severely impacted by the mining activities. The mountains collapsed because of the tunnels, a large number of livestock died because of contaminated water, and the chemical powder from the tailing ponds polluted the rangeland ecosystem. Especially, the mining created negative impacts on caterpillar funguses, the funguses are herders' main economy after the animal husbandry. In response to these impacts, local herders organized various ecological movements since 2008, and finally herders be able to stop the mining development in 2019.

Due to the mining company has been damaged a large area of land in

Ser Tang village, and plus herders' summer rangeland was protected by the state conservation project, so herders are not allowed to graze their livestock in the protected rangeland, thus many herders have to buy extra land and grass from other places. Some herders are no longer to do the herding, because they didn't have enough land to feed their livestock. In this context, the powerless herders' land has been occupied by the powerful herders, especially the women whose land has been occupied by her relatives, neighbors and others. However, women are not passive group, they use their own gendered knowledge to negotiate with different actors to gain the land rights.

3. Women's Negotiation Over Land Rights

This section describes three women's experiences with negotiating land rights. The participants' backgrounds are as follows:

Name	Age	Village	Residency	Occupation	Marital Status	Education Level
Drolma	48	Ser Tang	Ser Tang	Herder	Remarried	Never attended school
Drolpe	45	Ser Tang	Ser Tang	Herder	Remarried	Never attended school
Tsema	57	Ser Tang	Ser Tang	Herder	Single Mother	Never attended school

Each woman's land rights' story consists of five sections: background of family, negotiation over land rights, summary and significant themes and narrative analysis. In this section, I have included each women's marital status. Some are single mothers, others are widowed and divorced women. The marital status reflects the different women's life experiences and their struggles with land rights in different contexts.

1) Drolma

Drolma is a 48-year-old herder who was married to her former husband at the age of 20. Her husband was from Ser Tang village, and they had their first son when Drolma was 25 years old. Her family was very fond of her son, as he was the first child in the family. Before having a child, Drolma and her husband lived with her in-laws and his siblings. After their child was born, her husband's family decided to divide the livestock between them and allowed them to have their own house. However, the family did not divide the land, so Drolma and her husband grazed their livestock on the family's common land. Without their own land, they remained under the control of her in-laws. For 16 years, Drolma and her husband lived with her in-laws. Tragically, her husband passed away in a motorbike accident when she was 36 years old. After his death, Drolma continued living with her in-laws for three more years and grazed the livestock with them on the family's land. However, she encountered numerous challenges. Her father-in-law refused to let her graze her yaks on the winter rangeland because the family's sheep needed the lower land during winter. As a result, Drolma had to use her own money to rent extra land from others every year. She felt this was unfair, especially since her four children and she already had their own land in the winter rangeland, which was sufficient for grazing their livestock.

Negotiation over Land Rights

"In 2011, I went to see the village leader who I knew very well. I was little bit nervous when I brought this issue to him, but I told myself that I needed to tell the village leader about my situation, because it was related to my rights. If I didn't bring this issue to him, I could not get my own land from my father-in-law. After he heard about my situation, the village leader was willing to help me. He told me that he would discuss this issue

to other village leaders, and they would make decision. A few days' later, the village leaders came to see my father-in-law to discuss this issue. My father-in-law was very surprised when he learned about this. He didn't make any statement in front of the village leaders and he told them that he would consider this issue. After the village leaders left, my father-in-law was angry with me, because he never expected that I was able to report this issue to village leaders. He never thought that I had the courage to claim land back from him. He then blamed me because my actions damaged the family reputation within the village. My father-in-law told me that it was impossible to redistribute land to me, because he didn't want to separate the family's land. If land was redistributed to me, I would need to put up fences which requires a lot of work. He said that, as a woman, I couldn't do all the work myself. At that time, I thought that my father-in-law would not divide the land with me, but he finally agreed to, because he wanted to keep a good relationship with the village leaders. In 2011, I got my land back and I was able to lead my own life. Actually, my brother was my backbone. H encouraged me to communicate with the village leaders. My brother also told me that I have the rights to get the land back from my father-in-law. My brother used to be the village leader and he had the experience, so he taught me how to talk with the village leaders. I won, because I had my brother's support. Now I can manage my own land."

"When my first husband was alive, we rented the land from the village monastery which is located on the border of Ser Tang Village and another village. Village monastery has 30 monks. All of them have land, so the monks wanted to sell their land, because the monks had large areas of lands near the border. Our family was the first group who came to this place to buy the monastery's land 22 years ago. In the early years, we didn't need to pay rent to monastery, because the monetary had their own livestock. These livestock were donated to monks by the herders. Some of these livestock was free and some was not, so the monks needed someone to take care of

their livestock. They also needed milk, butter and cheese from the livestock, so monks allowed my family to stay here to take care of their livestock."

