CARPET WORLDS: 
THE CULTURAL REPRESENTATION AND 
PRODUCTION OF TIBETAN CARPETS 

by 

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This dissertation investigates the representational politics of Tibetan carpets and the political economy of carpet production from the early twentieth century to the 2000s. I describe how socio-historical practices and processes formed the conditions from which Tibetan weavers invented their subject positions in socialist and post-socialist Lhasa. By examining the history of a Tibetan carpet factory, I analyze the interplay of patriarchy, ethnicity, and capital accumulation that has marginalized women weavers in Lhasa’s post-socialist carpet industry.

The first three chapters consist of an historical analysis of representations of “Tibetan carpets.” I begin by investigating “Western” ideas of Tibetan carpets and the establishment of a carpet production centre in Nepal. I then explore the making of “Tibetan carpets” as commodities and as cultural symbols under the Tibetan government, the socialist Chinese government, and the post-socialist Chinese government. I argue that the making and marketing of Tibetan carpets directly or indirectly turned Tibetan carpets into internationally-celebrated “ethnic folk art,” thus contributing to the emergence and development of an export carpet industry in Lhasa.

The second part of the dissertation is a case study of the history of Tibet’s first carpet factory, Lhasa Carpets, from the 1960s to the 2000s. I discuss the changes in meanings of carpet-weaving, weavers’ social-economic status, working conditions, and labour relations. I describe how weaving prestige carpets started as men’s work in pre-socialist Lhasa, became women’s work in socialist Lhasa, and finally became migrant women’s work in post-socialist Lhasa. I show that pro-market policies and Tibetan patriarchal family structure combine to subject women weavers to exploitative and patriarchal working conditions. Finally, I examine the legacy of socialism and Tibetan Buddhist culture that gave these women the strength to confront the local patriarchy and exploitative labour policies. I conclude by discussing the limitations of women’s collective and individual strategies for social status and economic reward.
Key Words:

patriarchy; gender; ethnicity; work; labour; development; representation; cultural policy; political economy of craft production; arts and crafts; Tibetan carpet
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A NOTE ON TRANSLITERATION

Because the Wylie Tibetan transliteration system has not been used widely, Tibetan place names and words very often appear with different transliterations in different texts. In order to allow readers to recreate the Tibetan spellings, I used the Wylie system to transliterate Kashag official titles, some place names, and Tibetan words for various kinds of carpets. However, for some common names and words, I have used simplified transliterations to help with the flow of the text. For example, I use Barkhor rather than the Wylie spelling Bar-skor to refer to the middle circumambulation path around the Jokhang Temple in Lhasa. For people's names, I have also used simplified spellings. For Chinese terms, I have used standard pinyin transliterations throughout the text.
Photo 1: The façade of the carpet shop

![Photo 1: The façade of the carpet shop](image)

Tracy Y. Zhang © Lhasa 2006

Photo 2: The interior of the carpet shop

![Photo 2: The interior of the carpet shop](image)

Tracy Y. Zhang © Lhasa 2006
INTRODUCTION: CARPET WORLDS

Lhasa Carpets Inc. is the oldest carpet factory in Lhasa and the third incarnation of a state workshop built by the Tibetan Kashag government in 1953 on the outskirts of Lhasa city. When I started doing fieldwork in this factory in the fall of 2006, this part of the city had already transformed into a bustling area; its newly paved roads were lined with stores, restaurants, bakeries, tea houses, banks, and barbershops. The factory was hidden in the middle of a packed block, but its giant showroom stood out in the crowd and faced the main road. The carpet store was named bod rum gyi zhint kham, meaning “Tibetan carpets’ heavenly land.” The store also boasted English and Chinese names which were displayed on a large signboard: the English “Tibetan Rugs and Carpet Gallery,”1 and the Chinese zangtan da shijie or “The Big World of Tibetan Carpets.”

This store mainly sold khadens and sadens. Khaden are rectangular carpets, usually laid on a Tibetan couch, with a gyabney (back cushion). In the Shigatse region, people call these couch carpets drumtse. Saden is the Tibetan term for floor carpet. Sometimes, it is called rum, for example, rgya rum for “Chinese carpet” while bod rum refers to a “Tibetan carpet.” Nowadays, khaden carpets are a standard size: 3-feet wide by 6-feet long. In this store, khaden sold for between 1200 to 2500 yuan (US $175-366). Prices increase in accordance with the intricacy of the pattern and the quality of the material.

The store’s interior was visually stunning: large carpets were stacked on the floor and piled on racks, medals and cups were displayed on shelves, colourful tapestries in all sizes hung on the white-washed walls next to certificates of merit, large photos of visiting officials, and red silk banners. The photos, medals and cups demonstrated that the factory had not only received numerous government awards but that Tibetan carpets had acquired prestige over the past several decades. China’s official guide to Tibetan handicrafts praises Tibetan carpets as a leading export commodity, central to the

1 On the signboard, the English was “the Tibetan Rugs & Carpets Gallery.”
economic development of the Tibet Autonomous Region (TAR). In 2002, carpet export sales increased to 9,750,000 USD, ranking second on the list of exports for the region. However, the impressive façade of Lhasa Carpets Inc., the worldwide fame of Tibetan carpets, and their significance as exports convey neither the complex history of the carpet industry nor the weavers’ working and living conditions.

During my fieldwork, I came to know the women workers who had, for over fifteen years, woven carpets in this factory. The majority came from Tibetan rural areas and entered the factory when they were seventeen or eighteen. However despite their long years of work in the factory, they were still considered “temporary workers” without pension rights and healthcare benefits; they did not have legal residence status in Lhasa.

On the shop floor, these women wore blue work uniforms and wove carpets in pairs or in groups of four or five. Under the supervision of the male managers, they worked nine hours per day and six or seven days a week for piece-rate wages, earning approximately 250-300 yuans (US $ 35-42) per month. I was befriended by several unmarried women in their early and mid thirties. They lived in the factory’s dormitory quarter and earned a wage that barely covered their living expenses in Lhasa. Their rural kin still sent them food, such as roasted barley flour and butter. Despite their low wages, these women liked working together. While weaving carpets, they sang Tibetan songs, gossiped about neighbours, or exchanged local news. They took tea breaks together, eating cheap spicy noodles and drinking salted black tea. Outsiders might find it difficult to comprehend why the women accepted low wages and why they did not utilize their workplace solidarity to help them improve their socio-economic status in the factory.

In fact, as I observed, visitors to the workshop often quickly concluded that these workers fit the stereotype of happy-go-lucky Tibetans. The paradoxes and puzzles that I found in the factory showroom and workshop spurred me on to study the historical processes that contributed to the carpet weavers’ marginality; specifically, to look at the socio-cultural dynamics that shaped the representation and production of Tibetan carpets from the early twentieth century to the twenty-first. This dissertation demonstrates that in

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4 The managers said that a weaver could make 600 yuan per month. Women workers told me that fines were subtracted from their earnings if they made mistakes in weaving.
the last one hundred years, the making of Tibetan carpets was an uninterrupted cultural production amidst global imperialist contests. During this time, not only did the carpets’ physical appearances and production techniques change, but the carpets acquired new meanings and values. There are several key issues that I explore: First, I ask what historical conditions contributed to the cultural identity of Tibetan carpets and how this cultural identity affected the political economy of carpet production. Second, since the 1960s, there has been consistency in the use of “Tibetan carpets” for developmental purposes by governmental agencies. I investigate how and why such modernization programs became prevalent and who participated in and benefited from them. Third, I discuss how Tibetan men and women made carpets, and in doing so, also made new Tibetan subjectivities under different political regimes.

This chapter introduces my theoretical framework and explains how my personal history and social position informed my epistemological visions, research ethic, and methods. First, I discuss why the analysis of the politics of value and feminist political economics are indispensable to understanding women workers’ marginality in the carpet industry. Using an interdisciplinary approach, I intend to tease out the analytical links between cultural imaginings and labour politics. Second, I discuss my position, research methods, and fieldwork dilemma. This section looks at power and knowledge issues in the research process, especially how uncertainties and gaps became part of my reflexive understanding of women weavers, managers, dealers, development experts, and overseas investors in Lhasa’s carpet economy. Then, I briefly describe my research procedures and explain my rationales for choosing these techniques. Finally, I present an outline of the chapters.

* * *

How does a piece of old Tibetan khaden carpet displayed in the Textile Museum of Canada have any effect on artisans, for example, the women workers weaving export carpets at Lhasa Carpets Inc.? How does the success of Tibetan carpet producers in Nepal contribute to the marginal status of carpet weavers in Lhasa? To answer these questions, I chose an interdisciplinary approach. In the following sections, I elaborate key concepts and methodological insights drawn from Material Culture Studies and
feminist approaches to gender, labour, and globalization. These analytical tools help me to make sense of my fieldwork experience and subsequent data.

The Politics of Value

The concept of “the politics of value” emerged from discussions on the relationship between material culture and exchange theory. Drawing upon the work of Georg Simmel, Arjun Appadurai first pointed out that it is economic exchange that creates value, and not vice versa. The link between exchange and value is politics, broadly defined as social relations and activities pertaining to power.\(^5\) Assuming that value is embodied in commodities, Appadurai’s approach tracks “the social life of things” and explores “the conditions under which economic objects circulate in different regimes of value in space and time.”\(^6\) After him, many researchers looked at multiple, co-existing, and interrelated “regimes of value.”\(^7\) They all share an assumption that certain objects, for example Tibetan carpets, are collected, bought, sold, and displayed as valuable because of the ways in which they are understood to represent, embody, or signify.\(^8\) It can be said that each regime of value is a different “world,” in which people have their particular ways of seeing, thinking, and placing values on things. Importantly, this literature led me to realize why Tibetan carpets became meaningful and “valuable.” This dissertation explores how certain discourses, such as modernity, tradition, ethnicity, authenticity, and cultural heritage have been inscribed in Tibetan carpets by diverse individuals and institutions that classify them, and give them their meaning and value. For example, I discuss how some Tibetan carpets were featured as “ethnic folk art” in professional arts journals; some were represented as the embodiment of “authentic” Tibetan tradition; yet others were seen as instruments of development by the state and business elites in post-socialist Lhasa.

Furthermore, the politics of value emphasizes the existence of hierarchy in the construction of value. The relationship between “hierarchy,” value, and objects can be

\(^6\) Ibid., 4.
\(^8\) Ibid., 53.
understood from two angles. One perspective is that in their on-going struggles for political legitimacy, social agents hold onto valued objects to express their tastes, identity, status, power, and ranked difference. This view is useful to understand for example how Tibetan carpet producers in Nepal and in Lhasa began to use carpets to express their cultural identity and status in a globalizing carpet business dominated by Euro-American distributors.

The other perspective shows that seemingly objective and universal notions of things, such as “fine art” and “folk art,” are in fact the effect of the domination of particular regimes of value. Michael Herzfeld provides some insights into this form of politics. He observed a global “common sense:” “People from vastly different cultures appear to share some surprisingly similar values, at least in deciding what is a fitting way of disporting themselves on the international stage.” Using Greece as an example, he found that Western Europeans’ invention of pure Greek culture is promulgated by the Greek state and elites as more real than Greece’s actual history as part of the Ottoman Empire, with a Turkified language and culture; this meant that non-European cultural legacies had to be suppressed to cosmeticize Greece as the cradle of Europe’s “high culture.” Like Herzfeld, I will discuss Tibetan carpets as an artefact lauded by connoisseurs or dealers for their intrinsic worth that was to a great extent invented by “the Westerners.” My work describes how this global order of cultural knowledge of Tibetan carpets emerged from the international geopolitical system that gradually took shape through imperialist contests since the nineteenth century. One important context is known as the Great Game, a rivalry among British India, the Russian Empire, and Qing China in the late nineteenth century; the other context is the Cold War, where Nepal and Tibet were on the frontline between socialist China, India, and the United States. In the second half of the twentieth century, Western discourses about “Tibetan carpet” began interacting with international commerce and capital. Particularly, cultural “experts” (e.g., connoisseurs, curators, and dealers) and arts institutions (e.g., museums and galleries)

9 Ibid., 15
11 Ibid., 6-7.
started to participate in creating socio-economic hierarchies in the international Tibetan carpet business.

In summary, I use the concept of “the politics of value” to explain how the cultural dynamics of four political regimes (the Tibetan Kashag government, exile Tibetans in Nepal, the socialist Chinese state in Tibet, and post-socialist Tibet) shaped the political economy of carpet production in the twentieth century. In part, this historical examination provides a context for understanding the export carpet industry in the TAR (the Tibet Autonomous Region). In 2006, when I toured downtown Lhasa, I found that inexpensive machine-made carpets manufactured in the Chinese provinces prevailed in the bazaars. Locally-made hand-knotted wool carpets were displayed only in a few factory showrooms; for most Tibetan buyers, these carpets were unaffordable; all the local factories aimed at export sales. Several managers I spoke with compared local labour costs with wage rates in the Tibetan-Nepalese carpet industry, commenting that Nepalese labour was cheaper and more abundant. It was evident that Tibetan carpet companies were in a dual competition, on the one hand, with cheap products from Chinese carpet factories, on the other hand—as managers pointed out to me—with Nepalese producers who have the advantage of cheaper and more abundant labour. They wanted to keep local workers’ wages competitive with overseas labour markets in order to sustain this export business. How exactly was this market situation translated into shop floor management? Did only the imperative of profitability shape labour relations at Lhasa Carpets Inc.? I needed a different theoretical tool to make sense of day-to-day labour politics inside the carpet workshop.

**Feminist Methodology and Political Economy**

Working with Professor Alison Beale, I was inspired by Prof. Beale’s feminist approach to policy because the feminist epistemology and methodology are not only sensitive to historical questions of “male domination” but also challenge some basic assumptions in political economy theories, especially, the dualist thinking of power (e.g., the working class versus the capitalists), and the patriarchal notions of wage, skill, and labour. Also I drew many insights from feminist approaches to gender, labour, and globalization that are enriched by post-colonial studies, the critical political economy,
and feminist policy studies. For example, this body of literature inspired me to question a monolithic view of “Chinese political economy,” to identify the historical-regional particularity of industrial modernization in Tibet, to investigate gendered hierarchies in inter-connected social domains, such as workplace and family, and to investigate the source of Tibetan workers’ socio-cultural agency.

Many feminists have shown that race, gender, ethnicity, kinship and other structuring factors together constitute variations of “patriarchy” that subordinate women to men. My gender analysis is inspired by a literature that examines particular forms of patriarchal oppression and political opportunities derived from their historical conditions. The premise is that patriarchy must be understood as an on-going socio-cultural process that flexibly interacts with specific economic forms to reproduce labour hierarchies among men and women, in terms of unequal payments and employment opportunities. Thus, it is important to chart how Tibetan patriarchal culture was harnessed by different political economic regimes, how Tibetan women responded to the social forces of socialist industrialization, urbanization, and privatization, and how this interaction gave rise to ironies and paradoxes in women’s lives.

I discuss changes in meanings and practices of carpet-weaving because such changes reflect not only larger social tendencies but also shifts in the gendered division of labour. Moreover, I analyze contrasting situations: in the Kashag workshop, for example, men made prestigious carpets and garnered a respectable artisan status; at Lhasa Carpets Inc., women wove expensive export carpets and were identified only as temporary workers. Following in the footsteps of many feminists, I explore whether the

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gendered re-definition of skill labels was accompanied by increasing labour control and patriarchal-managerial power.\textsuperscript{15}

The feminist methodology also stresses that gender is a social construction, pertaining to the maintenance of dominant social orders. Hennessy argues that gender ideologies, especially heterosexuality, naturalize and reproduce asymmetrical social divisions.\textsuperscript{16} Historically organized, heterosexuality-patriarchy became the natural criteria by which wage labour and heterosexual matrimonial households are justified.\textsuperscript{17} My analysis of economic exploitation, patriarchy, and institutionalized ethnic discrimination incorporates these feminist concepts of labour, gender, and family structure because they are useful in exposing the linkages between patriarchal family practices and the creation of a female labour force in the Lhasa carpet industry.

The most important point I learned from the “gender, labour, and globalization” literature is that these feminists criticize abstractions of “the state” and other social categories that generally reinforce assumptions of unified phenomena or institutions. Instead, they advocate that “the state,” “the market,” “the global” or “the local” activities should be understood as changing and connected social processes—a part of our social lives.\textsuperscript{18} Their writings are centred on peoples, their activities, and texts—the social dimension, the meso- and micro-level of capitalism. Aiming to build an “embodied” political economic framework, these scholars identify the patterns of power by examining

actual peoples, their interactions against a set of local arrangements, and the social processes linking one locality to multiple sites.19

Influenced by this feminist literature, I devoted much time and energy to getting to know carpet weavers, factory managers, carpet traders, sellers, and development workers who played different roles in the regional and international carpet business. I used oral history to investigate the “scattered” cultural ideology and its differentiated impacts on the people who are directly or indirectly involved in the making and marketing of carpets. Oral narratives were “personally meaningful constructions”20 of past events. These personal stories not only enriched my understanding of the local history but also reflected my interviewees’ current experience and expectations. Also, I investigate policy practices that implicitly or explicitly promote “official cultures,” and I analyze these practices as interactive social processes subject to local interpretations and infiltrated by historically-established patriarchal norms and rules.21

In short, the feminist methodology and political economic theories constitute the examining lens through which I explore the gender and ethnic-cultural dynamics, government socio-cultural programs, and subject formation in the Lhasa carpet industry. To avoid generalization, I use terms like “labour,” “the carpet weavers,” “the Tibetan cadre-managers,” and “the Tibetan cadre-capitalists,” with specific references to my interviewees’ subject positions and identities, or their social interactions in homes, communities, and workplaces. Next, before discussing my methods, I will describe my introduction to Tibet.

**Putting “Self” in the Field**

My first encounter with Tibet was random; until I was 12 years old I lived on Tibet Road in China’s largest industrial city, Shanghai. My parents and school teachers told me little, only that Tibet was a remote and isolated plateau inhabited by people who drink butter tea and herd yaks. In the mid 1990s, my awareness of “Tibet” was

20 Naples, *Feminism and Method*, 90.
heightened by rock star Zheng Jun’s hit song, *Return to Lhasa*. Before I left for Canada, I had a memorable encounter with “Tibet.” On the night of June 30th, 1997, my university organized us students to watch the live telecast of Hong Kong’s handover ceremony. However, before the celebration, school officials screened *Red River Valley*, an “educational” film. The film is set in early twentieth century Tibet during the period when British troops were sent to occupy Lhasa. I was immediately captured by the impressive visual representation of idyllic landscapes, bloody warfare, and “Tibetan” protagonists (performed by Chinese film stars). I was not the only one in the theatre feeling emotional; many students stood up and clapped as the last scene was fading out. These moments encountering “Tibet” made me appreciate “Tibetan” culture and history as distinct from “Chinese culture,” and also created for me an imaginary “Tibet,” connected to China’s colonial past and implying an incomplete sovereignty. “Tibet” gradually entered my psyche as a geographical symbol integral to China.

I carried this idea of “Tibet” to Canada where I discovered that Canadians had very different conceptions of Tibet-China relations. Meanwhile, living in Canada meant that I was constantly reminded of my “race” and “ethnicity.” When I proposed to study Tibetan culture in a graduate methods class, the professor asked me how, as a Chinese researcher, I could justify such an investigation. She suggested that Tibet is an occupied region of China and that my “oppressor” identity would render such an inquiry problematic. Her doubtfulness about my critical faculties revealed the problematic triangular relationship between “the West,” Tibet, and China that developed on the basis of conflicted interpretations of a colonial history tinted by contemporary race politics. Although I could not respond to her challenge easily, I was also not convinced that my “Chinese” background would prohibit me from learning about Tibet. Could I justify the position that my experiences in China and Canada would help me understand “Tibet”? This dissertation is my attempt to understand Tibetan contemporary society through the study of “Tibetan carpets;” it represents my first attempt to converse with Tibetans and non-Tibetans connected to this history and material culture.

In the spring of 2005 in Vancouver, I began learning the Tibetan Lhasa dialect with Sonam, a Tibetan tutor, a young man about my age and the first Tibetan I ever met. At that time, Sonam was working as a tempura cook in a Japanese restaurant. I learned
that he was born in a Tibetan County, Nagwa, in the Amdo region near today’s Sichuan-Tibet border. In the mid 1980s, his parents entrusted him to a lama who took him to India. Sonam recalled that he was disguised as a Nepalese shepherd and following others, he walked across the border under the eyes of the Chinese soldiers into Nepal. Then, he went to India and studied Tibetan and English in a boarding school. Since he had no passport and could not apply for a visa, he did not, for several decades, return to Amdo to visit his family. Through Sonam, I became friends with a few other Tibetans, who left their natal families in similar ways. They told me about how their families were affected by Chinese policies in Tibet. Their stories made me aware of the complex effects of Sino-Tibet history and politics on different individuals.

While preparing fieldwork, I read the work of Donna Haraway and Sandra Harding, two prominent feminists. Both argue that no researcher can claim that her analysis and theory are universally applicable because knowledge is always produced in specific circumstances and is shaped by the power relations inherent in the research process. They advocate intellectual inquiries that acknowledge their limits, specificity, and partiality. One of the ways to situate “self” in the field is exploring the researcher’s privileged position and her relationship with subjects and by making these aspects visible in the writing and open to debate. Building awareness and historical sensitivity into my method means that I must consider to what extent and in what ways my “ethnic and gender identity” can help me connect to Tibetan weavers and others in the research process. How do my relationships with my subjects vary in shifting social contexts, and how does such uncertainty affect my interviews and participant observations? These are difficult issues. However, I would use them as guidelines when I had the chance to meet and learn from the Tibetans in Lhasa.

Making a Life in Lhasa

I arrived in Lhasa in September 2006 planning to stay for four or five months or as long as my limited funding permitted. In the previous year, I had participated in a

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two-month Tibetan language training program in Lhasa with a group of American students. During that time, I toured the city to get some insights into the local culture; I also made a few contacts, one of which was with an American-Chinese woman working as a program coordinator at Tibet University. After I explained to her that I did not have enough money to rent a hotel room for several months, she offered me the option of sleeping in her living room. In return, I did the grocery shopping and cooked the main meals for the two of us.

I chose Lhasa Carpets Inc. as my field site because this carpet factory is the oldest in Tibet. The first person with whom I made friends in the factory was a shop assistant wanting to learn English. We met during my first Tibet trip and kept in touch by e-mail for a year. At first, she was confused by my ethnic background, taking me for a Korean. Then she accepted the idea that I was a Chinese from Canada. This woman, one of my most important informants, not only guided me inside the factory but also introduced me to a circle of Tibetan friends outside the factory.

The carpet weavers were all Tibetan women; they always regarded me as a university student wanting to practice Tibetan and learn about their lives. They all called me by my Tibetan name “Dikye.” My initial encounter with the factory owner Nima was memorable. He spoke fluent Mandarin and asked me specifically where I grew up. When I told him I was born and raised in Shanghai, he claimed that one of his favourite school teachers was from Shanghai. Then, he revealed that his teacher was sent to a labour camp during the Cultural Revolution because of her “bad class background.” I said my family did not have such a political history, that they were Shanghai businesspeople. He laughed, suddenly softening his voice to indicate his friendliness. Typically my relationships in Tibet began in uncertainty; the relationships were clearly varied. Very often, I was not quite sure how people judged me based on my physical appearance, language, attitude, education, and/or perhaps other factors of which I was unaware.

This carpet factory is located within walking distance of my American friend’s apartment building. In the first two months, I visited the factory almost every day in order to record weavers’ work routines and sometimes chat with weavers, managers, and shop assistants. I became comfortable with my new identity as “Dikye” which was
emerging from our interactions. At the same time, I did not always understand how the history and policy affected people’s everyday activities and sometimes put myself in certain social networks and political situations without knowing the consequences of doing so. Sometimes, I did not even consciously know that I had entered a situation that could affect my research beyond the factory gate. For example, I did not realize that American and European researchers who lodged in nice hotels could impact my study until one of my Tibetan interpreters, who spoke English, Tibetan, and Mandarin, disappeared suddenly. Later, I was told that an American Fulbright scholar had offered her a higher fee.

In several cases, I was not in an appropriate position to uncover more information, such as the details of the pension dispute between the weavers and the factory owner and the legal procedures of privatizing the factory. I look at such uncertainties and gaps in the fieldwork as indications of my own limits and the constraints of the surrounding environment. My experience illustrates what Gillian Rose called the failure of “transparent reflexivity”: the impossibility of a quest to know fully both self and context.23 Therefore, I ask my readers to view this study as a co-production of knowledge between me and the people involved in the research process. This dissertation tells less about facts than personally meaningful constructions of specific events and policy discourses embedded in social relations and local culture.

Methods and Research Process

As I decided to use an exploratory approach and the people-oriented political economy framework, I designed procedures and techniques that allow flexibility in defining and refining my research questions. My main methods include participant observation, interviews, surveys, and archival research. For example, when I first approached the factory owner of Lhasa Carpets Inc. for an interview, I told him about my research objectives and convinced him to give me permission to carry out a study in his weaving workshop. As soon as he acknowledged my presence, I started to visit the shop floor to become familiar with the workers’ names and to document their work routines,

division of labour, and patterns of interactions. After two weeks of on-site observation, I
designed a survey which I carried out on the shop floor to collect baseline information,
including weavers’ marital status, age, length of service, residence status, and home
towns. Based on this data, I refined my first batch of interview questions and began to
identify potential interviewees who could represent the weaver population. Eventually,
fifteen weavers agreed to participate in private interviews which I conducted in the next
one and a half months. We met inside the workshop, in the workers’ dormitory, or in my
apartment.

At the same time, I asked the factory owner to introduce me to retired carpet
weavers who could tell me about their past work experiences. However, for unknown
reasons, only the former factory director came to the scheduled interview session.
Luckily, through my connections outside the factory, I was able to find two of his co-
workers who were willing to participate in oral history interviews. In November, I
conducted two large surveys involving a total of 146 weavers. One was carried out at
Lhasa Carpets Inc., the other in a private factory. These surveys asked carpet weavers
about their family backgrounds. The comparative data generated by these interviews
helped me identify the particular features of the labour force at Lhasa Carpets Inc.

In the last stage of the fieldwork, I researched the public archive, looked for local
literature on Tibetan handicrafts in bookstores, and collected statistical data in the
university library. Whenever I had time, I wandered around the downtown markets,
which were crowded with Tibetans who came from the countryside to shop for their New
Year celebrations. I looked for opportunities to chat with Tibetan, Han-Chinese, and
Chinese Muslim carpet sellers. During these months, I also had formal and/or informal
interviews with several development workers and overseas businessmen who had
connections with the handicraft business.

After I returned to Vancouver in January 2007, I started to survey carpet
catalogues published by Europeans or Americans. Also I studied the literature on the
geopolitical history of Tibet since the late nineteenth century. In the spring, I spent a
week at Columbia University’s East Asian Library to search for relevant news stories
published in Tibet Daily and other government newspapers and journals from the 1950s
to the 1990s. These historical materials are used to contextualize the structural changes in the “Tibetan carpet” industry and the stories told by senior Tibetan artisans in Lhasa.

A Guide for the Reader

I have organized this dissertation into six chapters using the history of Lhasa Carpets Inc. as a central thread to tie these stories and discussions together. Chapter 2 reveals several examples of Victorian, colonialist, and orientalist ideas of Tibetan carpet not directly related to each other but linked to the shifts in “Western” views of the non-Western worlds and a historical transition from nineteenth century British imperialism to twentieth century American hegemony. I analyze how the discourses on Tibetan carpets were articulated through different attempts to establish carpet production centres in the Himalayas.

Chapter 3 and Chapter 4 chart the making of “Tibetan carpets” under two political regimes—the Tibetan Kashag government and the People’s Republic. Chapter 3 describes the organization of carpet making in early twentieth century Gyantse and the birth of the first government carpet workshop (Kashag workshop) that emerged from the historical conjunction of a falling Tibetan theocracy and an ascending socialist China. Chapter 4 discusses several development discourses that affected the Lhasa carpet industry in post-socialist Tibet up until the 2000s. Also, it describes how different institutions and individuals contributed to reinforcing a hierarchy of values that turns Tibetan carpets into high-end exports.

From Chapter 5 to 7, I trace the development of Tibet’s first textile factory, Lhasa Carpets, through its three incarnations as the carpet workshop of the Kashag government, as a socialist factory, and as a post-socialist private enterprise. Chapter 5 reviews the interplay of ethnic, gender and class politics which shaped the labour relations in Lhasa Carpets in the 1960s and the 1970s. Following this, Chapter 6 and Chapter 7 investigate the privatization of Lhasa Carpets from two different angles. Chapter 6 examines changes in wage policy, non-pecuniary rewards, and real estate deals. Chapter 7 presents the stories of several carpet weavers who entered the factory in the 1980s and the 1990s. I discuss the factors that tied the weavers to the factory and examine the sources of social-cultural agency that gave these women the strength to confront the local patriarchy.
and labour exploitation. In the final chapter, I summarize the arguments presented in the previous chapters.
Figure 1: Lhasa, Gyantse, and Shigatse
Figure 2: Lhasa City
ORIENTAL RUGS, SPIRITUAL TECHNOLOGY, ETHNIC FOLK ART

This chapter charts “Western ideas” of Tibetan carpets from the late nineteenth to the twentieth-first century and describes the emergence and development of a carpet production centre in Nepal. This is not meant to be a comprehensive survey. However, I propose to focus on the selected stories of “Tibetan carpets” to elaborate three interrelated themes: 1) the roles of various individuals and institutions in producing the meanings and values of “Tibetan carpets” amidst global imperialist contests; 2) how the categories of “Tibetan carpets,” as signifiers of ‘the Other,’ came historically into being; 3) what factors facilitated the international business of “Tibetan carpets.”

First, I examine British imperial army officers’ travel writings influenced by Britain’s colonial trade policy. These officers described the carpets from Tibet as exotic commodities. They believed that through international trade, carpets could help Tibetans break away from feudalism. However, the British government was only interested in Tibet’s raw materials and using Tibet as a “buffer state” to contain the Chinese and Russians. The proposal to finance a commercial carpet industry in Tibet was never pursued. Then, from the early to the mid twentieth century, anti-modern romantics created new meanings and practices of “making Tibetan carpets.” They cherished Tibetans’ simple weaving methods and carried out a cultural preservation project through the making of “Tibetan carpets.” Finally, in the early 1970s, the combined forces of the Tibetan nationalist movement, the anti-communist governments in the Himalayas, and the politics of foreign aid in Nepal fostered a Nepalese-Tibetan export carpet industry. In response, the classifying and marketing of “Tibetan carpets” was intensified on an unprecedented scale. Anthropologists and carpet dealers started to find new significance in Tibetan carpets, and this intent also engendered an opportunity for the Tibetan government-in-exile to make and sell carpets to finance their political activities.
The Imperial Trade

We have, as one result, partially freed the people from the terrible incubus of priestly control, and there are unmistakable signs that we left them better disposed towards us after our advance to Lhasa than they were before.

--Francis Younghusband

The British-Tibet Affair: International Politics, Trade, and Information

During the imperialist encounters in Central Asia, Tibet was at the political junction of three Asian empires, namely Russia, China, and British India. In this context, conditions were created for a group of British army officers to conduct research in Tibet. They were sent by the British India government to Tibet from the 1880s to the 1920s, and the information gathered by them gives us clues about the British-Tibet political-economic relationship at the turn of the twentieth century.

In the 19th century, Asian colonies became increasingly important to Britain’s economic success. A simple explanation of this dynamic is that after the American Civil War, nineteenth-century Britain had substantial trade deficits with the Americas and continental Europe, a situation which forced Whitehall to strengthen “the second colonial empire” by creating the British Raj in the Old World. Colonial policy and enforced

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3 I focus on employees of the British Indian Civil Service. In addition to these government employees, many British travelers, botanists, missionaries also made their ways to Tibet from the 1880s to 1910s. See for example, Peter Bishop, The Myth of Shangri-la: Tibet, Travel Writing and the Western Creation of Sacred Landscape (London: The Athlone Press, 1989), 136-140.


trade agreements artificially created outlets for British products in Asian markets, facilitated lucrative commodity trade (e.g., opium trade in China), and tolerated coercive labour practices to export cheap farm products such as tea and indigo to Europe.

In the stark, rugged, mountainous lands of South Asia, armed or semi-armed trade expeditions were first carried out by the British East India Company. Military confrontations were staged to advance the Company’s negotiations with various Himalayan states. After the demise of the Company in the mid-nineteenth century and the subsequent establishment of the British Raj, the British India government took the lead in settling trade agreements and pacts with rulers in Southern and Eastern Himalayas. Near the Tibetan borders, Assam, Sikkim, Bhutan, and the Monpas one after another came under the shadow of the British rule.\(^6\)

The first attempt to open Tibet to British trade was made in the late eighteenth century. The British East India Company’s concerted trade expeditions in 1774 and 1784 sought direct contacts with Tibetan authorities.\(^7\) Two missions were dispatched by Company officials in light of immediate economic concerns. The Company aimed to expand its trade network to the northern-western Himalayan lands in order to revive the stagnating markets of Bengal.\(^8\) Also, the Company executives hoped that Anglo-Tibetan trade would channel manufactured goods into China through her back door at a time when the Qing state restricted foreign trade to the port of Canton.\(^9\) However, these earlier trade proposals were rejected by the Tibetan authorities on the basis of a seclusion law modelled on China’s foreign trade policy.\(^10\)

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\(^6\) After the victory in the first Anglo-Burmese War in 1826, Britain acquired the province of Assam. Sikkim was taken under the British Empire in 1861. Bhutan followed the suit in 1865 after the signing of the Sinchula treaty. In 1853, the British government made an agreement with the Monpas, an ethnic group of Tibetan cultural background, controlling some trans-Himalayan trade routes through the Tawang corridor. For a literature review on this history see, Wim van Spengen, *Tibetan Border Worlds: A Geohistorical Analysis of Trade and Traders* (London and New York: Kegan Paul International, 2000), 28-31, and Derek Waller, *The Pundits: British Exploration of Tibet and Central Asia* (Lexington, Kentucky: University of Kentucky Press, 1990), 10-11.


\(^8\) Ibid., 145-46,

\(^9\) Ibid., 149.

\(^10\) This isolation policy was not yet imposed on Tibet by the Manchus until 1793. However, the Lhasa Government had already adopted this policy to some extent. For example, when the Panchen Lama met the British trade representative in 1774, he informed the British that Tibetans had to get permission from the Manchu emperor before signing any trade treaties with them. See Cammann, 50-51.
Though these early efforts did not lead to a satisfactory relationship between the British and Tibetan authorities, they did give rise to the first generation of Tibet agents. Their sponsor, Warren Hastings, governor of Bengal, ordered the missions’ leading men, George Bogle and Samuel Turner, to record whatever they saw concerning the British India Company’s economic returns. Bogle and Turner reported potential Tibetan exports such as musk, yak tails, wool, and salt, and also suggested that iron, fruit, spices, silk, rice, tea, and tobacco were in great demand. Tibetan manufactured goods were few, as they concluded, except for coarse woollen cloth and narrow bolts of serge fabric, which did not appeal to the Company. In their journals, words such as “rugs” or “carpets” simply describe a piece of textile that the visitors happened to sit on.

In the following century, China’s front door was violently opened by the British navy during the first Opium War (1839). Step by step, Britain put diplomatic pressure on the Qing government to allow them to trade in Tibet, assuming that Tibet was under Manchu suzerainty. Two controversial agreements were signed in Beijing: the 1890 Anglo-Chinese Convention that defined a borderline between Sikkim’s northern territory and the Tibetan frontier, and the 1893 trade agreement legalizing a British controlled trade-mart at Yatung on the Tibetan side of the frontier.

Despite the consensus reached by Britain and China, the Lhasa government denounced the Sino-Anglo dealings. Armed Tibetans actively resisted British advances in the Sikkim-Tibetan borderland. While Anglo-Tibetan relations were deteriorating by the end of the nineteenth century, the 13th Dalai Lama appeared to pursue a political alliance with Russia through his tutor, Agvan Dorjiev, a Buriat subject of the Tsar. Most historians have assumed that Dorjiev’s meetings with high officials in St. Petersburg between 1900 and 1901 alarmed George Nathaniel Curzon, Viceroy of British India, and that this prompted him to establish a direct relationship with the Tibetan government.

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11 Ibid., 35 & 146.
12 Ibid., 55-57.
14 This means that the British government acknowledged Tibet’s tributary relationship with Qing China. See details, for example, Mehra, The Younghusband, 63-73, Shakabpa, Tibet, 201, and Richardson, Tibet, 77.
Believing that this connection was critical to validating his government’s political-economic rights in Tibet, Curzon sent out the well-known Younghusband expedition to Lhasa. The end result of this military mission was the Lhasa Convention (1904), signed by the Lhasa representative of the 13th Dalai Lama, the British government, and the Chinese representatives. Through this treaty, the British forced the Lhasa authority to accept the Sikkim-Tibetan borderline, build two new British-controlled trading marts at Gyantse and Gartok, open its frontiers to foreigners, and pay a huge indemnity. At the climax of Anglo-Tibetan history, the British interest in Tibetan-made carpets surfaced.

