The Art of Narrating and Practicing Grassland Restoration for Tibetan Pastoralism's Cultural Survival and Revival

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Introduction

> People always came to me to ask about how to sow grass. But once the grass is sown, that's not even what it's about anymore. What you really need to do has nothing to do with sowing grass. (Palsang)[1]

When I was travelling in eastern Tibet, many Tibetan intellectuals, after I had told them I am interested in understanding the relationships between grassland, yaks and herders, the subject of my ethnographic research, pointed out right away that I should visit a Tibetan called Palsang. I looked him up on the internet. Many news articles, video clips and documentaries about him popped up. They are often titled "Palsang – desertification control practitioner". Palsang's model has been inspiring for many communities on the Tibetan plateau. He is now often invited by other regional local government officials to tutor the local herders about the practice of sowing grass. A simplified version of his widely known grassland conservation story on the internet can be summarized as such:

> One day during his holidays, Palsang came back from university to the grassland where he grew up; he was astonished by the severity of the desertification. He consulted a research institute about how to sow grass and which seeds to use. The experts told him about two ways of sowing grass. One is to spread the seeds all over the place. The second is to sow the seeds in rows. Due to the climate conditions of the Tibetan plateau, the first method does not suit the Tibetan grassland, as the seeds would be blown away by the wind and exposed to the blazing sunshine. They decided to sow seeds in rows by digging ditches, spreading premixed seed and fertilizer, and then covering them with sand. However, despite the increased survival rate of the grass seed, digging ditches is

1 Except for Palsang, all the names of people and places below county level in this chapter are pseudonyms. All of Palsang's statements are from the in-person interviews conducted in Dzögé in 2022.

> a slow process and needs a large labour force. Whilst sowing the grass seed, he overheard two herder women saying that the yaks had strong feet and they could trample the seed deep into the soil. Yaks can replace human labour and also provide the precious fertilizer – yak dung. Inspired by his fellow villagers, Palsang let yaks and sheep graze moderately on the enclosed land where the grass seeds had been sown. Based on scientific experiments conducted by a research team from the Chinese Academy of Sciences, scientists endorsed the method by stating that Palsang's moderate grazing method helps the degraded grassland to recover. The herders' local method was approved by the experts.[2]

Films and videos praise Palsang's success in regreening the degraded grassland, highlighting the unique participation of fellow herders and livestock, as well as the incorporation of local knowledge.[3] I was also intrigued by his story. I initially contacted Palsang, thinking it would be a perfect case study of local ecological knowledge. After my one-month research stay at the Ecological Culture Centre that Palsang had established in his hometown, I came to realize that the grassland conservation they have been practicing is neither just about the local nor only about ecology. To be more specific, this is a case about grassland conservation, as well as about legitimizing pastoralists' way of life through artistic visual narratives.

This chapter offers a case study of a grass sowing practice led by an iconic Tibetan environmentalist in Dzögé county (mdzod dge, or Ruo er gai County), Sichuan Province, China. This grassland conservation practice largely resonates with other scholarly observations in China that local environmental practices are as much about conserving the eco-biological sphere as they are about legitimating the long marginalized cultural practices (Bum 2024; Hathaway 2012; Yeh 2014). The alliance between global environmentalism and indigenous activism has been prevailing since the 1980s (Conklin 2006). The human stories and images of the Indigenous, which meet the projection from the mainstream global imagination of the local group, make the environmental activism narratable (Brosius 1997; Conklin and Graham 1995). The marginalized group was able to advocate their culture and own appeal by collaborating with global environmentalism (Brosius 1997; Conklin and Graham 1995). Although the Chinese state, the government in exile and Tibetans themselves do not identify Tibetans as an Indigenous group, Tibetans' self-representation has "a family resemblance to indigenous formation around the world" (Yeh 2007: 71). And "[m]ore specifically, Tibetan claims and representations about environmental stewardship and ecological wisdom resonate strongly with other indigenous formations" (ibid.). The global eco-indigeneity in China has also created a space for ethnic minority groups and their scholar-activists for their cultural expressions (Hathaway 2012; Yeh 2014). This case study argues that the alliance with modern environmentalism and science not only legitimizes Tibetan's cultural practices, which have already been observed by other scholars (Bum 2024; Yeh 2014), but more importantly, this alliance, which

2 This is summarized from a variety of online reports, videos and my interviews with Palsang. For English reports on Palsang, see: CGTN 2020; Feng 2017.