"Now, I have remarried and my current husband has a good relationship with the monastery. The monks in the monastery don't have the livestock now, so we need to pay 11000 yuan to rent 3000 mu of land from the monks. We spend most of our time here, and I feel that the area is my home as we have stayed here for more than 20 years. The monks know us very well and we know the monks very well too. I often visit the elder monks when I have the free time, and I bring them milk and butter. A two years ago, 8 families came to this area to buy the land. Now we have 9 families here, grazing our livestock on the monastery rangeland. And 9 families need to pay 50000 yuan to the monastery each year."

"Although there are 8 other families renting the monastery's rangeland, the monks do not really trust the other families like they trust us. These families don't have a good relationship with the monastery, so they need to pay the money on time. But for us, we can delay a little bit, and monks will consider our situation. The monks can sell their land to any herder if they want to, so we need to keep a good relationship with them, because we need to renew our land contract every year. It is very risky if the monks change their mind. So, in order to get land using rights, we give them the deposit before our land contract expires. This way, we can guarantee that we have our land."

"Now, my son is married and his wife is working in the town, so he has moved to the town. For me, I wanted to be a herder and graze the livestock to earn the income to support my son. As my son doesn't have a stable job like his wife, so he needs more support from our family. My current husband also likes my son very much. He treats my son like his own son, so I really very appreciate my husband. As a wife, I respect my husband and I let him decide everything at home, because I trust him. I never use social networks like Wechat, because I feel that I should respect my husband.

The social networks like Wechat cause trouble and damage personal relationships sometimes, so I never use Wechat. My husband also feels that I am a good wife and he also respects me and asks me for my opinions whenever he needs to."

Summary and Significant Themes

Under the patriarchal system, a father has more power than his son. For Drolma, she had to live under her father-in-law's control. She and her husband had no rights to own her husband's family's land. Drolma played the role of a good daughter-in-law until her husband was dead in a motorbike accident. As the mother of three children, she had to rely on land and livestock to make a living, so she decided to take her land from her father-in-law. In doing so, she was supported by her blood brother who shared the land ownership policies with her and encouraged her to use the law to defend her rights. Drolma's blood brother used to be the village leader so he knew how to communicate with other village leaders and the local officials. Drolma first approached a village leader who she knew well and she asked him to convince other village leaders to discuss this issue. She used the village leaders' power to challenge her father-in-law, and she successfully took the land from him. In order to get more land, she built up a good relationship with the local monastery and she used the monastery's rangeland as her winter rangeland. She grazes her livestock there and pays low rental fees. Gradually, the 8 families from Ser Tang also needed to ask for Drolma's help to rent the land from the monastery. In this case, Drolma has built the social capital with the 8 families and monastery. Drolma challenged her former father-in-law and also challenged the patriarchal system in Ser Tang village.

2) Drolpe

Drolpe is a 45-year-old herder. In 2002, when the common land was divided and allocated to individuals, she was given land equivalent to that

of seven people. Drolpe has four children, but only two of them received land, as the children born after 2002 were not eligible. Now, with nine family members depending on the land allocated to just seven people, the resources are stretched thin. In 2002, Drolpe knew she should have fenced her land, but she was too poor to afford it. For a family like hers, fences were prohibitively expensive. As the female head of the family, Drolpe has faced many challenges, particularly because there was no strong man in her family to defend their rights. Her father was a weak man, and his siblings often used their power to dominate him. After her father passed away, his brothers began encroaching on her land. One of her uncles, her father's younger brother, claimed that his family didn't receive enough land from the local government and that they lacked caterpillar fungus on their fall rangeland. Using this as an excuse, he tried to take over Drolpe's fall rangeland. Her family's land and her father's brothers' lands are located in three different valleys that are adjacent to each other, making it easy for her uncles to encroach on her land.