**Scholars, Spies, and Imperial Officers**

The consolidation of the British Raj fostered a sophisticated intelligence force, which gathered information for the British rulers in the Himalayas. The desire for more knowledge about British India’s northern neighbour grew at the turn of the twentieth century in response to the unstable political situation in the region. Before the signing of the Lhasa Convention, British-trained Indian or Bengalese pundits had travelled in Tibet to secretly collect geographical information. After 1904, the British officers stationed in the three Tibet trade marts gathered valuable intelligence about local events and geography. Whether scholar-spies or imperial officers, these individuals played strategic roles in the information warfare with their Chinese and Tibetan counterparts.

I draw on descriptions of carpet-making from works by Sarat Chandra Das, Perceval Landon, and David Macdonald. All travelled or worked in Tibet to serve the British India Government. In 1879-82, Das, disguised as a Hindi language teacher, toured Central Tibet to investigate Tibet’s geography and political conditions for the

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16 Before the British troop reached Lhasa city, the Dalai Lama had already fled to Mongolia. For details of this history, see for example, Jennifer Siegel, *Endgame: Britain, Russia and the Final Struggle for Central Asia*, (London and New York: I.B. Tauris Publishers, 2002), 12-14. Also see Bell, *Tibet*, 284.
17 Bell, *Tibet*, 284. The amount was reduced by the British government due to international pressure. At the end, the Chinese government paid this indemnity.
18 In Bishop’s analysis, the British government was also worried about French expansion in South-East Asia and the collapse of the Chinese Empire. Control over Tibet was seen as crucial for securing the British Empire’s hold in South Asia. See Bishop, *Myth*, 142. Also, see for example, A. McKay, “19th century British Expansion on the Indo-Tibetan Frontier: a Forward Perspective,” *Tibet Journal* 28, no. 4 (2003):61-76.
19 This term refers to native surveyors who explored the South Asian regions to gather geographical information for the British Empire in the nineteenth century.
20 Alex McKay, ‘*Truth*, ’ *Perceptions, and Politics*, 69.
Survey of India. Landon participated in the armed trade mission to Lhasa in 1903-4. A special correspondent for The Times, he was also responsible for collecting Tibetan artefacts and Buddhist books for the British Museum. Macdonald was one of the interpreters accompanying the troops; the signing of the Lhasa Convention led to his appointment as British representative at the Yatung and Gyantse Trade Agency in 1904-24.

Sarat Chandra Das was a high-caste Bengalese educated to become an engineer at Presidency College in Calcutta. Before visiting Tibet, he was also the headmaster of the Bhutia Boarding School in Darjeeling. David MacDonald described himself as a son of a Scottish father and Sikkimese mother. He spent his adolescence in the Darjeeling High School where he was trained to be an interpreter for the British Indian government. Both learned to speak Tibetan and even compiled English-Tibetan dictionaries and grammar books. Oxford-educated Perceval Landon had already established his journalism career before he joined the journey to Tibet. He had worked for the Times during the South African War and was a special correspondent of the Daily Mail in China, Japan, and Siberia. The backgrounds of these men manifested some central logic of the selection policy in the imperial bureaucracy: they represented a generation of British subjects that lived in British colonies and were indoctrinated through a colonialist education system that aimed to train young professionals for an Empire. Also, these exceptionally capable men’s early lives affected their attitudes towards the imperial policy. For example, David Macdonald confessed that he had “peculiar sympathy, affection and understanding for the Tibetan people and their country”.

Meanwhile, he devoted himself to “[taking] some part in the shaping of [his] Empire and the carrying out of its policy.” Signs of such complex colonialist psychology are noticeable in these officers’ observations of “carpets.” They had a belief in industrialism and economic progress; they developed personal interests in non-European cultures; and they defended England and the British imperialism. These men reflect the dominant ideology and geopolitics of their time.

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21 For Das’ biography, see Waller, Pundits, 193-208. For Macdonald’s biography, see David Macdonald, Twenty Years in Tibet: Intimate and Personal Experiences of the Closed Land among all Classes of its people from the Highest to the Lowest (India, Delhi: Cosmo Publications, 1996), 11-13.
22 Ibid., 11.
23 Ibid., 11.
Discovering Carpets

While visiting aristocrats and high lamas, the foreigners noticed rugs covering Tibetan divans in lavish private houses and large monasteries. Sarat Chandra Das witnessed how the local authority presented honoured guests with Tibetan rugs as valuable presents. David MacDonald’s photographs capture the images of studious lamas and jewellery-glittering aristocrats surrounded by seating and saddle rugs. In these representations, carpets appear as a refined oriental object marked with a high social status in the local material culture.

Chandra Das and Landon jotted down the rug production sites close to the trade routes from Khamba Djong (near the Sikkim-Tibetan border), Gyantse, to Lhasa in South-Central Tibet. Their journals record village names such as Targye, Dora chu-tsan, Panam, and Wangden, where they found rug-making skill relatively widespread among the peasants. They also visited large estate workshops. In the Shape Phala factory in Gyantse and the Doring factory at Little Gabshi near the Gyantse-Lhasa road, they both witnessed dozens of Tibetan men and women producing rugs. Sarat Chandra described, “ninety women are kept constantly employed, some picking the wool, some dyeing it, and others weaving.”

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25 For example, David Macdonald’s book, Twenty Years in Tibet (the edition published by Seeley, Service Co.Ltd. in 1932), includes the photos of the Tashi Lama, the Dalai Lama, and a Tibetan aristocrat, Rinchen Drolma, taken by Macdonald. The pictures show that these individuals were sitting or standing on carpets. Also, Macdonald took a photo of his children riding a yak covered with a saddle rug. David Macdonald, Twenty Years in Tibet: Intimate and Personal Experiences of the Closed Land among all Classes of its People from the Highest to the Lowest (London: Seeley, Service& Co. Ltd., 1932), frontispiece, 106, 114, 286.
26 Das, Journey, 213. Also, see Perceval Landon, Lhasa, 228.
27 Das, Journey, 213. Das did not record any information about carpet sales. Nonetheless, his observation suggests that Gyantse had an active commercial carpet production in the late nineteenth century. However, according to a trade report prepared by the Department of Commerce of the United States in 1915, British India had also developed a large export carpet industry, which regarded Tibetan carpers as a potential rival. For example, during the fiscal year 1913-14, the United Kingdom imported 1,354,532 pounds of woollen carpets and rugs, valued at $582,233, from British India. In the same year, the United States imported 99,769 pounds of Indian carpets, valued at $66,034. The same report also shows that the imports into British India from Tibet mainly consisted of living animals and raw materials: sheep and goats, borax, hides and skins, musk, salt, and wool. Carpets were not listed as an important trade item between Tibet and British India. Henry D. Baker, British India with notes on Ceylon, Afghanistan, and Tibet. Department of Commerce, Bureau of Foreign and Domestic Commerce, Special Consular Reports, no. 72 (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1915), 250 &563.
These visitors did not seem to appreciate Tibetan weaving technology: they found the looms “small simple affairs”, “primitive”, and “the crudest apparatus.” Not a single visual illustration of the loom was included in their journals. Nonetheless, the rugs were thought to have great potential in overseas markets. Macdonald, who had worked for twenty years as a trade agent, claimed that Tibetan rugs were among the few manufactured wool articles that sold abroad. The most ambitious Englishman in this group was Perceval Landon. He urged the British government to invest in a Gyantse carpet industry that would produce rugs for wealthy Londoners. He argued:

The difference in quality between one rug and another is often a matter of expert knowledge only…But when the eye is once taught to recognize the difference, the cheaper rugs are easily seen to be inferior from every point of view. They are, however, more than good enough for the London market, and this is one of the industries at Gyantse which might most profitably be developed. Even now, if a big London firm were willing to place an order for five hundred rugs in Gabshi, that is to say, if it were to buy up practically the entire annual output of this first factory in Tibet, it could, while it held the monopoly, charge almost any price it liked to London buyers and obtain it. It is an experiment which is, perhaps, worth the attention of Farringdon Street Without. In those halcyon days at Gyantse I wrote to Lord Curzon in London and offered to act as commercial traveller for any firm which cared to make a trial of these really beautiful things.

Under the eyes of these colonial officer-scholars, “carpets” became attractive oriental objects. This was not surprising because “oriental carpets and rugs” from the Middle East had already made inroads into European aristocrats’ living rooms since Tudor times. In the eighteenth century, the British East India Company began importing carpets of Mughal India to sell in Europe. Likely, these British Tibet officers thought that Tibetans’ carpets would have similar export potentials in the European market. Landon’s letter can be seen as an expression of colonialist consumerism: the British government and a London elite class demanded for ‘exotic’ things from their colonies to

29 Macdonald, The Land of the Lama, 124.
30 Landon, Lhasa, 228-229.
define Britain’s prowess or to reinforce a hierarchy of English society. However, after Lord Curzon resigned his post in 1905, the idea of trading rugs was never pursued by the British India government. How did the discovery of “Tibetan carpets” and the failed attempt to establish a carpet business correspond to Britain’s larger political-economic objectives?

Carpets of Empire

The imperial officers, generally conforming to the views of their superiors, deliberately restricted the entry of private European travellers to the region in order to monopolize information from Tibet. This control of information flow was to allow the British to construct a historical image of Tibet that contributed to legitimizing Tibet as “buffer state” restraining the Chinese and Russians on the northern border of British India. Sarat Chandra Das, Perceval Landon, and David Macdonald carried out their research work under different political circumstances in this episode of British-Tibet history.

Sarat Chandra secretly surveyed Tibet because the Tibetan authorities refused to establish formal political and trade relations with the British government. He was ordered to collect useful information, including trade routes and carpet production sites. His description of “carpets” is part of a British secret survey of Tibetan society that ultimately generated some key assumptions about a Tibetan feudalist economy and shaped the British Tibet policy before 1904.

Landon marched into the Tibetan land with the assistance of rifles and gunpowder. By contrast, MacDonald lived in Yatung and Gyantse during the time when the tension between Britain and Tibet was significantly lessened. He worked with Tibetan officials within his jurisdiction. Nonetheless, both men’s writings show common patterns. First, both used a romantic perspective to describe the Tibetan rural

34 After the collapse of Qing China, the 13th Dalai Lama began actively seeking possibilities for political independence. His political aspiration was soon recognized by the British diplomat, Charles Bell, who became the Dalai Lama’s entrusted foreign advisor. He was instrumental in the negotiation of an Anglo-Tibetan trade regulation in 1912-13.
population. Landon wrote: “[The peasants] had no quarrel with us…at any rate they would prefer to take up any service, however menial, with us rather than go back to the tyranny of their priests”. Macdonald was delighted by Tibetan businessmen. He stated, “If England is a nation of shopkeepers, Tibet is a nation of petty traders. Every Tibetan is a born dealer. Many adopt trading as a profession either whole time or as a side-line to agriculture”. Particularly, Landon reported:

In the realm of commerce the women are usually supreme. Both at Gyantse and at Lhasa my experience was the same. It was the women who managed the family trading, and if the man were there at all, it was only to help in carrying goods backwards and forwards between the bazaar and the town.

Similarly, Macdonald made a remark regarding Tibetan women’s social behaviour, “Women form by far the greater proportion of petty traders and stall-keepers in the bazaars.”

Previous private British travellers had characterized Tibetans as a lazy and cowardly Himalayan tribe. In contrast, Macdonald and Landon identified them as excellent traders and emphasized especially that the Tibetan trading culture broke gender and caste rules found in neighbouring Asian countries. In their writings, gender serves as a key element in imagining non-European people, and they found that the Tibetan gender ideology did not completely contradict the British capitalism: a British controlled carpet industry could incorporate Tibetan peasant women as wage labourers without clashing with the local patriarchal order.

Second, they had numerous complaints about the reactionary tendencies engendered by the Tibetan theocracy and saw all aspects of Lama-ruled Tibet as

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35 Landon, Lhasa, 158.
36 Macdonald, The Land of Lama, 124.
37 Landon, Lhasa, 360.
38 Macdonald, The Land of Lama, 133-34.
39 Bishop, Myth, 121.
40 Stevan Harrell pointed out that sexual relations are a key metaphor used in the imagery of civilizing projects. From his perspective, this eroticization and feminization of the peripheral is used to justify the “civilizers” activities, aimed to transform, assimilate, and rule the peripheral society. Stevan Harrell, “Introduction: Civilizing Projects and the Reaction to Them,” in Cultural Encounters on China’s Ethnic Frontiers, ed. Stevan Harrell, 10 (Seattle and London: University of Washington Press, 1995).
41 Meanwhile, the British were also alarmed by Tibetan peasant women’s ‘promiscuous’ behaviors. For example, David Macdonald reported that many of the low-caste women have practically no moral and there is little stigma attached to premarital sex. See his comment in Macdonald, The Land of Lama, 134.
challenging their idealized Victorian England of “minimal governmental interference, free enterprise, true competition and trust, as well as freedom from tariffs, bureaucracies and the secret police.” 42 For example, Macdonald reported: “The lamas were against the school.”43 He believed that “it is impossible for the priesthood to hold up forever the march of progress in Tibet, and the opening of the country would benefit the masses of the people, who now have to support so great a number of unproductive priests.”44

These British imperial officers acted as if they were the missionaries of British “free trade” policy. 45 Their visions of and approaches to “social progress” were similar to that of European missionaries who saw cultural difference as an indicator of possibilities of social change and wanted to convince the “inferior” groups to participate in their civilizing programs.46 Likewise, the “free trade missionaries” actively searched for methods to integrate Tibetan economy into the imperial trade system, and they believed “free trade” was the best way to civilize Tibetans. I argue that the carpets became a target in the production of justifications for such “free trade” policy.

Making and trading rugs was perceived by the “free trade missionaries” as a means to opening up Tibet. For Landon, selling the Tibetan native products to the upper class in England was profitable and compatible with the British “free trade” agenda. David Macdonald and his wife romanticized themselves as the crusader of mass education in Tibet. This Christian couple became engaged in teaching village children in Yatung how to make rugs and aimed to support the masses of people and the progress of Tibet. 47

In summary, Sarat Chandra Das described carpet-making as part of a feudalist economy; Landon saw carpets as exotic commodities; Macdonald perceived training

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45 The Macdonald’s is a Christian family. David Macdonald’s family was involved in a Christian missionary movement in Sikkim. He in fact completed a Tibetan translation of the New Testament. Likely, his religious background had an impact on his ideas of improving Tibetans’ economy and culture, though this was not explicit in his writing.
47 Ibid., 224-225.
carpet weavers as a way to liberate Tibetan villagers from their feudal lords. These ideas and practices were invented while Britain was promoting its “free trade” policy and creating political hegemony in Central Asia. As the scholar-spies and officers, working within the colonial bureaucracy, they had to justify British aggression in Tibet and built consensus among a resistant native population. Certainly, these officers also had their own conviction and idealism, fostered by the ideological trends at the time. As individuals, they were influenced by European humanist and liberalist thoughts, and they might genuinely believe that feudal and monastic rules impeded “modern progress” in Tibet and that free trade would bring benefits to Tibetans. Thus, their proposals to make or trade carpets were consistent with the European liberalism framework as well as the larger imperialist political-economic objectives. However, the British government wanted to use Tibet as a “buffer” state in Central Asia, and its main economic interest was not “oriental carpets” but rather raw materials. 48 Without strong government support, the imperial officers’ attempt to build an export carpet industry in Gyantse failed.

In fact, a carpet production centre was growing in early twentieth century South-Central Tibet under the influences of cross-regional trade and dispersed monastic/aristocratic powers. Carpet-making was part of the regional semi-agriculture and semi-pastoral economy, and artisans not only gained political support from the highest authority in the Tibetan theocracy but also formed a guild that gave them privilege and protection. However, these British army officers were preoccupied by their own assumptions about Tibetan society and their self-interest in the carpet business. In Chapter 3, I will elaborate in detail the social formations and cultural dynamics in a Gyantse-centred artisan society.

**The Loom**

Seven years before the Younghusband expedition, missionary wife Katherine Graham had set up an arts and crafts centre in Kalimpong primarily devoted to Tibetan-style carpet weaving. 49 Her husband, Dr. J.A. Graham, a well-known missionary, who

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48 See footnote 27.
had an affiliation with the General Assembly of the Church of Scotland, opened an orphanage for children of Anglo-Indian parentage in the same town.\textsuperscript{50} This famous school, the St. Andrew’s Colonial Homes, provided students with vocational training opportunities. Likely, Katherine’s craft centre had a religious and social affinity with the Scottish missionary school. Some reported that Tibetan artisans were employed at the centre to teach students knotting and dyeing. Non-Tibetans were also recruited to staff the workshop.\textsuperscript{51} From 1947 to 1952, this little-known craft centre raised its profile, with the assistance of three British men, Marco Pallis, Richard Nicholson, and Aristide Messinesi.\textsuperscript{52} These men undertook the earliest carpet preservation project in pursuit of recovering the knowledge of traditional dyeing, design, and weaving.\textsuperscript{53} In this section, I explore a British idealist’s engagement with the carpets.

Pallis and Nicholson are known for their Himalaya expeditions and spiritual adventures in Tibet between 1923 and 1936. They were students of Tibetan Buddhism and culture and brought this enthusiasm to Tibetans’ handicrafts. My analysis focuses on Aristide Messinesi because he was the only person who actually practiced handloom weaving in England; he also published important essays on the use of carpet looms by Tibetans. The social conditions and ideological trends that inspired Messinesi to study carpet-making in the Himalayan Mountains are revealed in his writings.

**Cogs in the Machine**

In his autobiography,\textsuperscript{54} Messinesi states that as a young man, disillusioned by the destruction of the Great War, he became affected by the residual influence of the Arts and Crafts movement of the late nineteenth century. He was particularly drawn by this movement’s anti-modern critique against factory labour conditions, technical progress, and the social dislocations that industrialization brought.\textsuperscript{55} He dropped out of art school

\textsuperscript{50} Marco Pallis, one of the supporters of the craft center wrote about this school, *Peaks and Lamas* (London: Readers Union, Cassell & Co., Ltd. 1948), 88.
\textsuperscript{51} Myers, 31.
\textsuperscript{52} Ibid., 31.
\textsuperscript{53} Ibid., 31.
and turned towards graphic design hoping to find a career in the textile industry. However, the glory of artisan-led studios was replaced by the smoky chimneys of factories after the war. He said:

It dawned on me before long that I was wasting my time; I and my designs cut straight across the interests of these industrialists; we would only be like sand in the wheels of their machines, threatening to put everything out of gear. Industry gnashed her teeth or waved a tentacle engagingly, according to her mood – so I withdrew for fear of being torn to shreds or manoeuvred into harmlessness.\textsuperscript{56}

This metaphorical writing vividly captures Messinesi’s disgust. Clearly, he perceived manipulative businessmen, the cruel logic of standardization and mechanization as sources of artisans’ fears, alienation, and disillusion. This experience turned him into a conscientious protester against industrial modernity.

In the 1920s, Messinesi decisively cut himself off from industry and began learning handloom weaving from a veteran of the Arts and Crafts movement. After a four-year apprenticeship, he founded his own textile studio to produce high-quality brocades for individual customers. In the 1930s, about ten years after the founding of his boutique, he travelled to India. He explained that this field trip aimed to “[add] to my experience and to the scope of my work. The visit lasted a year, during which time I was enabled to produce a number of very fine carpets by making use of facilities offered to me for this purpose in several friendly establishments.”\textsuperscript{57} The literature also suggests that after this pilgrimage, Messinesi was not entirely convinced by India’s commercial carpet industry. However, he returned to the Himalayas around 1947 and started to collaborate with other Europeans at the Kalimpong craft centre, where he learned about the Tibetan carpet making. Through such “experiments”, he sought solutions to the problems he encountered in England. Also he was the first European who published articles to introduce a kind of upright loom, used by Tibetan and Nepalese artisans.

\textsuperscript{56} Messinesi, \textit{A Craft as a Fountain}, 32.
\textsuperscript{57} Ibid., 33.
Emancipation through an Upright Loom

Messinesi’s essay, “Rug-weaving in Tibet,” appeared in the *Quarterly Journal of the Guilds of Weavers, Spinners and Dyers* in 1956. There is no evidence that he had surveyed any village or estate carpet workshops in Tibet. He likely wrote his paper by drawing craft knowledge from his work experience in the Kalimpong craft centre. The essay does not examine issues of labour relations and production organizations in detail. By contrast, its focus is the upright loom. Messinesi explained:

> For the weaving of pile rugs in Tibet, the loom itself and many of its accessory implements are unlike anything to be found in other countries. In Central Asia, in China, Persia and Turkey, for instance, the differences in the loom and the methods of weaving, as between one country and another, are superficial and do not affect the foundations of the technique.  

He carefully describes loom structure and explains its operation. He made annotated drawings of the loom itself, the warping pattern, the heddle, the knotting loops, and the small accessory tools. He summarized how much he appreciated the wonderful quality of this technology: “the loom is just what it should be (and nothing more) and the design is often known practically by heart.”

This obsession with the upright loom (or Asian carpet looms) reflects Messinesi’s anti-modern tendency and his desire to use this loom to develop a spiritual artisanship. Elsewhere, he explains: the upright loom is “the simplest and most elementary type of loom.” He encouraged European artisans to use it because it is “the least limiting and allows for the greatest freedom and intricacy of pattern,” and “the austerity of [upright loom] structure and the uncompromising nature of the technique this structure imposed did not allow of its being exploited by the powers of subversion, as happened in the case of the more luxurious and accommodating horizontal loom.”  

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61 Ibid., 37.
62 Ibid., 38.
Messinesi’s efforts to revive Tibetan weaving technology, it should be noted, coincided with the English neo-romanticism movement. After WWI, England saw the growth of a white-collar class and the decline of small workshops. This social-economic transformation fostered a growing sense of alienation among skilled workers, artisans, and low-rank professionals, who constitute the hard core of the English anti-modernists after the turn of the century. Participants in this movement advocated community experience, the unconscious, and pantheism; they hoped to form a harmonious relationship with the natural elements while looking for intuitive body experiences. Messinesi’s journey to mountain villages, his craft preservation project, and his spiritual interest can be seen as manifestations of these inter-connected anti-modern discourses.

Notably, this group of romantics often incorporated non-Western knowledge and religious ideas, such as Hinduism and Buddhism, in their advocacy of spiritual or natural lifestyles. They adopted a universal idea of Tradition and an “anthropological style of anti-modernism” based in their studies of non-European cultures and religions to frame their critique of industrial societies. Messinesi’s work expresses this form of popular rebellion against rationalism in English culture in the early and mid twentieth century.

**Messinesi’s Legacy**

Because of his “anthropological style,” Messinesi was represented by contemporary carpetologists as the founding father of “Tibetan Carpet Studies,” a field that came into being in the next half of the twentieth century. For example, his style—using drawings to illustrate the loom and production methods, describing the functions of rugs, and elaborating the Tibetan uses of natural dyes and sheep wool—are adopted and imitated by the textile anthropologists who arrived in the Himalayas in the 1960s. His

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64 Trentmann, *Civilization*, 600.
65 Ibid., 602.
66 Before Messinesi arrived in Kalimpong, the craft center mainly imported chemical dyes from Germany. Myers, *Temple*, 31.
obsession with certain material qualities of “Tibetan rugs” (e.g., the knot, natural dye, and sheep yarn) has been translated into a general acceptance of “traditional Tibetan carpets” among Euro-American textile experts. Further, Messinesi wrote in his essay: “of recent years, and especially since the war which opened up trade routes, the output [of the domestic industry] has greatly increased to the detriment of quality.” 67 This critique of commercialism and industrial modernization has had a long-lasting influence on the scholarship of “Tibetan carpets.” In particular, such discourse informs the on-going debate over what constitutes “authenticity” of “Tibetan carpets” in the face of commercialization.

The most creative technique “invented” by Messinesi involves juxtaposing a fantastic image of Tibetan people upon Tibetan carpet-making in order to enhance the attractiveness and antiquity of the craft. Messinesi stated:

The Tibetans are a practical people and one cannot fail to notice the way they manage to combine speed with good work in everything they do: this is true efficiency. The unfailing association of Wisdom with Method is a doctrine which pervades their entire tradition. The symbols of this inseparable pair are the bell (dilbu) and the thunderbolt (dorje), emblems which are used in the performance of many of their sacred rites. 68

To date, this representation technique is frequently appropriated by connoisseurs, advertisers, and marketers to create the mystique of “traditional Tibetan carpets” and their ‘pre-modern’ makers.

In this story of “Tibetan carpets,” a British romantic became a serious student of the Tibetan craft finding in the Tibetan material culture a source of inspiration and self-emancipation. He promoted the Tibetan loom to criticize industrialized England and commercialism; however, paradoxically, this romantic vision of Tibetan culture would be adopted to increase the exchange value of “Tibetan carpets” and to feed on desires for “economic progress” in post-WWII Nepal.

67 Messinesi, Rug-weaving in Tibet part II, 636.
68 Ibid., 634.
The Market

Carpets in Exile

Part I and II show that wool carpets were on the list of goods Tibetans have traded with their neighbouring countries since the late nineteenth century. This regional trade fostered the growth of a carpet industry in Gyantse, a Tibetan town near the Nepalese-Tibetan trade routes. In the early twentieth century, the local economy was characterized by estate workshops, household workshops, and many journeyman weavers who travelled from place to place and worked for individual employers. Amidst these developments, a guild facilitated the activities of an expanding artisan community and had a significant level of autonomy from the Tibetan government, monastic authorities, and aristocrats. (Chapter 3 examines the history of the guild in detail). Also, on a small scale, the knowledge of producing rugs spread to a few famous border towns such as Kalimpong and Yatung.

Before 1950, Gyantse artisans and their carpets had risen to fame in these Himalayan districts. Travelling middlemen distributed these wool rugs in border fairs and in Lhasa bazaars. At the same time, unstable political condition in Tibet began to have a profound impact on this Gyantse-centred economy. The forces of cold war conflicts, the Tibetan nationalist movement, and international aid policy created a condition in which Gyantse carpets finally entered the complex global commodity chains.

The Chinese Communist Party (CCP) under Mao Zedong declared its intention to ‘peacefully liberate’ Tibet in 1950. When resistance proved futile, the Lhasa Government agreed to comply with the CCP and signed a ceasefire document in the spring of 1951. In response, that same year, the Nepalese government agreed to take part in the US aid program under the assumption that economic development would curb the communist influence on its poor population.69 In a similar fashion, the United States,

India and Pakistan signed agreements in 1954, with the aim of combining the power of all three governments to contain Chinese communism in South Asia.\textsuperscript{70}

In the mid 1950s, the conflicts between Tibetans and Chinese were heightened by socialist land reforms in eastern and northern Tibet. In the winter of 1955-1956, a large revolt against Chinese socialism broke out in several eastern Tibetan towns, and subsequently hundreds of rebels from these regions fled to Central Tibet. These refugees accelerated the Tibetan nationalist movement in Lhasa.\textsuperscript{71} In late 1958, Tibetan hardliners organized an armed uprising with backing from the Central Intelligence Agency of the United States. At the same time, the Chinese radical faction in Lhasa was eager to put forward socialist policies.\textsuperscript{72} Fearing that “the Chinese communists” would arrest the young Dalai Lama, the Tibetan advisers plotted an escape scheme to send their spiritual leader to a foreign land. On 30 March 1959, the 14\textsuperscript{th} Dalai Lama and his party crossed the border into exile. Subsequently, thousands of Tibetans entered India and Nepal to seek asylum.\textsuperscript{73} This displacement of Tibetan people, including artisans from the carpet-weaving districts, led to the renewal of foreign interests in Gyantse carpets. However, the people who spearheaded the making and marketing of carpets were European and American aid workers, assisting Tibetans to settle in Nepal.

In her book, \textit{Tibetans in Nepal}, Ann Frechette claims that exile Tibetans and their international patrons played central roles in establishing an export carpet industry.\textsuperscript{74} Swiss intergovernmental organizations were key providers of capital and training. They also served as guarantors of the Tibetan settlement camps and supported Tibetans in obtaining business ownership despite Nepal’s restrictive policy. Frechette describes a particular vision of the Swiss aid program. She states that the Swiss found these refugees

\textsuperscript{70} For the details of this history see for example, S. Mahmud Ali, \textit{Cold War in the High Himalayas: The USA, China and South Asia in the 1950s} (Richmond: RoutledgeCurzon, 1999). India also maintained friendly relations with China in these years.


\textsuperscript{72} Melvyn C. Goldstein, \textit{The Snow Lion and the Dragon: China, Tibet, and the Dalai Lama} (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999), 53.

\textsuperscript{73} Shakya, \textit{Dragon}, 207.

extremely poor and lacking in modern skills, therefore the Swiss preferred creating commercially-viable programs for Tibetans.\footnote{Ibid., 35-58}

Swiss aid workers believed that making rugs could “[help] the Tibetans attain economic independence” and “[enable] the Tibetans in Nepal to strengthen their economic and social roots in their new homeland.”\footnote{The delegate of the Swiss Federal Council for Technical Co-operation, (an untitled note), \textit{Palette} 27, no. 27 (1967): 3.} The International Committee of the Red Cross set up the first rug workshop for Tibetan refugees at Jawalakhel (Nepal) in 1961; several similar projects were replicated with Swiss aid in subsequent years. Many Tibetans, who knew nothing about rug-weaving, acquired skill from these Swiss-Tibetan weaving centres. At the outset, the European aid workers advised Tibetans to target European and American tourists because they saw the Nepalese government opening its borders to boost tourism. To capture this market, these carpet centres adopted Sino-Tibetan motifs and used inexpensive Indian wools.

Also, the Swiss experts wanted to bring Tibetan carpets closer to overseas buyers. They argued that “the full material and social independence of the Tibetan community in Nepal will be assured only when their products find a steady and sufficient sale on the world market.”\footnote{Ibid., 3.} In light of this, a number of export agencies were formed, and the Dalai Lama’s government-in-exile, acted as a representative agency, collaborated with the Swiss intergovernmental organizations to set up the earliest marketing and export companies.\footnote{Ibid., 3. For more history on these rug companies, see for example, Eric McGuckin, “Tibetan Carpets: From Folk Art to Global Commodity,” \textit{Journal of Material Culture} 2, no. 3 (1997): 294-95 and Tom O’Neill, “The Lives of the Tibeto-Nepalese Carpet,” \textit{Journal of Material Culture} 4, no. 1(1999):26.} These organizations started to market their carpets as “Tibetan rugs.” The specifically Tibetan identity of this textile product was created to show that it has a Tibetan cultural origin and is produced by Tibetan artisans in refugee camps.

Foreign patrons regarded carpets as a panacea for the Tibetan displacement problems. Similar business models were applied to form and manage carpet-weaving projects in settlement camps in north India. The early 1970s saw the building of thirteen US-financed Tibetan refugee camps in Nepal that accommodated several thousand CIA-trained Tibetan guerrilla fighters. These people were members of Tibetan resistance groups who had fought against the Chinese army during the 1950s and 60s and had been
demobilized after US president Richard Nixon introduced his China policy and ended US covert aid to the Tibetan guerrillas. Modelled after the Swiss-Tibet craft centres, the US government sponsored carpet factories and an export company to train guerrilla men how to make and export carpets. Today, these settlement camps are managed by the Dalai Lama government-in-exile.  

Between the late 1960s and 1970s, refugee carpet factories were privatized and placed in the hands of Tibetan entrepreneurs. The Swiss aid organizations started to withdraw from the rug business in 1972, and since then, the carpet industry’s revenues have come from local tourism and overseas contracts. In the late 1980s and 1990s, this industry expanded rapidly and came to be Nepal’s most important sector creating millions of jobs, not only for the Tibetan community but increasingly also for the Nepalese. Tom O’Neill reports that in the mid 1990s, most carpet weavers were migrants to urban area, coming from agricultural hill and lowland regions bordering India. His 1995 survey estimates that Tibetan refugee weavers constituted less than one percent of the entire workforce—approximately 88,000 weavers were Nepalese Sherpas, Tamang, and Lama. His survey also indicates that Tibetans from refugee background owned more than 50 percent of carpet export companies and dominated the trade with foreign importers.

On the other end of this global commodity chain, a handful of American and European companies control the distribution and marketing of Tibetan-Nepalese carpets. These international enterprises that only began in the 1980s have developed sophisticated operations targeting the high end market for oriental rugs. I found that several US-based carpet importers have marketing firms and design studios in American metropolises.

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79 Frechette, Tibetans, 71-74.
80 McGuckin, Tibetan Carpets, 295. According to Ann Frechette, the Swiss owned all of the shares of Swiss-Tibetan carpet factories and nearly eighty percent of shares of the export company. They started to transfer their shares to Tibetans in the 1970s. However this process had been very slow and completed in 1995. See Frechett, Tibetans, 46-48.
Some own carpet factories or have their designated carpet producers in Nepal. The most powerful companies have extensive distribution networks in North America and Western Europe.

Several studies show that under this market-driven strategy, carpet producers in Nepal had altered product design, production methods, and labour management to increase carpets’ appeal to foreign customers. Also the literature argues that the success of this carpet industry became dependent on large numbers of under-paid migrant workers from Nepal’s rural areas, a group socially and economically marginalized in cities. O’Neill discovers that Nepalese carpet-weavers can rarely obtain sufficient resources by weaving “Tibetan carpets” to fully integrate as permanent residents in the carpet districts. He finds that this social phenomenon has its roots in the history of the carpet industry, government policy, Nepal’s socio-cultural system, and the Tibetan community’s socio-economic links with Western Europe and North America.

Also, he describes two strategies of coercive labour control by workshop owners: one is wage advances that create a debt cycle to bind weavers to their looms; the other is the practice of remitting wages to weavers’ (especially young unmarried weavers) natal family in the countryside. His study demonstrates that such exploitative practices especially intensified the marginal status of those people who have very poor education background and little experience in the cities.

Next, I propose to examine the development of the Nepalese-Tibetan industry by linking this history to the production of the discourses about “Tibetan carpets” throughout the Cold War era. I argue that the emergence and proliferation of such categories as “traditional Tibetan carpets,” “commercial Tibetan carpets,” “government carpets,” and “refugee carpets” is central to the international success of carpets made in Nepal. I investigate the transnational linkage between a “Third World” industry and the “First World” marketers, designers, and consumers.

83 For example, Emmett Eiland, a California –based rug distributor, gave an informative overview of the US-based carpet companies that have long-term operations in Nepal. Emmett Eiland, Oriental Rugs Today (Berkley: Emmett Eiland’s Rugs, 2003), 92-105.
Defining Tibetan Folk Art

The late 1960s saw the arrival of American and European idealists, who were among international tourists taking advantage of Nepal’s and India’s open door policy to explore Himalayan nature and cultures. A few became interested in the carpets made by exile Tibetans. In some ways, these people were like Aristide Messinei, alarmed by the commercial carpet industry and hoping to rescue a pre-modern art. Hallvard Kåre Kuløy, one of the pioneer carpet researchers, explained:

My interest in these unusual rugs started to develop shortly after I came to India in 1968, and the realization that there was an old tradition which probably was in the process of disappearing, grew steadily. When comparing the rugs the refugees in India made, it was clear that the older rugs were much different in quality and execution. So, without much knowledge of rugs, research methodology or Tibetan culture, I started to photograph old rugs, measure them and get some of the patterns copied by some young Tibetans.  

In the 1970s and 1980s, some of these individuals started to form a network of textile anthropologists, art historians, connoisseurs, and dealers. Their activities gave rise to a corpus of literature on “traditional” Tibetan rugs and introduced these woollen textiles as pre-modern artefacts into the Western arts world. The rug specimens and their images were promoted through museum exhibits, gallery shows, professional publications, and even small media such as postcards sold in museum gift shops. Early in this “Tibetan carpet” phenomenon, these researchers seemed to be partially influenced by a trend in museology that deployed Eurocentric evolutionist perspectives to categorize, define, and interpret non-Western objects. Overall, these carpet enthusiasts devoted themselves to describing and defining a “pre-modern” Tibetan character for this line of carpets.

The first feature of their writings is that the Kantian classification of “fine art” (e.g., ‘art for art’s sake’) and “applied art” (e.g., handicrafts) was used by these researchers to identify and categorize “Tibetan carpets.” They adopted this definition of “folk art” to discuss Tibetan carpets and emphasized carpets’ utilitarian character. One of

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the leading writers is American anthropologist Philip Denwood who ventured into north India in the early 1970s and wrote the first book, *The Tibetan Carpets*. He described “Tibetan carpets” as ordinary articles widely used by every caste in Tibetan society. In a similar vein, Hallvard Kåre Kuløy, a friend of Denwood, called carpets “ubiquitous folk art.” In Kuløy’s popular book, *Tibetan Rugs* (first published in 1982), almost every key chapter is written in accordance with the rugs’ specific functions. Chapter III, for example, is entitled, “Rugs used for sitting and sleeping;” Chapter IV “Rugs used in monasteries and for ritual and ceremonial purposes;” Chapter V “Saddlery rugs;” and the last chapter, a miscellany, is called “Rugs used for other purposes.”