3 For films about Palsang, see: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hLQ6GaLzF3Q> [Accessed 12 September 2024]; <https://tv.cctv.com/2014/10/20/VIDE1413735487900677.shtml> in Chinese [Accessed 12 September 2024].

is embedded with modernity and internationality, creates new meaning to contemporary Tibetan pastoralism.

This case study also points to the importance and power of narrating environmental stories. The latter matter, because "[n]arratives of decline and extinction or, conversely, of resilience and improvement in nature always intertwine ecological facts with cultural histories and value judgments […]" (Heise 2017: 6). While both the Chinese rangeland management policies imposed on Tibetan pastoralism and herders' own practice envision a healthy grassland, the narratives they tell are embedded with conceptual tensions of how to live with a healthy grassland. The state narratives suggest that the herders and livestock are the cause of grassland degradation and in need of policy interventions, such as limiting and even excluding pastoralism completely. Tibetan herders use media and photography to tell their multispecies stories which persuasively unsettle this dominant (mis)representation of pastoralism, arguing that pastoralism and their multispecies way of life are an integral part of a sustainable grassland ecology. It is an example of how Tibetan environmentalists take the state-endorsed conservation practice as an opportunity to achieve self-representation.

Herders' storytelling through photography and films enable the herders to visualize their environmental narratives and share them with wider audiences in the digital era. This way of narrative resonates with the emergence of Eco-Fourth Cinema, i.e. "films displaying the intrinsic but dynamic connection Indigenous peoples have with the environment and other living beings" (Frey 2018: 22). The artistic articulations in this case study show the rapport between pastoralism, global conservation ideas, the charismatic and photogenic highland animals (e.g. snow leopard, black-necked crane) and the idyllic grassland. This makes pastoralism narratable, legitimate, modern and apolitical (or provides political expression in a subtle, not a confrontative manner). The hybrid images and narratives which blend global conservation ideas and traditional pastoral culture are also especially powerful to restore the pride of pastoralists. A pastoralist who graduated from university once told me: "People like Palsang and Tashi Dorje [another Tibetan environmentalist] made it possible for herders to walk with their heads up." Thus, the narratives and artistic films and photographs are not only about presenting the relationships between pastoralists and other beings, more importantly, they create possibilities and imaginations of future pastoral life, which has confronted modernity and state interventions.

I stayed at Palsang's Ecological Culture Centre for one month in May 2022. The centre itself is an interesting complex where Palsang and his members work, live and share their stories with visitors. It consists of a library equipped with a coffee machine and a fireplace, a hotel, an exhibition hall, a workplace for Palsang's co-workers, as well as Palsang and his relatives' home. They offer a discounted accommodation price of 30 Chinese yuan (about four euro) per night for people like me travelling there for fieldwork. As it was during the time of the COVID-19 pandemic, there were rarely other visitors. During this month, I conducted a total of 14 hours of recorded face-to-face interviews with Palsang and spent time in the centre with other members. In addition, I participated in one of the grass sowing events which lasted four days, during which I gained a better understanding of how the grass sowing was practiced on the ground.

In the following, I firstly explain how the dominant yet problematic narratives about Tibetan pastoralism can be understood in the context that the Tibetan Plateau, which is primarily a grazing grassland, is considered to be crucial for China's ecological security. Then, I show through the ethnographic account how the practice of grass sowing is an environmental conservation practice and an opportunity to reunite the community. After that, I illustrate how Palsang and the centre members use photos, documentary films and talks to convey the legitimacy of pastoral culture through global environmentalism and create a proud image of modern pastoralists. Finally, I show that the stories about pastoralism are aligned with global environmental conservation ideals, such as biodiversity conservation, carbon politics and charismatic animals to make the narratives appealing to wider audiences and give new meanings to pastoralism.