Negotiation over Land Rights

"When I was young, my family was very poor and we only had 9 yaks. I worked as paid herder for neighboring families until the land allocated to individual families. When the government implemented land reform, I was given a big piece of land as it was allocated according to my family's size (7 people). I also have caterpillar funguses on my fall rangeland, but I have no money so I cannot put fences up on my fall rangeland. In 2013, I finally put fences around my land. I had 300 mu of fall rangeland and I bought 19 fences. In 2013, one fence costs 250 yuan (1 fence is 100 meters long). In spring, I could collect and sell the caterpillar funguses that grew on my fall rangeland. I had 30 yaks and a total income of around 60,000 yuan per year. In 2009, my uncle (my father's younger brother) started letting his animals graze on my land. In 2015, my relatives on my uncle side broke down my

fences and took over my fall rangeland. They told me that I have no livestock and that my land boundary was not clear. I am no longer able to get income from collecting caterpillar fungus, so my livelihood depends solely upon the income from my 30 yaks. I also need to take care of my 4 children and my disabled younger brother. My eldest son is a monk and my youngest son was still at school, so they cannot help me get the land back from their uncle. My eldest son is 18 years' old. If he was not a monk, maybe he could help me, but monks cannot become involved in family issues. Now, all I can do is to put fences up again when my uncle breaks them. I can also take photos to show how my uncle damages the fences and uses my land and resources."

"In 2019, my uncle and other relatives wanted to divide the land again. My uncle invited some elder relatives to come to my family home. They told me that they wanted to divide the land again, and that I will also get an equal share of land from them, but I didn't trust them. I know that if I agreed to this, they will only give a small piece of unproductive land to me, so I kept silent. And I pretended to know nothing, I told them that "I am a woman, I don't know anything about land, so let the government divide the land between us". Finally, they could not do anything and they left. I'm worried that they will come again in future."

Summary and Significant Themes

Drolpe has no father and no husband, so her uncle can easily take the land from her. Drolpe's eldest son is a monk so he is unable to take care of family issues as his mother would expect. Because Drolpe's first husband dead, the herders didn't recognize her other husbands. The herders' think that Drolpe had many boyfriends, so they see her as a 'bad woman' or 'inauspicious woman'. In the village, Drolpe has no social position as the herders have constructed her identity as a widow, even though she has a boyfriend now. In this context, Drolpe could not get support from others. Her relatives are not on her side and although she once tried to invite some tribal leaders to solve

the land issues, her uncle didn't listen to them. Drolpe felt that dealing with relatives was much more difficult than dealing with non-relatives, because she needed to consider about the family's reputation in the village. Drolpe's strategy was she put fences on her fall rangeland to protect her land. When her uncle damages her fences, she will put the fences again. This is one way to resist her uncle every time. The fences should define the land boundaries and land ownership rights. When her uncle wanted to re-divide the land among the family, Drolpe used her identity as a powerless and illiterate woman to negotiate with her uncle and she said that she didn't know anything about the land. Without her agreement, her relatives could not divide the land.

3) Tsema

Tsema is a senior herder who has never married. She has three children, and her youngest son still lives with her. Tsema's son could not marry until he was 30 because the family was very poor and lacked the money needed to take a wife. When visitors arrive, they often see Tsema's daughter-in-law, who is from another village. However, Tsema worries that her daughter-in-law may leave them one day because she might not be able to adjust to the difficult life in the village. Tsema lacks confidence in both her son and daughter-in-law, feeling that her son is not capable of being the head of the family without her support. Tsema rarely leaves her village and has had few opportunities to travel, even to the nearby county town. Whenever visitors come to her village, she tries to meet with them and discuss her land issues. These conversations often leave her in tears. Tsema hopes that the local government will recognize the inequalities in land allocation and that land will eventually be redistributed more fairly to poor herders. In the same village, another herder, a 57-year-old woman, recounted her experiences with land reforms. After the Ser Tang state farm was dismantled in 1999, its land was reallocated to herders. During the first land reform, her family received a large plot of land based on family size, and she was very satisfied because

they had enough land. At that time, the state farm leader came from another village and had no relatives in Ser Tang. This impartiality allowed him to distribute the land equally among all herders, regardless of their "family guanxi" or personal connections. She appreciates this leader, describing him as fair and just. However, during the second land reform, the new leader was from Ser Tang village. Unlike his predecessor, this leader favored his relatives and tribal connections, allocating larger plots of land to them while giving only small plots to poorer herders. Tsema, as a poor woman, felt powerless in this system. Now, her family of six relies on just 300 mu of rangeland to survive, a far cry from the equitable distribution she experienced during the first land reform.

Negotiation over Land Rights

"My family is poor so we could not get the land from powerful families in the village. I didn't have a husband and I didn't have any relatives in Ser Tang. My neighbor A wanted to take my winter rangeland as they needed more land, so they use their 'guan xi' to bribe the leader when they divided land again. My neighbor A has a good relationship with the village leaders and his family is very rich in Ser Tang village. My neighbor A told the village cadres that my family does not belong here and we are not the native people in Ser Tang. But my mother's ra (black tent) could approved that we are native people and that we moved to this place a long time ago. We are the first family who settled down in this valley. My mother is 87 years old now. She lost her husband during the Cultural Revolution and she became a worker at the state-farm in Ser Tang, so we are native people in Ser Tang."