These authors accessed “Tibetan folk art” by emphasizing the non-industrial production methods and materials. Kuløy claimed that the Tibetan knotting technique “was different from any knot now in use in rug-making,” and asserted that traditional carpets must use “hand-processed, organically dyed wool” from south-east Tibet. These statements on knots, wool, and dye materials elaborate the ‘defining’ features of carpets made in pre-1959 Tibet, but they downplayed the influence of commercialism on carpet design and technology in pre-1950 Tibet. Also, the assumption that “traditional Tibetan rugs” were protected from commercialism and foreign markets not only simplifies the scale and scope of carpet-making activities in early twentieth century Tibet but also de-links carpets from their transforming social-political context.

Defining “traditional Tibetan carpets” as “folk art” was also influenced by a European version of “art history” that is premised on the assumption that the degree of artistic freedom is reflective of the stage of civilization of a given society. From this perspective, the presence or absence of “fine art” and “folk art” constitute the “ultimate measure of human achievement.” The more civilized a country, the more “fine art” found in it. Using a linear framework of social transformation, art historians were interested in and debated the genesis of Tibetan pile rugs. Some constructed an image of Tibetan society as an evolving civilization that “actively [absorbed] the rich and diverse

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90 Hallvard Kåre Kuløy, “Introduction.”
92 Myers, *Temple*, 32.
heritages of the surrounding civilizations.” They dated the origin of rug-weaving techniques back to the period of the tsenpos (the ancient Tibetan kings who ruled from the seventh to eighth century) when the Tibetan empire stretched from Kashmir in the west to the border of Tang China in the east. Others argued that carpet weaving techniques were imported from Manchu China in the seventeenth century after the Dalai Lama accepted a tributary relationship with the Qing court. These studies intended to plot an evolutionary trajectory of Tibetan material culture by looking at traces of foreign influences on designs and motifs. In all cases, these researchers attempt to prove Tibetan carpet’s ancient origin, and represent carpets as folk (assumed to be made and developed by “semi-civilized people”) rather than fine art that is found in “more advanced” civilizations. More interestingly, as Chapter 3 will discuss in detail, this evolutionary view of art was also adopted by Chinese anthropologists and policy makers in the 1960s. They regarded Tibetan carpets as folk art, having little importance in socialist modernization, and did not support a Tibetan carpet industry until the early 1970s.

Third, euro-centric ideologies manifested themselves through two major narratives that reinforced a particular notion of Tibetan-ness in carpets. The first, which I call the “archaeology view,” is premised on the evolutionary history of “Tibetan carpets.” From this perspective, symbols and patterns in the carpets become a form of ancient iconography laden with complex, mysterious meanings. However, the Euro-American experts believe that this ancient symbolism has a waning connection to contemporary Tibetan communities. Kuløy said:

The wide variety of design elements and motifs making up a complete rug are not all equally important, and many of the elements employed by the Tibetan rug weaver may have little or no symbolic meaning to him or her. [I have] on many occasions asked Tibetan craftsmen as well as high lamas and educated laymen for the meaning of different symbols or designs, and

more often than not has the answer been that “it is only for decoration”, “a flower or something decorative”, and so on.97

The underlying assumption is that Western researchers have the capacity and ‘advanced’ research techniques to redeem the lost knowledge and rescue “traditional Tibetan carpets” along with other world civilizations. Such representation justifies Western researchers as legitimate guardians and patrons of a “lost” Tibet.

The second is “a fantastic view” of “Tibetan carpets.” This idea of Tibetan culture borrows some imaginative notions of “traditional Tibet” to stress that carpets have a ‘mythical’ quality. Thomas Guta, an American weaver and artist, who studied Tibetan carpets and participated in reviving vegetable dyes in the 1970s, epitomizes the New Age American romantism. He wrote:

[Carpet-weaving] was truly a folk art, for it was totally anonymous. There were no great schools, and no great artists… Old carpets were copied in new colours and arrangements. They were woven for sale, or as offerings… The weavers were men and women of every manner and bearing. They were occasionally combed and oiled; but generally they wove through the bazaars with their long hair dishevelled, a timeless hunch and a preoccupied look. Weavers were a low rung on the feudal ladder, yet carpets were used by all segments of society. For king or nomad, the carpet was an essential element of every occasion, from picnic to wedding party. Their craft was a dimmer light in the spectrum of graphic arts. They were inevitably associated with alcohol, snuff, fleas, gossip, and many a colourful story.98

This paragraph vividly depicts a fantastic image of the pre-modern Tibet, characterized by dirtiness, disorder, and timelessness. Also Guta dramatized Tibetans’ organic connections to carpets. He wrote:

[Tibetan weavers] would lend his own touch according to his understanding. The weavers brought life to the figures they wove—they

97 Kuloy, Tibetan Rugs, 44.
did not merely follow the dictates of a rigid stylization. It was in their blood, so to speak. It was the natural expression of their view.\textsuperscript{99}

This analysis of Tibetan weaving conflates the object and people to create a generalization of Tibetans. His idea that Tibetans have the blood to produce carpets echoes Aristide Messinesi’s romantic and anthropological view of Tibetan people, and particularly Guta’s representation displays traces of a biology-based essentialist notion of non-Europeans.

In addition, these writers were, like the former romantics, critical of the commercial rugs. They advised rug producers in Nepal not to abandon “traditional” materials, techniques, and motifs to make generic carpets in accord with industrial, market, or governmental interests. These preservationists hoped to revive “traditional Tibetan rugs” “also as an art and not only as an industry.”\textsuperscript{100} This construction of the image of “traditional Tibetan carpets” can be seen as a response to the proliferation of commercial carpet production in Nepal.

The fourth common pattern is related to the fact that the emergence of a “Tibetan carpet” identity coincided with the anti-communism movement of the Cold War. It is important to note that before the 1960s, “Tibetan carpets” were analyzed as part of the Far East carpet family, namely Chinese and Mongolian carpets, in the oriental rugs literature. For example, H.A. Lorentz, a carpet connoisseur, who lived in China between 1922 and 1949, examined Tibet as a regional production centre in China.\textsuperscript{101} Even Aristide Messinesi grouped Tibetan and Chinese rugs together in the same category. It was not until the early 1970s that a different discourse emerged. Denwood and Kuløy, for example, challenged the previously-established classifying system. Denwood argues:

Tibetan carpet weaving is essentially a local folk art, derived as such from the Iranian world a thousand years or more ago. Technically, [Tibetan weaving] owes little or nothing to the carpet industries of China and India, [which] developed comparatively late and never reached down to such a popular level. The role of China was to provide the already entrenched


\footnotesize{100} Ibid., 24.

Tibetan carpet industry with a wide and highly popular range of visual designs, patterns and motifs which dominate its repertoire to this day.\textsuperscript{102}

By contrast, these researchers deprecated the carpets produced in Chinese-occupied Tibet. Speculations on the socialist destruction of Tibetan culture were wide-spread. Kuløy commented:

In Tibet, it seems the Chinese influence on overall design has been very penetrating. One of the last rugs illustrated in this book is a technically evenly executed rug with Tibetan knots but it is completely devoid of Tibetan character as far as design and overall aesthetic impression is concerned.\textsuperscript{103}

I do not intend to assess if his observation/speculation is ‘accurate,’ but argue that the obvious effect of this “cultural destruction” discourse was that Western writers adopted the year of the Dalai Lama’s flight to India to mark the doomsday of “traditional Tibetan rugs.” They assumed that rugs made after 1959 were “uniformly boring and very poor mechanized images of the older rugs,”\textsuperscript{104} and the ones made in pre-1959 Tibet were labelled genuine “traditional rugs,” and were seen as the embodiment of pre-modern Tibet. In this sense, the promotion of “traditional Tibetan carpets” by these Euro-American idealists is also a critical response to communist domination in Tibet.

\textit{“Ethnic Folk Art” and Commercialism}

The reincarnation of Tibetan rugs as “ethnic folk art” involves productions of both material objects and their meanings. Tibetan producers in Nepal were convinced by development organizations to capitalize on exotic aesthetics. Western textile historians, anthropologists, and connoisseur-dealers engaged in evaluating and preserving the rugs in which they identified “traditional” and “artistic” values. These ‘traditional’ rugs were distinguished from modern replicas and were channelled into special commodity traffic and commerce. As Arjun Appadurai has suggested, such ‘exotic arts’ not only generate monetary value but also play a role in the status contest and politics of consumers and

\begin{footnotesize}
\begin{enumerate}
\item Denwood, \textit{Tibetan Carpets}, 94.
\item Kuløy, \textit{Tibetan Rugs}, 24
\item Ibid., 23.
\end{enumerate}
\end{footnotesize}
Next, I analyze several intricate interdependent mechanisms that reconcile the incorporation of carpets (made in Nepal or India) into the European-American consumer culture with the desire for conserving certain groups of rugs (e.g., “traditional rugs”) as prestigious artefacts.

The first one was fostered by Euro-American romantics’ educational zeal. For example, Kuløy, in his carpet catalogue, explicitly states: “It is hoped that this book will contribute a little towards not only the preservation and revitalization of traditional designs on the part of those who now make rugs, but also to a more critical and knowledgeable attitude on the part of those who buy and use rugs.” Despite of these individuals’ good intent, their promotional activities reinforce orientalist assumptions of Tibetan society. The titles of some rug catalogues reflect this attitude: The Woven Mystery: Old Tibetan Rugs and Dream Weavers: Textile Art from the Tibetan Plateau. In 1984, the Textile Museum in Washington D.C. organized a Tibetan rug show, Temple, Household, Horseback: Rugs of the Tibetan Plateau. In Europe, the Oslo Museum of Applied Arts named their Tibetan rug exhibit Fra Tempel Til Hesterygg Den Tibetanske Teppetradisjonen (From temple to Horseback: the Tibetan Rug Tradition). These Euro-American textile curators and arts institutions conflated “old Tibetan rugs” with a pre-modern world of monks, nomads, and peasants. Such representations encourage Western consumers to connect “Tibetan folk art” to the myths surrounding a feudal Tibetan society. Such myth-making is important because it reinforces the idea that the farther distant the carpets were from the modern world, the more desirable they became. Also, this form of representation has the power to establish a distinguishing status for these carpets and even enables their modern replicas to succeed in the international market.

The second mechanism operates between the industry and arts institutions (e.g., the Newark Museum’s Tibet collection). Currently, American and European importers take the lead in marketing and distributing Tibetan-Nepalese carpets. These distribution

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106 Kuløy, Tibetan Rugs, “Preface”.


companies have adopted some aspects of the narrative of “ethnic folk art” to create an identity for the “modern carpets” made by Nepalese weavers. Specifically, they emphasize such defining features as Tibetan knots, vegetable dyes, and high-land sheep wool. In reality, these materials are not easily obtained without large capital. Vegetable dyeing and hand-spinning are expensive and time-consuming production methods. Only large manufactories can afford to make such carpets for a high-end market. Because of this, the large carpet dealers and producers started to promote themselves as the patrons of “traditional Tibetan carpets,” which became a status symbol. In recent years, they embraced the discourses of environmentalism and anti-child labour to reinforce their “patron” status and enhance the prestige of their brands in the industry.\(^\text{109}\)

As I have shown, Western European and American researchers cherish so-called traditional Tibetan design and regard such creativity as something inseparable from Tibetans’ culture. The discourse of “traditional Tibetan carpets” glosses over Nepalese weavers’ working conditions and cultural identity and in part supports the capitalist labour management that reduces the craft skill of Nepalese weavers to sweatshop wages. By contrast, carpet producers promoted the application of modern design and art. Large marketing companies employ European-American graphic designers and celebrate their success in marrying “traditional craft” with “new ideas.” In this trend, the carpets made by small independent producers who have no resources to use expensive methods or hire designers, are pushed to low-end markets.

At last, a political-economic linkage has been established between the Tibetan-owned enterprises, the settlement camp factories, the Dalai Lama’s government-in-exile, and the international market. In the late 1970s and 1990s, the settlement camp factories, sponsored by either Swiss or US aid money, have been transferred to the Dalai Lama’s government-in-exile. They are fundamentally government-owned enterprises, in a sense, generating incomes for the exile administration. These camp factories have carved out a small but significant niche market of “refugee carpets.”

As early as the 1970s, Philip Denwood praised “refugee carpets.” Though he disdains “commercial carpets,” made from the “standardized range of patterns and

\(^{109}\) A good example is Odegard Carpets, established by a former World Bank consultant in Nepal. On the company’s website, viewers can find information about the anti-child labor and sustainability campaigns. http://www.odegardinc.com/flash/home_bump.html (accessed on February 5th, 2009).
materials,” he seemed to realize that Tibetans dislike “over-organization” and “disciplined industrial labour.” Therefore, he concludes that making “refugee carpets” would allow Tibetans to remain in their communities and maintain their original lifestyle.

This idea that carpet-making can support an ‘original lifestyle’ has been embraced by the government-in-exile which identifies carpet-weaving centres as income/employment generating ventures for the refugees and as a form of cultural activity, affectively binding exile Tibetans to the exile-government and its nationalist policy. Ann Frechette, who worked in the Jawalakhel Handicraft Centre, describes how these settlement camps have turned themselves into tourist sites to attract rich foreigners, who support the Tibetan political cause. She recalled:

Tours of the Jawalakhel Handicraft Center are led by clean, well-dressed English-speaking Tibetans. They show the tourists JHC’s spacious, well-lighted, and well-ventilated weaving hall, filled with the cheerful, smiling faces of only adult Tibetan weavers. They tell the tourists about the atrocities the Chinese committed against the Tibetan people; about the poor Tibetan refugees who poured into Kathmandu in 1959, helpless and needy; about the camps the Tibetans established to help rebuild their lives; and about the school the JHC built to help preserve the Tibetan culture and the independence cause. The tour ends at the JHC showroom where tourists are encouraged to purchase a carpet.

These camp factories exploit the sympathies of buyers from Europe and North America toward Tibetan political-economic interests. As they constitute the major site that produces both the ideas of “refugee carpets” and the products with this label, this marketing of “refugee carpets” has proliferated. When I was researching the sales of “Tibetan carpets” in New York City, I found many small Tibetan shops selling carpets, accessories, and Buddhist artefacts, imported from Nepal. The majority of the shop owners told me that their carpets were made by Tibetan refugees. Clearly, they knew that “refugee carpets” have a better chance to attract buyers.

In the virtual world, the camp factory has developed Internet marketing campaigns to reach international customers and disseminate “Tibetan refugee” stories. Tibetan Karma Carpets, on its website (www.karmacarpets.com), claims they have an

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110 Denwood, *Tibetan Carpets*, 78.
exclusive contract with the exile government; their rugs are made at the oldest Tibetan settlement camp in Kathmandu, Nepal. The main page has a web link, “the Tibetans,” that gives information about Chinese repression of Tibetan culture and the successful history of Tibetan refugee camps. The general information page reads: “Any revenue which does not remain in the settlement camp to support the immediate needs of the population is channelled directly to the Tibetan Settlement Government in Exile to promote the Dalai Lama’s agenda of world peace.”

The Tibetan government-in-exile and their marketers have successfully married their “free Tibet” discourse to the Western idea of “Tibetan folk art.” This enables them to retain a special “refugee business.” More significantly, in this case, the exile Tibetans appropriated the European discourse of “liberation” and belief in commodity trade: making carpets to free Tibetans from Chinese repression and to conserve Tibetans’ cultural and religious tradition.

Concluding Remarks

This chapter demonstrates paradoxes and ironies in a history of “Tibetan carpets” that sprang from encounters between different imperialist powers in the twentieth century. The historically-formed imaginings of “Tibetan carpets” teach us about the rise of a global order of cultural knowledge on Tibetan carpets and its interactions with capital. Tibetan carpets emerged from these historical processes as a “cultural commodity”—an object with power that marks social hierarchy, exclusivity, and distinction. The British colonial officers wished to release Tibet’s latent, unrealized potential for development (e.g., skills, labour power, and a native talent for trade) by political-economic means, such as an export carpet industry. However, the British government ignored their business proposal partly because it did not want to agitate its political enemies and partly because it was less interested in buying carpets than importing Tibet’s raw materials, such as wool, borax, or animal hides and skins. European and American romantics were ardent critics of capitalism and industrial modernity. However, as they represent “Tibetan carpets” as a manifestation of fully

realized human life, artisan creativity, and ethnic folk art, they actually facilitated the increase of exchange value in these carpets. By fetishizing the product—by turning it into an expression of some higher values—romantics helped to turn the wheels of capitalism.

Representations of “Tibetan carpets” also reflect the dominate discourses on “modernity” or “progress.” They show that nineteenth century colonialism still haunts people in the twentieth-first century through “the global hierarchy of value” that promulgates the binary notions of “tradition” versus “modernity” and “fine art” versus “folk art.” Influenced by a colonialist legacy, such representational politics obscures all the enabling infrastructure and socio-political arrangements. As I have demonstrated, the making of “Tibetan folk art” involves all the “modern” communication technology, management, and institutions, such as international aid agencies, developmentalist governments, arts institutions, and international firms. The production of “Tibetan carpets,” mediated through capital, the state, and local socio-cultural norms, gave rise to social exclusion and economic polarization in Nepal’s carpet districts. Meanwhile, the business, cultural conservation, and development activities that revolve around transnational linkages tend to legitimate Europeans and Americans as guardians of Tibetan heritage and/or as key distributors in the industry.

Since the 1980s, the “Tibetan carpet” has gained particular force in Nepal’s carpet economy. The Tibetan community-in-exile invented new meanings for their carpets: the so-called ‘refugee’ carpets, made to express Tibetans’ cultural distinction and political determination. Overseas Tibetan businessmen use them to interact with and benefit from the international commodity trade. I argue that ‘refugee’ carpets are a transnational commodity and a political-cultural medium conforming to the international political economic order and contributing to the identity of the Tibetan diaspora community.

Nonetheless, this claim and marketing strategy have repercussions. For example, they implicitly portray the men and women of Tibet as passive victims of Chinese political-cultural oppression and undermine these Tibetans’ roles in maintaining and re-inventing their cultural values and practices. Also, romanticizing a “pre-modern” Tibetan society glosses over important questions about historical ruptures and continuities.
In Chapter 3, I use archival and oral history materials to explore how the meanings and uses of carpets changed under the impacts of Chinese occupation and socialist modernization.
MAKING CARPETS FOR THE POTALA, MAKING POTALA CARPETS

This chapter explores the cultural representation and production of “Tibetan carpets” under two different political regimes: the Tibetan government and the Chinese socialist government. I focus on the institutional practices that regulated carpet production and trade from 1920 to 1985.

I divide the chapter into two parts. The first part shows how in early 20th century, Gyantse (Central Tibet) carpet making was a proto-industry: carpets were commodified and incorporated into long-distance trade. During this period, a state-sponsored guild played an important role in facilitating the expansion of labour market, and carpet production remained ruled by local customs and embedded in a patriarchal culture. The Tibetan Kashag government recognized the cultural use of carpets in legitimatizing its rule and maintaining social order. After the Chinese army occupied Lhasa, the capital of Tibet, the Tibetan elites founded a government carpet workshop in collaboration with Beijing to assert Tibetans’ political and cultural autonomy. Both Gyantse and Chinese artisans were recruited by the Kashag\(^1\) to experiment with weaving prestige carpets for the Potala Palace, the residence of the Dalai Lama and an architectural symbol of Tibet.

Part II shows that after 1959, the CCP (Chinese Communist Party) had to justify Chinese rule in Tibet by stressing the benefits of socialist modernization. Under this policy directive, Gyantse carpets were not seen to be useful to modernizing the country because the carpet production withdrew a part of the workforce from the agriculture sector, and carpets were not as essential as other textile products in rural Tibet. Thus, the government invested few resources in fostering an indigenous carpet industry. However, in the early 1970s, the success of the “Tibetan carpet” industry in Nepal inspired Beijing to stage a revival of “Tibetan carpets.” For the first time, Tibetan artisans made hanging carpets with a Potala Palace design for the visiting kings and foreign tourists.

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\(^1\) The Kashag was the Tibetan equivalent of the council of ministers.
By charting and comparing the practices that emerged from radically different social-political contexts, I investigate how they contributed to both ruptures and continuities in Tibetan society. Both governments wanted to polish their credentials as “modern government.” Both modernization projects, particularly the CCP’s, were inconsistent and changeable, largely because of indecision about the extent to which Tibet could or should be transformed. I demonstrate how this created problems for Tibetan artisans, but how it also empowered them.

**Two Gyantse Carpet Makers**

I found Jamyang through my connection to a carpet factory, Lhasa Carpets, where he spent his entire career. In our first meeting, Jamyang proved himself a vibrant storyteller. He grew up in Gyantse, where he began to learn carpet weaving from a master weaver at the age of thirteen. After spending several years as an apprentice living with his master’s family, he graduated as a skilled weaver and became a member of the Gyantse carpet guild. In 1954, when he was eighteen, the Tibetan Kashag government recruited him and nine other young men to learn special weaving techniques from five Han-Chinese artisans. As a result, Jamyang and his fellow artisans settled down in a permanent government workshop in suburban Lhasa. The early 1960s saw a critical turn in Jamyang’s life. After the carpet workshop was taken over by the socialist government, he joined the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) and subsequently became a Tibetan cadre in the workshop, which was then turned into a state-owned textile factory, Lhasa Carpets. The first Han factory director sent him to study Mandarin and management in a Beijing college. He proudly said that he mastered the technology of shearing machine and electric scissors in a Chinese-carpet factory and brought these technologies to Lhasa Carpets. His career was interrupted by the Cultural Revolution (1966-1969) for a few years. When the political climate stabilized in the early 1970s, Jamyang was appointed to be the first Tibetan factory director of Lhasa Carpets. He held this position till he retired in 1986.
I visited Jamyang’s home and interviewed him several times. But he did not introduce me to any other surviving artisans from the Kashag workshop.² By coincidence, the father-in-law of my Tibetan language teacher was a carpet maker from Gyantse. Upon my request, my teacher arranged an interview with this old man, Tsering. Like Jamyang, he was drafted into the Kashag workshop in 1954 and stayed on in this job after 1959. He joined the CCP in 1977. He was the production manager at Lhasa Carpets for two years before he retired from this factory in 1988.

**Peasant Roots**³

Tibetan rural handicrafts prospered in the early twentieth century and started to attract people from poor farming households.⁴ Rural artisans migrated to principal towns, such as Gyantse, and disengaged themselves from agriculture.⁵ However, blacksmiths, coppersmiths, goldsmiths, silversmiths, butchers, and potters were all hereditary closed artisan groups because farmers regarded them as polluted people.⁶ Unlike these artisan communities, the carpet trade absorbed agricultural surplus labour in Central Tibet because there was no customary barrier attached to carpet makers. Generally speaking, they had a higher social standing than other craftsmen and often came from an agricultural background.

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² I requested Jamyang to put me in contact with his former co-workers. However, he refused by saying that his co-workers either died or were too old to remember anything.
³ In pre-1959 Tibet, Tibetans classified the non-aristocratic lay population into two main categories: 1) treba (taxpayer) and 2) du-jung (small household). For an examination of the social structure in Tibet, see Melvyn Goldstein, “Stratification, Polyandry, and Family Structure in Central Tibet,” *Southwestern Journal of Anthropology* 27, no. 1 (1971): 65-58. This study shows that the artisan population largely grew out of du-jung families that did not have direct access to the land.
⁴ The English literature on the political economic history of Tibetan handicrafts is sparse. I mainly consulted an edited volume in Chinese language that includes several research papers by Tibetan and Chinese scholars. Li Jianshang, ed., *Xizang de shangye he shougongye diaocha he yanjiu* (survey and research on the Tibetan commerce and handicraft sectors) (Beijing: China Tibetology Press, 1999).
⁵ Jiangzi County History Editorial Team. *Jiangzi Xianzhi* (*Gyantse County History*) (Beijing: China Tibetology Press, 2004), 382-385.
⁶ Some researchers have found that this caste ideology did not apply to Amdo and Kham regions. Blacksmiths, coppersmiths, goldsmiths, and silversmiths were respected by the agricultural communities there. See, for example, Zhaga, “Xizang wujin hangye de diaocha yu yanjiu,” (survey and research on the Tibetan hardware sector) in *Xizang de shangye he shougongye diaocha he yanjiu* (survey and research on the Tibetan commerce and handicraft sectors), ed. Li Jianshang, 293-294 (Beijing: China Tibetology Press, 1999).
Jamyang came from a semi-artisanal family that owned no land. His father hired out as a farmhand in the village; his mother and sisters wove rugs to support the family. However, he did not receive any training at home because, according to Jamyang, his mother did not have good skill. “People liked to learn from families with advanced rug-weaving skills.” His parents requested a well-known weaver to take him as an apprentice. In return, his father roasted barley flour for the master’s family.

Tsering, by contrast, lost his father six months after his birth. He recalled that his mother raised her three children by weaving or shearing rugs for other families. Though Tsering’s mother was an able artisan, she never taught Tsering how to weave. He explained, “My teacher is my sister’s husband. My mother died when I was eleven. Immediately, he took me to his home, and I started to learn about rugs from him.” Tsering lived and worked with his sister and brother-in-law till he was called upon by the Kashag administration in 1954 to work in Lhasa.

Why did the mothers want senior male artisans to teach their boys the craft? According to which principles was the supply of skilled labourers regulated, and which social relations where engendered by the training? I will explore these questions in the next few sections that examine the local practice of apprenticeship, the guild, and the scale of the carpet market.

**In the Master’s Workshop**

In 1949, Jamyang was taken to live with his master’s family. His master’s house resembled a strict vocational school, operated according to local norms and rules. The training spanned three highly disciplined years. He remembered:

My master had five apprentices, three boys and two girls. We learned the techniques of spinning, dyeing, and weaving. We wove during the day. In the evening, because we did not have electricity, we used oil lamps and spun wool to make yarn for next day’s work. Only after making sufficient yarn were we allowed to go to bed. Dyeing was mostly done by my master’s wife. We learned about this through assisting her in the courtyard. Our master taught us how to weave rugs. We looked at the grid
structure in the back of his rug and followed its patterns to weave. In the first two and a half years, I learned to ‘read’ and understand the grid structure. Then, I spent six months learning how to weave.

Tsering remembered, “My teacher was weaving a rug. We sat besides him, observing him and weaving our rugs. We learned how to read the grid structure first.” Both considered reading the grid structure and knotting yarns the foremost skills that apprentices need to learn. Yarn spinning and dyeing were taken-for-granted, probably because most village households mastered these techniques through making woolen serge as sideline products. This suggests that rug-making involved special skills that were not widespread in the village and were controlled by those within the carpet trade. Also, the apprenticeship turned these special skills into something like “human capital” that people had to spend time and investment to acquire. Such ‘standard training’ would enable young artisans to obtain a membership in the craft community and develop a sense of professional identity.7

Jamyang particularly resented the extra household tasks he had to undertake during the apprenticeship. He recalled, “I got up very early in the morning to fetch drinking water for the entire family.” He complained, “When we worked at our master’s home, he owned all the rugs we made. We did not have a wage and had to do a lot of housework.” It may be an indication of how a young apprentice felt about the controlled work rhythm and strict disciplines in the master’s workshop. His description of the master’s workshop also suggests that this kind of training taught apprentices how to interact with their peers (e.g., the other apprentices) and senior artisans.8

Stories of favouritism manifest the tensions between the master and his apprentices. Jamyang said that not every apprentice was taught some ‘advanced techniques’, in particular the technique of contouring the pile surface of a rug. This contouring technique involves the use of a specially-shaped scissor to clip away pile threads along the lines of junction between colours in the rug. By angling the scissor blades, a skilful artisan can create a bevelling effect on the pile surface. Jamyang and

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8 Ibid., 2-3.
Tsering remembered that their masters guarded this knowledge and only passed it onto their favourite disciples. Jamyang recalled, “In my village, if the apprentice was a good student, then the master would teach him how to contour rugs. Generally, masters did not teach this to apprentices. Even if the apprentice is a man, he will not teach it to him.” Tsering admitted that he only learned a little of this technique before he left his master.

The practice of keeping the contouring technique secret demonstrates the particular apprenticeship dynamic and rivalry between masters and apprentices. Jamyang described, “I was a bit scared in the beginning. Later, my master was a bit afraid of me because I was a good listener and learned (the craft) quickly.” This comment points to the internal contradiction of apprenticeship: it is the means of perpetuating the craft and the means of destroying craftsmen’s power. The capacity of masters to guard the secrets of rug-making has significant impacts on the prestige and survival of the craft.9

Gyantse rug makers did not study how to draw. They hired mural artists to paint designs on papers. Jamyang said that his mother could only make rugs by imitating a finished sample rug. His master could make a rug from a design on paper. Tsering also claimed, “If a person has ability, then he can weave patterns by just looking at pictures.” Their comments suggest that the masters saw their skill in being able to weave from a graphic design made by a professional painter. One must build this composing skill gradually through many years of practice to assure his success in business, to attract disciples, and to be recognized as a master by his peers. Within a relatively short period of apprenticeship, it was unlikely that apprentices were able to obtain this “advanced” skill and exceed their masters. Thus, the prestige attached to this composing skill was the central factor that demarcated the social strata in the community of Gyantse rug makers.

In addition to the age and skill factors, I find that both Jamyang and Tsering shared a view that men were more intelligent than women. Jamyang commented, “In the past, men made rugs with care. They wove better rugs than women did.” Tsering said, “Men had more ability in interpreting the blueprints. Women had weaving skills, but, they are timid. Men mastered techniques faster.” This view corresponds to the general patterns of patriarchal culture in Central Tibet and influenced women artisans’ status in

9 Ibid., 4-5.
Likely, the local gender ideology shaped the ways in which masters coached their apprentices. At the same time, this apprenticeship could reinforce people’s assumptions of skill and gender.

Students of apprenticeship elsewhere in the world point out that a complex relationship exists between the fees paid for apprenticeship, the payment made to apprentices and the length of apprentices’ training. This calculation reflects the cost of training, the benefits of having apprentice labour, and the problem of introducing new competitors into the trade. The apprenticeship in Gyantse generally lasted for three or four years. Jamyang recalled that apprentices’ families paid the masters fees in the form of barley flour and some gifts, such as auspicious scarves and jars of barley beer. The masters provided apprentices with “room and board” and tools. Also, Jamyang claimed that his master made profits from apprentices’ work. These details indicate that in the early 1940s, the market for Gyantse rugs was stable or expanding, as the cost and risk of training new journeymen were not perceived as threats to the artisans, who could still successfully and safely practice their trade.

Independent Artisans

“In 1952”, Gyantse County History claims, “more than eighty percent of Gyantse people participated in rug production”. The high participation rate indicates that the village craft had evolved into a commercial industry concentrated in the township. A survey conducted in Gyantse in 1954, documented one hundred and sixty “Professional Carpet Households.” The category of “Sideline Carpet Households” counted fifteen families, a relatively small population. This shows that the rug trade had divorced a

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11 Coy, 5-11.
12 JCHET, Gyantse County History, 382.
13 Che Rurong, Fen Shib o, Zhang Lan, Lu Dilian, “Jiangzi shougong fangzhiyi diaocha cailiao,” (Gyantse handmade textile survey material, reprinted in Xizang shehui lishi yanjiu (Tibet nationality socio-historical survey vol. 4), 146 (Lhasa: Tibet People’s Press, 1988). The third category, “free carpet household” (ziyou zhitian hu) is not clearly defined in the report. Under this category, after the 1954 flood, the number of households was reported to be twenty, and the number of total weavers was twenty-five.
significant population of carpet makers from agriculture, a clear indication that the
demand for Gyantse rugs was ascending when Jamyang and Tsering joined the trade.

Several kinds of tradesmen had been drawn into a complex production chain of
rugs. Mural artists were hired to paint sample designs. Tailors sewed cotton cloth or thin
felt onto the back and edges of a finished rug. Vegetable and mineral dyestuffs were
collected and sold by professional dealers. Some dyes, such as indigo, were imported
from India or Nepal.

Artisans adapted their production activity to the semi-agriculture and semi-
pastoral economy in Gyantse. They used local wool to make yarn,\textsuperscript{14} which could be
purchased by Tibetan currency at the markets, or exchanged with nomads for barley flour
or dried turnips. However, rug makers generally did not own any agricultural land or
livestock to produce staple foods. Thus, they often worked for well-off farmers, who had
access to wool and had yarn stocks.

Overall, Tibetan artisans consisted of three groups.\textsuperscript{15} The first group was subject
to the Tibetan Government, paid the Kashag head taxes, or performed labour services.
Jamyang and Tsering belonged to this group. They described their early work in Gyantse
as self-employed artisans. It means that they did not have hereditary contracts with the
local lords or monasteries. The second group was estate artisans, bonded to a monastery
or an aristocrat estate. These artisans had to pay their lord head taxes and labour. The
last group was bonded to both a lord and the Kashag and paid double taxes. Generally,
artisans in the first group formed guilds to protect their common interests. Estate artisans
were “looked after” by their lords: if there was any dispute among the artisans, the lord of
an estate artisan would step in to speak for his artisan.

After he graduated from his master’s workshop, Jamyang frequently carried his
loom to rich farm households and made rugs for them. They provided him with a room
to sleep in, three meals, tea, production materials, and sample rugs. Tsering worked
under his brother-in-law’s guardianship. Both of them would board with a farmer family
and weave rugs for this household. “When we finished the work,” Tsering told me, “I

\textsuperscript{14} Ibid., 149. My informant also recalled that wool was collected in Gyantse. They did not use wool from
North Tibet, which has now come to be the much-desired material in the present-day carpet industry.
\textsuperscript{15} I could not find the proportion of these groups in the artisan population. Probably, each trade had a
different proportion of “self-employed artisans.”
would receive some money and gifts, according to the local customs. In the Shigatse area, they (the employers) liked to give us Tibetan blouses.”16 These economic rewards would be distributed within the family. Tsering’s brother-in-law was in charge of the family capital. Jamyang’s income went to his parents’ saving.

To keep up their year-round production, rug makers began to build and extend their connections to merchants. Gyantse was an important market town near the Sikkim-Tibet trade routes, and it frequently lodged horse, mule, and yak caravans from neighbouring countries and Lhasa. Usually, merchants visited rug makers’ workshops to place orders and gave artisans sample rugs to reproduce fashionable carpets. Jamyang remembered that he collaborated with his mother and sisters to make rugs for the travelling carpet dealers, who sold rugs in Nepal and Lhasa. To my surprise, during the interview, Tsering suddenly switched from Tibetan to Mandarin and commented, “We toiled and moiled, but could not get rich. The businesspeople became rich.”

In addition, Tibetan monastic institutions actively participated in the regional commodity economy. Jamyang recalled:

In the past, many temples were scattered around Gyantse. I remember there were sixteen temples. Now, we only have two. There were monks who traded rugs. Sometimes we needed money. We went to ask them for money. In return, we made them rugs.

To my knowledge, monks rarely made rugs in their monasteries. They did however use rugs to furnish their chanting halls and dormitories. Very likely, the monasteries were important patrons of the Gyantse carpet trade. Also, studies of Tibetan trade routes have shown that monasteries’ caravans brought Tibetan-made rugs to the country’s frontiers and exchanged them for rice, sugar, tobacco, and tea.17

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16 Blouses were usually made of cotton textiles, which were not local fabrics. Tibetan families usually purchased such products in the markets. I speculate that artisans were respected by their employers and received these valuable gifts. This was part of their salary in an only partly monetized economy. Artisans usually received food, a place to sleep, and clothing from their patrons.
Jamyang’s description and Tsering’s criticism imply that in the early twentieth century, Gyantse artisans began to produce rugs for distant or foreign markets. They were aware that they had little influence over the carpet prices, controlled by the merchants. Overall, artisans did not have much capacity to accumulate raw materials and cash. The large-scale circulation of wool rugs was sustained by a relatively small-scale production and regulated by economic and religious interests, in a context of ecclesiastical control and collaborations among merchants and artisans. Nonetheless, the Gyantse carpet makers formed an artisan association to protect their craft and advocate their socio-economic interests.

**The Gyantse Carpet Guild**

The Gyantse carpet guild was founded in the early twentieth century, probably in the 1910s or in the 1920s. Tsering described the Gyantse guild as the largest artisan organization in the Shigatse region. He explained to me the origin of the guild:

Our founder went to Lhasa and made rugs (for the Dalai Lama). The Thirteenth Dalai Lama liked his work very much and called him las tshan pa Sonam Dorje. After he came back to Gyantse, he formed this guild. Since then, it became compulsory for all Gyantse carpet makers to join it.