The Tibetan Plateau as an Ecological Security Barrier and Grazing Land

The Tibetan plateau is one of China's Ecological Security Barriers (*sheng tai an quan pin zhang*), a term referring to "a marginal area that protects the structure, function, and process of internal ecosystem from damage or threat from the external environment" (Tang et al. 2023). Scientists identified four ecological security roles of the Tibetan plateau in China; water conservation, biodiversity conservation, soil and water conservation, and a carbon sink (Sun et al. 2012). China's policymakers and scientists are aware of the potential detrimental effects of a degraded Tibetan grassland, such as floods and sandstorms, on its populous and wealthy cities located in the eastern lowlands (Harris 2010). The Tibetan Plateau is primarily a grazing land, therefore, discussions on pastoralism have been centred to discussions on whether and to what extent this anthropogenic activity has been causing grassland degradation. The causes of the degradation of the Tibetan grassland are generally considered to be a combined outcome of environmental changes (e.g. global warming) and herders' "unscientific" management of the grassland (e.g. overgrazing) (Harris 2010). A number of highly controversial state interventions on pastoralism which are supposed to improve the grassland ecology have been implemented since the 1980s, such as a household responsibility system (i.e. dividing and allocating pasture to individual household), livestock carrying capacity policy (setting livestock limits), livestock reduction, the ecological resettlement of the herders (i.e. moving herders to townships for conservation reasons) and eradication of grassland rodents (Foggin 2008; Harris 2010; Nyima 2015; Yeh et al. 2017; Yundannima 2006). The legitimacy of pastoralism, livestock and other critters on the grassland hinges on its status in relation to grassland health.

In the past decade, with the rise of social media and mobile phones, official media no longer monopolize the news and information. Alternative narratives and images have started to emerge and spread. Palsang's story is one of them, which shows pastoralists' knowledge of and efforts in conserving grassland. Palsang's home village has also been experiencing severe grassland degradation, mainly in the form of the appearance of 'black soil beach' (Chinese: *hei tu tan*), a term which describes patches of bare soil on the grassland. However, Palsang's talks and interviews run counter to the mainstream

overgrazing narrative, as he explains that the reasons for the degradation which has occurred at his home village cannot be simply attributed to the herders' bad management of livestock grazing, but are, instead, a result of multiple recent alterations of the political ecology of the grassland, with its own historicity and sociality. One of the reasons, for example, was the drainage of the grassland. Dzögé had a lot of wetlands in the 1970s. Livestock could not graze on these wetlands in the summer when they were swamps, however, they would become an excellent grazing place once the swamps were frozen in the winter. Yet, outsider experts had decided to drain the wetlands, so that the livestock can also graze the area in the summer. Elderly herders in Palsang's village attribute the historical wetland drainage practice to today's grassland degradation. In addition, there have also been mining activities, the poisoning of pikas,[4] the privatization and segregation of the grassland with fences, the disappearance of sheep manure and climate change. All of which have directly or indirectly caused the local grassland degradation. These narratives highlight the historical contingency and the sociality of the grassland degradation.

Sowing Grass to Reunite the Community: A Day of Planting Grass

> What we can see is grassland degradation, but what we can't see are the changes in human relationships. Human relationships are lost in development and fences. Grassland degradation is tangible and visible. But if you can also see the cultural loss, it is much, much, much, severer. To be honest, the international NGO [non-governmental organization] is not willing to do these kinds of things [the cultural aspects]. Because you can't see them. So, I thought, I need to make them [the NGO] happy, and I do want to restore the grassland. But can I also use the opportunity to do something more important? (Palsang)

Palsang was employed by an international NGO. The latter sees grass sowing as the most immediate and preferred way to restore the grassland, as it is measurable, effective and visible. However, in Palsang's opinion, restoring the loss of the pastoralists' cultural aspects is equally important. One of the main changes is the separation among families due to the privatization of grassland. Sowing grass together provides an opportunity to reunite the herders who have been separated by the fences which divide the formally common grassland into patches.