"One day, a group of people came to see me and forced me to accept the unequal land division they made. But, I resisted, because they only gave me small plots of land. Most of my land was allocated to my neighbors, A and B. My winter rangeland is sandwiched between neighbor A's and neighbor B's, so they wanted to take it from me. All the people in

this group were Tibetans from Ser Tang village, except one person who was a Han Chinese from outside. The Tibetan leaders told me that if I didn't' cooperate with them, they would not invite the Han Chinese person again. The Han Chinese person in this group was responsible for dividing the land and he had a land map with him. The Tibetan leaders told me that if I let the Han Chinese person go back, then he would not come back to allocate the land to me. In this case, I would need to invite another person to define my land boundary, and I would need to pay him 20,000 yuan. The village leaders clearly knew that I didn't have the money to pay, so they thought that I would have to agree."

"I could not help crying in front of these people, but the village leaders in this group didn't listen to my voice, and they didn't tell the Han Chinese person about my situation. I felt that the Han Chinese person thought that something was wrong with me and he wanted to know why I was crying. At that time, the Tibetan leaders didn't listen to me and my only hope was that the Han Chinese person could save me. However, I could not speak Chinese to him and he could not speak Tibetan to me. The Han Chinese person asked the village leaders to translate as one of village leaders could speak Chinese. I told my real situation to the translator but he didn't tell the truth to the Han Chinese person. So, the village leaders took my land and gave my land to my neighbors."

"The majority of my winter rangeland has been occupied by neighbors, A and B. Now, I have less than 300 mu of winter rangeland (I don't know the exact size of the land, and I don't know how to measure it). The grass on my winter rangeland is only enough to feed 40 yaks for two months, so I have to buy extra land and have to move to my fall rangeland and village common land for the rest of the year. In a few years ago, neighbor A occupied some parts of my fall rangeland; they told me that this piece of land belonged to them according to the land map. The village leaders only allowed neighbor A to see the land map. The village leaders never allowed me to see the land

map even though I requested to. As uneducated woman, I don't know how to measure the size of my land and boundaries, so I had to give this land to neighbor A. Afterwards, neighbor C came to see me. They told me that part of my fall rangeland was their land according to the land map. They wanted to take this land from me. At that time, I wanted to struggle for my land rights and so I wasn't silent like last time. If neighbor C takes this land from me, then I have no land to survive, so I must fight against neighbor C. I told neighbor C that this land allocated by the government and that he has no rights to take it from me. If he still wants to take it, I asked him to take my life before taking my land. Finally, neighbor C didn't take my land. I knew that my neighbors use the land map to grab my land. Land map became their strategy to take the land from me. These rich herders would say 'let maps speak', and land maps can speak when rich people want to take the land from poor people."

"Now, my family is facing a land shortage. We are unable to buy the extra land, so I have to negotiate with other herders whose fall rangelands are next to mine. I asked these herders whether we could make our fall rangeland as a common land to be shared among the 7 families. The advantage of common land is that herders will not put fences on the rangeland, so everyone can do their herding together without land boundaries. In the beginning, the herders didn't agree, because they thought that my land is small while their land is big, so they didn't want to make the fall rangeland a common land. However, I told them that if they wanted to keep their land as private land, then everyone needed to put the fences on their land in order to prevent livestock encroachment. The yaks often damage the fences if herders do not watch them, so the owners of these yaks have the responsibility of fixing fences or buying new fences. I always watch my livestock and I would not let my livestock damage other families' fences. For other herders, if they do not watch their livestock all the time, the livestock will damage the fences whenever people do not watch their livestock carefully. Finally, my neighbors

agreed to graze the livestock together. 7 families' fall rangeland has become common land now. In future, I hope that the local government will re-allocate the land to us again, otherwise we poor people won't be able to make sustainable livelihood."

Summary and Significant Themes

Tsema as a powerless and poor woman, used three forms of negotiation to defend her land rights. Firstly, Tsema sees that her neighbors wanted to exclude her from Ser Tang Village in order to get their own benefits. Tsema's neighbors gave her a new identity, that she is 'otherness', and that she did not belong to Ser Tang village, and has no rights to own land. In response to this, Tsema used the black tent to prove her identity as a native herder. The black tent is related to territorial rights, as it shows that whoever occupied the land first has the rights to own it. Secondly, when Tsema's land was occupied by her neighbors, these neighbors use the land map as a strategy for taking her land. At first, Tsema had no idea about the land map, so she didn't resist when these herders took her land from her. Gradually, Tsema realized that male herders used the land map to grab her land, and that the land map can speak for rich people. So, when neighbor C tried to use the land map to take her land, she defended her rights by saying that she felt that her land is her life, and that taking her land meant taking her life. Finally, Tsema encouraged 7 families to turn their private land into common land by saying that if their yaks damage other families' fences, the herders will need to buy the new fences. The herders agreed to share their land, and Tsema gained access rights to the other families' land.