*Las tshan pa* is an official title, equivalent to a seventh-rank officer in the Tibetan bureaucracy. From its inception, the guild was endorsed by the Dalai Lama’s government. Jamyang had a similar understanding of the guild history and described to me how it operated:

We had an artisan group, called *tshogs pa* (group). The head (of this group) was from Gyantse. He was a fourth rank officer. There was a

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18 Ibid., 106. Though there are random records of carpet trade, the scale and size of this transaction is unclear in the literature.

seventh rank officer under him. This person was from Gyantse too. At that time, the local government\textsuperscript{21} requested carpet makers to work in Lhasa every two or three years. This fourth rank officer and the seventh rank officer looked after this arrangement. Whenever the government informed them to send people, they would find artisans to work in Lhasa. They would go with these carpet makers.

These artisan-officials received salaries from the Kashag administration, and the guild received a stipend from the government. In return, the guild artisans took turns to work on short-term assignments for the Dalai Lama government. According to Jamyang and Tsering, this policy was imposed only on the male artisans in Gyantse.

Despite the government influence and demand, Tsering and Jamyang believe that ultimately, the guild was organized by and for the artisans themselves. During the interview, Tsering immediately associated the guild with communal activities, such as the summer picnic events, when people consumed abundant barley beer, meat, dry fruits, and cakes in a convivial atmosphere. He mentioned that guild members did not pay fees to the guild. He only contributed to some entertainment fund during the summer picnics. “The amount was not big,” he said, “we spent it on food and drinks.” Similarly, Jamyang remembered his summer picnics and did not think that the guild imposed any economic burdens. He explained:

When we were apprentices, we gave the guild a little money. The amount depended on a person’s economic situation. After having learned the craft, men and women were expected to join this group. But my mother and sisters did not need to pay member fees. We [the male artisans] handed in our member fee once a year. The amount corresponded to how many carpets we wove.

This suggests the guild had functions in fostering solidarity and cooperation among the artisans. Importantly, it supervised the practice of apprenticeship. The literature shows

\textsuperscript{20} In the literature, this person was a fifth rank officer.
\textsuperscript{21} Jamyang sometimes used the term “Tibet local government” to refer to the Tibet government in pre-1959 Tibet. The use of this term must be associated to his adoption of the language from the CCP.
that apprentices had to apply for a permit from the guild to start their formal training. This application involved giving gifts (such as Tibetan auspicious scarves, sugar, or some money) to the head of the guild, paying the guild a member fee, and having a guarantor. If an apprentice wanted to drop out, then the master would report to the guild and then allow the apprentice to leave. These regulations manifest that the guild contributed to the cultural continuity of the craft.

Clearly, there was a certain degree of gender discrimination in the guild, as women did not pay fees, did not attend summer parties with men, did not go to work for the Kashag in Lhasa, and consequently did not play any leadership role in the guild. All of these factors explain why Jamyang and Tsering were not trained by their mothers or sisters. It was because a senior male artisan could influence the guild’s decision that granted the boys a full membership. Put differently, the significance of an apprenticeship was not only acquiring special skills through a fixed period of training but also an artisan membership, constituted by the guild-based collective rights and obligations.

**Recruiting Young Artisans**

The organizational structure, management, and functions of the Gyantse guild was modelled on the first Tibetan craft bureau (zhol 'dod dpal), established by the fifth Dalai Lama (1617-1682) to recruit and administer skilled artisans for his residence and administration centre—the Potala Palace. Government artisans came from craft districts around Tsang and Lhasa areas. They mainly made ritual objects and cast deity figures for the theocracy. Within this bureau, artisans were rewarded with fixed salaries, food quotas, or estate properties, according to their ranks. For example, the big master ('dod dpal do dam pa) held titles as fifth rank officers, followed by the deputy masters (equivalent to seventh-rank officers (chen mo las tshan pa). Special laws and rules were made to enforce the bureau’s control over its staffs; the artisans were also freed from the

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22 Gyantse Handmade Textile Survey Material, 154-55.
23 Ibid., 155.
25 'dod dpal do dam pa literally means craftsmen manager. chen mo las tshan pa means craftsmen cadres.
manorial lords, merchants, and the local authorities (outside Lhasa). Though the Dalai Lama government implemented this policy in the seventeenth century to ensure the state monopoly on the production of religious objects, in subsequent centuries, the craft trade was diversified, and it proliferated and expanded. New guilds adopted some organizational features from the craft bureau and also invented new rules to meet the local situations. The Gyantse guild is such an example.

In Gyantse, some artisans could freely sell their labour to individual employers or exchange rug products for cash and food at the markets. As I have mentioned in the section on “independent artisans,” some rug makers had a hereditary relationship to estates, (which means they were compelled to work for their lords.) However, estate artisans still received a wage at a market rate and food allowance from their lords, and some artisans could even produce commercial rugs on their own to make extra cash. Nonetheless, estate weavers were not obligated to work for the Dalai Lama government, but had to make carpets for their lords. “Independent artisans,” like Jamyang and Tsering, performed labour services instead of paying the government head tax and took turns to finish the carpet orders, issued by the Kashag administration.

Both young men were only eighteen and had not married when they heard about the news that the Kashag wanted young men to weave carpets in Lhasa. Jamyang described how he was selected.

In 1954, the government demanded for ten young men between sixteen and twenty. We had to come (to Lhasa) because we used our two hands to pay our taxes. At that time, the official (serving at the guild) had already died and [there was no replacement]. But our guild was still active and organized the selection without the officers. People all knew the young men who made rugs in Gyantse. They chose us to work (in Lhasa).

26 Zhaxi Ciren, “Xizang difang zhengfu shougongyeju de jianli ji bianzhi,” (the establishment and organization of the Tibetan handicraft bureau) in Xizang wenshi ziliao xuanlan (selection of materials on Tibet history and culture vol. 15), 136-141 (Beijing: Nationality Press, 1995). I do not know the background of the author, but the entire book is said to be a collection of memoirs by former Kashag officials, Tibetan aristocrats, or religious elites.

27 Gyantse Handmade Textile Survey Material, 156-57.
Jamyang’s story suggests that the communications between the Gyantse guild and the Kashag no longer relied on guild-officers in the early 1950s. Several documents issued by the Kashag suggest that in the 1940s, the carpet orders from Lhasa were not directly sent to the Gyantse guild officials. The information on design, wage, carpet sizes and quantities was first passed to the Gyantse government (a subordinate body of the Kashag). Then, the head of Gyantse town forwarded the orders to the artisans. Nobody was required to work in Lhasa.28

Without ‘official’ guild managers, the guild still functioned and was supported by carpet makers. This shows that the Gyantse guild could protect local artisans by preserving a degree of autonomy from the government. Its mobilizing power was in part embedded in the artisan community culture and politics. Jamyang said, “In our town, whoever made good rugs received respects from the others. I was able to come to work in this workshop because I made good rugs.” Tsering gave me more details on how young artisans were recruited.

At that time, I wanted to go. But my brother-in-law wanted me to work with him. He went (to the guild) to ask to take me off the list. In response, the guild requested me to put my finger print on a document, declaring I would never make rugs and use looms in the future. I could not do it. If I did it, then I would not be able to weave at all. I did not give them the finger print. So, I could come to Lhasa. Some young men’s families did not want them to go. Who would know what life would be like in Lhasa? Parents thought it was good that their children stayed in Gyantse. But, [these young men] wanted to go (to Lhasa) very much.

Tracy: Why did you want to go to Lhasa?

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28 These documents are kept in the TAR Public Archive. Due to their policy, I could not make photocopies of these documents. The archivist translated them to me on site. I recorded his translation on November 30th, 2006. Document A was issued before 1949, but it does not indicate the exact publication date and year. It describes a request from the Kashag, asking the Gyantse government to produce carpets for the Potala Palace and Norbulingka. Document B was issued by the Kashag on July 21, 1948 (Tibetan Calendar). This was an order issued by the Kashag to request the Gyantse government to make special sitting rugs and carpets for the annual government picnic.
Tsering: Lhasa is a very important and sacred place. I really wanted to go there. My brother-in-law did not want me to go. He wanted me to work with him. In Lhasa, I could earn my own wage and use it to help my relatives.

This explanation reflects young artisans’ vision of the carpet maker society: competition permeated the whole artisan community; tensions existed between junior weavers and their senior relatives. Young weavers’ acceptance of the Kashag appointment was partially due to the political enforcement. But they were also motivated by the idea of escaping from the guild disciplines and influence of their family authority.

**Gyantse Artisans in Lhasa**

The organizations of Tibetan craft communities varied from region to region, although they all shared features adopted from the Kashag craft bureau. As the centre of Tibetan economy, culture and polity, Lhasa was home to many artisan organizations, with complex internal structures and different sets of rules from the Gyantse guild. Each Lhasa guild had several head artisans of different official ranks, supervising craft production and administering the guild affairs. For example, they decided on professional protocols, settled members’ disputes, organized regular picnics and religious gatherings, collected fees and taxes, and aggregated artisan labour for government use. Lhasa-based artisans performed labour services for a fixed number of months every year in lieu of paying the head tax. By contrast, in Gyantse, guild artisans took turns to fulfil such labour obligations. Lhasa guilds continued to function in more or less the same way.

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29 The guild for goldsmiths, silversmiths, coppersmiths, and blacksmiths inherited the name from fifth Dalai Lama’s handicraft bureau, “zhol ’dod dpal do dam las khungs” (craftsmen management office). The definition can be found in *Zanghan da cidian* (Tibetan-Chinese Dictionary) (Beijing: Minzu Press, 1999), 1419. By the early twentieth century, these artisans could work outside their institution and keep such earning. There was no specific tax imposed on these activities. For detailed study on this guild see Zhaga, *Xizang wujin*, 276-277.

30 For detailed studies on the Lhasa guilds see for example Nuobu Wangdan, “Xizang shougongye ji qi hanghui,” (the Tibetan handicraft sector and guilds) in *Xizang de shangye he shougongye diaocha he yanjiu* (survey and research on the Tibetan commerce and handicraft sectors), ed. Li Jianshang, 234-268 (Beijing: China Tibetology Press, 1999), and Ciren Yangzong, “Lasa diqu shougongye diaocha,” (research on the Lhasa handicrafts) in *Xizang de shangye he shougongye diaocha he yanjiu* (survey and research on the Tibetan commerce and handicraft sectors), ed. Li Jianshang, 299-314 (Beijing: China Tibetology Press, 1999).
even after the advent of the People’s Liberation Army and lost their power over artisans only in 1959.31

In Lhasa, guild artisans often used both customary rules and intricate personal politics to navigate their career, as the guilds became hierarchicalized and the population of non-member artisans increased.32 For example, in addition to their guild membership, some artisans had a patron-alliance (e.g., a landlord or a monastery) who could protect their livelihood and practice of the craft.33 This kind of social network had a crucial importance to the artisans in a highly competitive labour market because it advanced their careers faster. Because Jamyang and Tsering had no local connections, they initially found it difficult to adapt. Jamyang recalled:

The Lhasa artisans asked us to join them. We told them that we did not want to because we came from the Gyantse guild. In Gyantse, we only paid our fees once a year. But, in Lhasa, they asked us to pay fees once a month and to work in their workshop. We wanted to be independent from them and not to pay them anything.

Tsering also remembered a dispute he had with the Lhasa artisan group. He said,

The government announced that it would give each artisan in Lhasa one silver dollar during Labour Day. This bonus fund was distributed through the local artisan guilds. Only guild members received this money. They (the Lhasa artisan organization) said that they would not give us this money unless we joined them.

The May 1st Labour Day was introduced to Lhasa by the Chinese Communist Party after 1952. The CCP government used this holiday to showcase the benefits of socialism. But the guild leaders appropriated this policy for their own purposes.

T: Why did you not want to join the Lhasa artisan group?

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31 I have not found any historical documents to explain how exactly the Chinese government dissolved the Lhasa guilds.
33 Nuobu Wangdan, *Xizang shougongye*, 240-41.
Tsering: If we joined it, we would not be allowed to work outside the organization. This was not the case in Gyantse. There was only one guild in Gyantse. Lhasa had many guilds. (The guild told us) not to work with other people and to follow their rules. They said, “If other people learned your skill, then your mouth would not be fed.”

Clearly, the Lhasa guilds wanted to keep the specialized skill within the trade and control the size of the artisan workforce. However, this argument did not convince the young Gyantse men, who eventually won political support from the Kashag. The government approved that the Gyantse artisans would only work for the Kashag workshop and did not need to register in any Lhasa-based guilds. Jamyang and Tsering admitted that at that time, they had little contact with their Gyantse organization either. As Tsering put it, “We became completely independent from any guild.”

There is no published evidence that Lhasa had a specific guild for carpet makers in the mid 1950s. (Perhaps, it was one of the reasons that the Lhasa officials asked the Gyantse guild to find them qualified weavers.) Then, who were the people that harassed these Gyantse artisans? It appears that Jamyang and Tsering were confronting a more complex artisan society, imbued with bitter rivalry, than theirs in Gyantse. Jamyang still resented that two Lhasa rug makers were given official titles and higher salaries in their workshop. He half-jokingly-half-seriously said, “One man got a fourth rank title. The other received a seventh rank title. Their wages were higher than ours… They did not weave that well! They were good at patting the buttocks of the local officials (pai pigu).”

Jamyang and Tsering’s memories of Lhasa artisan associations point to the evolution and variation in the linkages between the Tibetan state, guilds, and artisans. The preceding analysis suggests that carpet makers, especially “independent artisans,” could retain their relative autonomy from the religious and aristocratic manors. It was their alliance with the Dalai Lama government through the establishment of a guild that legitimized these artisans’ “independent” status and legalized their privileges, originally reserved only for the government craft bureau. However, independent artisans’ rights were anchored in the guild’s organizational structure, which varied in accordance with local political culture. Situated in Lhasa, the guilds became institutional manifestations
of a sophisticated system of artisan membership that had developed since the eighteenth century. On the one hand, the Lhasa guilds complied with the Kashag rule by handing in taxes and organizing skilled labourers for the government; on the other hand, they had significant juridical power in making law and operating a guild court outside the Kashag legal system. By the mid twentieth century, these guilds had grown a complex bureaucracy, infected by widespread institutional corruption. Newcomers, like Jamyang and Tsering, could be frustrated by not being able to enjoy their artisan rights, devastated by the restrictive guild law, or intimated by the overwhelming power of the guild elites. Again, their strategy was to request the Kashag to legitimize the status of the Gyantse artisans and shield them from local guild power.

These stories demonstrate how the Kashag and artisan groups reinforced each other’s political legitimacy by expanding artisans’ rights vis-à-vis the state and guilds. Ultimately, through these institutional practices, the Lhasa administration succeeded in fostering the relationship between the state and a population of “independent artisans,” stabilizing a socio-cultural order, and containing the regional power holders, which included large monasteries, aristocratic lords, and guild officials. These issues became especially important to the Kashag, when the Tibetan political system were driven to the verge of collapse by the Chinese communist government in 1950. The founding of the Kashag carpet workshop in 1953 has particular meanings that can help us understand the mentality of the Tibetan elites and their agendas. Next, I will describe the context of this carpet initiative, examine the workshop’s management, and discuss its implications at this junction of Sino-Tibetan political history.

**Political Crisis and the Kashag Carpet Workshop**

As discussed in Chapter 2, in 1950, the CCP deployed military force to press the Kashag to accept China’s sovereignty over Tibet. The Kashag wanted to fight back but the Tibetan political system was weakened by external and internal problems. Because this history is important to understanding the establishment of the Kashag carpet workshop in 1953, I will briefly discuss the political situation and explain its linkages to the carpet workshop. In the international arena, the Kashag looked to Britain, India and the United States for assistance. However, none of these governments was willing to
recognize Tibetan independence. The Secretariat of the United Nation regarded the Kashag as a non-government organization, when they received the Tibetan appeal.\textsuperscript{34}

Also, the threat from China accelerated the political rivalry and factions in Lhasa. The Tibetan ruling elites were split into two camps: one seeking independence, the other wanting to negotiate with Beijing. These quarrels caused confusion in the official circles and created a leadership vacuum. As a result, the Kashag had to consult State Oracles and then asked the 14\textsuperscript{th} Dalai Lama, who was sixteen years old at the time, to assume religious and political authority.\textsuperscript{35} Nonetheless, the internal division did not disappear overnight and continued to affect the ways in which the Kashag officials negotiated with the CCP.\textsuperscript{36}

On a different level, the Dalai Lama government had a long history of dispute with the authorities in Tashilhunpo, in the Tsang province of Tibet, which supported the second highest lama in Tibet—the Panchen Lama. In 1923, the 6\textsuperscript{th} Panchen Lama was forced into exile under the pressure from the 13\textsuperscript{th} Dalai Lama, and later passed away in East Tibet. Later, the Tashilhunpo monastery selected a child candidate as the 7\textsuperscript{th} Panchen Lama. They hoped to restore the Panchen Lama’s status and power in Tsang and decided to collaborate with the Chinese government, which certainly wanted to use the Panchen Lama’s prestige to influence his followers in Shigatse and Gyantse (the two principal towns of Tsang).\textsuperscript{37} The fact that China had this powerful religious figure as an ally further shattered the confidence of the Lhasa officials.\textsuperscript{38}

In late April 1951, the Tibetan delegation under the leadership of Ngabo Ngawang Jigme arrived in Beijing. They negotiated with the Chinese a comprehensive ceasefire, known as the Seventeen Point Agreement, which declared China’s peaceful liberation of Tibet. The Tibetan delegation did all they could to ensure that this agreement would not drastically alter their political and religious system and endanger the status and power of the Dalai Lama.\textsuperscript{39} However, they were unable to prevent the Chinese government from setting up a Military-cum-Administrative Committee in Lhasa

\textsuperscript{34} Shakya, Dragon in the Land of Snows, 53.
\textsuperscript{35} Ibid., 48.
\textsuperscript{36} Ibid., 82-83.
\textsuperscript{37} Ibid., 68-69.
\textsuperscript{38} Ibid., 36-37.
\textsuperscript{39} Ibid., 89.
and sending troops to Tibet. Thus, after this agreement was signed, the Kashag had to co-operate with newly-arrived Chinese officials.

These are the political events that set the stage for the Kashag carpet workshop. I was told by many people that Ngabo Ngawang Jigme was behind this decision of opening a carpet workshop. When he was leading the Tibetan negotiation team in Beijing, he and his colleagues were taken on a sightseeing tour by the Chinese officials. He was particularly impressed by the Beijing Carpet Factory and proposed to the Kashag that Tibetans could employ a few Chinese carpet makers in Lhasa. It is important to note that Ngabo was a very critical figure in this episode of Sino-Tibet history. In 1950, he was sent by the Kashag to defend Chamdo against the Chinese army. This enabled him to witness the Chinese military prowess and the incompetent Tibetan government system. He decided to surrender and collaborate with the CCP. The Chinese officials identified him as a “patriotic” Tibetan and later appointed him as the first Deputy Commander of the Tibetan Military District Headquarters. He also participated in the new Education Committee, aimed at introducing modern schools to Lhasa. In retrospective, Ngabo epitomizes a group of Tibetan elites who believed that their cooperation with the Chinese government would reduce the impact of Chinese policies on the Tibetan political and religious system and might lead to some positive changes in Tibet. It is significant that his name is associated with the Kashag carpet workshop.

A document issued by the Kashag in 1953 to arrange the reception of Chinese artisans shed some light on this initiative. It says that in 1952 the Tibetan official, Kapshopa, first requested Beijing to invite Chinese artisans to work in Lhasa. Beijing sent six Chinese carpet masters, one of whom got very sick and returned to China. The rest, together with three experts of tea plantation, arrived in Lhasa in 1953. The document states that “because this initiative is beneficial to the development of Tibet, [the Tibetan] local government should be responsible for all the expenses.” It further suggests that the Tibetan government invest a significant amount of resources in recruiting Chinese artisans, accommodating them in Lhasa, purchasing chemical dyestuffs from China, and building a new workshop: “It is important that [the Tibetan

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40 Jiefanghou Wenjian, No. 926 (Post-liberation Document, Number 926). The TAR Public Archive.
government] continues to support this workshop because Tibetan traditional craft can benefit from such learning through personal examples as well as verbal instructions.”

Among the five carpet artisans, there were three weavers, one dyer, and one graphic designer. They were first put in a government garden (khral 'khri gling ka) near the Lhasa River. In April 1954, ten Gyantse rug makers were recruited to staff the workshop. Jamyang and Tsering began to make carpets under the Han-Chinese masters.

“We had two workshops, some offices, and a masters’ dormitory”, said Jamyang, “several of us had to rent a small room to sleep in the first two years.” The Chinese master dyer took one Gyantse rug maker as his apprentice. They carried out the dyeing work in the courtyard and used chemical dyes bought in Beijing. A tangka painter from Lhasa assisted the Chinese graphic designer. He was taught how to use pencils to draw blueprints and apply a system of codes to identify colours. (This coding system consists of Chinese characters and is still in use in today’s Lhasa Carpets.) According to Jamyang, they used Chinese-knotting techniques to reproduce several ancient designs, copied from fragile antique rugs in the Potala Palace. In addition to the weavers from Gyantse, the workshop also hired artisans from Lhasa, including three men and three women. Temporary labourers were hired to spin yarns in the garden.

Jamyang recalled that wool stocks were taken from the government warehouse. Cotton wefts and warps were imported from India. In 1956, they all moved to the new Kashag workshop, in a garden known by the locals as dpal lha'i mtso 'khor. The architecture included a weaving workshop, a dyeing workshop, a warehouse, and workers’ dormitory. The garden was large enough to allow artisans to grow their own vegetables. Around the same time, most Chinese artisans returned to Beijing. Only one weaver stayed because he had married a Tibetan woman.

Between 1954 and 1956, holidays in the workshop were scheduled to follow both Tibetan and Chinese customs. Tibetans took breaks according to their lunar calendar. The eighth, fifteenth, and thirtieth of a month were auspicious days of month. In addition, Tibetans did not work during their religious holidays. The Chinese artisans

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41 khral 'khri gling ka means labor tax garden in Tibetan. Jamyang recalled that not only carpet makers but also other artisans worked in this garden as a way of paying head tax to the government. This garden is now the backyard of the TAR Military Headquarter Meeting Hall (Xizang junqu litang).

42 dpal lha'i mtso 'khor means Pen Lhamo Goddes’ lake garden in Tibetan. The Kashag owned this land and held annual picnic parties there from the end of the 1930s till the establishment of the carpet workshop.
followed the Roman calendar and took Sundays off. As a result, the Tibetan artisans were not allowed to stay in the workshop on Sunday either. Jamyang and Tsering sometimes spent their Sundays weaving rugs for the local customers for extra income. During the Tibetan New Year, everyone would have a fifteen-day holiday.

The workshop’s entire production was intended for the Tibetan government to furnish the Potala Palace, Norbulingka, and other government buildings. A few Lhasa-based Chinese officers made special orders. No carpet was sold at the market. Jamyang said, “Mainly, the knotting methods were different. We understood the other techniques. One day, we would study the Chinese-style knotting technique; the next day, we could work independently.” He stressed, “Our output was small. We only paid attention to quality, not quantity.” The rhythm in the weaving workshop was smooth. Jamyang described, “Life was easy at that time.” Tsering also remembered, “Whenever I could, I took a break.”

Workshop employees had fixed wages. The manager-officers received salaries according to their rank. Jamyang recalled that the Chinese artisans were paid in silver dollars. He and his co-workers received wages in kind: two and a half ke barley flour (approximately 33.75 kilogram) and some cash to buy tea, butter, and grocery. Tsering was pleased that he could use his own money to support his relatives. In retrospect, this Kashag carpet workshop was a genuine political-cultural innovation. Both the Chinese and Tibetan officials recognized that their government must solve the problem of legitimacy through the instruments of ‘modernization.’ This was particularly central to the Kashag government that desperately needed a ‘modern’ identity to compete with the Chinese and to gain international support. Lhasa had a mint and an arsenal, which were the remnants of the modernization efforts by the 13th Dalai Lama in the 1920s. The Tibetans could not continue to pursue these development projects because Beijing would see them as a violation of the Seventeen-point agreement. To avoid raising any suspicions of the Chinese authorities, the Kashag invested in this carpet workshop and demonstrated their ways of developing the country. The workshop’s relationship to the government displays the continuity of the previous handicraft bureau, ‘dod dpal, and it

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43 Jamyang said that the masters’ wage was 300 dayong per month. I can not find a way to verify this number. However, Jamyang’s memory suggests that the Chinese masters received a significantly higher salary than the Tibetan artisans.
was given new meanings: the Kashag represented itself as the guardian and innovator of the Tibetan civilization, and the Tibetan elites could assert their political and cultural autonomy in the face of Chinese occupation.

This carpet workshop had neither an official name nor sign posts at its front gate. Jamyang said, “People knew it. But, in Tibetan we called it ‘making rugs’ (rum thag).” He called their carpets *rgya rum* in Tibetan, literally meaning ‘Chinese carpets.’ In Beijing, they were known as “court carpets” (*gong tan*), which were originally made for the Qing emperor and then became prestigious commodities, like Chinese silk and porcelains, sought after by overseas collectors, including Tibetan elites. Previously, such Chinese carpets were transported to Lhasa by the caravans through Tibet’s North-East trade routes. This Kashag workshop essentially created a Tibetan version of ‘court carpets.’

Like any successful artisan communities in the world, Beijing carpet makers had their own guild and professional codes to protect their craft. Tibetans could hire Chinese masters because the traditional carpet industry in Beijing had undergone a major transformation since the founding of the PRC in 1949, detailed in the next section. Thus, the success of the Kashag workshop not only displays Tibetans’ creativity and determination but also signifies a sea change in the Chinese handicraft sector. Part II briefly reviews the main structural changes in the Beijing carpet industry from the beginning of the twentieth-first century to 1973 and explores the main views that framed the socialist handicraft policy and how this policy was put in practice in Tibet.

**Arts and Crafts and Socialist Modernization**

**Socialist Handicraft Policy and Beijing Carpets**

The leaders of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) based their strategies for modernizing China on a Marxist model of progress. From such a perspective, household or workshop-based manual production is considered inferior to large-scale mechanized

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44 H.A. Lorentz discussed these trade routes through which Tibetan wool was transported to the carpet production centers in Beijing and Tianjin. Likely, Chinese-made rugs could be taken back to Tibet through the same trade caravans. Also, he pointed out “gye-rum” rugs, made by Chinese artisans, were usually used by wealthy Tibetans. Lorentz, *A View of Chinese Rugs*, 110-111; 160.
industries, and public ownership of means of production is seen as superior to private ownership. The CCP promised to build a large-scale industrial sector and to modernize the country’s agricultural economy. Handicraft production in general had a dual role to play in this picture. First, the indigenous handicraft sector was to produce low priority consumer goods, using labour-intensive methods and surplus, scrap, and waste materials that could not be processed in the modern sector. Thus, handicrafts would not compete for scarce resources with heavy industry and would ease the burden of light industry, for example textile and food industries. Second, socialist economic planners wanted communal or collective handicraft enterprises to contribute to the development of agriculture. Artisans from such workshops were mobilized to produce small agricultural tools, utensils, and fertilizers. From the First Five-Year Plan (1953-1957) to the years following the Great Leap Forward (1958-1960), Beijing put increasing emphasis on small enterprises that were assigned the role of “supplying agriculture with new types of inputs and equipment and to provide the rural population with needed consumer goods.”

In addition to this developmentalist policy framework, a cultural nationalist approach was deployed to regulate the production of so-called “art handicrafts” (shougong yipin) or “industrial arts” (gongyi meishu pin), which are defined as handmade art objects for display. These handicrafts include such trades as jade carvings, ivory carvings, porcelains, silk embroideries, lacquer ware, lace-work, and cloisonné that had a long-established history. Borrowed from a European notion of “fine art,” the government media described them as “the colour of [China’s] national life” that should be preserved and freed from commercialism and capitalism. In particular, the central government aimed to develop “art handicrafts”, which could succeed in the international market and generate income for China’s industrialization. From 1949 to 1965, step by step, the CCP implemented policies to reconfigure the production structure, transform labour relations, change production orientations, and develop new production techniques in this industry of “art handicrafts.” During the early years of the Cultural Revolution

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45 The top priority goods include products such as chemical fertilizer, insecticide, farm machinery and power. Carl Riskin, “Small Industry and the Chinese Model of Development,” The China Quarterly 46 (1971): 270.
46 Ibid., 269.
48 Ibid., 22.
(1966-68), most private-public joint ventures that specialized in “art handicrafts” in large cities, such as Beijing, were converted into state enterprises.49

Beijing’s court carpets (gong tan) won a medal at the 1904 World Exposition in St. Louis and developed an international appeal. After the fall of the Qing and the opening of treaty ports on China’s coast, court carpets evolved from royal luxuries into export commodities. The 1920s saw the peak of this carpet industry, in which over two hundreds registered rug workshops and factories employed more than six thousands weavers to produce carpets for the European and American markets.50 Then the industry experienced setbacks during the World Depression, the Sino-Japanese War, and the Civil War. Before the CCP took over Beijing in 1949, forty-three registered carpet enterprises, with four hundred and thirty-two fulltime weavers, remained in operation.51

Under the socialist government, the Beijing carpet industry went through several phases. In the first phase (1949-1953), individual artisan workshops were gradually merged into carpet cooperatives. The state trading company regulated market prices and commodity flows.52 The second phase (1953-65) corresponded to the CCP’s nationwide socialist reform policy. Communist cadres took over the directorship of large private factories through acquisitions and mergers. By 1958, eight state carpet factories were formed to produce export rugs.53 From 1966 to the early 1970s, this carpet sector was engulfed by different political movements and became stagnant. Many workshops were closed down; carpet makers were relocated to other industrial sectors.54 It was not until 1973 that the Beijing Carpet Industry Company restored the hand-knotted and machine-made carpet production and moved the industry into a new phase.55

Thus, the Beijing carpet masters, who came to Tibet, were probably recruited through the craft cooperatives. The Chinese media described them as “blanket-weaving

49 Jia Guifa and Wang Yu: “Beijing gongyi meishuye de fuxing,” (the rise and fall of Beijing’s handicraft sector) in Wenshi ziliao xuanbian (selection of materials on history and culture vol. 13), 9-22 (Beijing: Beijing Press 1982).
51 Ibid., 181.
52 During these years, the CCP also launched 1952’s “five-anti” campaign (against bribery, tax evasion, property, theft of state property, cheating on government contracts, stealing state economic information) targeted large carpet producers and placed them under state surveillance.
53 Shi Fuxiang, Beijing de ditan ye, 185.
54 Ibid., 185.
55 Ibid., 186.
workers,” helping Tibetans to build a “blanket factory.” Clearly, these artisans’ public image had changed from traditional craftsmen into socialist workers. With this new professional status, they were impelled to share their skills and knowledge for the interests of the party-state. Also, it seemed that the Chinese government deliberately concealed that they supported the production of luxury goods in Tibet. Similar socialist handicraft policies, however, generated different patterns of development in Tibet. The next few sections will explore this particularity, in relation to the larger social campaigns and movements that were led or instigated by the CCP to establish its rule in Tibet.

**Researching Gyantse Carpets**

Because Beijing and the Kashag agreed on a principle of ‘gradual development,’ no systematic socialist reforms were put forward in Tibet between 1951 and April 1959. During this period, the CCP’s handicraft policy in Tibet was guided more by political expediency than transformative agendas. They were cautiously carried out to minimize the frictions between the two governments. The most well-known policy is the special loan program for Tibetan artisans. The CCP officials argued that the exportation of raw materials at low prices and importation of foreign goods destroyed Tibetans’ indigenous craft industries. In 1952, the branch organizations of the People’s Bank of China and the “State-Owned Tibet Trading Company” began to function as CCP policy instruments in Lhasa, Gyantse and Shigatse. Through these offices, the party-state granted loans to Tibetan artisans at low interest rates and encouraged them to buy raw materials for craft production. In Gyantse, the Chinese communist committee offered loans to rug weaver families when the region had a flood in 1954. It was reported that this policy enabled approximately fifty households to resume their production.

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57 Ibid., 102.
60 *Gyantse Handmade Textile Survey Material*, 146. This study was originally conducted in December 1958.
A senior CCP cadre, Guo Guanzhong, admitted in his memoir that the agricultural-artisan loan program was to attack a number of problems at once, including the need to promote a socialist Chinese government and collect information (such as demographic data, commerce, and government financing system) for policy making in the future.\(^6^1\) Guo described how his colleagues ‘secretly’ documented the conditions of Tibetan rural households, when they distributed loans among the farmers. He also participated in the Gyantse relief work from August 1954 to May 1955. He said that because of this special circumstance, the Chinese relief team could conduct interviews with disaster victims to gather detailed data on local political and economic conditions. As a result, they completed a report for the communist committee in Lhasa, titled “Survey Materials on Land Relations, Taxation, and High-Interest Loans in Gyantse and Panam Districts.”\(^6^2\)

Guo’s story is an example of how policy and research are two interconnected tools used by the CCP to make sense of and shape their relations with the Tibetan populace. Louisa Schein has argued that government specialists played a key role in producing the knowledge of the alien peoples within China’s newly-demarcated boundaries for the purpose of modern state-building.\(^6^3\) Their work was to classify various groups according to “the stage of development of the society and the economy, class situation, and relations among the various nationalities” in remote villages.\(^6^4\) The state authorities need such information to firstly identify who was who, and secondly to design specific educational or social policies for these communities.\(^6^5\) Beijing also implemented a large-scale cultural survey and research project, targeting “non-Han people,” from 1949 to 1957. In Tibet, where the Seventeen-point Agreement limited Chinese interference in inner-Tibetan affairs, these survey projects developed differently. The earliest investigations were ‘disguised fieldwork’ conducted by party cadres. Then, the college-trained researchers arrived in Gyantse and the nearby Tibetan villages much later than their colleagues working in other non-Han communities. Their research years

\(^6^1\) Guo Guanzhong, *Xizang shehui fazhan lunshu* (brief discussions on Tibet social development) (Lhasa: Tibet People’s Press, 2003), 6-7.
\(^6^2\) Ibid., 8-10.
\(^6^5\) Schein, *Minority Rules*, 84.
spanned the late 1950s up till 1962, when ethnic studies elsewhere were already completed. Thus, by examining such government field reports, we can gain some insights into the theoretical and ideological framework, which would influence the implementation of handicraft policy in Tibet after April 1959.

My main source here is a 13-page study on the Gyantse carpet industry, written by Che Rulong, Feng Shibo, Zhang Lan, and Lu Liandi on the basis of research that was conducted in December 1958. The report extensively discusses the mode of production and emphasizes that the local labour arrangements were based on feudal extraction and barter, rather than on a free labour market. In the Production Tool section, the authors provide a few sketches of “simple” and “primitive” carding tools, spinning tools, and a knot cutter. They describe that rug makers, farmers and carpenters had similar social status, but the rug makers’ living standard was lower than the other groups. They argue it was because the Gyantse rug makers were still plagued by a “backward social economy, primitive weaving tools, low productivity, high production cost, small production capital, and overproduction.”66 In short, the Chinese fieldworkers believed that it was difficult to develop a carpet industry because these carpets were expensive to make and their market demand was small.

This report has several profound implications. First, the Chinese specialists view carpet makers as landless peasants, whose livelihoods were hopelessly dependent on a stagnant craft economy. They did not see that carpets were important consumer goods in Tibet and assumed that Tibetans’ carpets had a small domestic market. Second, they looked down upon the Tibetan production methods and did not classify them as national art handicrafts, like Beijing court carpets that had export potential. Instead, they represent Gyantse carpets as folk handicrafts, beautiful to look at but useless to rural

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66 Gyantse Handmade Textile Survey Material, 146.
development and socialist modernization. These views would proliferate and affect the production of carpets, through the handicraft policy implemented in Tibet after 1959.

Tibetan Rural Crafts under Socialism

Between April 1959 and May 1961, China’s Tibet policy shifted quickly towards hard-line socialist reform and then returned to moderate political-economic restructuring. Five days after the fourteenth Dalai Lama had fled to India (March 17, 1959), Beijing issued a policy of “cracking down on revolts and reforming Tibet.” The CCP formed people’s committees in the rural, urban and pastoral areas. Through these organizations, it launched a campaign against “revolts, corvee tax, and slavery.” Since the CCP had classified Tibetan rug makers as landless peasants, they mobilized the carpet makers to participate in the land reform that expropriated and distributed the property of those who were involved in the 1959 uprising. As a result, carpet makers were given land and asked to practice agriculture; Gyantse experienced a noticeable decline in rug production in early 1960.

Meanwhile, Lhasa saw the formation of Tibet’s first handicraft cooperative—“July 1st Iron and Wood Cooperative” (qi yi tiemu shengchan hezuo) in 1960. The

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67 In an article published by China Reconstruct in 1956, Tibetans’ carpets were described as “decorative arts of the national minorities.” The author argues that “the functions of the objects themselves, the materials used and the type of decoration applied all reflect the way of life and the natural surroundings of those who make and use them.” Also, he states: “The traditional patterns and ornamental designs of our brother peoples are becoming more widely known all over China, and are being adapted by our textile designers, engravers and other craftsmen to enrich our everyday life.” This socio-anthropological perspective implies that the ‘national minorities’ crafts were ‘natural’ products, from which Chinese experts could derive inspirations. But, the original forms of these crafts have a small role to play in socialist modernization. This official view is consistent with the Gyantse survey report. Young Chingchi, “Decorative Arts of the National Minorities,” China Reconstruct 5, no. 2 (1956):14-15.