Although news articles often praise the different techniques in Palsang's grass sowing practice, he himself was less interested in the techniques themselves. He ridiculed his grass sowing techniques: "When you talk about these techniques in real pastoral area, such as spreading dung and putting up fences to conserve the new grass, these are not techniques. Who doesn't know this already?" In Palsang's opinion, creating possibilities for herders to have discussions among themselves and restoring the solidarity of the community are the keys to revitalize the grassland and pastoralism, not the grass sowing

4 According to Palsang, the poisoning of pikas has led to the deaths of the pikas' predators, which, in turn, have caused the explosion of the pika population.

techniques themselves. One of his reasons is that, as weather and grassland conditions on the Tibetan plateau vary from place to place and time to time, herders cannot rely on universally applicable techniques to restore the grassland. Restoring the grassland requires the flexibility, understanding of uncertainties, and constant negotiation and discussion among herders. Scholars in other parts of the world have also observed that local knowledge can inform environmental practice, for example, Australia's savanna's burning project benefitted from incorporating Indigenous fire-management practices, informed by both custom and the observation of the seasons (McKemey et al. 2020). However, it is important to note that Palsang's grassland restoration is not based on traditional practice. In the past, pastoral communities do not maintain a healthy grassland by cultivating the land but through mobile grazing, which has been restrained by grassland privatization policies.

Palsang has not asked the international NGO to pay for the daily wages of the grass sowing participants over the past 13 years, which is different from most grass sowing projects conducted by other NGOs and commercial companies. During our interviews, Palsang did not dismiss the grass sowing projects which hire workers to sow grass for daily wages. But he was proud that his grass sowing practice has been conducted through communication and understanding instead of in monetary terms. He has several reasonings for this choice. First and foremost, Palsang emphasizes that the herders whose grassland needs to be seeded with grass should ask for helpers from the village themselves. Asking for help, being indebted to others, is the first step to establishing and reinforcing the relationship among villagers and families which has been disappearing due to the privatization of the grassland. Palsang explains: "Pastoralist culture is about helping each other. I help you, and you help me. Of course, there will be frictions. It is like there are sounds when using a wok and spatula. But the relationship lasts for a long time." Secondly, the continuity of grassland conservation is ultimately dependent on the herders' own management and care, not on the NGO or companies' payment. Thirdly, he maintained that the self-determined action gives the herders a sense of dignity, which is more important than the petty payment, which is usually 100 yuan a day (about 13 euro).

Cooking together, eating together and having fun are important and integral parts of the grass sowing activity in Palsang's opinion. Although the participants are not paid daily wages in Palsang's grass sowing practice, he uses NGO funding to make sure everyone eats well during the period when the grass is being sown. Grass sowing is usually conducted in the early spring when meat is scarce. Palsang would purchase meat and soft drinks to have a feast. "On the one hand, we are working. On the other hand, we are gathering together with families and villagers", said Palsang. During the days of sowing grass, Palsang often took the lead in cooking. On the first evening, Palsang made our dinner: spring onion fried with yak meat. While cooking, he said to me: "I am cooking to lift the mood. I don't want them to think that doing this (sowing grass) is painful."

The day before the grass sowing day, we drove to the village centre in the grassland. We had to go there early in the morning before the checkpoint officials at the entrance of the village started to work, because it was during the COVID-19 pandemic time and outsiders such as me were not welcomed by local authorities. We loaded equipment from a storage house in the village onto the pickup truck, including sheepskins, rakes, seed buckets, carpets, different sizes of aluminium pots, an aluminium teapot, a chopping-

board, knives, water buckets and grass seeds packed in sacks. Two pickup trucks and a tractor fully loaded with goods and food set off to Tsering's pasture in the afternoon. Tsering was the herder whose grassland would soon be treated with Palsang's grass sowing this year. He had asked Palsang to help him to restore his grassland this year after witnessing that his neighbour's grassland had become much lusher after a grass sowing event.