Narrative Analysis of Three Cases

The three cases above show that women's personal strategies over land rights are varied. Different types of access mechanisms are involved in various forms of negotiation when both men and women try to

gain land ownership rights. The first case shows how a daughter-in-law tried to gain land from her father-in-law. Drolma used the mechanism of social relations—she mobilized village leaders to convince her father-in-law, knowing that he respects them. She intentionally built a good relationship with these leaders in order to access land rights. In addition, she established a good relationship with the local monastery to further strengthen her position in gaining land access. The second case shows how a poor woman struggled over land with her uncle. Her uncle viewed Drolpe as a powerless woman with no social position in the village, especially because people labeled her as a "widow" with "many boyfriends." Despite this, Drolpe put up fences to protect her land. Although she had little social power, she used the fence as a tool to defend her rights. In this case, Drolpe used the mechanism of technology—fences became a form of hidden resistance and a weapon for women to protect their land. The last case shows how a single mother fought for land rights with her neighbors. When her neighbors claimed that Tsema didn't belong to the village, she used the black tent as evidence to challenge them. She argued that the tent represented her identity as a native herder and used it to claim her territorial rights and improve her position in the village. More importantly, Tsema worked with her neighbors to turn private land into common land. Through this collective approach, she gained access to seven families' private land. In this case, Tsema used the mechanisms of identity and labor to maintain her access rights. All three cases show how women use different mechanisms of access to resist exclusion and negotiate for land rights.

4. Conclusion and Discussion

This study explores Tibetan herders' property rights changes and women's socioeconomic situation in Ser Tang village. From 1955 to 2002, the herders experienced a shift in landed property rights from state-owned

to household-owned land. As mentioned earlier, the land reform policy in Ser Tang village was based on family composition and livestock population, so this was one of the main factors that created an economic gap among the herders. Mining activities also occupied and damaged herders' rangelands. In this process, herders have experienced both internal and external challenges. Most importantly, the paper reveals that how women have been facing land privatization, re-marginalization, and land scarcity through the lens of Ribot and Peluso's access framework. Rather than focusing solely on land ownership, this framework emphasizes the ability to benefit from resources, whether or not one holds formal property rights.

In Ser Tang village, the formal land rights remain largely in the hands of men, marginalized women must rely on informal strategies to retain or reclaim access, resulting in the feminization of poverty. This is not only due to gendered power inequalities but also a structural outcome of unequal access systems reinforced by local customary rights. This paper highlights that access is mediated through multiple, dynamic mechanisms. The women's stories in this paper demonstrate how they mobilize various mechanisms of access such as social relations, identity, labor, and knowledge to assert their land claims in contexts of deep gender and economic inequality. For instance, the case of Drolma, she leveraged her social relations with village leaders and kin to pressure her father-in-law into redistributing land, despite lacking formal legal rights. She also built social capital with the monastery to secure affordable rangeland for grazing, showing how access can be achieved through relational networks. In contrast, Drolpe, who lacked strong familial support, relied on technology, specifically fencing, as both a physical and symbolic tool to protect her land from encroachment. Meanwhile, Tsema invoked identity and labor to contest exclusion. She reclaimed her status as a native resident through ancestral evidence (the black tent) and later negotiated collective access by forming a common land arrangement with other families. These cases reveal that women are neither passive nor

homogeneous. Instead, women selectively mobilize mechanisms of access depending on their personal circumstances including marital status, family networks, and social reputation. Importantly, these strategies highlight how gendered power is contested not only at the institutional level but also through everyday practices, negotiations, and acts of resistance.

In conclusion, land privatization in Ser Tang village has accelerated inequalities among different herders based on who have ability to gain, control and maintain land and resources. The access theory helps to show that women are not a passive group; instead, they navigate and resist exclusion by relying on informal access rights. This study further shows how women mobilize personal, gendered, and context-specific forms of knowledge through relationships, memory, and negotiation to maintain access to land. Recognizing access as something distinct from formal property rights allows us to see how informal and often invisible mechanisms shape how resources are used and controlled. This perspective draws attention to the everyday practices and strategies women use to assert agency within systems that often overlook or marginalize them.

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