68 Guo, Xizang shehui fazhan lunshu, 152.

69 Ibid., 158. “Patriotic aristocrats and lamas” refer to the people who supported “unification” and showed their royalty to China.


71 JCHET, Gyantse County History, 382-385. This literature also suggests that Gyantse carpet dealers were unable to continue their business because of the tightened Sino-Indian borders. These descriptions do not show to what extent carpet makers in rural areas were put under pressure to abandon their craft and become farmers. However, it is certain that there were professional carpet makers working in towns and villages.
local newspaper depicted it as a model enterprise that everyone should emulate to transform Tibet quickly into a socialist society. However, before urban carpet cooperatives were organized, such radical policies as collectivization were held back by the CCP in 1961. Instead, Beijing heralded a policy of “developing the private economy of the working people” (fazhan laodong renmin de geti jingji). Under this policy directive, the provincial government began to promote mutual-aid teams (huzhu zu), which were modelled on a rudimentary form of socialist cooperative. Unlike the latter, participants in the mutual aid teams bartered labour and tools, but did not share income or plan production collectively. This meant that independent carpet makers were not completely integrated into the planned economy.

It was not until the early and mid 1970s that the Tibetan carpet industry came under systematic state planning. Many artisans or urban dwellers were drafted into different neighbourhood-based cooperative workshops. For example, Gyantse saw the first carpet cooperative in 1972-73. Lhasa Carpets, where Jamyang and Tsering made carpets, entered subcontracting relationship with four urban cooperative workshops in 1975.

To understand how Tibetans artisans made sense of these policy shifts that affected their work, I will tell the stories of Jamyang and Tsering to discuss their interpretations of a succession of socialist reforms and campaigns. Their new careers began in 1959, when the Kashag workshop was transformed into a socialist textile factory under the leadership of the CCP. Ngabo Nawang Jigme was appointed as the first honorary factory director.

Lhasa Carpets: Politics of Value and Legitimacy

In 1963, two British journalists, Stuart and Roma Gelder, were permitted to travel in Tibet. They were taken to a carpet factory, which was described as the “only industrial

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72 The entire front page of Tibet Daily July 3rd issue was about the establishment of this handicraft co-op. Tibet Daily, July 3, 1960.
plant in Lhasa.” They reported, “A group of antique timber buildings where 120 men and women also produced knitwear and striped aprons on wooden hand looms.”75 Though the factory was called an “industrial plant,” the Gelders admitted that it employed “primitive” technology to produce carpets that were only sold to official institutions. They described the factory as a socialist model enterprise. The Tibetan weaver-workers had regular work schedules, a fixed monthly wage (7 to 8 British pounds a month), and free housing. Also, there was a subsidized canteen and a nursery inside the factory. A Han manager-director and Tibetan designers supervised the carpet production.76

This ‘model factory’ was Lhasa Carpets, the previous Kashag carpet workshop, where Jamyang and Tsering once worked as court artisans. Under the rule of the CCP, this ‘carpet factory’ was configured to showcase how socialist modernization enhanced the living standard of “Tibetan proletariats” and to provide international journalists with living evidence of Chinese “peaceful liberation” in Tibet.

When I asked Jamyang and Tsering what happened to their workshop after April 1959, they responded to my questions in an almost identical way: the temporary labourers, hired to spin yarns in the courtyard, all became government employees. Many village people were also recruited by the factory to make wool sweaters, socks, and blankets. The Kashag workshop was named Lhasa Carpets by the socialist municipal government. Jamyang interpreted this change as a result of “liberation.” He said,

After 1959, Tibet was liberated. This liberation was to develop Tibet quickly. There was no other factory that produced such things as sweaters and blankets. So, these production units were all moved to our carpet factory.

The party-state justified its rule in Tibet by promoting the economic benefits of socialist modernization. Government enterprises were one of the instruments used for this objective. Jamyang described how inside Lhasa Carpets, he and his colleagues continued to make quality Chinese carpets in small quantities for governmental uses. Tibetan carpets were made occasionally if the factory received special orders from the local

76 Ibid., 155.
residents. Overall, he thought, around seventy to eighty percent of carpets went to
government institutions. The number of carpet makers did not increase much and
remained around thirty or so. As the Gelders observed at Lhasa Carpets, the “large-
scale” production was carried out by over one hundred new workers, who made coarse,
inexpensive articles. Because Tibet did not have a spinning factory to meet this
concentrated textile production, twelve cooperatives were formed to card and spin yarns
for the factory. The state trading cooperatives or companies distributed sweaters,
blankets, socks, or aprons, made by Lhasa Carpets to different government stores in the
rural areas. Presumably, these efforts were to create employment for the poor urban
dwellers and to cloth the rural population, who could not afford such textile articles in the
past.

Tsering told me (in Mandarin) that in the early 1970s, Lhasa Carpets sent him to
Beijing, where he participated in a weaving project for the Great Hall of the People,\textsuperscript{77} one
of the most prestigious and symbolic buildings of the People’s Republic. In this
complex, each province, autonomous region, and metropolis is represented by a stylized
meeting hall. Every year, the regional representatives of the National People’s Congress
and the Chinese People’s Political Consultative Conference are assigned to these rooms
accordingly. For example, Tibetan delegates are put in the Tibet Hall to hold their
tutorial discussions. Tsering recalled,

Tibet’s mission was to make a carpet for the Tibet Hall. Because the floor
carpet was very large and wide, we had fourteen weavers, a master, and a
manager sent to Beijing. We took cars and \textit{gulu gulu} [imitating the
rumbling sound of the cars] got there. The carpet [we made] was a
Chinese carpet, [made with the Chinese knotting technique.] Beijing sent
fifteen weavers. Tibet sent fifteen weavers [including a Chinese master].
We worked together. We had a very tight schedule. Fifteen weavers
worked during the day; another fifteen people worked during the night.

\textsuperscript{77} Tsering first said the building was Chairman Mao’s Memorial Hall (\textit{mao zhuxi jinian tang}). Then he said
the carpet was made for the Tibet Hall (\textit{xizang ting}). There was no Tibet Hall in Chairman Mao’s Memorial
Hall, which was completed in 1977. I speculate that this carpet was put in the Great Hall of People, which
does have a Tibet Hall.
We stayed there for almost seven months. Lhasa gave us a salary. Beijing looked after our foods and accommodation.

For these artisans, the socialist reforms were irresistible and brought them unprecedented career development. Jamyang is an outstanding example. His humble background and pro-socialist attitude made him stand out as a key activist. He was elected to be the first Tibetan cadre of Lhasa Carpets in 1960. Soon after, he was sent to Beijing to learn about spinning technology because the Lhasa municipal government planned to build a spinning factory. He said,

Our first factory director was a Han woman. She knew nothing about technology; she was a cadre. She sent me to Beijing and entrusted a mission to me. She said, ‘you are our factory’s technician. You must study new technology and bring it back to our factory’. This new technology could improve productivity and lower production cost, and we could work faster and make better carpets. I stayed in Beijing for about eight months to study spinning machines.

Then, in August 1960, a telegram arrived and asked me to return immediately because Tibet started the land reform. I ordered some machines from Shanghai and returned to Lhasa. However, the central government’s policy changed again. I heard that Tibet would not have any reform in the next five years. Because of this policy, everything had to stay the same. The spinning machine was transported back to Shanghai.

Jamyang identified himself as an expert with both traditional skills and newly acquired modern knowledge. He stressed Tibetan activists’ contribution to reforming Tibet and his own role in moving Lhasa Carpets towards industrialization. Also, he was frustrated with the unstable environment, affected by often contradictory or confusing approaches to Tibetan modernization. The first Tibetan spinning factory was not set up until 1966 in
Nyingtri, a county approximately 200 kilometres south-east of Lhasa. Since then, Lhasa Carpets used machine-spun yarns from this factory.

These accounts from Jamyang and Tsering illuminate that the socialist state used, and still uses, carpets and other textiles to claim its right to rule in Tibet. It does so in two ways which are equally important: by producing and appropriating prestige goods – the best carpets now go to the Great Hall of the People instead of the Potala – and by showing its care for the masses, who are now clothed and covered by the products of state factories. Why did the Tibetan artisans make Chinese carpets for the Tibetan Hall? Perhaps, it was a technical decision that Chinese artisans, who collaborated with the Tibetan artisans in Beijing, did not know the Tibetan knotting techniques. It was convenient for both groups to use the knowledge and skill that they shared. What is significant in this story is that the government did not identify “Tibetan carpets” as a special category of cultural commodity and did not think that “Tibetan carpets” could play a role in socialist modernization, even though the government supported Tibetan artisans to make prestigious carpets. While the party-state invested few resources in fostering this tradition, carpet makers continued to practice their craft through mutual aid teams and in small private workshops.

Reviving Tibetan Carpets

In the early 1970s, the government policy shifted with a surprise. An order came directly from Beijing, requesting Lhasa Carpets to use the Tibetan technique to make export carpets. Jamyang proudly explained to me where the idea of this new policy came from:

It was in 1972 that a large carpet conference was held in Shanghai. At that time, our factory had already stopped making carpets because they were considered part of the “four olds” during the Cultural Revolution. We only made blankets and Tibetan dresses. So we did not attend this conference.

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78 It was not quite clear why the spinning factory was set up in Nyingtri County, which specializes in agriculture.
The term, “four olds”, refers to “old ideas, old culture, old custom, and old habits”. The “campaign to smash the four olds” aimed to abandon anything that was deemed traditional, as “tradition” became synonymous with backwardness or even counterrevolution. At the peak of the Cultural Revolution in 1966-68, Lhasa Carpets was considered a manifestation of the “four olds,” and was shut down. Jamyang, who benefited from the earlier socialist reforms, was disoriented amidst the radical campaign.

I did not know Mandarin. I did not know how to write. When I was a kid, there was no way to go to school. After I was appointed the vice factory director position, around 1964-65, I was sent to study Mandarin and administration in Beijing. This was the most pleasant time I had. My career was successful. I had a salary even when I was studying. I did not need to worry about anything else. Then, the Cultural Revolution began in May 1966. I had to return to Lhasa before I completed my courses. It was very chaotic (luan). I wanted to do a good job for my factory. But, there were always struggle sessions going on. There were armed people fighting each other. Nobody dared to work in the factory. In 1970, the factory opened again. I went back to work as the factory director.

After 1972, he received an order to make carpets with Tibetan knotting techniques. He continued:

During the conference in Shanghai, some said that Nepal and India were using the label “Tibetan carpets” to export their rugs. [Our] premier said Tibetan carpets had a worldwide reputation. He asked why we did not make carpets that have a long history in Tibet. After that, the Light Industry Bureau ordered us to make and export Tibetan carpets. Without this incident, the TAR government officers would have had no idea [how important Tibetan carpets were].

As I discussed in Chapter 2, in the 1960s, the Western relief organizations encouraged Tibetan refugees in Nepal to produce hand-knotted carpets for a tourist market. Their activities eventually gave rise to an export carpet industry in Nepal. Jamyang’s account
demonstrates that the Chinese government was aware of the political-economic situation in South Asia. After the “anti four olds” movement ended, they quickly responded to the international market by “upgrading” the status of “Tibetan carpets” and began to organize its production.

My main informant for this section on the 1970s’ Lhasa carpet industry, Tenzin, joined one of the cooperative workshops in 1975 that had a subcontracting relationship with Lhasa Carpets. In the mid 1970s, these urban carpet cooperatives mobilized young women to revive “Tibetan carpets.” She recalled that her workshop employed people who “had lost jobs or education opportunities because of the Cultural Revolution.” She was twenty-one when she started to make carpets, whereas her youngest co-worker was only fourteen. Workers all lived in the same district. “There were other jobs, such as making aprons and tailoring,” said Tenzin, “but weaving carpets was very trendy at that time. Most women liked to learn weaving carpets.”

The establishment of these small enterprises was also a result of socialist restructuring. The cooperatives subcontracted work from Lhasa Carpets and used colored machine-spun yarns and designs supplied by the carpet factory. Also, government technicians were sent to these workshops to support and supervise their production. Tenzin said, “We had to maintain product quality, otherwise the factory would not take our carpets.” The advantage for Lhasa Carpets was that workers’ wages and benefits were much lower in the collective than in the state sector. Tenzin commented, “[my workshop] was like a private workshop. If we were sick and could not work, then we would not have any wage.”

The relationships between state enterprises and cooperatives could be easily discontinued if orders were running short. In 1985, Tenzin’s workshop was disbanded. Lhasa Carpets took their looms. “Eight or nine women went on to work in the factory. The rest either changed jobs, or got married,” Tenzin said. She did not continue to work because the factory was far away from her home, and she had three children to look after. As the then-factory director, Jamyang, recalled, “We gave these collective workshops money and wool. Then, our factory cut off the [subcontracting] relationship with them.” The larger and more independent workshops transformed into small collective enterprises.
Marketing Tibetan Carpets in Socialist China

Since the policy of “reviving Tibetan carpets” was implemented, the question of marketing and selling Tibetan carpets was no longer a simple function of a centralized economy and government propaganda. The promotion of Tibetan carpets to foreigners became part of Lhasa Carpets’ role. As a result, the Tibetan artisans started to create new meanings for their work. The factory director, Jamyang, was especially concerned with his factory’s production orientation:

I liked weaving hanging tapestries with the image of the Potala Palace. We began to make them in 1972. At that time, Tibet started to develop tourism. The Potala Palace is an ancient building, which people can only see in Lhasa. Foreigners all think what the Potala Palace looks like. [When they were visiting Tibet], they liked to buy our Potala hanging carpets. These carpets were sold fast. I think this is a very meaningful souvenir for them because when these foreigners are not in Tibet, they can still see the Potala Palace on the carpet.

These Potala carpets were certainly meaningful to Jamyang, who used them to express his cultural pride and to raise his factory’s profile. Nonetheless, the policy that recognizes the political-cultural value of “Tibetan carpets” sometimes clashed with the policies that regulated state enterprises within the socialist bureaucracy. Jamyang remembered he was frequently discouraged and intimidated by the high-level officials. He said:

When the king of Nepal came to our factory, he wanted to buy our carpets. We wanted to sell him some but the TAR government [Tibet Autonomous Region]\(^79\) did not give us the right to sell to foreigners. We had to wait for the government permit but the king was going to leave Lhasa next day. I thought I was the factory director and I could sell the rugs and take responsibility of the consequence. So, we sold the king our carpets before

\(^{79}\) The Tibet Autonomous Region government was formed in 1965.
he left Lhasa. After that, the permit finally arrived. This (permit application) was useless.

Then, around the mid 1970s, some Japanese came. They complained that they could not find any souvenirs. The TAR government came to ask me why I did not make any souvenir carpets. So, our factory began to make small hanging rugs especially for tourists. We made many small rugs in winter. Then, the municipal finance bureau sent people to inquire why we produced these things. I said these were for foreign guests. In the next spring, foreign tourists really came. My rugs were sold out in three months. These officials liked to check and block us.

In both instances, Lhasa Carpets and Tibetan carpets were chosen by the TAR government to demonstrate the success of Tibetan socialism to the outsiders. However, the centralized structure of political-economic system did not give the carpet factory much power to promote its products. The trade of “Tibetan rugs” was controlled by the bureaucrats, who acted on behalf of the state and the CCP. The Tibetan factory cadres, like Jamyang, were frustrated by the rigid and politically watchful government, and also he was motivated to enlarge and legitimatize his autonomy through selling and marketing Tibetan carpets.

Concluding Remarks

Romantics from Western Europe and North America liked to imagine that every Tibetan was a natural carpet weaver, but there was no artisan organization in “old Tibet.” Jamyang and Tsering reported that learning to make carpets was anything but a romantic experience. They described divisions of labour, gendered hierarchies and competition in the carpet trade, and they remembered a carpet guild in Gyantse that was founded by “independent artisans” to protect their craft and livelihoods.

Guilds and apprenticeship played an important role in imparting craft knowledge, facilitating the cultural continuity of the artisan society, and maintaining its own complex systems of inclusion and exclusion, with a set of values and assumptions. These
institutions attached different meanings to different levels of skills, turning these skills into markers that established artisans’ professional membership and identity in the hierarchical structure of the trade. As these institutions incorporated the local patriarchal norms, their everyday operation reinforced the patriarchal structure of Tibetan village society. This led to the lower status of women and junior artisans within the trade.

From a different perspective, the history of the Gyantse guild can be seen as a response to a growing commercial craft sector—under the stimulus of interregional trade and under the control of the Kashag government—which displayed some features of a “proto-industry:” “the rapid growth of traditionally organized [and] market-oriented, principally rural industry.”80 In Gyantse, artisans were of peasant stock, but most of them left agriculture to become full time weavers. They engaged in commodity production for both local buyers and long-distance trade. Gyantse carpets, described by the European-American catalogues as “traditional Tibetan carpets,” were not made by “simple peasants” in a self-sufficient cottage industry.

This development gave rise to a population of “independent carpet makers,” who strove to keep their “independent status” by negotiating with the powerful capital holders, like merchants, aristocrats, and large monasteries, and by allying with the Kashag government. “Independence” was also achieved by creating some overlaps between the Tibetan bureaucratic system and the guilds. On the one hand, the Kashag could use the guild to draw tax revenues from “independent artisans” and exert a certain degree of political influence over their organizations. On the other hand, the artisans needed the power of Kashag to legitimatize their “independent status” and customary rights, manifested through guild membership. Such linkages between the state, the guild, and artisans varied in contingent upon the socio-political nexus, in which these organizations operated. The artisans in Gyantse evidently had more freedom to conduct their business than their counterparts in Lhasa.

The establishment of the Kashag workshop marked a critical transitional period: the reign of the Tibetan theocracy was replaced by the rule of the Chinese party-state. The workshop was an attempt made by the Kashag, which felt the need to polish its

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credentials as a “modern” government, and it also met the CCP’s desire of harnessing this craft sector to establish its rule in Tibet and accomplish socialist modernization projects. Both governments, particularly the CCP, were indecisive about the extent to which Tibet could and should be transformed. The two governments’ wavering attitudes towards Tibetan modernization created problems for artisans but it also empowered them. The Kashag carpet workshop gave Jamyang and Tsering an opportunity to escape from the influence of patriarchal village society. However, their memories of the Lhasa guilds suggest that disgust with corruption and distrust in Lhasa’s rigidly hierarchical society motivated both men to support the CCP and join in socialist reforms that put emphasis on collectivity and communal experience. Although in the socialist factory, artisan status was given new meanings, such as “workers” and “technicians,” Jamyang and Tsering probably perceived Lhasa Carpets as continuity of the Gyantse guild that celebrated artisan skills, solidarity, and collective welfare. However, they were impelled to produce sweaters and socks one day, and prestige carpets for the governments the next.

Both the Kashag and the CCP handicraft projects attached new meanings and values to carpets; these projects contained traces of the European theory of “tradition” and “modernity.” In particular, the Chinese handicraft policy in Tibet not only reflected the Western fantasy of “progress” but also injected Sino-centric attitudes into the application of a Kantian art theory: “Tibetan carpets” were first seen as folk handicrafts, useless to socialist modernization; “Beijing court carpets” were “art handicrafts,” having export potential. It was not until the Nepalese-Tibetan carpet industry achieved financial success in the 1970s that Beijing began upgrading the status of “Tibetan carpets” to high-status ethnic/nationality handicrafts. More significantly, in practice, this handicraft policy sometimes complemented and sometimes ran into conflict with the CCP’s frequently-changing campaigns, such as land reform, democratic reforms, the “anti four olds” movement, and the socialist cooperative movement. Again, this created problems for artisans, but it still empowered them in meaningful ways. The artisans now had more symbolic resources to draw on. Their work became traditionally Tibetan and simultaneously a national Chinese treasure. In this situation, well-placed actors like Tsering and Jamyang, could move between different cultural worlds and pick material and symbolic resources for their use. They could contribute to clothing the masses and
building Tibetan socialism, and at the same time, they celebrated Tibetan culture and history. In the next chapter, I will examine how multiple imperialist, colonialist, and socialist legacies continuously shaped the meanings and values of Tibetan carpets, amidst the emergence of pro-market developmentalism in China.
Photo 3: A tourist showing artisans a photo taken during artisans’ weaving demonstration

Photo 4: A carpet-weaving training program for young women in Panam, Shigatse

Tracy Y. Zhang © Lhasa 2005

Tracy Y. Zhang © Panam 2005
CARPETS “MADE IN TIBET, CHINA” AND NEW TIBET DEVELOPMENT

“Strive to build a united, prosperous, and civilized new Tibet”
-- Hu Yaobang, May 29th, 1980

The Prelude of “New Tibet” Developmentalism

As discussed in the previous chapter, Lhasa Carpets started using the Tibetan knotting technique to make carpets in 1972, thanks to a policy aimed at reviving “Tibetan carpets.” Jamyang remembered that when they started to make Tibetan carpets, the factory also had to accommodate a citywide job-creation program to bring local Chinese cadres’ families to Tibet. Many of them were then placed in his factory to make inexpensive Tibetan blankets.

It was not until the early 1980s that the blanket workshop was disbanded. Jamyang associated this policy decision with a meeting hosted by the then CCP (Chinese Communist Party) general secretary Hu Yaobang:

Hu Yaobang went to Tibet in 1980 and held a big meeting. Tibetan cadres all attended it, and the seats in the meeting room filled up fast. After this meeting, we stopped making blankets. The blanket workers were sent to other work units. We also ended our subcontracting relationship with the small cooperative workshops.

After this famous conference, in early 1981, the TAR handicraft bureau announced that the TAR (Tibet Autonomous Region)\(^1\) carpet sector would be geared towards expanding production by 52.4 % and reaching an output of 16,000 square meters by the end of

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\(^1\) Between 1959 and 1965, Tibet had an ambiguous political status under the rule of the Tibet Military-Administration Commission. The Tibet Autonomous Region of China was founded as a special region of the PRC in 1965, and a provincial government was formed. The TAR borders are not the same as the previous Tibetan borders.
1981, because “people enjoyed increasing incomes and wanted to improve their lives; they especially liked local traditional handicrafts.” The assumption underlying this new policy was that carpets were more than a source of export revenues and could become economic instruments that contribute to the growth of commodity production, trade, and consumption.

Why did Hu Yaobang speak to thousands of Tibetan cadres on May 29th, 1980? During the meeting, Hu criticized the socialist programs implemented in the TAR and asked every cadre to participate in building “a united, prosperous, and civilized new Tibet (tuanjie, fuyu, wenming de xin Xizang).” His proposal aimed to decentralize the economic system and transfer administrative power to low-level Tibetan cadres. The current literature gives two main interpretations of Hu’s “New Tibet” developmental policy. One links his development strategy to the visit of a delegation from the Dalai Lama government-in-exile between 1979 and 1980. When the delegation toured Lhasa and Amdo, they were met by large numbers of Tibetans who displayed their affection for the Dalai Lama. They also found that twenty years of socialist rule had not substantially improved living standards in Tibet. Reports about the delegation alarmed Beijing and led to the decision to send a fact-finding team to Tibet. The team, led by Hu, stayed in Lhasa from May 22 to May 31, 1980 and drafted a reform plan for Tibet.

The second interpretation points out that China’s new leadership under Deng Xiaoping had completely repudiated the old command economy in 1978 and embarked on a series of pro-market reforms that were to solve problems of political instability and unbalanced growth. The TAR’s party secretary, Ren Rong, opposed Beijing’s orders, claiming that the people of Tibet wanted communism. Beijing did not press Ren but sent representatives to approach the Dalai Lama’s elder brother, Gyalo Thondrup, in

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3 Xu Xun, “Woqu jinnian jiang zenchan ditan, zangbei gongying chenxiang shicang,” (our province will increase the production of carpets and Tibetan blankets to meet the city and village market demands this year) *Tibet Daily*, April 26, 1981, Chinese edition.

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Hong Kong. In 1979, they arranged tours for the Tibetan delegation to inspect ‘communism’ in the TAR. Immediately after Hu’s delivery of the “New Tibet” development policy, Ren was removed from his government post.

These details have important implications for analyzing the TAR economic reform. First of all, they show that Beijing in the late 1970s was facing a nationwide legitimacy crisis and identified this problem as the result of the centralized political-economic system. The central government was determined to prescribe economic reforms for Tibet and expected that it would keep up with the other regions in China. By contrast, the TAR provincial government insisted on using the Maoist approach to “develop” Tibet. Thus, it is important to understand the particular manifestations of development discourse in the TAR and examine them, in relation to the structural transformations taking place elsewhere in China.

Second, while promoting a nationwide reform agenda, Beijing cautiously and strategically collaborated with the TAR government. Tensions exist between the central and provincial leaders, and they reflect the uneven political-economic conditions in China. In particular, the TAR was perceived as an unstable ‘ethnic’ frontier, where the party-state needs to work hard to improve its legitimacy. Concern about national security is always integrated into the TAR economic development policy. This dual objective of “New Tibet” developmentalism became paramount when a group of twenty-one monks staged a demonstration in Lhasa in the fall of 1987. The Tibetan nationalist movement, which attracted more and more international media attention, had a significant impact on how the TAR “development” objectives are expressed and pursued. In the following sections, I discuss the most popular “development” discourses and elaborate how they operated through discursive activities that gave rise to an export carpet industry in post-socialist Lhasa.

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Mental Emancipation: Artisans Go Urban, Urban Collectives Go Private

During a 1974 TAR Commerce and Handicraft Work Meeting, the officials asserted: “socialist trade must adhere to socialism, oppose capitalism, and contribute to the politics of the proletariat.” They also stated that the handicraft production must serve the needs of agriculture and animal husbandry.\(^8\) Political phrases such as revolution (geming) and “mass movement” (yundong) were used to emphasize how a revolutionary zeal should be injected into economic development. In short, this socialist handicraft policy still largely relied on ideology and exhortation to encourage workers and peasants to produce more. By the end of 1975, the light industry had successfully built 460 handicraft cooperatives, which had subcontracting relationships with the state-owned factories. Mutual aid teams were phased out, and small independent workshops were closed down.\(^9\) With concentrated resource and labourers, it was reported that the carpet industry’s total output rose from 615 square meters in 1975 to 6996 square meters in 1979.\(^10\)

Five years after this socialist centralization, the TAR government – now led by critics of the centralized economy – instigated a different policy, aimed to blow away “wrong leftist thoughts” and “liberate people’s minds.” They argued that the socialist plan economy had failed to meet people’s consumption needs. The new guideline was to “integrate the guidance of the state with market fine-tuning (Guojia jihua zhidao he

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8 Tibet Daily, “Jianshi dang de jibeng luxian banhao shehui zhuyi shanyi,” (adhering to the party baseline, organizing socialist trade) February 6, 1975.
10 TAR Statistics Yearbook 2003, 209. In 1975, Deng Xiaoping was appointed as the vice-Premier assisting Premier Zhou Enlai to begin restructuring the country’s political economy, especially the People’s Liberation Army, railway transport, and the iron and steel industry. Deng and his supporters also cautiously implemented policies that use material incentives to mobilize workers and farmers to participate in “modernization.” On this history see David S. G. Goodman, Deng Xiaoping and the Chinese Revolution: A Political Biography (London: Routledge, 1995), 81-82. However, it seemed that the party leaders in the TAR continued to deploy “revolutionary” discourse to justify the need for socialist reform, eliminating small private producers. I believe this strategy is associated to Tibet’s special Cultural Revolution experience. During the 1969, the party leaders used the same discourse to justify their crackdown of many Tibetans peasants’ rebellions that challenged the party rule by denouncing socialist communes and anti-religious policy. On this history, consult, for example, Melvyn C. Goldstein, Ben Jioa, and Tanzen Lhundrup, On the Cultural Revolution in Tibet: The Nyemo Incident of 1969 (California: University of California Press, 2009). Likely, in the mid 1970s, the local party still perceived their “revolutionary” policy as having significant persuading (or terrifying) power.
According to this view, small-scale, household-based production or village collective enterprises should assume important roles in revitalizing the domestic market and stimulate the rural economy.\textsuperscript{11} At the same time, the nationwide rural commune-brigade system was dissolved and replaced by a “household responsibility system,” in which commune properties were divided among farmers, who could regain some degree of responsibility over their lands and livestock and control their labour allocation. In the TAR, it was applied to both farmers and nomads. Additionally, the “New Tibet” programs gave rural Tibetan producers a special tax concession: farmers and nomads did not need to pay taxes “for a few years.”\textsuperscript{12} In 1985, this idea of “liberating people’s minds” was applied to state enterprise reforms (SER). The key principles of revitalizing the state sector include: 1) state enterprises manage their own daily affairs; 2) state enterprises are responsible for their own profits and losses, 3) they elect their own factory directors; 4) they recruit their own workers; 5) they set up workers’ wage schemes.\textsuperscript{13}

The official discourse of “mental emancipation” signalled the replacement of Mao’s ideological approach with Deng’s pragmatism: providing firms and individuals with material incentives and promoting “market competition” to stimulate economic growth.\textsuperscript{14} From 1978 to 1985, the policy announcements demonstrate 1) the government’s support for substantial entry of non-state producers, particularly in rural areas, 2) the release of state investment in the consumer goods industry, and 3) the loosened government control of rural-to-urban migration and trade.\textsuperscript{15} While the government polices were laid to create the conditions of reform, the non-state actors, especially rural Tibetans, were pursing interests that could not be fulfilled in Mao’s time.

\textsuperscript{11} Feng Zetian, “Wuzi jiaoliuhui shengkuang kongqian, minzu shangpin gongying jinque,” (the trade fair is an exceptionally grand occasion, nationality commodities are in urgent demand) \textit{Tibet Daily}, March 14 1981. Also, see for example, an editorial commentary, “Qingli zhuo de yingxiang, cujin minzu shougongye de fazhan,” (cleaning the influence of the left tendency, promoting the development of the nationality handicraft industry) \textit{Tibet Daily}, April 26, 1981.


\textsuperscript{13} Luo Changyou, “Quanxu minzu shougongye gongzuo huiyi zai lasa jiesu,” (the provincial handicraft work meeting completed in Lhasa) \textit{Tibet Daily}, March 23, 1985.

\textsuperscript{14} David Harvey, \textit{A Brief History of Neoliberalism} (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 120-22.

Norbu and Choejor worked as shop floor managers for a private carpet factory in Lhasa since the mid 1990s. Norbu (born in 1969) came from Nyemo County in Lhasa Prefecture. Choejor (born in 1965) came from Gyantse County in Shigatse Prefecture. I interviewed them to find out how they started to make carpets, left their villages for Lhasa, and ended up working for a private carpet enterprise. Neither man’s family had a tradition of weaving carpets.

Norbu remembered, “Around 1979, many private businesses started in my town because the government supported these activities. Usually, if a family had extra labour, the parents would send off their children to find other jobs.” He went to work in a village carpet workshop, Nyemo Khaden and had a good memory of his first job. “I worked and played with other young weavers in my workshop. Nobody inspected production quality. It was a very easy life.” However, after a year, this workshop went bankrupt. He explained: “we had difficulty in selling carpets in the big markets, such as Lhasa. In our village, few people had money to buy our carpets. As soon as the government stopped giving us support, the workshop could not survive.” After the closure, he made small carpets at home which his father took to the market. “We had a drought in 1983 and 1984. Our family was able to survive the drought because we could exchange carpets for foods and money,” Norbu said proudly. In 1985, he decided to venture into Lhasa to make more money. He first found a job in a Lhasa collective factory, called City Carpets.

In a similar situation, when Choejor turned to fifteen in 1980, his parents used personal connections to find him a weaver job in Gyantse Carpets, one of the earliest collective carpet factories in the TAR. The carpet production was divided into several stages, carried out by different workers. He learned to contour carpets from his master in their spare time, but since he was a weaver and not a carpet-shearing worker (jiantan gong), he never got to use this skill. He recalled that Gyantse Carpets was managed by party cadres, who were too intrusive. He said: “they [the cadres] wanted to know everything. I even had to report to them that I wanted to get married.” Finally, he had left Gyantse Carpets in 1983-84. He explained: “Several young women came to our factory

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16 Norbu did not tell the name of the workshop. For writing purpose, I call it Nyemo Khaden, named after the County.
because they wanted to learn how to use blueprints. I fell in love with one of the students and decided to marry her and live in Lhasa.” Choejor’s wife was actually an employee of City Carpets. He migrated to Lhasa to start his family and work as a master weaver in City Carpets.

However, Norbu and Choejor had very different views about this collective enterprise. Choejor found that City Carpets’ facility was poor and the managers treated workers unfairly. He said:

The managers always gave their relatives and friends training opportunities. In Gantse, the weavers all helped each other. City Carpets paid our [piece-rate] wage a half month after we completed our piece work. In Gantse, we were paid as soon as we finished our carpets.

In contrast, Norbu was impressed by City Carpets. “Everything was better than my village workshop. In Nyemo, we made rugs without any rules.” He also recalled that the Lhasa workshop sent weavers to Gantse and Tianjin (a Chinese city) to acquire new skills. “I wanted to learn and improve my skill,” said Norbu, “So I worked very hard. I slept besides my loom and eventually became ill. But I was happy because my skill improved.”

While Norbu was still working for City Carpets, Choejor decided to quit in 1987 and started making carpets on his own. “It was easy to live and work independently in Lhasa,” he said, “I made rugs in my clients’ houses. I also made and sold imitations of old carpets. Tourists like them.” In the early 1990s, both Choejor and Norbu were persuaded by friends and relatives to join newly established private factories. Norbu said, “Because the factory was new, few people knew production techniques. I quickly became one of the best weavers. The factory gave me several apprentices and treated me very well.” Choejor had a similar experience with the new factory. He became the master and liked his managerial position.

Choejor and Norbu’s stories reflect how rural-to-urban migration emerged in respond to a transforming socio-economic environment. With government loans, township and village enterprises first mushroomed to create new employment opportunities in the rural area. These village workshops were organized in idiosyncratic
ways, and many of them were short-lived. However, they trained a population of young skilled carpet weavers for the more successful urban-based carpet factories. Meanwhile, the government loosened its control over private trade and rural-to-urban migration, and this policy enabled skilled carpet makers to leave their villages for Lhasa, where urban collective workshops gained more autonomy, took advantage of the relaxed labour market, and hired temporary weavers. State carpet factories, such as Lhasa Carpets, followed suit. By the mid 1980s, only fifty percent of the carpet weavers were state workers who received fixed salaries. The rest were collective workers (jiti gong), paid piece-rate wages. In 1987, Lhasa Carpets got rid of public ownership and obtained a “collective” status to end the dual wage system. By the end of 1993, the TAR had two prefecture carpet factories, five county carpet factories, and eleven village or township carpet workshops. Only one factory was identified as state-owned (quanmin qiye) firm, which means this factory was invested by the county-level, or municipal governments directly. The rest were labelled as collective-owned and usually invested by street or district committees (in the urban areas), township-level governments, or village-level governments. Mostly, they were located in the agricultural or semi-agricultural areas in Lhasa, Chamdo, Lhoka, and Shigatse.

These changes brought Tibetan carpet makers to the centre of the political economy of reforms. Choejor and Norbu’s stories suggest that their career move was largely driven by the chronic problem of poverty and by the desire of escaping from the

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17 Losang zhunzhu, “Lasa shi ditanchang gai wei jiti suoyouzhi” (the Lhasa carpet factory changed into a collective ownership) Tibet Daily, February 16, 1987. The newspaper suggests that after 1987, Lhasa Carpets began applying the same (piece wage) policy to both collective and formal workers. My informant recalled that in the beginning the wage difference between collective, formal, and temporary workers was not significant. Rather, these labor categories were associated to the different welfare packages.


19 This factory was located in Shigatse city. It had a very long name: The Tibet Shigatse Regional Economic and Trade Bureau’s Foreign Trade Company’s Carpet Factory (Xizang Rikeze diqu jingmaoju duiwai maoyi gongsi ditanchang). However, this factory was not recorded in TAR Statistics Yearbook 1994. Assumingly, it was dissolved.