Soon after we drove off the paved road onto the grassland, we had to stop in front of barbed wire fences and pull out the iron rods of the fences. After pulling up bars, two people must stand on the wires while the trucks and tractor drove over the wires. The iron rods were not easy to pull out. It was better to put on gloves so as not to get injured by the wires. Before pulling up the iron rods, you must sway the bar back and forth until the soil was loosened. One rod was so tightly rooted in the soil that it took three people to take it out. "Ouch, my eyes", a young herder shouted when some soil flew into his eyes. We had to repeat the same procedure several times every hundred metres before finally arriving at Tsering's pasture. I was astonished by the density of the fences on this grassland.

Pulling up the barbed wire fences brought me back to the countless conversations about grassland fences I had had with many herders and environmentalists. The grassland household contract policy started in Palsang's village in 2008, relatively late compared to other regions in Tibet. The size of the grassland allocated was according to the family size at that time, 157 mu (1 mu = 666 square metres) per person. The larger the family, the bigger the grassland to which they were assigned. The location of the pasture was determined by lottery. Fences were thereafter erected between the pastures. Despite the fact that many recent studies have shown the negative impacts of fencing on the grassland ecology and pastoral life (Harris 2010; Yeh et al. 2014; Yundannima 2017), there is still little sign of removing the fences.

The most labour-intensive part of sowing the grass took place on the next day. We woke up around 8 a.m. in the tent set up on Tsering's grassland. Preparational work included Palsang explaining the process to Tsering, mixing different grass seeds and making a "plough" out of a roll of iron fences. Palsang was very proud of the homemade "plough". He explained to me, "We could have just bought a ready-made tool from the market. But when we make it ourselves, it is about the group effort we made to make things work." This year, a part of the "plough" was defective. I asked him: "What can we do?" He said: "Don't worry, we will figure it out. You see, there will always be difficulties and problems. The important thing is to try to figure it out together."

Villagers started to show up at Tsering's pasture at 10 a.m., mostly coming by motorbike. Tsering had been worrying about the number of people who would show up for a long time. His concern was not without reason. Tsering was known for not being very sociable or willing to help others in the village. In addition, the day of the grass sowing this year coincided with a function at a local monastery. Around 30 villagers came to help him. The year before, a herder has been able to get help from 90 villagers.

The first step in the grass sowing was spreading the grass seeds. Some people filled up their buckets with seeds of local rye (*Elymus sibiricus*) and oats, and spread seeds over the bare soil, while others used rakes to mix the soil and seeds. After a while, a tractor dragging the homemade 'plough' went over the area where the seeds had been sown. Many lumps of the 'black soil beach' on the grassland were a result of zokor's[5] digging. When the 'plough' brushes over the lump, soil would then cover the seeds, without damaging the existing vegetation. At 2 p.m., people gathered around the tent for lunch. Palsang invited two women, who were said to be the best cooks in the village, to make noodle soup. Many helped to break the dough into small pieces and throw them into the soup. The herders then sat on a white plastic tarpaulin laid out on the grassland scattered with cola, energy drinks and snacks, eating the noodle soup and chatting with each other. Groups from other parts of the Tibetan grassland who visited Palsang to learn grassland conservation techniques also often integrated the lunch feast into their own grass sowing practice.

(Figure 1:) Herders spreading grass seeds. Photograph by the author.

5 Asiatic burrowing rodents resembling mole-rats.

(Figure 2:) Tractor with homemade 'plough'; the driver was resting. Photograph by the author.

(Figure 3:) Herders throwing sheep dung into the air. Photograph by the author.

After lunch, it was time to spread sheep dung. A tractor loaded with sheep dung drove across the pasture, with one person pushing off bags of sheep dung along the way. Herders on the ground opened the sheep dung bags and filled their buckets with the dung which herder Tsering has been saving for this event. They threw the dung into the air, into the direction of the wind. Sheep dung is an important yet disappearing fertilizer

on the grassland. Herders have been using sheep dung for its excellent ability to make a strong fire. However, recently, more and more companies have started to purchase sheep dung from pastoral areas and sell it to other agricultural regions as high-quality fertilizer. Palsang wrote an article in Tibetan in a local nomadic magazine advocating the relationship between sheep dung and grassland health, in which he explained that where there is more sheep dung, the grass grows better, as the nitrogen in sheep and yak dung sustains the vitality of the grassland.