20 Lhasa Carpets is a unique case. After it was granted a “collective status,” the factory was still under the supervision of the municipal government that sent cadres to manage the factory. Thus, in essence, Lhasa Carpets was still a government owned factory between 1987 and 2005. However, with a collective status, the cadre managers could use the policy that favors “collective” firms. By contrast, City Carpets is a collective factory under the supervision of the district government. In the 1990s, the manager of City Carpets turned the factory into her own private business. Such confusing definition of “collective-ownership” demonstrates that the government policy did not make fine distinctions between different “collective firms.” Many owners or managers of the firms simply adopt this status for their own political convenience and economic speculation.
power of local cadres. Norbu’s background is especially interesting because the villagers from Nyemo County were punished by the TAR government after the crackdown of Nyemo peasant rebellion, led by a nun in 1969, against communes and the anti-religious policy. With the new grain taxes (as penalty) and the start of a collective system, Nyemo farmers had suffered severe food shortages and political repression from 1969 to 1979. Norbu’s memory of emerging village businesses indicates that people were eager to improve their living conditions, as soon as they noticed the relaxation of private trade and business. For him, new craft skill was central to enhancing his family’s economic wellbeing and to carving out a new career path outside a devastated village. He and Choejor actively participated in the reform process by learning and teaching skills in different workplaces, from rural to urban, and from small collective workshops to large private factories. Ultimately, their activities contributed to training weaver-workers, who had little chance of upward mobility in private factories.

The Human Resources Approach: Tourism and Cross-regional Trade

In the early 1980s, two Chinese economists, Wang Xiaqiang and Bai Nanfeng, conducted fieldwork in the TAR and several other Western Chinese provinces. They concluded that economic backwardness in the area was caused by the poor “quality” of human resources. They explained that Tibetans despised artisans and small businesspeople, and that their value system encouraged them to spend money on religious activities rather than invest in economic development projects. More generally, they diagnosed Tibetans and other ethnic minorities as having a “poor ability to use resources.”

Both Wang and Bai worked for an influential think tank, the Economic Structural Reform Institute of China, which advised the CCP leaders, in particular, Zhao Ziyang, on reform policies. Their theory was put to test in 1987 at the Second Aid Tibet Work

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21 Goldstein, Ben Jiao, and Tanzen Lhundrup, 159-161.
23 Ibid., 35.
24 Ibid., 293.
25 Zhao was Premier of the People’s Republic of China from 1980 to 1987, and General Secretary of the Communist Party of China from 1987 to 1989.
Meeting that identified development problems in Tibet as the result of poor human resources. The officials advocated using “the power of knowledge to support Tibet.” This policy aimed to advance Tibet’s education and culture and stimulate economic development. It had (at least) three important implications for the development of carpet industry. First, it stimulated Tibetan self-expression in the areas of literature, the arts, education, and even religion. In fact, under the influence of this policy, a Tibetan cultural renaissance emerged, fostered the publication of the Tibetan language literature in the mid and late 1980s, and facilitated the emergence of Tibetan cultural nationalism. The promotion of Tibetan carpets, identified by Tibetan intellectuals and cadres as traditional Tibetan artefact, was part of this trend. Second, the theory that Tibet does not possess good human resources provided a policy basis for promoting a tourism industry. Officials believed that tourists would sow the seeds of modern culture in Tibet and educate the inhabitants of this backward region. Also, tourism was promoted as a low-investment-and-high-return business, a ‘smoke-free’ industry that can contribute to the market economy and the information and culture sector. These ideas shaped a tourism policy that eventually led to the relaxation of foreign entry requirements to the TAR. The number of international tourists increased exponentially, from 1,959 persons in 1980 to 15,402 in 1985 and 108,750 in 1987. As I mentioned before, local carpet factories and independent carpet makers responded to the massive influx of international travellers. They learned to make small Potala hanging rugs or imitations of antique carpets to meet Western tourists’ particular tastes for Tibetan handicrafts.

The last important effect of the “human resources” approach on the carpet sector was that Lhasa became a shopping Mecca. Since the early 1980s, the number of

28 On this see Tsering Shakya, “Tibetan Questions,” New Left Review 51, (May-June 2008), http://newleftreview.org/?page=article&view=2720. According to the author, there are two main trends of Tibetan cultural renaissance. One group advocated the continuation of “traditional” arts and crafts and believed these cultural forms are central to an authentic Tibetan identity. The other group looked for new means of expressions of Tibetan culture. The development of the carpet industry was influenced by both trends.
30 Tibet Daily, February 23, 1987. This issue published several articles on developing a tourist industry in the TAR.
domestic tourists – Tibetan pilgrims and tourists from “inland” China – grew steadily, with an average yearly increase of 52% from 1980 to 2000. To grasp a sense of how this change affected the carpet market in Lhasa, I interviewed several carpet dealers who had stores in the downtown area.

Mr. Bai came from Fu Hong village, Qingbai River District, in the vicinity of Chengdu (Sichuan Province). He had a carpet store on Ramoche Street, (one of the busiest streets in the old town,) selling both hand-made and machine-made rugs. His customers were mostly Tibetans from the rural areas and foreign tourists. He recalled that in the late 1980s, several Chengdu export carpet factories went bankrupt and sold their equipments to nearby villages or towns or subcontracted their work to village workshops. At first, Bai worked as a wool purchasing agent for a township carpet factory. He saw the potential profit in this business and decided to open a workshop in his hometown. He said: “People in our village were very poor. They all wanted to work for me. So, I hired a carpet master to teach them.”

Bai first sold his hand-made carpets in Chengdu. He soon learned that these carpets were favoured by Tibetans and expanded his business to Lhasa in 1992. He said: “The labour cost of our carpets is very low. I pay a worker 30-40 yuan to contour a khaden (3 by 6 foot carpet). In Lhasa, it probably costs 200 yuan.” One reason for this discrepancy is the enormous labour surplus of Sichuan, one of the most populated provinces in China, and the pervasive shortage of skilled labour in Tibet. An additional factor is that Bai used wool and cotton yarns from Shandong, Hebei, Sichuan, or Jiangsu, which were much cheaper than Tibetan materials. His carpets all imitated Tibetan designs and looked like Tibetan village crafts, but cost only a half as much. These factors contributed to Bai’s early success. His carpets sold well and drew more Chinese carpet dealers into the Lhasa business. He recalled: “until 1998, we were doing very well. On this street, there were around ten Han Chinese-owned stores. They all sold carpets made

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32 Ibid., 246.
33 The old town refers to Lhasa’s downtown area, centered on the Jokhang Temple. The old town is populated by Tibetan residents. The new town began to develop since the 1980s in west Lhasa district.
34 For example, in 2008 the average wages in Tibet were 11% higher than Sichuan wages. On Sichuan wages see: http://www.scol.com.cn/focus/zgsz/20090409/200949103408.htm. Because I could not access China Statistics Yearbook, I consulted several Chinese websites that quote Tibetan wages from China Statistics. In 2008, the average wage rate (32436 yuan) in Tibet was ranked third after Beijing (39663 yuan) and Shanghai (39004 yuan).
in my village. Even Hui (Chinese-speaking Muslims) and Tibetan dealers purchased carpets from us.” At that time, he had a large workshop and employed over two hundred weavers.

In 2004-2005, Bai’s business experienced significant setbacks because of two factors. First, machine-made acrylic carpets, which were much cheaper than even Sichuanese carpets, became popular. Second, many Sichuan villagers went to work in the cities and stopped making carpets. Most Chinese carpet stores on Ramoche Street were replaced by clothing stores; in 2006 only one was left besides Bai’s shop. He strove to keep up his business through two Tibetan peddlers, who sold his Sichuan carpets in the rich neighbourhoods of Lhasa as Gyantse carpets. He also sold a small number of acrylic carpets. “Now, I have only fifty weavers,” he said, “I lend the weavers looms and give them designs, yarns, and other materials. They work at home. I sent an agent to collect their carpets.” It was uncertain how long his business would survive, or whether his hand-made products would be completely replaced by acrylic carpets.

The Ding Brothers were Muslims (Huimin) from Linxia (Gansu Province), and like most other Muslim carpet traders, they specialized in acrylic carpets. The younger Ding, who was eighteen, had lived in Lhasa for less than a year and worked for his brother. The older Ding was in his late twenties and had lived in Lhasa for several years. He ran a carpet store in Barkhor Market, the heart of the old town. Like Tibetans, Chinese Muslims use carpets to furnish their homes. In the early 1980s, Hui merchants began to capitalize on this tradition by making carpets especially for the Tibetan market. Ding senior followed in the footsteps of his father and his uncles, who used to sell hand-woven carpets from Linxia carpets factories. When Sichuanese carpets took over the low-end market in the early 1990s, Hui dealers stopped trading their hand-made carpets and changed to acrylic carpets. Ding senior bought these at a wholesale price in Linxia. He said that these carpets were made in Tianjin or Shandong province.

The Hui carpet stores were the largest ones in the Barkhor. Usually, several dealers built their stores next to each other. They sold Tibetan-style acrylic khaden and back cushions. On the side, they also sold a few hand-made carpets that to me looked like Sichuan carpets, though the dealer claimed that they were made in Gyantse. The
Ding brothers said that Tibetan farmers, nomads, and pilgrims bought most of their carpets. Yang and her brother ran a carpet store on Mentsikhang Lam (Zang Yiyuan Lu), near the Jokhang Temple in the centre of the old town. They are native Lhasa-nese, though their mother is from Gyantse, where she learned to make carpets. Yang had some vague memory of her mother weaving carpets and teaching young weavers at home. None of the children inherited their mother’s talent. Instead, they sold imported carpets from Nepal and India, which they ordered from overseas relatives several times a year. She said that Indian carpets were the best and were a little cheaper than the carpets made in Lhasa. However, few tourists would buy imported carpets, and local demand was small. Yang’s store had to sell wool cushions and electronic blenders (for making butter tea) to complement the carpet sale.

In the Bakhor, I found three other Tibetan stores run by Tibetans from Nepal or Kham (East Tibet). Their carpets looked similar to those in Yang’s shop; one pair of khaden cost about a thousand yuan. These shops also sold souvenirs such as small handbags, scarves, and wool fabrics. There was only one Tibetan-run store that sold acrylic carpets and low-end hand-made carpets. However, its façade was less impressive than the Hui dealers’ shops, which stocked a more diverse range of attractive products.

These stories demonstrate that Tibetan, Han, and Hui dealers mostly built their business networks on the basis of their varied geographical, cultural and social affiliations and compete for different niche markets by controlling accesses to particular producers or wholesale markets. Dealers’ pursuit of profit from domestic sales contributes to the regional expansion of the carpet trade and intensifies the segmentation of Lhasa carpet market. Also, the business competition occurred at different levels and scales, for example, between state factories and private village workshops, between hand-woven carpets and machine-made carpets, and between Chinese-made carpets and Indian/Nepalese carpets. These changes were not only an effect of the TAR development policy per se but also fostered contestations among producers that took advantage of the uneven political-economic transformations across regional boundaries.

More significantly, the selling and marketing of these tourist carpets gave Tibetan-made carpets a particular status and meanings. They are generally perceived to
be very expensive because the local production cost is high; they are also prestigious items because they are made in Tibet. Small dealers do not sell them; most Tibetans do not use them. In Lhasa, these carpets were exclusively sold in factory showrooms, or sold overseas.

**Revitalizing and Internationalizing “Tibetan Carpets:” Joint Ventures and International Development Organizations**

The main forms of international collaboration in the TAR are joint ventures and international aid programs. Joint ventures were seen by the TAR government as effective instruments for giving local enterprises access to foreign capital, advanced technology, management skills, and international markets. Meanwhile, partial state ownership allowed the government bureaus to maintain a certain degree of control over these enterprises.\(^{35}\) International aid organizations usually target rural areas that are in need of schools, clinics, and transportation infrastructure. They are required to work with local partners, such as local bureaus or research institutions, through which the state can monitor their activities.\(^{36}\) In the Chinese regions, these two forms of local-global co-operations began in the 1980s. In the TAR, regulations to “encourage foreign investment” were promulgated on July 14, 1992. The preferential measures were similar to those implemented elsewhere in China, such as income tax concessions and import duty waivers for materials, machinery or equipment.\(^{37}\) The names of two Sino-Joint carpet factories first appeared in the official record in 1994. Both were located in Lhasa, but had already closed down by the time of my visit in 2006.\(^{38}\) I visited Snowland Carpets in the west outskirt of Lhasa city. It was founded in 1993-4, by a Tibetan-American, Kesang Tashi, in partnership with the TAR Native and Animal Product Import and Export Corporation that lent Tashi a piece of land for constructing the workshop and

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\(^{38}\) One of the factories turned into a carpet distributor.
workers’ dormitory.\textsuperscript{39} This factory did not have a retail store in Lhasa and only produced high-end export carpets. The manager recalled that in the 1990s, they had 250 weavers. In 2006, the workforce was reduced to about one hundred. The manager explained this shrinkage as a result of changes in the US export policy after 9/11 and slack overseas demand. Also, I was told the new privatization policy allowed Snowland Carpets to buy up all the shares from their local government partner after 2006.\textsuperscript{40}

Foreign aid workers arrived in the TAR at almost the same time (the late 1980s). There are several handicrafts-oriented programs, financed by various international funds. One of the pioneers is the London-based Save the Children Fund (SCF), working on educational and environment protection projects. SCF organized vocational training while coordinating an EU-sponsored agricultural program in Panam village (in the Shigatse region).\textsuperscript{41} They designed and set up special courses for weaving, carpentry, tailoring, and traditional painting in the village schools. In 2002, they also started a carpet-making program for rural women (ages 15-35) from low-income families. The program coordinator explained that they aimed to help these young Tibetans learn useful skills and find jobs in the local economy.\textsuperscript{42} Then, the United Nation Development Programme (UNDP) and the Finnish Government financed a handicraft project in the late 1990s, with a mandate to design and produce internationally marketable Tibetan handicrafts. This was carried out under the direction of the TAR Women’s Federation. Craftsmen from Thailand and Singapore flew in to teach Tibetan artisans how to make and market silver jewellery, leather handbags, and woolen shawls.\textsuperscript{43} The most well-known case is Dropenling Handicraft Development Centre, established in 2004 as the marketing and sales outlet for the Tibet Artisan Initiative (TAI), funded through the US-

\textsuperscript{39} The renewable land lease is one of the government preferential policies.
\textsuperscript{40} In 2007, a new foreign-owned factory was built in Lhasa. The factory director was a Tibetan from Nepal, and the owner was a British.
\textsuperscript{41} The Europe Union sponsored an integrated agricultural development project (7.2 million Ecu) in Panam (the Shigatse administration district). The project started in 1999 and caused a great controversy. The international Human Rights activists claimed that some components of this project encouraged the Tibetan farmers to grow agricultural products that are not Tibetan traditional foods but are demanded by non-Tibetan residents in the TAR. In the context of this controversy, the vocational training program was designed to be more Tibetan-economy-oriented.
\textsuperscript{42} Author personal interview, July 15\textsuperscript{th}, 2005.
\textsuperscript{43} This handicraft program started around 1998. When I visited the TAR Women Federation office in Lhasa in 2006, I was told that they finished the second phase in 2004. The former local coordinator showed me some photos, taken during the training sessions and the product catalog, developed by the foreign experts.
based Tibet Poverty Alleviation Fund in conjunction with the Lhasa municipal handicraft bureau.\(^{44}\)

These international stakeholders have particular visions of “Tibetan handicrafts” and Tibetan artisans. The TAI describes that “Tibetan handicraft traditions are currently in danger of extinction.” They want to give business contracts to artisans and offer “product design training, business skill training, and financing.”\(^{45}\) As TAI’s marketing organ, Dropenling’s mission is to “preserve Tibetan crafts and culture” and “improve the lives of Tibetan artisans throughout Tibet by selling only unique, high quality handicrafts made in Tibet, by Tibetans.”\(^{46}\) They have made a special carpet program for artisans in Wangden village, famous for its meditation rugs for high lamas. Their price range is from US$160 to US$200.

Dropenling coordinator Nima Tashi, interviewed by *Xizang Shangbao* (Tibet Business Gazette), said: “We think that the largest obstacle in the Tibet handicraft industry is artisans’ [lack of] commodity consciousness (*shangpin yishi*). They do not have much sense of market competition. This attitude leads to the production of handicrafts that lack a competitive edge.”\(^{47}\) In the summer of 2005, I met a group of Wangden artisans in Dropenling’s showroom. They were giving demonstrations to foreign tourists and weaving special rugs on small rough wooden looms. The showrooms’ walls were covered by poster-size photographs taken in Wangden village. The exhibition’s leaflets were printed in English and distributed to large hotels and restaurants. At the centre of the brochure, readers are invited to “come and support the Tibetan artisan community and get a taste of the real Tibet!”

\(^{44}\) United Nation Development Program sponsored a Tibet Development and Poverty Alleviation Programme (June 2006-July 2010), with a total budget of US$ 6,000,000. Its end goal is to capitalize on “the cultural wealth of Tibet” to generate jobs and incomes and to achieve “cultural and environmental protection in the fields of handicrafts, sustainable tourism, trade, and protection of the old city core.” The UNDP website: http://www.undp.org.cn/modules.php?op=modload&name=News&file=article&catid=8&topic=31&sid=429&mode=thread&order=0&thold=0.


\(^{46}\) Dropenling Handicraft Development Center, brochure printed in June 2005.

The founder of Snowland Carpets, Kesang Tashi, also wanted to “revitalize Tibet’s carpet-weaving heritage.” I had an interview with him inside his showroom in Hanover, New Hampshire. He recalled,

When I went on a first exploration trip [in 1986], the rugs I saw were synthetic materials with colours and dyes that were jumping out in the daylight and even glowed at night. They were all over the Bakhor. Tibet has the best wool in the world and a tremendous [carpet-weaving] tradition. And yet they produced this.

My vision is that Tibet is land-locked [and therefore cannot compete on the basis of lower prices]. Nepal already has a very successful export carpet industry. In order to compete with them, my strategy is that we cannot go for cheap production.

Tashi was especially concerned with the quality of materials. In 1987, he organized a four-day session at Lhasa Carpets to train dyers in the use of Swiss Sandoz dyes. Also, he required all of his local suppliers to use hand-carded and hand-spun yarn, made of sheep wool from North Tibet. His own factory was built in 1993-94 and connected to distributors in Japan, West Europe and North America. In 2008-9, he opened a retail store in Beijing and began marketing high-end carpets to Beijing expatriates and wealthy Chinese. He described Snowland Carpets as a model enterprise where locals can learn about design, dyeing, management, and marketing. Also, he emphasized that his carpets are “cultural products” and his business is beyond mere economic calculations.

We are not selling door knobs, flowers, or oil, which are commodities. We are selling a cultural product. What is embedded in our design and colour is a piece of Tibet. That’s why I promote it. We revitalize it; we put passion back into rugs; we put colour back into rugs. We come up with designs and colours for the western markets.

Tashi believed, “What is embedded in all these things is the matter of cultural pride.” I asked him if his business also responds to the fact that Tibetans in Tibet like carpets with bright colours, flower patterns, dragons, and birds. He said, “If I am stuck there, then I cannot expand. In order to make it [the business] sustainable and expand, I have to go beyond and go international. I think Tibetans should take ownership of the Tibetan heritage.” His comments reflect a folklorist’s typical ambivalent relationship with “the folk.” On the one hand, he emphasized the need for the “true” artistic traditions of Tibetan people; on the other hand, he distanced himself from “the people,” who prefer gaudy colours and tacky designs. This attitude manifests both a romantic idea of historical continuity with past generations and a desire of projecting a modern and forward-looking Tibet.49

International commerce backed up by the state seeks to increase the exchange value of Tibetan-made carpets through ‘modern’ production, management, and marketing techniques. However, there are some political tensions between local and global actors. Aid workers and overseas investors confronted the TAR bureaucracy and strove to adapt to local politics in order to legitimize their presence in the TAR. For example, foreigners’ travel permits to Tibet are often used by the government as a bargaining chip to contain “foreign” activities. Also, since the local factories were pushed by Chinese and Hui producers or encouraged by the government to produce for overseas buyers, their relations with foreign ventures became increasingly strained. Several local informants described to me how foreign enterprises took their business and dominated the export sale. Nonetheless, these frictions reinforce the interdependent relationship between foreign capital and the TAR government, and the industrial competition is ultimately advantageous for an export economy.

The desire for entering the international market was not confined to the joint venture and development organizations, like Dropenling; but it infected every Lhasa carpet producer and accelerated the technical and management transformation in the industry. By 2006, all large carpet factories50 in Lhasa produced high-end carpets and used foreign dyes, high quality yarn, and intricate designs. The internationally funded

50 In 2006, Lhasa has three established factories and a few small producers.
handicraft programs also inspired Chinese donors and volunteers. In 2006, I was introduced to some Chinese Buddhist philanthropists and visited their vocational school in Lhasa. They gave Tibetan orphans free accommodation, foods, and handicraft courses (e.g., *tangka* painting, carpet weaving, and coppersmithing) and expected that these children would be able to find jobs in the burgeoning handicraft sector.

More significantly, these pro-market international development programs popularized a discourse of cultural preservation and revitalization that Western notions of ‘authenticity,’ ‘tradition,’ and ‘uniqueness’ are used to enhance the value of “Tibetan carpets.” In so doing, international aid workers and businesspeople acted as interpreter and driving force of a Tibetan cultural revitalization. Certainly, these international efforts had created income-generating opportunities for Tibetans and to some extent fostered Tibetan cultural nationalism as a subtle strategy to resist Chinese political domination. However, as Michael Herzfeld has reminded us, commodifying values and aesthetics, for example “Tibetan-ness,” can subject artisans to a “market” logic that renders them subordinate. As I have shown, the idea of “market consciousness,” used by the Chinese officials to justify the “human resource approach,” found a place in the pro-market handicraft programs, funded by international organizations. At the Dropenling craft centre, the Tibetan craft culture was celebrated by re-enacting artisans’ craft-making; but, artisans were represented as lacking “commodity consciousness;” managers and designers had final say on product development and marketing.

**Security and the Virtual Tibet: Telecommunication and Internet Marketing**

The mid 1990s began to see major government efforts in developing a transportation and communication infrastructure in the TAR. At a Post and Telecommunication meeting in 1994, Tsering Drolkar, vice-chairwoman of the TAR government, described Tibet as “the motherland’s south-western screen,” a region where the “anti-splittist” struggle was “complex and arduous.”

This speech suggests that security was the top priority in the TAR communication policy and planning, shaping the

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51 Tibet Information Network, 84.
architecture of China’s telecommunication hardware and the production and distribution of its software.

The Chinese military completed a satellite telecommunication network across the TAR region by the end of 1995. Then, three large fibre optical cables were laid in 1996 to provide postal and telecommunication services for the governments and residents of Lhasa, Shigatse, Nyingtri, and Gyantse. In 1997, the TAR cable networks were connected to Xining in Qinghai province and Lanzhou in Gansu province. This project was said to create the main communications artery between the northwest and the southwest and to link Lhasa (the last provincial capital) to the Ministry of Post and Telecommunications terrestrial fibre optic network. In 1997, Lhasa was hooked up to the national digital mobile telecommunication network. In the same year, the Canadian government provided a US$8.85m loan to upgrade satellite telecommunication equipment in Lhasa city, Nyingtri, Chamdo and Ngari prefectures. Ground satellite stations were intended to provide long distance communication capability for prefecture and provincial governments. It was not until 1999 that major research and education institutions received satellite connections, linking them to reach the southwest regional node of China’s Education and Research Network (CERNET) in Chengdu (Sichuan Province). In 2000, the Canadian International Development Agency (CIDA) funded a pilot project, called Pan-Asia Tibet (CAD$314,600) in Lhasa to create Internet access in twelve education, research and development institutions. The same project offers staff members training courses on website design, publishing, and LAN (local area network) development.

These activities and investments suggest that the rapid infrastructure development in the mid and late 1990s was to large extent driven by the government’s strategic planning: the Internet was laid to strengthen the communications between regional and central governments; military and state institutions were the first beneficiaries, as they were not only given access to technologies but also resources to acquire expertise in content creation. This led to a situation in which state institutions and media outlets dominate the production and circulation of on-line Chinese language information from

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52 Ibid., 84-85. The information is collected from Xinhua news, Tibet Daily, and government work reports.
the TAR. The Chinese language search engines, such as google.cn and Baidu, demonstrate that general information about Tibetan carpets and the carpet industry is mostly provided by Chinese state agencies. A very few carpet factories maintained their Chinese language homepages.

I identified four main kinds of website that provide information about Tibetan carpets. First, central or provincial government agencies finance various information centres that disseminate policy and product information through the Internet. For example, the Tibet Agriculture and Animal Information Net (http://xznm.agri.gov.cn) is an operation under the supervision of the TAR Agricultural and Animal Office. This website publishes policy and trade news on the TAR carpet sector. Another example is the Chinese Tibetan Carpet Net (www.china-tibetan.com), the media organ of the Chinese Tibet Blanket Association, currently the main network that offers information on policies, industrial regulations, trade fairs, research and development, and carpet factories. This website is based in Qinghai province and supported by the provincial government; enterprises from Qinghai are therefore given more exposure than their TAR counterparts. In addition, government propaganda websites, such as the Chinese Culture Net (www.chinaculture.org), an English-Chinese bilingual information website affiliated with the PRC Ministry of Culture, has a special edition on Tibetan culture and history. It includes a webpage describing Tibetan carpets’ material quality, functions, and origins. Generally, such educational information is copied and circulated by other government websites, for example, the Chinese Textile Net (www.texnet.com.cn). The second important source is government news agency websites, such as Xinhua News and the China Tibet Information Net (www.chinatibetnews.com), a sub-organization of Tibet Daily. This website introduces Tibetan carpets as folk art and also publishes news on

54 For a detailed examination on the communication policy in post-Mao China, see Zhao Yuezhi, Communication in China: Political Economy, Power and Conflict (Lanham, Maryland: Rowman & Littlefield, 2008).
55 I used the leading Chinese Internet search engine Baidu (www.baidu.com) and the Chinese version of Google to find the main sources of on-line information on Tibetan carpets (zang tan). After I entered keyword zang tan in Chinese, Baidu showed 80,800 results, and Google China generated 318,000 results. Then, I checked the websites shown on the first three pages, generated by each search engine. I categorize them according to their functions, affiliations, and contents. Because I conducted this quick search in Montreal in May 2009, the results have limitations. For example, I may get more hits than the viewers in China or in Tibet. In this section, my purpose is to get a sense of what dominant discourses on “Tibetan carpets” are on the Chinese-language websites.
56 The official link of this website is: http://www.chinaculture.org/gb/cn_index/node_2755.htm
policy development and business activities. The third category is commercial websites, including tourism (travel) websites and commerce platform websites. The former introduces carpet factories as tourist sites. The latter are usually managed by so-called e-commerce companies. They sell on-line advertisement space and run their news sections by copying and quoting stories from official media outlets. One such example is the Chinese Home Textile Net (www.hometexnet.com). This marketing company is affiliated with the China Home Textile Association, an intermediary organization standing in-between government agencies and private factories. On these commerce platforms, people can find names and brief contact information of Lhasa-based carpet factories. The last category is enterprise websites. Several Qinghai-based carpet factories have created their own homepages, while so far only a few TAR-based carpet factories have developed individual websites. Even long-established enterprises such as Lhasa Carpets and City Carpets did not have websites in 2006. Foreign invested enterprises, such as Snowland Carpets, have permanent homepages that allow people to order carpets on-line. International NGOs, such as the Dropenling handicraft centre build their own websites. However, they only publish information in English. English language marketing websites became the main alternative source of information on Tibetan carpets. More interestingly, even though some of these marketing websites contain pro-Tibet independence information, when I searched “Tibetan carpets” by google.cn in Shanghai in 2007, I found they were displayed on the top page of the search results and were accessible for Chinese viewers.57

What is significant is that the Chinese language networks deliberately incorporate Tibetan handicrafts and artisans into a Chinese symbolic universe. They depict “Tibetan carpets” as an ethnic folk tradition that forms part of the wider cultural heritage (wenhua yichan) of a united China. This discourse of “cultural heritage” or “intangible cultural heritage” ties every single object, every dance, every song, and every costume, to a notion of national culture. For example, the White Paper on Protection of Tibetan culture

57 I tested these websites in Shanghai in October, 2009 and found that they were still accessible. Compared with these Chinese-language websites, English language marketing websites on average are much more technically sophisticated and advanced. Though I did not study these websites’ origin, design, and marketing techniques systematically, I speculate that most of them are marketing outlets for the Tibetan-Nepalese carpet industry. In the future, I would like to explore how the marketing websites became a vehicle of Tibetan nationalism that circumvents the Chinese party-state’s media censorship.
claims: “Tibetan culture is a lustrous pearl of Chinese culture as well as a precious part of world culture.” In this sense, carpets are not just carpets, but they are part of a Chinese (rather than Tibetan) heritage and are important to promoting Chinese cultural nationalism. By adopting phrases, such as “intangible heritage” from the international cultural policy forums, the Chinese official narrative of “cultural heritage” is a new modification of the CCP nationality rhetoric, which previously claimed Hans, Tibetans, and all the other ethnic groups are brothers of a big family—Chinese people (zhonghua minzu).

There is a very intriguing on-line phenomenon worthy of our attention. Since the early 2000s, the Qinghai government (Qinghai province borders the TAR to the north and the east) started to champion their provincial carpet industry in competition with the TAR for foreign investment and buyers. Qinghai’s economic development strategy includes an ‘aggressive’ on-line campaign, claiming that Qinghai is the birthplace of “Tibetan carpets,” and Qinghai sheep wool is the best material to make quality “Tibetan carpets.” At the same time, the Tibetan information network announced that “Tibetan carpets” are from Gyantse, the hometown of “khen.” These competing narratives indicate that the ‘official’ websites, while being caught in the web of economic and provincial interests, do not exist in ‘harmony’ with each other. With its specific political location and technological capacity, the beautiful “virtual birthplace” of “Tibetan carpets” is produced by the Qinghai government and Qinghai-based carpet factories with a range of registers. First, the beautiful imagery of “Qinghai Tibetan grassland” facilitates Chinese Internet users’ romantic sense of imagined “ethnic communities” within imagined Chinese cultural territories and, especially, attracts a population of wealthy Chinese, who have idealized notions of China’s Wild West and are potential buyers of carpets. At the same time, such cultural and technological construction of “ethnic” virtual space conforms to

58 On this, see China Cultural Network: http://211.147.20.24/info/2008-10/01/content_313170.htm
61 In addition to Qinghai and the TAR, the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Regions and Gansu province are also included in this representation of China’s Wild West.
the official cultural framework that marginalizes claims or representations, containing more diverse, alternative, or subversive meanings of “ethnic” geography and culture. Second, competitions in the production of ‘authentic’ imagery of “Tibetan carpets” (for Chinese-speaking audience) are new venues for the capital and state power to work closely at regional and international levels. This on-line campaign polishes the provincial government’s credential by praising economic policies or showcasing local officials, in terms of their ability to maintain region’s economic growth and political stability. Also, the provincial government can directly benefit from the carpet industry by taxes and bribery. For factory owners, claiming a cultural ownership of “Tibetan carpets” helps secure a market share or government loans.

Concluding Remarks

This chapter has charted four important ways that government officials, development experts, and private investors express “development” issues and how various “development” policies created conditions for making and promoting export “Tibetan carpets” made in Lhasa. These discourses and practices demonstrated both discontinuities in and influences of Tibetan-Chinese socialism. Furthermore, the circulation and promotion of “Western” discourses on tradition, ethnic folk art, and cultural heritage were accelerated through the assistance of international NGOs, overseas investors, and new media technology.

“New Tibet Developmentalism” is best seen as the overarching term for the Hu and post-Hu strategy (1980-present). “Mental emancipation” was part of the ideological reorientation in the early 1980s. It involved refutation of collectivism, celebration of economic individualism and rationalism, and promotion of entrepreneurial talent; policy activities paved the way for privatization of the carpet industry, widespread use of cheap migrant labour, orientation towards export markets, and influx of foreign expertise and capital. In similar fashion, the “human resource” approach built up on the “mental emancipation” policy: entrepreneurialism is represented as universal and as a norm; Tibetans are represented as lacking in market consciousness, and therefore as targets for

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62 One example of such intellectual effort, see Robert Barnett, Lhasa: Streets with Memories (New York: Columbia University Press, 2006).
development. Significantly, after the mid 1980s, this discourse provided the justification for bringing in tourists, international NGOs, and ‘smarter, more economically rational’ Han traders. The “cultural revitalization” approach is part of a much larger project of cultural engineering in China and abroad.63

In this chapter, I briefly summarized the Tibetan experience with cultural revitalization, which is quite complex, because the “cultural project” is the meeting point of local and international interests. International NGOs and investors attempt to “preserve” Tibetan culture through pro-market handicraft development programs that capitalize on Western imaginations of “Tibet.” This trend was welcomed by provincial and central governments, business elites, scholars, travel agencies, and many who have found ways to profit from this “Tibetan cultural business.” In particular, the TAR government sees handicrafts as a rural development strategy of absorbing agriculture surplus labour and of incorporating Tibetan farmers and nomads into “a market economy with Chinese characteristics.” Tibetan elites see cultural programs as ways of appropriating foreign capital in non-politically sensitive areas and boosting Tibetan cultural pride. Since 2000, this “preservation and revitalization” program has adopted the Internet to construct a virtual Tibetan heritage. The party-state seeks to strengthen its legitimacy by representing itself as the protector, promoter, and gatekeeper of “Chinese civilization” in cyberspace; claiming that guardianship of “Tibetan culture” became an important part of this cultural policy in the face of constant challenge (e.g., the cultural genocide critique) from the Tibetan exile activists and international human rights groups. Further, small-scale handicraft production is now transformed into “cultural commodities.” Local groups (usually local governments and factories) are vying for market shares by marketing their carpets’ regional identities, such as Gyantse carpets, Lhasa carpets, or Qinghai carpets. In short, the New Tibet Developmentalism consists of overlapping (partly contradictory, partly mutually reinforcing) policy practices that disguise the repressive measures, marginalizing equity issues, policing the Internet, and delimiting the domains of alternative and subversive expressions.

Besides powerful actors, individuals, such as, Nyemo peasants, Gyantse masters, Wangden artisans, Sichuan weavers, and carpet dealers of various ethnic backgrounds

63 I plan to explore the history of the Chinese heritage industry in my future research projects.
played equally important roles in the New Tibet development. These individuals and groups pursued interests that could not be realized in the socialist time (1960s-70s); they were eager to escape from chronic rural poverty and local authorities; some took advantage of bankrupted state factories. In one way or another, they benefited from their early entry into the carpet business, and their achievements are often cited by the media as evidence of successful Tibetan development. As I have shown, the dealers and Sichuan weavers have fostered a low-end carpet business in Lhasa, where Chinese made carpets prevail and Tibetan-made carpets are hard to find. A small number of Tibetan artisans, such as Cheojor and Norbu, either run their own small carpet business or engage in training up an echelon of cheap wage laborers, who mainly consist of young Tibetans from rural areas, for the Lhasa export carpet industry. By contrast, Wangden artisans perform “authentic” Tibetan folk art in front of foreign tourists. In multifold ways, these individuals’ activities contributed to making a carpet world, increasiningly subject to the logic that “Tibetan culture” is a rich field that should be further integrated into the market economy. Despite “Tibetan carpets” have achieved a national and international status, the commercialization of the carpet industry has only exacerbated the marginal status of most carpet weavers in Lhasa. In the next three chapters, by examining the history of Lhasa Carpets, from the 1960s to the 2000s, I discuss the interplay of patriarchy, ethnicity, and capital accumulation that marginalized women weavers in Lhasa’s post-socialist carpet factory.
In Chapter 3, Jamyang and Tsering told us that both men and women participated in the carpet trade in the early twentieth century. Except for the Wangden rugs, woven exclusively by men, basic weaving knowledge was widely disseminated among villagers in and around Gyantse through apprenticeships. Traditionally, Tibetan women were active in small business: like men, they could learn carpet weaving with other students in a master’s workshop, make carpets at home, and trade them for food with travelling middlemen. Also they could sell their labour to rich households or large estate workshops. Nonetheless, first-class weaving and expert knowledge were a preserve of men. Pre-1959 court workshops predominantly hired skilled male artisans. Lhasa Carpets started as one such government workshop. In the literature and in my interviewees’ memories, master carpet weavers were typically male.

In the summer of 2005, when I first toured around this recently-privatized Lhasa Carpets—now called “Lhasa Carpets Inc.” I saw only Tibetan women knotting wool on the large looms. They did not wear the colourful ethnic costumes featured in tourist brochures, but the work uniforms of assembly-line labour. Tibetan male employees worked as dyers, graphic designers, and managers. This chapter investigates the cultural and political dynamics that have facilitated the influx of women workers from the 1960s to the 1990s, before privatization.

First, I discuss the institutional features of Lhasa Carpets as a work unit (danwei) within the political hierarchy of the People’s Republic of China (PRC) to point out that the incorporation of the Kashag workshop into the work-unit system created the condition for making the Tibetan-Chinese labour subject. In Chapter 3, I introduced Jamyang and Tsering as former factory managers and Tibetan party-cadre, who were actively involved in the process of building a socialist workplace. Here, I continue their stories which have

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important implications for learning how labour politics and Chinese discourse on “Tibetan culture” intersected in the daily operation of the socialist factory regime.

Second, I examine labour policy as a technology of culture, which interacts with previously-established cultural and economic norms and concurrently reinvents racialized and gendered labour categories through institutional mechanisms. My premise is that under the leadership of the CCP, the government in Lhasa, has invested enormous political and economic energy in assimilating the Tibetan population into the citizenship and employment frameworks of the PRC. However, since the 1980s, pro-market policies at both the governmental level and factory level have a tendency to exclude carpet weavers from this framework and subject carpet weavers to patriarchal and exploitative labour control.

I discuss carpet weavers’ changing social-political positions in the factory as well as their relationship to the party-state. In particular, I analyze three labour categories—“socialist weaver-workers”, “temporary workers”, and “contract workers”—that corresponded to the different political-economic structures of Lhasa Carpets. Also, I demonstrate how the discriminatory labels, put in practice by local officials and factory cadre-managers, have served to legitimize socialist or more exploitative labour relations and have contributed to a shifting social order within a mixed Tibetan and Chinese cultural milieu.

**A Model Danwei, a Motherly Factory Director**

**Danwei Characteristics**

In Chapter 3, I mentioned that the international journalists who visited Lhasa Carpets in 1963 were impressed by this “only industrial plant” in Tibet. They reported that the workers worked a regular labour schedule, received a fixed monthly wage, had free housing, ate in the subsidized canteen, and could send their young children to the factory nursery school.3 In addition to these services, the decision-making power was split between the factory director and the representative of the CCP, such as the party

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secretary. A workers’ union (gonghui), a CCP branch (dang zhibu), and a Youth League branch (tuan zhibu) were stationed there. Jamyang described:

   At that time, the policy was that ‘workers are the elder brothers (of farmers and other people outside state employment).’ Workers enjoyed a higher status than all the others. In our factory, they [the CCP branch and Youth League branch] recruited many new Party and Youth League members. I joined the CCP in 1960. I was the first Tibetan party member [in the factory].

The union supposedly looked after workers’ welfare and advocated their interests. Jamyang’s co-worker, Tsering, added that the union did not do much apart from sending some money to workers who lost family members or organizing parties during festivals and national holidays. In certain respects, the union inherited the social functions that were fulfilled by the guild under the Kashag regime: it organized parties and summer picnics and created a sense of solidarity between members. I also mention elsewhere, the small collective workshops did not provide their weavers with these welfare benefits and only paid them piece-rate wages. Their organizational structure was much simpler than that of Lhasa Carpets.

   The form of political arrangement and social provisions, found in Lhasa Carpets and not found in the cooperatives, were characteristics of the socialist danwei system in urban China. Since it emerged in the 1950s, this system instituted a wide range of different government work units, including small collectives, which had little or nothing to offer their employees except for wages, and mega factories that encompassed a variety of facilities and political departments, from canteens, bathhouses, cinema, clinics and day-care centres, to unions, CCP committees, Youth League committees, and their branches. As the model enterprise under the jurisdiction of the TAR light industry, Lhasa Carpets fell within the middle range of the danwei spectrum.

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4 For the literature on the Chinese danwei system, see for example, Xiaobo Lü and Elizabeth J. Perry, eds., Danwei: The Changing Chinese Workplace in Historical and Comparative Perspective (London: M.E. Sharpe, 1997), and David Bray, Social Space and Governance in Urban China: The Danwei System from Origins to Reform (Stanford, Calif: Stanford University Press, 2005).
The *danwei*’s organizational features contributed to stabilizing social order in (at least) two important ways. First, the *danwei* assigned its employees (mostly urban residents) cradle-to-grave jobs. This led to a uniform and rigid urban labour market and made it impossible for migrants, who did not have urban residence permits, to land permanent jobs in cities. Second, *danwei* leaders were responsible for distributing social provisions among the urban employees. This meant a person’s membership in a *danwei* was critical to his/her access to welfare benefit packages. Also, as Tsering remembered, most workers’ unions were handicapped and marginalized by the CCP in terms of their political function within socialist enterprises. Instead, the party committees supervised workers’ political activities. Thus, this socio-political arrangement only fostered employees’ identification with the party-state. Omnipresent CCP agents monitored employees’ public and personal activities, encouraged them to swear allegiance to the CCP, and censored social-political protests.

Jamyang’s reminiscences of workers as “the elder brothers” of farmers and people outside the *danwei* system demonstrate how he understood a particular form of political-economic inequality, engendered by Chinese socialism. On the one hand, *danwei* was an important mechanism that reinforced social divisions through uneven distribution of welfare benefits and control of labour mobility. On the other hand, because employment was lifelong and often passed on to one’s children, individuals could develop positive attitudes towards their occupational identity and a sense of belonging in a worker community.

The multiple functions performed by a model *danwei*, such as Lhasa Carpets, are also indications of its complex internal structure and the intricate relationships between varied functional departments. Cadre-managers were put under pressure to coordinate these activities. I asked Jamyang if he liked to be a manager. He smiled and responded:

> I prefer weaving carpets to managing the factory. Weaving carpets only requires my attention to the quality of carpets. Management is very

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6 Lu and Perry, *Danwei*, 3.

7 In Andrew G. Walder’s analysis, he describes “four facts of life” in the manager’s world, which involve manager’s overlapping and intersecting connections with the Party, employees, the bureaucracy, and other enterprises. “Factory and Manager in an Era of Reform,” *The China Quarterly* 118 (Jun 1989): 242-264.
complicated. It requires a lot of brainpower. Chairman Mao said that a factory director manages a factory like managing a family and has to think about where to get salt, vinegar, and soy sauce. If there was no food, the children will have a hungry stomach and would not study well. A factory director works like a mother [in the family]. I had to think of arranging food and clothing for over a hundred workers, and I had to think about where to find good production materials. If there was not enough production material, then workers could not work. They would be unhappy. As long as I get enough production materials, I am not afraid (bu pa le).

What is significant in Jamyang’s complain is that he used “mother” and “family” as a metaphor for a maternalistic attitude held by the cadre-manages toward their workers. This labour relationship is different from the Tibetan patriarchal rule, found in Gyantse’s village workshops, where Jamyang, as a teenage apprentice, obeyed every order from his male master. In this narrative, “a motherly” figure evokes an impression of a diligent, thoughtful, humble, and perhaps under-appreciated socialist manager. He expressed a low-level cadre’s mixed feelings towards his supervisor position, which compelled him to carefully respond to the demand of the “elder brothers” and collaborate with the Party representatives in the factory.  

Further, the hierarchical nature of the danwei system determined that cadres from low-rank work units had limited decision-making power. Even though Lhasa Carpets was a model enterprise, it was a low-rank enterprise under several bureaus. In addition to the Light Industry Bureau that supervised overall capital investment and production outputs, the factory worked under the municipal Labour Bureau that allocated workers, and the Foreign Trade and Relation Office that was in charge of export and import.

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8 During the 1970s, Jamyang’s factory also participated in the management of neighbourhood workshops that engendered a unique layer of institutional collaboration during the socialist time. Therefore, Jamyang’s idea of “family” might include not only the workers from Lhasa Carpets but also the workers in the small workshops.

Before the mid 1980s, Lhasa Carpets, for example, did not have direct access to raw materials, could not market their own products, and could not sell anything to foreigners. As Chapter 3 shows, this situation often led to Jamyang’s frustrations with the superior government offices that wielded power over him.

Thus, Jamyang’s vision of a motherly manager captures the complex and contradictory institutional arrangements that assign cadre-managers a daunting task: they must treat their workers, represented as the children of the party-state, with a lot of kindness and patience and try to make certain they are “happy.” Meanwhile, they have to obey the party officials and “Chairman Mao,” who embodied both political and bureaucratic power and who were the real heads of the household. This adoption of the family trope manifests how the Chinese nationalist policy intertwined with a family ideology, which has some important effects on socio-cultural assimilation. On the one hand, this metaphor serves to naturalize the national-regional hierarchies, structured around the CCP’s political agreements with Tibetan cadres. On the other hand, as this family trope celebrates the socialist workplace as the site of social reproduction, it has a tendency to undermine other forms of Tibetan cultural production that historically facilitated linkages among varied Tibetan communities, for example religious institutions. It was not until the 1980s, the socialist factory system started to transform, and economic rationalism began to replace the ‘family’ rhetoric as the key mobilizing discourse.

**Economic Rationalization and Enterprise Reforms**

Chapter 3 suggests that the Kashag workshop practiced a degree of labour division. Some of the Gyantse weavers were trained as specialists in mordant dyes, manufactured in Beijing. A studio was created to produce in-house designs with new blueprint techniques. The workshop managers coordinated yarn spinning, wool dyeing, carpet-weaving and design to create a workflow. I argue that the Tibetan elites injected these ‘non-Tibetan’ elements into this workshop to make prestigious carpets for the

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10 This observation is inspired by Anne McClintock’s discussion on the function of the family analogy in producing nationalist discourse in her book, *Imperial Leather: Race, Gender and Sexuality in the Colonial Contest* (New York: Routledge, 1995), 357.
Potala Palace, and in so doing, they fashion a “modern Tibetan” identity in the face of Chinese occupation.

After the workshop was taken over by the socialist government in 1959, economic rationalization, (broadly defined as the practical application of knowledge to organize production and achieve efficiency,) was actively pursued by the party cadres. In Chapter 3, I show how Jamyang was sent to learn about spinning machinery with the goal of improving the factory’s productivity. Later, he travelled to Beijing again to purchase shearing machines for Lhasa Carpets. Also, he and other Tibetan artisans who were sent to work in Beijing brought back electric scissors for contouring the carpet surface. They adopted these technological innovations in the mid 1960s, in parallel to the establishment of the nationwide danwei system.

I asked Jamyang how he understood the benefits of these technologies from a manager’s perspective. He replied that

With these technologies, some workers dye yarns. Some make balls of yarns. Some weave carpets. Some just need to trim the surface of the finished carpets. Some only work on contouring the rugs. Thus, we can produce rugs as one complete dragon operation (yi tiao long). Each unit has a team leader responsible for quality control. This is good for management. And we will not make inferior products.

His description explains socialist industrialization as a process that transformed artisanal production into divided activities, giving rise to technical differentiation and specialization. Further, this principle was employed by cadre-managers to quantify labour, evaluate “efficiency,” calculate productivity, and most importantly justify the benefits of “socialist modernity.” However, as I have discussed, cadre-managers also had limited administrative power in socialist enterprises; they could not simply run their businesses in accord with economic rationality.

In fact, “one dragon operation” was a policy term that emerged in the early 1980s. It referred to a strategy that intended to integrate agricultural, industrial, and commercial
When the large state enterprises were undergoing enterprise reforms, this approach was perceived as a principle for building socialist conglomerates and was said to reconfigure and create a new danwei system during a transitional period. I think that “economic rationalization” was always promoted to some extent during several decades of socialist industrialization; but, Jamyang could remember this phrase so well precisely because this principle became a norm in the 1980s and constituted the centrepiece of Chinese state enterprise reforms.

The political orientation of danwei started to diminish after the early 1990s. The enterprise reform gradually dissolved the power-sharing scheme between the factory director and party secretary. Jamyang’s first successor as factory director was a cadre sent by the municipal government to carry out reform at Lhasa Carpets. He commented, “[the new factory director] wanted to take charge of everything. The party secretary was his car driver.” I heard a different story: this director worked hard, received lots of government awards, but died of cancer in the late 1990s. The second successor, Nima, took over the leadership in 2001. When I visited Lhasa in 2005, he was negotiating with the government to privatize the factory. The party secretary was removed in the following year. These changes all indicate that a different set of institutional mechanisms is emerging from privatization.

The twentieth-first century incarnation of the Kashag workshop was semi-mechanized. In addition to the shearing workshop that used electricity-powered machinery, the dyeing workshop deployed steam dyeing machines, bought from Tianjing in the late 1990s. Nevertheless, mechanization of carpet production did not profoundly alter the weaving technique. The carpet weavers were trained to master at least eight major skills: mounting the warp, tensioning the loom, stringing the heddle rod, edge and end binding, the weaving cycle, the knotting cycle, and composing the pattern. On average, it took a novice more than six months to master these techniques. Normally, an experienced weaver could complete a 3-foot wide and 6-foot long rug in roughly twenty days.

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12 Naughton, *Danwei*, 183.
13 For illustrations for these techniques, see for example, Denwood, *Tibetan Carpets*, 36.
The core figures in the factory were the factory director Nima and his managers. They divided their responsibilities among the production, marketing, and selling of carpets. They ordered cotton wefts, warps, and wool from spinning factories, participated in nationwide trade fairs to explore new design ideas and markets, supervised every stage of production, and importantly they created criteria to evaluate the quality of each finished carpet and to decide the wages that a weaver would receive.

Carpet weavers sat at the bottom of the salary hierarchy at Lhasa Carpets Inc. because the managers valued dyeing and designing skills over weaving skill. Also, in the industry, weaver-workers’ production capacity and wages were kept competitive with overseas labour markets in order to defend local economic success against international competition. They wove for piece-rate wages (approximately 300 yuan or 40 USD per month) that barely covered their living expenses in Lhasa, where most daily commodities are manufactured in the Chinese regions and expensive due to transportation costs.

The current factory director/owner described his weaver-workers to me as rural women with little education, could not speak Mandarin, and therefore were losers in an urban economy. The gendered divisions of labour, women weavers’ low wages, and the managers’ comments all suggest that as the carpet sector incorporated more and more women in the transition towards a profit-oriented market economy, the category of “women weavers” was progressively degraded. Next, I further explore how institutional practices interacted with the previously established cultural norms to define Tibetan labouring subjects in both socialist and late-socialist Tibet. I ask what the implications are in such cultural processes for the establishment of a commercial carpet industry.

“Deaf-mutes, Illiterates, and Women”

Cadre-managers play critical roles within the danwei system: with limited autonomy, they must creatively interpret state discourses, circulated in political meetings, public media, and government reports. While interacting with both the higher-level bureaucracy and workers, they must actively translate policy rhetoric into social actions and create local power dynamics to maintain a particular social order on the shop floor. Thus, their interpretations of policy are important to our understanding of meaning-making practices by political-economic institutions. The stories they tell about carpet
weavers can reveal the linkages between policy discourses and policy implementation at the factory level. Moreover, as Tibetan cadres, they are expected to be minority leaders, guiding their countrymen towards China’s unification and modernization. To accomplish this, they actively embrace their ethnicity as different from Han cadres; yet concurrently, they assert a political identity that may not be welcomed by their Tibetan subordinates, who look up to non-party authorities (e.g., various religious establishments). In this section, Jamyang’s tale of his gaining control over the Tibetan workers illustrates that the reproduction of state power is intertwined with gender and ethnic politics at Lhasa Carpets. Also, it demonstrates a gender dynamic that gave rise to a particular labour force for the Lhasa carpet industry.

When we talked about why many women worked at the carpet factory, Jamyang did not answer my questions directly. Instead, he began recalling his failures and successes in resolving labour conflicts at Lhasa Carpets and in marshalling labour power according to different economic principles. Reviewing his narrative, I find that he drew on a range of labels—“illiterate”, “deaf-mute” and “temporary worker”—to represent the women weavers and to explain their declining socio-economic status from the 1960s to the 1980s. These labels can be directly or indirectly associated with the PRC labour policy, which has undergone several revisions since the 1950s. Through analyzing these labels, I discuss: 1) how the Sino-centric discourse of Tibetan culture shaped the implementation of labour policy; 2) how socialist labour policy interacted with the existing cultural ideology and workplace order; 3) how a labour allocation system perpetuated gender-biased notions of work throughout socialist modernization. Then, I will move on to analyze the fundamental changes in labour politics that surfaced in the early 1980s, as the New Tibet developmentalism began to affect the TAR carpet sector.

**Weaver-Workers in Socialist Lhasa (1960s-70s)**

Handicrafts held an awkward position in China’s socialist industrialization. From the CCP leaders’ viewpoint, it was not a desirable technology of development, but something inferior to mechanized industry. As I discussed in Chapter 3, throughout the

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1960s, the handicraft policy in Tibet marginalized the production of Tibetan carpets because the state planners did not see Tibetans’ carpets had a role to play in socialist modernization. Stevan Harrell (1995) observes that the PRC officials premised their development agenda on the Marxist-Stalinist notion of “social progress”: the economic base determines how close a society is to the most advanced social form, communism.\(^\text{15}\) For example, Chinese official reports always depict pre-1959 Tibetan society as a monstrous theocracy coupled with a manorial economy living off the labour of Tibetan serfs and slaves. The TAR “White Paper” (a government report published by the PRC State Council Information Office) states: “The feudal serfdom in old Tibet (jiu xizang) was more miserable and backward than the European counterparts in the Medieval Age.”\(^\text{16}\)

In the 1960s, the CCP launched so-called “Democratic Reform”, with a clear agenda of “liberating millions of Tibetan serfs and slaves from economic, political, and spiritual oppression and to make them the owner of their land and production materials.”\(^\text{17}\) Underpinning such depictions is the assumption that Tibet’s civilization was so primitive that the CCP had to transform everything in it. Tibetan artisans and their knowledge were no exception. This view was accepted with mixed feelings by Tibetan cadres such as Jamyang:

> In the beginning [1960s-70s], only the Labour Bureau had the right to [hire workers]. We did not have anything to do with it. We got whomever they gave us. So, we got many women and many people who had little education (wenhuadi de ren). They said that people did not need education (wenhua)\(^\text{18}\) to work in the carpet factory. They said in the carpet factory, most people were women (nüren), illiterate\(^\text{19}\) (wenmang) and deaf-mute (longya). But I think only people who have education have great creative power. They can participate in the reform (gaige).

\(^\text{15}\) Stevan Harrell, Introduction, 23.
\(^\text{17}\) Ibid., 122.
\(^\text{18}\) In Mandarin, wenhua has wider connotations. It can refer to “civilization”, “culture”, “education”, and “literacy.”
\(^\text{19}\) The Chinese term wenmang associates illiteracy with blindness.
Jamyang was roused to indignation when I asked him to explain why women workers began to enter the weaving workshop. His resentment might come from his painful experience of discovering his skill was considered “backward” and his colleagues as people without education. Importantly, he articulated his discontent through criticizing a centralized labour policy that dictated the TAR labour market throughout the 1960s and 1970s. He stressed that it was the Labour Bureau that first drafted illiterate women into his workshop.

I have mentioned in the previous section that the regional labour bureaus played a role in allocating cradle-to-grave jobs among the urban citizenry according to their education, skills, and often family background. This labour policy was critical to modern state-building and the consolidation of communist leadership in the newly founded PRC. First of all, centralized labour planning enabled the party cadres to mobilize urban populations for varied state projects in industry, agriculture, and the military. Second, the early labour policy suppressed wage differences, while implementing a work unit-dependent welfare program to win the hearts and minds of urban citizens as well as to put them under state surveillance and control. In the TAR, it was particularly salient as the newly-arrived CCP was keen on constructing a legitimate framework of citizenship for the Tibetan population. During Democratic Reform, building factories to recruit previous “slaves and serfs” was a well-publicized means of raising a class of Tibetan workers loyal to the socialist government.

In Lhasa Carpets, the installation of a canteen, free health care, and a union create an environment of social equality and enhance workers’ sense of ownership and citizen entitlement. This labour policy was to seek out the most “oppressed” Tibetans that could become enthusiastic supporters of the party state. The labour bureau probably assumed that these former “slaves and serfs” would be “liberated” and become socialist protagonists through engaging in political campaigns and collective labour activity within their work unit. I argue that the use of the term “deaf-mute” by Jamyang to describe the Labour Bureau’s attitude expresses his resentment towards a Sino-centric mentality in the

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20 Lü & Perry, Danwei, 8.
TAR government.\textsuperscript{22} The Tibetans deemed by the local authority as “deaf-mute” did not have any physical disabilities. The Han-dominated political system described them as “deaf-mute” subjects because they did not learn to speak Mandarin and were alienated by the PRC political culture. Such discriminatory labelling by the local authorities indicated its contempt not only for craft knowledge but for the Tibetan populace and their culture generally. This Sino-centrism in the implementation of labour policy would provoke Tibetan cadres to react against the socialist bureaucracy. In Jamyang’s narrative, later on, he mobilized his dissatisfaction by competing for power with the labour bureau, when the political-economic environment turned to favour managerial autonomy.

More significantly, Jamyang’s story shows that the centralized labour allocation was staffing a prestigious artisan workplace with “liberated” but “unskilled” Tibetans. In this context, the term, “illiteracy”, not only means a lack of formal (and Chinese) schooling but also points to a significantly different workforce, assigned by the socialist Labour Bureau to Lhasa Carpets. Jamyang and his cohorts were already outstanding weavers when the Kashag recruited them from Gyantse. It was an honourable appointment that signified professional status and recognition from the state. By contrast, the local Labour Bureau did not care if the new workers had any previous knowledge of weaving. Instead, party officials intended to cultivate a politicized workplace that had certain cultural continuity with native place-based, guild-based artisan associations that were established under the Kashag regime.\textsuperscript{23} For example, the union organized workers’ solidarity-building activities, similar to the summer picnics hosted by the guild; highly skilled artisans were given special status in the workshop with great respect. Nonetheless, such cultural practices were carefully directed to meet new political objectives.

In Lhasa Carpets, at first, communist cadres would not praise former court artisans for their skill, but singled out new, politically-radical artisans as the agents of socialism on the shop floor. Skilled weavers’ access to socio-economic status became

\textsuperscript{22} In Tibetan language, the word “stupid people” (\textit{guba}) literally means “deaf-mute.” It is possible that Jamyang was thinking of the word \textit{guba} while telling me his story. In any case, his memory of this labeling is an evidence of ethnic discrimination in the operational culture of the government bureaucracy.

contingent on their closeness to the CCP. For example, after Jamyang joined the CCP, he was given opportunities to move upward rapidly. The senior weavers were organized to promote socialism and Chinese nationalism. Tsering, who was in Jamyang’s cohort, recalled that he was sent to weave Chinese-style carpets for the Great Hall of the People (renmin dahuidang, an architecturally symbolic building in Beijing) in the early 1970s. Then, he was nominated as a CCP cadre after he helped build socialist carpet factories in the most remote regions of the TAR. Second, this labour policy continued to supply Lhasa Carpets with unskilled young Tibetan urban dwellers and school dropouts, who would learn a segment of the craft and work in separate production units. With this micro-level labour arrangement, young workers had limited access to the craft technology, and therefore they could not inherit an artisan title, which was once handed down from masters to their apprentices. For the new generation, occupational identity was normalized as “factory worker” in order to fit squarely into the notion of socialist employment framework in the PRC.

Analyzed in other Chinese contexts, the PRC work-unit system perpetuated gender inequality despite the socialist rhetoric of equality.24 Women were more likely to be given jobs related to “light” work or the light industry—the textile industry. Men controlled so-called “technical” positions. The socialist Labour Bureau’s ostensible goal was to raise a “gender-equal” Tibetan working class, but their actual policy classified carpet weaving as “textile production”, associated with femininity, and facilitated a large influx of women workers at Lhasa Carpets. In the very beginning of the Democratic Reform, a Han-woman cadre was appointed to be the first factory director; Tibetan women were recruited to card wool and spin yarn; the factory was praised in the local newspaper for building a nursery.25 Such gender dynamics also shaped the factory’s expansion in the early 1970s, when a city-wide job creation program was implemented for Han cadres’ families. My informant, Tenzin, recalled, many Han women, who followed their husbands to live in Lhasa, were making blankets at the carpet factory because there were not many job options for women.

Importantly, in this case, the impact of gender ideology on carpet weaving should be examined in an intertwined Tibetan and Chinese cultural context. The changed demographics challenged traditional labour relations in the weaving workshop because it endangered a male-cantered knowledge culture that once permeated the Tibetan carpet trade: the most prestigious carpet weavers were men in the official workshops. In the pre-1959 time, master weavers had great power over their students’ labour and output, while the socialist welfare program intended to protect workers from every form of what they deemed unequal labour relations. Therefore, in the socialist workplace, senior weavers, such as Jamyang, had difficulty in retaining their authority and apprenticeship orders among the women workers. He recalled:

When they [the workers] were young, they were ok. After a while, they would tell me they had problems in their lungs or their livers. They asked for sick leave, stayed in bed, and did not come to work. But, on pay days, they came to pick up their money.

Jamyang described a labour politics between a manager and workers as if it took place between a conscientious master and his “dishonest” apprentices. He expressed his difficulty in controlling his young workers, mostly women. Even though he was both a master weaver and a party cadre, women workers could still pay no heed to his authority and benefited from their alliance with the socialist government. Thus, over the course of the 1960s and 1970s, the centralized labour policy actively instituted changes in the gender composition and power relations at Lhasa Carpets. Through this process, carpet weavers’ symbolic attachment to their craft was gradually repressed across different generations; an artisan workshop order was replaced by socialist labour politics.

Despite the discriminatory labelling, women workers could and often did find means (e.g., sick leave) to passively protest against their managers’ commands and could refuse to contribute to “productivity.” Although there was no room for them to develop their artisanal prestige, their access to socio-economic welfare resources was guaranteed by their working class status. They had a certain degree of autonomy and a sense of dignity in their work. Yet, this work unit-based occupational security was only achieved through voluntary submission to government control and surveillance. With the arrival
of the enterprise reform policy in the 1980s, the bargaining power of the following generation of carpet weavers at Lhasa Carpets diminished rapidly.

**Temporary and Contract Workers in the Reform (1980s)**

Chapter 4 describes the way the tide of China’s economic reforms reached the Tibetan Autonomous Region (TAR) in the early 1980s. Supported by Beijing officials, the local government launched campaigns to weed out radical factions and conceived new policies with an emphasis on economic development. One of the key mandates was to alleviate poverty and to create a favourable policy environment suited to developing socio-economic conditions in the TAR. The early reformist activity was understood as a gradual abolition of the planned economy in parallel with the development of a “socialist market system.” Economic reforms inside state enterprises aimed at reducing party interference in production decisions while enhancing the role of managers.\(^\text{26}\) Jamyang thought of himself as one of the reformist Tibetan cadres and described to me how he initiated his own “progressive” labour policy in Lhasa Carpets and bravely talked back to the Labour Bureau. He explained:

Since 1980, I took very few people that came from the Labour Bureau. I hired temporary workers (*linshigong*) directly. These workers were all from the countryside. They got a small wage during the training period. After they got to know weaving, the factory decided how to pay them. This [arrangement] was better than [what we had] before. We had to pay the formal workers (*zhengshigong*) no matter what they did. Then they [the temporary workers] came. For example, if they made a carpet today, then they received a payment today. No product, no payment.

Formal workers, as Jamyang called them, refer to state workers who were recruited through the Labour Bureau. Because they were included in the state staffing quotas (*zhengfu bianzhi*) formal workers received social welfare benefits. Temporary workers who came to the cities and towns during the late 1970s and early 1980s were largely from

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the rural areas, where agriculture labour became redundant and peasants’ need for cash increased. In contrast to state employees, temporary workers had very limited accesses to the state welfare program, even though they were hired by a state enterprise. Jamyang explained to me the economic rationale behind his labour management: hiring docile “temps” greatly increased productivity in the factory. As I probed into his relationship with the Labour Bureau, he immediately used again the terms “deaf-mute” and “illiterate:”

Tracy: Did the Labour Bureau give you any trouble when you did not take their people?

Jamyang: The Labour Bureau used to say that carpet weavers were illiterate and “deaf-mute”. So, I wanted to write them my advice (yijian) [that temporary workers be hired]. I wrote a letter to the TAR officials through an internal review. The TAR CCP party committee agreed with me. They said my suggestion was good and I did not need to worry about the City Labour Bureau. At that time, the TAR provincial government had already given orders that our state enterprises should start to change from a planned economy into a market-oriented economy. If they [the Labour Bureau] still wanted to follow a policy of planned economy and suppress us, I would not obey them.

Here, Jamyang emphasized the terms, “illiterate” and “deaf-mute” to justify his reaction against the Labour Bureau. While he employed these very categories elsewhere in my interview (with an implied or explicitly negative value judgment), his comments need to be seen as always in relation to a particular economic policy and how this policy was lived out on the shop floor. As Jamyang clearly remembered and repeatedly used these labels, he probably knew that these tags could shape the public image of carpet-weavers. He used himself as an example to elaborate the ways in which “carpet weavers” had to negotiate the negatively loaded labels fostered by the socialist labour policy. I argue that he changed labour practices not only to meet economic expectations of the Beijing government but also to engage himself in the cultural politics of ethnicity in a particular
and indirect way. He embraced the economic reform policy because it empowered him to express his distaste of ethnic discrimination and to openly challenge the power of the Labour Bureau. Likely, he wanted to disprove the stereotype of short-sighted minority cadres and represented himself as being more “economic rational” than the Han cadres. Also, he might hope to restore an influential carpet workshop which would have a close connection to his own professional ethos.

As I have discussed, socialist labour politics reduced master weavers’ authority and disrupted a male-centred knowledge order. Jamyang found it difficult to discipline his worker-weavers and to re-connect masculinity to the prestige of the craft because women, introduced by the PRC labour policies, came to master the weaving techniques over the years. The disobedient woman worker became a dilemma for him. How could he recover the male master weavers’ prestige, revive the fame of the workshop, and fulfil new economic goals at the same time? Jamyang explained:

At first, the factory had more men than women. Women mainly worked in carding and spinning wool. At that time, men did not have the opportunity to go to schools. They used their hands to make a living. So men made carpets. Now, the social system is better. Most children can go to school. They could learn professional skills, science and technology. Therefore, they did not value manual work. Our factory had many women now. They were not from Lhasa, but from the countryside. They did not want to work in the field. They came to the city. But, they could not find any jobs easily. So, they learned to make carpets. The factory gave them wages. They tasted the sweetness of this reward and wanted to stay on the job.

This explanation strategically disassociates “masculinity” from carpet-weaving by emphasizing both the changes and continuities in men’s occupational preferences, as a result of “social progress.” It constructs a consistent symbolic connection between men’s work, knowledge, and social prestige, as carpet-weaving is devalued and feminized.

Furthermore, Jamyang suggested that employing rural women as temporary workers was his solution to economic reforms. Since these women were poorly educated, they had few alternative job options. Also, the urban population was protected
by policies such as household residence registration, which grants rights to reside in a city, to receive access to government subsidies, and to be eligible for certain benefits. Urban neighbourhood committees administered these policies and served as a medium, facilitating communications between urban residents and the government.\(^{27}\) By contrast, migrant workers, who came from the rural areas, did not have residence permit and such political representation in Lhasa. Consequently they had to accept a lower social status.\(^{28}\)

In short, these temps would stick to the factory, accept the demands from managers, and agree to take low wages. This understanding of women weavers’ social and educational background provides a basis for a discretionary labour policy by the cadre-managers, who saw the profitability in employing migrant women from rural areas. In Jamyang’s words, temporary workers were more “well-behaved (laoshi).” His euphemistic description of the vulnerability of temporary workers justified the exploitive labour practice emerging in Lhasa Carpets.

**Contract workers (early 1990s-)**

Throughout the 1980s, the winds of economic reform blowing inside state enterprises lifted cadre-managers’ status above firm-level CCP representatives, such as party secretaries and trade union leaders.\(^{29}\) Furthermore, amidst the currents of privatizing state properties, some local cadre-managers, such as Nima, the second successor of Jamyang, transformed themselves into entrepreneurs and partnered with a rising business class, supported by China’s globalizing economy. Along with a gradual collapse of the work-unit labour regime, exploitative labour practices are imitated and copied in the public and non-state sectors.\(^{30}\) Employing rural migrant workers was not a new invention in socialist China,\(^{31}\) but it became justified as a means of absorbing non-

\(^{27}\) For a historical review of the household registration system, see for example, Tiejun Cheng and Mark Selden, “The Origins and Social Consequences of China’s Hukou System,” *China Quarterly* 139 (Sep 1994):644-668.

\(^{28}\) A good reference for the citizenship and migration in China is Dorothy Solinger’s book-length study, *Contesting Citizenship in Urban China: Peasant Migrants, the State, and the Logic of the Market* (California: University of California Press, 1999).

\(^{29}\) Gallagher, *Contagious Capitalism*, 71.

\(^{30}\) Ibid., 72-82.

unionized wage labour and proliferated in both state and non-state enterprises after a pro-market labour law was put in place in 1995. However, the labour rights inscribed in this law are not for “temporary workers.” The law is mandated to “protect the legitimate rights and interests of labourers, readjust labour relationships, establish and safeguard a labour system suited to the socialist market economy, and promote economic development and social progress (Article 1).” What this law does is that it makes short-term contracts the norm for all state and private employees and basically abolished the old danwei tradition of life-long employment. Furthermore, without a systematic legal reinforcement, this law is subject to the local interpretations of labour management. The practice of the labour law in Lhasa Carpets manifested this problem.

“Contract workers” (hetongzhi zhigong), according to Jamyang, were the upgraded temporary workers. When a migrant woman was first employed by Lhasa Carpets, she would be treated as a temporary worker. As such, she had to demonstrate outstanding skill and diligence to be rewarded with a three-year or five-year contract from the factory. Under this labour contract, the factory would contribute to a pension fund (tongchou jijin) for this worker through the local Labour Bureau (now turned more or less into an insurance agency). Thus, the management of “contract workers” was in fact a combination of carrots and sticks held by the managers. Weaver-workers did not have much to say in this bargaining game. According to his story, Jamyang signed twenty or so contract workers before his directorship ended in 1987. He remembered except that the contract workers received a smaller grain subsidy than the state workers, they were enrolled in the same welfare program.

When I conducted my fieldwork in 2006, I could only find three woman workers who had been hired by the factory in the early 1980s and claimed that they had pension rights. The majority of weavers, whom the managers labelled “temporary”, had also served Lhasa Carpets for more than 10 years but did not have any welfare protection. Ironically, they had joined the factory in the mid 1990s, when the labour law was issued.

Gallagher studied how the CCP, after it had withdrawn from its previous role as administrator of labour allocation, hoped to make labour laws and rules that could

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regulate managerial power. She found, however, that “[the developmentalist] local
governments have neither the capacity nor the will to implement constraints on capital.”
In the Tibetan carpet industry, the most obvious evidence of a “developmentalist”
regional government, indifferent to temporary workers, is the TAR official reports that
overlook the economic contribution of temporary weaver-workers. For example, the
TAR White Paper published in 1995 announced that women counted for more than 85%
of the labour force in sectors like wool spinning, sewing, and carpet weaving. However, this well-circulated document does not suggest that the temporary workers are
included in the Government’s economic calculations. I also looked up the TAR statistics
yearbooks and found only very brief records of temporary workers from 1993 to 1998.
This category disappeared in the yearbooks published after 1999. Besides the items on
“permanent staff and workers”, there is one noted category called “contract work”, which
does not acknowledge the labour status of most women weavers at Lhasa Carpets.

The implication in the omission of “temporary workers” by the government
statistics is that these workers are placed outside the state employment framework. And
this is not unique. The local commercial industry employs hundreds of “temporary”
weavers who are not protected by any kind of legal agreements. When I visited two other
private carpet factories run by ethnic Tibetans, I did not find a single weaver with a
labour contract that ensures her rights to state welfare benefits. Nonetheless, it is
important to point out that carpet factories have a variety of managerial policy, including
idiosyncratic and ad hoc welfare measures, part of new disciplinary regime that grew out
of the planned system. The next chapter explores these practices and their implications in
detail. We can speculate that the entire Tibetan carpet sector is significantly dependent
on a population of “temporary workers”, whose invisibility is in sharp contrast to the
artisanal Tibetan carpets promoted in TAR’s media and export-related publicity.

Concluding Remarks

In the construction of modern Tibet, labour policy has an important role to play.
Its main objective is twofold: 1) policing the labour market to ensure optimum flows in

33 Gallagher, Contagious Capitalism, 96.
34 State Council Information Office, TAR White Paper Collection, 232.
supply and demand; 2) shaping labour relations to match the political-economic interests of the government. To fulfil these tasks, the execution of labour policy must go hand in hand with meaning-making practices—cultural practices—that invent or repress social categories associated with labour subjects. This is because the making of subject-categories is critical to the question of legitimation and hegemonic social order.

In the case of Lhasa Carpets, the socialist labour policy in the TAR repressed a masculine artisan subject but created a class of feminine workers; the market-centred labour policy abandoned state worker subjects to form a sweatshop labour market. In the cultural process of destruction, construction and reconstruction of the labour subject, we find not only that gendered meanings of work changed but that labour relations and workshop hierarchies shifted accordingly. Weaving prestige carpets started as men’s work in pre-socialist Lhasa, became women’s work in socialist Lhasa, and finally became migrant women’s work in post-socialist Lhasa. Lhasa Carpets transformed itself from a government workshop relying on the master-apprentice order, to a socialist workplace saturated by shop floor politics, and finally to a private sweatshop that follows the logic of profit maximization. Such structural change often incorporates living cultural and gender ideology to reproduce unequal social relations, manifested in a specific set of labour practices and labour subject-category. Clearly, labour categorization and the subject position inscribed in the national labour policy normalize ethnic, gender, and rural-urban tensions in CCP’s modernization programmes and legitimize the exploitive labour relations found in a profit-driven industry. At the same time, the pro-market labour policy has a tendency to alienate “temporary workers” from the PRC employment framework;ironically, it undoes the political-cultural “assimilation” work that the previous socialist policy had achieved.