Before the herders went home, they gathered inside the tent to have a discussion. Palsang, as well as other herders, expressed their thoughts, experiences and learnings from grassland conservation. One herder, whose grassland was treated last year, suggested sowing the seeds selectively, such as only on bare soils and not all over on the grassland, to avoid wasting seeds. Another herder, who had witnessed much worse degraded grassland in Mongolia, encouraged others to give up on caring for their grassland. An elderly herder added that he thought small black turfs which are created by zokors do not need to be sowed with seeds, as they might seem big from the surface but actually the hole itself was very small and there was still grass underneath the pile of soil. After the meeting, Palsang told me that he was fascinated by this insight, "I have never thought of this before. This is wisdom!" Just as Palsang had learned from two female herders' suggestion to letting yaks tread on soil and grass, such discussions have gradually improved, modified and localized the grassland sowing practice throughout the last 13 years.

Narrating with Photos and Documentary Films

During the entire grass sowing practice, it felt like I was on a film set. Drones were hovering over yaks and sheep. Multiple cameras were set on tripods to film and shoot the scenes from different angles. Professional filming equipment, such as cameras, video cameras, tripods, fluffy boom microphones and drones were all part of this conservation practice. Three young herders from the village filmed the entire grass sowing practice. They took, for example, close shots of herders sowing grass and spreading sheep dung, running beside the slowly driven pickup truck across the grassland to film the conversation between Palsang and herder Tsering inside the truck, documenting casual conversations in the tents and filming formal interviews with herders. The herders here were more at ease with the cameras than I was. I came to realize the environmental practice here is as much about doing the practice itself as narrating it to others, or, as Palsang puts it, "talking is more important than doing".

(Figure 4:) Filming the practices. Photograph by the author.

These young herder-photographers are members of the "Dzögé Photography Group" (*ruo er gai she ying xiao zu*), which was first established in 2015. Palsang organized filming workshops and invited a Tibetan monk who is also a professional documentary maker to teach 15 passionate locals, including herders, farmers and monks, about documentary filmmaking and editing. After years of group discussion and practicing, many of the members have since produced high-quality and award-winning documentary films with their own distinctive ideas; they tell the social-ecological stories from local perspectives, such as stories of grassland fences, herders and wolves, herders and black cranes, and stories of sheep dung. Palsang's centre provides free accommodation for them to sleep overnight, a kitchen to cook food and companionship. During my stay at Palsang's centre, it was not uncommon to see herders and monks seated in front of Apple computers, editing videos, making jokes and discussing their films.

Palsang gradually learned about the importance of having photos as evidence when conveying their achievements to others. At the beginning of his grassland conservation career, when he showed casual photos of different grass growth as evidence of the grass sowing practice, audiences were suspicious about the authenticity of the photos, no matter how hard he tried to convince them verbally. Later, with the before-and-after photos taken at the same location and the same angle, his story became much more powerful and convincing. Since then, he has started to pay attention to the art of communication through images.

In his conversation with me, Palsang listed several motivations to make documentary films. Firstly, it could potentially influence others. During the grass sowing event, Palsang explained to the herders in local Tibetan dialect about the importance of sharing their ideas and images with others: "You see so many photographers are here. Maybe what we are doing is very small. But they can spread it to more people. We treat 100 mu, 200 mu every year. We make tools ourselves. If 1,000 herders saw this, this will be an

impact. They will have new ideas." Secondly, it can help to preserve knowledge and document social-ecological changes, even if this knowledge will only be cherished in the future. Thirdly, the material filmed could be sold to television stations as a source of income. Part of the income is contributed to the funds of the Dzögé Photography Group to support their events and workshops.

These documentaries and photos contain stories and ideas that the herders want to convey to other herders, as well as to broader audiences. Palsang emphasized several times in our interview the importance of creating a "scenery".

> To be honest, I am doing everything I can to create a scenery. A scenery is also a role model, right? No one will pity you in today's world, right? It is like in nature. If you want to survive, even if you are scared, you must pretend that you are big. For example, I am a herder on the grassland. These days, some people see me as a role model. I can pretend that I am doing very well. For example, my Jeep Wrangler from 2008, a beautiful horse at home and the thing I did next to the yellow river, all these things are scenery.

The scenes he creates offer a possibility that pastoralism does not have to be separated from modernity. On the one hand, his horse-riding photos represent the Tibetan herder's culture, especially masculinity associated with horses. One of Palsang's photos, for example, where he is riding on a white horse with his young daughter sitting in front of him, has often been used in articles and posters. On the other hand, he uses a Jeep Wrangler and his Tibetan style home with contemporary design to represent modernity. It is a deliberate choice. Although his Jeep Wrangler is an old, second-hand one, often breaks down and is stopped by traffic police for excessive modification done by the former owner, it often appears in Palsang's social media, as it embodies a type of modern spirit in his "scenery". I once met a young graduate student from a pastoral family who was unsure about his future and contemplating visiting and learning from one of the prominent environmentalists. I suggested that he visits a monk environmentalist who lived just next to his hometown. He spontaneously rejected my suggestion and told me: "No, I want to visit Palsang. I like his style." Palsang's images are inspiring to many young people who yearn for both modern and traditional pastoral lifestyles.

A Global and Narratable Pastoralism: Aligning with Conservation Science and Charismatic Animals

> I talk about what I do in terms such as biodiversity restoration, grassland ecology restoration. If I didn't do it this way and only talk about tradition or our culture, no one would listen to you. I don't talk about culture. The last thing people want to hear is culture. Repackaging is an opportunity to survive. (Palsang)

Concepts of global conservation ideas are crucial in getting project funding. Every time that Palsang applies for fundings from the international NGO to sow grass, he needs to add new ideas in each application, or, as he puts it, bring in "innovations which suit their taste". Palsang kept his grass sowing practice in conversation with conservation sci-

ence. At the beginning, for example, he highlighted the "herders' participation" in grass sowing activities, when, at the time, most of the grass sowing projects were top-down projects managed by companies. Then, the next year, he brought the participation of yaks and sheep and their dung as fertilizer into grass sowing. And in 2013, he emphasized climate change. After that, he incorporated the measurement of the carbon sink in his project, knowing the importance of carbon sinks in contemporary science. All these elements ensured that he would keep receiving project funding for herders' grass sowing events. "What I want is their [NGO's] support." These innovations are the ones that suit the NGO's taste, which align with global conservation ideals.

Global conservation ideals are not only appealing for NGOs but also for young people from pastoral regions who often face the dilemma of deciding whether to pursue their postgraduate life in the cities or go back to pastoral areas. Pastoralism has been considered to be at the bottom of the livelihood option hierarchy. It was not uncommon for teachers to warn students that if they did not study hard, they would end up being a herder. Even among the pastoralists themselves, people often consider becoming state bureaucrats as the ideal and stable job for university graduates. Palsang translates certain traditional values of pastoralism into the words which young people can embrace. He reinterprets, for example, how the traditional pastoralist way of life is today's "sustainability", "recycling" or "low-carbon emission", as the comparatively low materialistic life of pastoralism has long been considered as "backwardness". However, with a new interpretation, it has become a role model of modern environmentalism. Palsang explains, "If we use these kinds of words, at least they [young people] will start to listen. They will feel it [pastoralism] is not something to be ashamed of." By re-interpreting of pastoralism and linking it to global course, pastoralism is endowed with a new meaning, in which pastoralist life becomes modern and international in the way that it connects the remote pastoral community with the global environmental missions.

Another strategy to legitimize the herders' way of living is to make pastoral life relevant for conserving charismatic highland animals. "Nowadays, we say the luckiest ones are those first and second class nationally protected animals." Palsang illustrated this by the example of another Tibetan environmental group that had managed to demonstrate that pastoralism was critical to the snow leopard's protection. They had used scientific methods to analyse the faeces of the snow leopard. They demonstrated that 70 % of a snow leopard's food source comes from pastoralists' livestock. "Their conclusion is that if there are no herders, and if there is ecological resettlement, the snow leopards will die of hunger without these livestock." Palsang clapped his hands and laughed out loud. "Now you [the snow leopards] are very useful, I [the herder] am not. You [leopards] are famous. Please, can you use your fame to protect me?" Palsang mimicked a conversation between herders and snow leopards. He explains further, "Perhaps using this way, people might say 'then for the snow leopard's sake, you [pastoralists] can stay here for now'."

Palsang adopts a similar narrative by telling a story of how the yaks and sheep, especially their dung and treading it into the soil, are critical to the grassland's ecology, indirectly stating the importance of herders and pastoralism.

> I don't say the herders are great. But I say the yaks and sheep are great. Their fertilizers are important. Going up and down on the mountain with livestock, who else is able do

> it except herders? No one needs to give them a salary. Their way of life *is* conservation. Sowing grass, treating black soil, all these are an interpretation of the relationship between herder and grassland. (Palsang)

The herders' way of life in this story is legitimized through their livestock bringing ecological benefit to the grassland.

The herder photography group has been documenting the coexistent relationship between herders and the black-necked crane, *Grus nigricollis*, an endangered and first class nationally protected animal in China. In their documentary film, black-necked cranes often lay their eggs near herders' home. They have also observed that black-necked cranes feed on the worms growing in yak dung. Therefore, in a way, the black-necked cranes thrive with pastoralism. By interpreting the grassland way of life through how herders coexist and even help the charismatic animals, the story of pastoralism become narratable and relatable.

Environmentalists speak differently in various political climates. The Penan foragers' knowledge in Malaysia was reduced to "the sacred" to be narratable by environmentalists (Brosius 1997), whereas Tibetan local environmental knowledge needs to be "scientific" to avoid being labelled as "superstition" in contemporary China (Yeh 2014: 271). Adding to this, I argue that the narratives which interpret pastoralism through the lens of modern and international conservation science is not only for political correctness, but also facilitating the local knowledge to be narratable to wider audiences, both pastoralists and others. However, there is also a potential drawback that catering to the global discourse will inevitably simplify and even distort the understanding of pastoralism.

Conclusion

Based on a specific case study of a grassroots Tibetan grassland conservation practice, this chapter shows that this practice addresses both the ecological and social reality of the grassland: The grassland is degrading and the continuation of pastoralism is at stake. Tibetan environmental practitioners adopt the state- and NGO-endorsed conservation practice not only to improve the condition of their grassland but also as a medium to revitalize and legitimize the herders' way of living. At first glance, what makes Palsang's grass sowing interesting to many is the success of regreening the grassland and the stories of how the grass sowing practice constantly incorporates both the old and new local knowledge and techniques, such as letting yaks and sheep tread over the earth to mix seed with soil. These practices deliver a message that herders are capable of taking care of a grassland, which contrasts with the mainstream narrative that the herders are to be blamed for grassland degradation. Moreover, in reality, the aim of the practice of sowing grass is not limited to growing grass on the grassland, but also includes the restoration of solidarity within the pastoralist community that has undergone drastic social changes.

More importantly, this chapter has shown the art of narration embedded in the environmental practices, which points to the importance of narrations which give new values and meanings to pastoralism. The narrations include storytelling through group discussions, formal and informal talks, images, project proposal writing, documentary films

and new interpretations of pastoralism. These narratives adopt a wide range of rhetoric and aesthetic tactics, such as scientific terms (e.g. biodiversity, carbon sink), international discourse (e.g. climate change), charismatic animals (e.g. black-necked crane) and Tibetan landscape. Such deliberate choices of rhetoric enable the local stories to be narratable to both outsiders and locals. This chapter, therefore, points to the possibility of a hopeful future which is being built upon local herders' artistic self-representation which incorporates but also clearly diverges from global environmentalism.

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