Finally, I want to emphasize that the cultural power of labour policy in the TAR arises from the interplay of policy discourse and its local interpretation and implementation. In this process, gender and ethnicity are in play and have a direct impact on people’s perceptions and actions. Seeing the implementation of labour policy as an interactive social process, it may be wrong to regard local manager-cadres, such as Jamyang, as chameleons or opportunists, changing their outlook in accordance with the temperature of the economic-political environment. On the contrary, through his
narrative, I come to know him as someone who struggled to reconcile his different subject positions—“master weaver”, “socialist worker”, “party cadre”, “Tibetan man”, and “reformist”—that are often rigidly ordered in the official discourse on “Tibetan-Chinese.”

In multicultural and multi-ethnic societies, we can look at state polices as cultural vehicles by which the dominant groups transport and circulate their perceptions of the “minorities” while the marginal groups including, as in the TAR, majority indigenous populations, have limited power to affect the public imagination. In the present TAR, the carpet industry is predominantly Tibetan, and Tibetan business people employ the Tibetan poor from rural communities.\(^{35}\) My field research determined that more than 90 percent of this labour force consisted of women. While the media and policy representations of Tibetan culture overlook the agency of Tibetan women weavers, Jamyang’s story suggests that the women weavers gained expertise in weaving and did find means to protest against the managerial power in the socialist era. The next two chapters explore emergent conditions and the strategies women weavers used to cope with the structural constraints imposed by a “developmentalist” state and the global capitalist economy.

\(^{35}\) This situation will change soon. Before I left the TAR, I found that a trans-regional enterprise has entered the TAR recently. The owner of this enterprise is a Han-Chinese.
Photo 5: Evaluating a large carpet in the factory’s courtyard

Photo 6: Tea break
Figure 3: Lhasa Carpets Inc.
THE BUDDHIST SPIRIT OF CAPITALISM: THE CULTURE AND POWER OF PRIVATIZATION

One week after I started my fieldwork in 2006, I attended a party that celebrated the first anniversary of Lhasa Carpets’ privatization. The banquet was set in a hotel, a landmark building in the 1960s but now dwarfed by the surrounding flashy architecture. We were settled in the dancing hall which conveyed a sense of displaced 1960’s aesthetics: a huge portrait of Chairman Mao oversaw a crowd of nicely-dressed woman employees, chatting, drinking Tibetan butter tea, or playing majiang. Then, the factory director, Nima Tsering, appeared with his assistants, carrying several bottles of barley wine. The group moved from one table to the next and toasted everyone. People drank and greeted each other enthusiastically.

A few days later, I spoke to Nima in his private office about my research. Cheerfully and proudly, Nima explained that he had worked at Lhasa Carpets since 2002, when the government dispatched him from his previous job at the TAR Economic Planning Commission (Jingji jihua weiyuanhui, or Jingjiwei) and installed him as the factory director of Lhasa Carpets. In 2005, he and several others bought the factory from the municipal government. Since then, Lhasa Carpets became a shareholding company, Lhasa Carpets Inc. Since Nima was the biggest shareholder and was the factory’s chief executive officer, everyone listened to his orders and referred to him as laozong (old chief). He said to me: “You can walk around the factory. We have no business secrets here.” Then, he stressed, “Han-Chinese often describe Tibetans as savage people, carrying knives and eating raw meat. It is not true. You ought to write about real Tibetans.” As I was jotting down his words, he spoke again, “I am a Buddhist,” he unbuttoned his collar studs and showed me a strand of prayer beads around his neck, “Religion is very important in Tibetan business culture. I took MBA courses in nei di (the interior). But, we have our own way of doing business. We use our Buddhist principles to make judgments on what we shall do or not do. We only take the money that we deserve.” I nodded my agreement. He seemed satisfied and then asked me if I
had overseas friends. “Our export business went bad after 9/11. We do not have any export contracts now,” he said. Then he complained that many contracts had gone to Nepal. “I hope that you can find some business opportunities for us,” Nima looked at me meaningfully.

This chapter begins with these two stories because they offer a fantastic assemblage of the themes of cultural hybridity, Tibetan nationalism, marketization, and patriarchal relations of production that I want to discuss here. These themes constitute multiple cultural dimensions in the commercialization and privatization of Lhasa Carpets, which affected labour politics on the shop floor, fostered new meanings about carpet making, and created conditions for Tibetan managers and weavers to re-fashion their subject positions. Under the banner of New Tibet developmentalism, the socialist factory regime evolved gradually through policies and practices that interacted with the established cultural frameworks and simultaneously re-invent disciplinary tools. I will examine that these practices display a hybrid mix of socialist legacy, Tibetan cultural revival, and pro-market ideology. The picnic party and Nima’s speech not only exhibit features of culture hybridity but also pose an important question: what constitutes Tibetan agency in a hybrid space of difference that expands our understanding of ethnic and gender binaries?

To explore these themes, I first probe into the piece-rate wage regime that incorporated the Tibetan patriarchy ideology, influencing women’s perceptions of their work in the family and in the workshop. I am especially concerned with the married workers, who saw their wages as a supplement to family income. I discuss the complex effects of this cultural issue, and then I examine the factory owner Nima’s particular approach to wealth and power. Unlike Jamyang and Tsering, Nima was not an artisan-manager but had an MBA diploma; like his predecessors, Nima wanted to assert his ‘Tibetan agency’ through the carpet factory. He belongs to a generation of emerging Tibetan elites that consciously claimed their cultural leadership and developed an ambivalent relationship with the Chinese party-state. Next, I investigate Nima’s welfare policy which incorporated Tibetan religious festivals into the regulation of the workshop. The Buddhism-inspired policy demonstrated Nima’s cultural affinity with his workers; but, this policy was deployed to support workers’ religious aspiration in the context of
low wages and absent pension rights. After that, I discuss the factory’s commercial housing project. Through the real estate deals, Nima could more easily profit from privatizing the factory. More significantly, the commercial housing invited women weavers to participate in the politics of privatization; as a result, it tied them to the factory shareholders’ economic interests. Last, I discuss the implications in the hiring of a Hui (Chinese-Muslim) master to show the new ethnicity factor that may complicate the patriarchal hierarchy and labour politics at Lhasa Carpets Inc.

**Prices of Power and Labour Power**

The weaver-workers at Lhasa Carpets Inc. were paid a piece-rate wage. This system was first introduced in the early 1980s and was only applied to “temporary workers.” In 1987-88, when the carpet factory was converted to collective ownership, the piece-rate wage was fully implemented. At that time, inflexible and overly egalitarian wages—“eating from the big rice pot” (*chi daguo fan*)—was described in the media as a crux of the factory’s economic problem. By contrast, the piece-rate system was introduced as a means to “arouse the enthusiasm of the workers and cadres”¹ because it linked payment to workers’ performance. Elsewhere researchers found that the Chinese state firms in fact used piece-rate systems to reduce total wages and attributed this reduction to fewer orders in the face of relentless market competition.² What kind of piece-wage policy was at Lhasa Carpets Inc.? How did it affect the women workers?

**The Depreciation of Labour-Power and Labour-Time**

I heard many complaints from the women workers about their low wages under this piece-rate policy. Significantly, the married women expressed concerns with under-appreciation of their work, not only in the carpet workshop but also in the homes. In theory, the piece-rate system was to induce additional employee effort by recognizing the variations in their performance. However, my interviewees pointed out that their piece-

rate wage did not fully recognize the content of their work. A woman worker who entered the factory in 1982 explained to me:

We used to make *khaden* rugs (a 3-feet wide and 6-feet long rug). This kind of rug has five grades. The formal workers (state workers) wove fifth-grade *khaden*; we made fourth-grade *khaden*. Different grades of work were paid differently. We also made hanging rugs. This is high quality work. This kind of rugs also has several grades. The floor carpets have different grades too…Now, these things [the grading systems] do not exist anymore. In fact, the new designs are more complicated to weave. However, they do not have grades.

Nima reported that he still rewarded workers according to the complexity of their task. However, his system only recognized three categories of carpets: hanging rugs, *khaden* rugs, and floor carpets. There was no additional scale of measurement within each category. For example, workers were paid fifty yuan per square foot for making hanging rugs, twenty-two yuan per square foot for *khaden* rugs, and fifteen to eighteen yuan per square foot for floor carpets. Nima also acknowledged that the factory had not received many orders for hanging rugs in recent years. This reduction was probably due to the factory’s weakened relationship with the government, who was the main patron of wall-size hanging rugs. Therefore, the workers mostly made *khaden* rugs and floor coverings, and the old grading and rewarding system was replaced by uniform wages regardless of skill levels and quality.

Specialized skill is an important factor in forming a worker’s subject position. This was especially true for workers who used to make high-grade or decorative tapestries, because they once received a relatively higher wage and status in the workshop hierarchy. Since the piece-rate system assumed an average skill level, it denied the specific content of labour, making it easier to extract surplus and to push the (economic and social) value of these workers’ labour to the minimum.

The majority of my interviewees said that they preferred weaving “clouds” because this design was the easiest one to weave. Since they were paid only a piece-rate wage, the faster they wove, the more money they could earn. This is a clear indication of
how these women responded to the intensified economic surplus production. Since the calculation of wages overlooks skill differences, the creative input of workers declines. At the same time, the weaving workshop was kept open from eight o’clock in the morning until nine o’clock in the evening. A daily work schedule was like this:

8.00-8.30am, the weavers entered the workshop.
11.00-11.30am, morning tea break. Workers ate snacks, and/or drank tea.
1.00-2.30 pm, lunch break.
6.00-6.30pm, afternoon tea break.
9.00pm, the weaving workshop was closed. (A manager assistant had the key to the weaving workshop. Each night, he asked the women to leave, and then closed the gate.)

At first, it seemed that workers could arrange their own schedules within these eleven and a half open hours (excluding the lunch break); after all, they were paid a piece-rate wage and were not required to be present all the time. However, the piece-wage rate was very low. Lhasa’s minimum wage was 495 yuans per month in 2004-2007 and 730 yuans in 2008. However, according to my informants, they only earned between 250 to 300 yuans per month (US $35-42) in 2007. The factory had an annual bonus policy, under which a worker who could make more than one hundred and thirty square foot of carpet per year would receive a bonus, calculated on the basis of the extra carpets she wove. The rate was six yuans for each extra square foot of khaden rug, and four yuans for each extra square foot of carpet. However, I was told that two weavers, working together on the same loom, needed at least 10 days (8 working hours per day) to complete one khaden (18 square foot). In other words, it took one weaver approximately 10 hours to complete one square foot carpet; but she only received 6 yuans of bonus for 10 hours of labour, much below the hourly minimum wage 6.5 yuans. Therefore, these women had to work as many hours as possible to earn a living.

One married worker said that when she entered the factory in 1981-2, the managers evaluated the workers’ output once a month and counted the number of knots each worker wove to calculate her monthly wage. “Now, if I do not reach the annual

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quota, then I will get no bonus,” said this worker. If the weavers were given assignments to make large-size carpets, they were not paid for two or more months until they finished their assignments.

At first, this policy gave rise to a wage gap between the women who could work in the evening and those who had to look after small children and do family chores. The women who worked for nine or ten hours per day could earn three or four hundreds yuan per month. Some married workers managed to use their lunch breaks to prepare dinner or wash clothes. However, the married workers generally left the weaving workshop before seven o’clock in the evening. Some of them reported that they earned only a little more than two hundreds yuan a month (30 USD per month). Their husbands were the main income contributors in the family. Another indication of the increasing control over their labour time is that previously, they made small rugs at home for their own use or to sell to relatives. Now, these activities were officially banned by the factory.

My informant, Lamo, was married to a driver and had one child. She said, “I don’t have any free days. When I work in the factory, I’m unable to look after my child; when I take care of my child, I can’t come to work. I’m upset by the fact that I am caught in between these things.” She also told me that her husband did not seem to understand her double workload in the workshop and at home.

Whenever I go home from work, my child tells me how hungry he is. The father doesn’t cook; they have empty stomachs but wait for me to cook. They don’t even know how to heat up leftovers. I also do the grocery shopping, the laundry, and clean the apartment. They don’t help me at all. I often get angry at them.

Many other married workers described how they also took full responsibility in their households. The production manager usually let the women decide on whom they wanted to work with. This made it a little easier for married workers to accommodate themselves to the workshop schedule, since they could form work teams according to their daily routines and personal interests. Team members always wove carpets together at the same loom; during the small breaks, they drank tea or ate snacks at the same table. If one of them got sick for a few days, then the other team members would take over her
work. The whole team split the payment that they received from the factory by the time they completed one carpet together. Because of this, workers tended to socialize with their team members.

Feminist economics has shown that labour time is organized in part through the interplay of gendered cultural ideology and social structure. Cultural assumptions about women’s work in family and in workplaces perpetuate the profound asymmetries in the organization of time among men and women. 4 Though the factory’s incentive system was in favour of single women who had few household responsibilities, the piece-rate system contained sufficient flexibility so that married women could participate in this form of surplus production. Despite their working more or less full time, the married women claimed that their earning could not support their own lives and only supplement the household income.

I discovered in my survey that four types of jobs were held by weavers’ husbands. 5 These include cab drivers (33.3%), businessmen (16.7%), temporary workers (29.1%), and government employees (16.7%). Generally speaking, cab drivers, businessmen, and temporary workers all have irregular or long work hours. This suggests that the piece-rate policy makes the married women not only financially dependent on their husbands but they also must carry out domestic work to accommodate their husbands’ relatively high-paid occupations. Thus, the piece-rate wage in part reinforces the household gender relationship by making the work schedule flexible and by reducing the value of these women’s market-labour time. In fact, I observed that skilled weavers were in great demand in the TAR carpet industry. The factory could keep the wage rate low by including married women who accepted such low-paid jobs because these women did not demand subsistence wages. Another reason was that the married women preferred working in a factory, close to their children’s day-care and schools. In short, the married women were thought of and thought of themselves as wives, mothers, not primarily as wage earners. This cultural ideology made it possible for the factory to underpay them; the factory employed them to show that there was no

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4 Carmen Sirianni and Cynthia Negrey, “Working Time as Gendered Time,” *Feminist Economics* 6, no.1 (2000): 59-76. This article includes a good literature review on temporal asymmetries in household-labor time, although their case studies were all from West European and North American countries.

5 Twenty-four out of twenty-eight married women answered this question in the survey. Among the twenty-eight women, two reported that their husbands had passed away.
labor shortage; but this situation made it difficult for the unmarried women to negotiate with their employers for a minimum wage. They could barely make a living by weaving carpets; many still received foods (e.g., barley flour and butter) from their rural families.

These institutional practices were not always consistent in their application. For example, some women who did not live in the dorms still wove small rugs at home. If there was an order for hanging rugs, then the production manager asked the “more experienced” workers to weave them. Nonetheless, the intricate policy devices created a condition in which the factory owner could maximize the use value of women’s labour for surplus production. Simultaneously, the piece-rate system incorporated gender ideology to reinforce gendered meanings of their work and reproduced patriarchal families in urban Lhasa. Next, I discuss this wage policy and the larger political trend, in which the CCP strategically created and embraced the private sector. This linkage is important for comprehending the perpetuation of low wages in the carpet industry from a broad and historical perspective. Also, this section discusses Nima’s cultural and economic principles in his management of Lhasa Carpets Inc.

**Wealth and Power**

When the piece-wage policy was first implemented, the cadre-managers claimed that workers happily embraced it. Several old workers revealed to me that in the 1980s, temporary workers’ wages were not depressingly low. One informant recalled that her wage simply did not grow in tandem with the rest of the local economy:

> When I entered the factory [in 1987], my wage was ok. Other [state] workers were paid not much more. Goods were not expensive. Then, the salaries in the *shiye danwei* (nonproduction work units)\(^6\) increased quickly. And the prices of goods increased. Now, it is hard to live on a small wage.

\(^6\) In the Chinese socialist *danwei* system, the *shiye danwei*, or nonproduction work units, include research institutions, educational institutions, social and professional organizations, health services, cultural organizations, athletic organizations as well as telecommunication and postal institutions, and transportation. Since the 1990s, private schools and hospitals started to emerge in some coastal cities. The telecommunication and postal institutions, railways, airlines, and public transit systems were still publicly owned but were commercialized. For the literature on *shiye danwei*, see for example, Xiaobo Lü and Elizabeth J. Perry, *Introduction*, 7.
In the planned economic system, both the *qiye danwei* (factories) and *shiye danwei* (the nonproduction sector) were public owned institutions. The socialist state set up a centralized wage policy for all the enterprises. This worker remembered her factory as a state-owned enterprise (SOE), which initially adopted a wage rate that matched her consumption needs. Her comment suggested that Lhasa Carpets’ managers reduced the growth rate of real wages to keep production cost low; at the same time the market-oriented policy created economic inflation to boost the market prices of goods. The immediate consequence of this dual process was the reduced average standard of wages, by which workers could obtain their means of subsistence. Huge wage gaps between the *qiye danwei* and *shiye danwei* are evident in the official statistics: in 2002, the average wage in Lhasa’s manufacturing sector was 6965 yuans per year (state-owned factories) and 10112 yuans per year (collective factories); in contrast, the average wage of state employees in government bureaus was 29958 yuans per year. Temporary workers in Lhasa Carpets found that they paid a particularly high price for China’s economic reforms. As their real wage did not keep pace with inflation, the value of their labour power diminished rapidly.

Furthermore, the devaluation of carpet workers’ labour power paralleled the political trend that fostered an alliance between the CCP and the private business owners. For example, Dickson pointed out that since the early 2000s the CCP embraces the private sector both by inviting entrepreneurs to join the Party organizations and by encouraging current cadre-managers to go into business. This process is very ambiguous and complicated by the CCP political reform: the regulations for “National Civil Servants” state that government officials and military personnel are not allowed to own any shares of private enterprises or to conduct business. Under such circumstances, the piece-rate wage policy was part of a new factory regime that arose from negotiations among the formal or informal members of the CCP.

Nima was a cadre-manager sent by the government to run Lhasa Carpets in the fall of 2001. According to him, he had a MBA degree, worked for several state economic

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planning offices, and supervised enterprise reform programs in Lhasa before he was assigned to Lhasa Carpets. In 2005, he abandoned his cadre hat in order to purchase the state-owned carpet factory. He was a canny Tibetan businessman in his mid forties. I saw him in the factory inspecting finished carpets with production managers, speaking to workers during workers’ meetings, and accompanying customers to the weaving workshop. He was fluent in Tibetan and Mandarin, always wore a business suit, and drove his land cruiser to work. He told me, “After I bought the factory’s shares, I envisioned a new starting point. To quit my government job was like going out to sea (xia hai).”

Nima represented his turn to economic individualism as his own individual choice. In fact, his decision corresponded to the government policy, which pushed for almost universal privatization of state-owned enterprises in 2000-01. He may have had personal reasons for his decisions to xia hai, but by going private, he also implemented state policy. He claimed: “entrepreneurs move society forward. Without entrepreneurs, how could our society develop?!” His statement was much in accordance with the ethos of the time, not only in Tibet but all across China—the celebration of individual entrepreneurship. Entrepreneurs are seen as the main creators of wealth, while workers are condemned for being conservative and unproductive. Justifying his wage policy, he said:

Our factory was originally a state enterprise and has been privatized for only a year. I could not reform it completely within this one year. Therefore, I partially followed the old way of conducting my business. Previously, I took additional expenses into account when I measured  

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10 Nima bought the factory with a few other shareholders. However, I was not able to find out who these peoples are. I was told by other informants that Nima still kept his party membership. However, he avoided talking about his political affiliation in front of me.

11 “Xiahai” has been a common term, much in fashion since the late 1980s. For discussion on the “xia hai” phenomenon see for example, Timothy Brook, “Profit and Righteousness in Chinese Economic Culture,” in Culture and Economy: The Shaping of Capitalism in Eastern Asia, eds. Timothy Brook and Hy V. Luong, 28-29 (Michigan: University of Michigan Press, 1999).

12 Dickson, Integrating Wealth, 835-836.

13 Several authors have pointed out this discourse on entrepreneurship in China. See for example, Yan Hairong, “Neoliberal Governmentality and Neohumanism: Organizing Suzhi/Value Flow through Labor Recruitment Networks,” Cultural Anthropology 18, no. 4 (2003):495-500. Also, Melissa W. Wright has shown how gendered views on workers is incorporated into management practices in her paper “Factory Daughters and Chinese Modernity: A Case from Dongguan,” Geoforum 34, no. 3(2003):296-299.
production costs, such as workers’ pension, health plans, taxes, and other government fees. So, our production cost was very high. Now, I know I can make these costs lower. But if I need to improve my workers’ wages, then I have to look at the entire industry. This is a market economy.

To make his latter point clear, Nima showed me the examples of factories in China’s Guangdong province:

In Guangdong, if I have a large order today, then I can call up workers and ask them to make carpets. After the contract is done, I can lay off workers and let them go. In our carpet factory, as soon as I hire a woman worker, I cannot fire her. In Tibet, if I asked someone to stop working, then these workers may go to talk to the workers’ union, the labour bureau, the economic trade committee, or other government agencies. Then, these cadres will come to question me. The government cares about Tibet’s stability. Stability overrides everything [wending yadao yiqie]. If I increase my workers’ wages, then I am afraid that I will not be able to reduce it in the future.

His comments explain how Lhasa Carpets Inc. was established in the negotiation of state-capital power-relations with “TAR characteristics.” Nima was among the people that benefited from the privatization of many state-owned enterprises. With rich working experiences in the government, he understood that the development policy and China’s unification project determined to what extend the labour issue could affect cadre-capitalists’ power in the TAR; in this game, the state held a “security” card. Nima had to carry out his privatization scheme to accommodate or take advantage of the TAR stability agenda. As long as he could keep his workers busy, he did not have to worry that his business would attract government hostility. The Tibetan cadre capitalist was willing to accept the CCP’s rule that has allowed them to prosper. In short, the piece-rate wage regime was implemented partially through the social structure of unequal gender

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14 Dickson made similar observations on the Han-Chinese cadre-capitalists. Dickson, Integrating Wealth, 847-852.
relations, and it contributed to the surplus production on the shop floor. Further, I think this perpetuation of low wages in Lhasa Carpets Inc. was shaped by the mixed effects of the Sino-Tibet political economy at the macro-level and the government security concerns in Tibet.

At the firm level, the Tibetan cadre-capitalist also justified his wage policy by using Buddhist moral discourse. Nima was keen to talk about cultural problems in economic development. “Although my blood and language is Tibetan, my way of thinking and doing business is actually drawn from the Han culture,” he said, “In Tibetans’ minds, businessmen are bad people. This is the old view.” He praised the entrepreneurship in Guangdong, Fujian, and Zhejiang, the three most prosperous regions in China, and argued that the Chinese mercantile culture is important to a place’s economic success. However, he quickly pointed out his business’s “Tibetan characteristics.” “I am a Buddhist,” the former party cadre added, “I do not cheat while conducting business.” Quickly, he began to sound like a communist cadre, “I use my two hands and work hard.” By the end of our conversation, Nima again used religious language to make his point. “From a Buddhist perspective, I wanted to increase wages. However, if I increase wages and do not have enough contracts, I will not be able to run my business.”

On the one hand, Nima criticized Tibetans’ negative evaluation of profit; on the other hand, he used Buddhism to differentiate his business approach from what he considered non-ethical practices. His paradoxical views on “Tibetan cultural tradition” demonstrate how he selectively drew certain elements from the Tibetan cultural system to reinvent a moral framework in which to act. He repeatedly emphasized his Buddhist principles in order to show me that he was not a capitalist who only thinks of profit. His rationale or business philosophy might be understood as endowing himself with a good “spirit,” in Max Weber’s sense.15 When the communist and socialist doctrines cannot sufficiently provide a Tibetan cadre-capitalist with a convincing moral base, the cadre-capitalist looks to religion that can lend his economic pursuit moral significance.

Holidays and Holy Foods

All of the women weavers at Lhasa Carpets Inc. were Buddhists who openly talked about their religious beliefs and displayed their devotion. There were altars in all of my informants’ apartments, no matter how small the living space. Many hung famous lamas’ pictures on the walls of their small bachelor suites. At the same time, they embraced many contemporary forms of local/non-local cultural entertainment. They told me that they liked Tibetan pop songs, enjoyed watching Bollywood music videos, and kept themselves updated on Korean or Chinese romantic TV dramas, broadcast by the Lhasa Television Station. With the assistance of mass media, these women were exposed to a complex and evolving symbolic environment. The new factory owner did not overlook this profound aspect in his workers’ lives. Since Nima bought the carpet factory, the Tibetan religious holidays were incorporated into the factory’s calendar, thus blending management and religious practice.

In late August, I saw a red banner with large Chinese characters being hung over the factory’s gate. Its style resembled government propaganda banners that advocate the state’s social agendas and call people to action. However, this banner actually celebrated Tibetans’ Shoton or Yogurt Festival. On this occasion, Tibetans picnic in parks, eat yogurt, and watch Tibetan operas that teach the Buddhist canon. In recent years, this festival has been recognized by the government and has become increasingly commercialized. It is now a major Tibetan festival promoted by the tourist bureau. I heard that the workers were given one day off on Shoton. The factory followed the government cultural policy and took measures to support this religious holiday. In a similar vein, during the Tibetan New Year—Losar, the factory was shut down for about a month to allow workers to return to their natal villages, where they participate in varied Losar events.

Tibetans also have numerous religious festivals that the Chinese official calendar does not recognize. The factory informally accommodated women workers’ religious activities on these auspicious days. An unspoken rule seemed to operate behind the factory gate. For example, the Tsongkapa Butter Lamp Festival commemorates the founder of the Gelugpa (Tibetan Yellow Hat sect) in November. On the evening of this festival, butter lamps are displayed in front of house windows to light the streets.
Thousands of people gather in the spiritual centre of Lhasa—the Jokang temple—waiting to enter the chanting hall or to simply walk around the temple. In the afternoon of the butter lamp festival, I noticed that many women workers were discussing their night outing. In particular, unmarried women without children were planning to go to Jokang together. In the afternoon, I walked by the factory and found the workshop closed. Then, I went to meet two women workers in their dormitory. They had already prepared special noodle dishes for the festival. We ate hot noodles together and lit seven butter lamps in front of the window. After that, we met a few other women workers who had gathered in front of the residence gate, and they were all ready to visit Jokang. Later, I was told that the government does not encourage employees of state institutions to participate in such big religious events. For example, professors from Tibet University were not ‘allowed’ to join the prayer crowd. Probably, the carpet workers were able to ignore this rule after the factory was changed into Lhasa Carpets Inc.

Another example is a special Lhasa holiday, the White Lhamo Festival, celebrated on the 15th day of the 10th month in the Tibetan lunar calendar. Because this holiday commemorates Palden Lhamo and her daughter—the protective deities of Lhasa, it was not commonly practiced outside the city. I was totally unaware of this event and went to the factory to meet people as usual. Then, I found nobody was working in the factory. In the afternoon, I ran into several women workers, who were strolling with their husbands or friends in the streets. Later, they told me this holiday is especially important to young women because the fable says that the deity’s daughter, White Lhamo, is only allowed to meet her lover once a year on this special day. The young women use this occasion to pray in Palden Lhamo’s temples for true love and good marriages. Also, the latest trend was that the local people considered young women a source of good luck for men during the festival. If a young woman asks a man for a little money, then she will bring him good fortune. More commonly, young women use this opportunity to socialize with their peers.

In addition to these religious holidays, the women workers sometimes received auspicious gifts from their employers. I was once invited by them to eat “blessed cakes”—Torma, during a tea break. These are barley flour cakes made in different shapes, decorated with coloured dyes and look like small clay figures. Torma are part of
the offerings to deities and a symbol of many things, such as healing foods, purifying tools, and/or weapons against devils. Some workers told me that these cakes were made by monks for special religious rituals or ceremonies, and that bring good luck. I asked them where they got these cakes. They said that the managers just returned from a monastery. Somehow, they got the Torma cakes and distributed them to the workers. Apparently, Nima knew that these auspicious foods contain moral attributes that his workers could identify and appreciate.

Lhasa Carpets’ non-pecuniary policy worked well by incorporating workers’ religious customs into the intense production cycle; and Nima cleverly demonstrated his cultural and religious affinity with his workers. What is not so obvious is that such Buddhism-inspired practice was part of the privatization. Nima described to me:

When it [Lhasa Carpets] was a government factory, I mainly had conflicts with the officials and government agencies at the higher levels. My work plan was completely messed up by them because I had to follow their ways of doing business. If I did not follow orders, they could fire me. After the reform [privatization], I had problems with my workers. Most of my workers are “temporary workers.” If they are formal workers, then they are entitled to pensions and healthcare. But these temporary workers were not automatically included in the municipal social welfare regime. My biggest challenge is how to give them benefits.

The establishment of Lhasa Carpets Inc. transformed the cadre-capitalist’s relationship both with the party-state and the workers. He was no longer subject to the absolute state censorship and bureaucracy; he could more creatively formulate a factory rule sensitive to workers’ spiritual needs, regardless of the government’s anti-religion attitude. However, the Buddhism-inspired policy needs to be examined in the context of the changed ownership and emergent tensions on the shop floor. In 2006, the majority of the workers were still not enrolled in the citywide pension plans: the Labour Bureau collects pension premium from workers and their employers till workers retire from their factories.

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(or for at least fourteen years); after that workers will be able to draw their pension on a monthly basis. Some workers were bargaining with Nima over who should pay the pension premium between 2002 and 2006 (the period starting from his cadre-manager appointment to the end of the public ownership). Instead of demanding pension rights from the government, the workers quickly turned to Nima, who was now legally responsible for paying part of the premium. Thus, Nima’s real ‘challenge’ was and is how to ease the labour tensions on the shop floor, without increasing wages or giving workers pension money.

The non-pecuniary policy demonstrates how certain elements of Tibetan religious culture can be used as a buffer against labour protests. The Marxist wage theory has suggested that workers have both physiological and historical-moral needs. The willingness to work under given physical and economic conditions is linked to the individual’s consumption level, which is “not simply a sum-total of calories, but is also a function of what is commonly considered by the working class to be its ‘current,’ ‘habitual’ standard of living.” I expand this notion of historical-moral need to emphasize it as a manifestation of a cultural-ideological framework, by which a person makes sense of the world and gives meanings to her everyday activities. The Tibetan carpet workers’ cultural tradition prescribes some essential aspects in their current cultural framework; religious activities constitute an important part of their “habitual standard of living.” If we regard religious holidays and blessed foods as a form of cultural commodity, then the cadre-capitalist gave these “commodities” to the workers as a compensation for the moral-historical components of the value of labour-power. In other words, this strategy was to create cultural space for women workers to invest meanings in their worldly pursuits, acquire a sense of dignity, and maintain a cultural

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17 The national pension policy was announced in 1997. It was applied to stated-owned and collective enterprises. Between 1999 and 2002, this policy was modified to include employees from joint ventures and private enterprises, and small private business owners. The official retirement age for women and men workers is 50 and 60 respectively. The proportion that workers and employers pay is determined by the provincial government. For information on the pension policy, see the official website: http://news.xinhuanet.com/zhengfu/2004-09/07/content_1952488.htm (accessed on October 8, 2009)
18 The details of this negotiation were not revealed to me by either workers or Nima. But I was constantly told by some workers, especially older ones, with an angry tone that they could not get this pension.
20 Ibid., 67.
membership. This Buddhist “welfare” policy is especially important since the wage was set below the subsistence level and Nima did not want to lose his workers. The non-pecuniary rewards were the result of ‘calm’ labour disputes and negotiations. The Tibetan cadre capitalist chose to enhance workers’ cultural rewards with the aim of stabilizing workshop order.

In addition, women workers’ active religious life suggests that in this society, women are more susceptible to these strategies because they are socialized to think of their work less in cash terms and more in terms of gendered virtue. Men think of work in terms of the ability to play roles as family’s main income contributors; by contrast, women have less pressure to do this but may perceive carpet-weaving as means to obtain female autonomy in both spiritual and material senses. The next chapter will explore carpet workers’ ideas of work and its effects on their career and residence choices.

What does the Buddhism-inspired rule in a newly-privatized, Tibetan-owned factory signify? I think this example expresses the power of a liminal cultural realm that is equivocal and ambiguous. Nima’s explicit glorification of economic individualism and use of Buddhist ideas suggest that this space expands through the negotiation of neoliberal power relations. In the last section, I examine how Lhasa Carpets Inc. became a hybrid cultural space through the real estate development and how this process affected workers’ participations in workshop politics.

Dorms in a Migrant Village

The privatization of Lhasa Carpets involved complex real estate deals. The factory was built on the outskirts of Lhasa in the early 1950s. As the city expanded around it in the next five decades, the location of the factory became prime real estate. In 2002-2003, Nima (then factory director-manager, not yet the factory owner) decided to rebuild the dormitory quarter and rent out part of the residential land to small businesses, such as restaurant, barbershop, convinience store, and clothing store. This was a common strategy and very profitable (nominally for the factory; but in practice, factory managers could easily enrich themselves.) At that time, the dorms and the factory compound

were located on the opposite sides of the main road, Jiangsu Road. Soon after, Hong Kong investors came and wanted to use part of Lhasa Carpets’ land for building a five-star hotel. The municipal government asked Nima to move; Nima grasped the chance to negotiate a favourable privatization deal for himself. Likely, he could do this because he had a de facto veto power on the hotel project—danwei units that occupy land are difficult to move. After the workshop building was demolished in 2005-6, the new compound, which was much smaller than the previous one, was placed right next to workers’ dormitory quarter. I heard that during this transition, many workers were laid off or asked to retire; the production was reduced significantly.

According to my informants, the residence quarter previously included several Tibetan-style dormitory buildings, a canteen, a nursery, and a bathhouse. In 2007, I saw workers and other renters living in the one-story bungalows; small shops and the factory showroom were built next to the sidewalk; only two old dormitory buildings were left intact. The new weaving workshop was constructed in-between the factory administration building and the dorms. The workshop entrance faced the factory courtyard, but its rear windows faced the dormitory quarter. People had to walk out of the factory’s main gate and enter their residence through another entrance, (approximately a two-minute walk from the main gate). Thus, unlike standard factory dormitories that isolate workers from the world outside the factory walls, these women workers were in fact living in this densely packed space along with Tibetan, Han, and Hui (Chinese-muslin) migrants. Men, women, children, everyone could freely pass the dormitory gate during the daytime. Although the gate closed after eleven o’clock in the evening, there were no rules to restrict workers’ freedom to move in and out of this residence. It was very common for workers’ visiting relatives to board in these apartments. The lax security control and the presence of other migrant families made the

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22 The actual amount of money that Nima Tsering paid was not clear. I was told that he could purchase the factory at a reduced price because of this special circumstance.
23 You-tien Hsing discussed in detail that danwei authorities had great control over their land and could profit from selling their land use rights; however, the municipal government had limited power to interfere them. You-tien Hsing, Land and Territorial Politics, 579.
24 I do not know how many workers were asked to leave. The factory’s advertising booklet (printed in 2003) claims that the factory had 285 employees. In 2007, I saw 70-75 workers in total working in the main workshops.
dormitory quarter more like a migrant village, where the women workers played an indispensable part.

This dormitory quarter was within walking distance of several schools, bus stops, markets, and temples. Inside the quarter, there were a corner store and a tiny restaurant run by migrants from the Tibetan countryside. The restaurant was very popular among the carpet workers. During breaks, almost every woman in the weaving workshop would buy cheap snacks such as tea, spicy noodles, and steamed potatoes from the restaurant. Because the rear windows of their workshop faced the residence, it was convenient for the women to pay the waitress through the windows and then have their food and thermos passed from the other side of the wall.

Each bachelor unit was seven or eight square meters large; it was equipped with a gas stove and a ceiling lamp. The workers paid 30 yuans per month for the room and about 15 yuans for electricity and gas. All renters shared public toilets and tap water. The women saw such affordable downtown housing as part of subsidies from the factory. My survey shows that six out of ten women lived there; 80% of them were single.

The loosely-guarded dormitory entrance still made symbolic connections between the workers’ domestic and work spaces. It had a large signboard that constantly reminded these women that their factory membership afforded them an urban lifestyle. Also, the factory frequently put up red banners to decorate the entrances to accommodate government campaigns. I saw red banners, marked with such phrases as “Long Live the Chinese Communist Party” and “Welcome and Celebrate the National Day.” Previously, the gates and red banners constituted a socialist enterprise’s visage and symbolized the power of the CCP. Since the privatization, these political banners strikingly displayed an ironic continuity between the factory’s previous and current political orientations.

I was intrigued by how the women workers furnished their rooms. The single women did not share apartments to save money. Apparently, they stored their hard-earned belongings, such as nice furniture and televisions sets, in their own suites. This was very different from the conventional dormitory settings, where several people had to sleep on double-deck beds and use utensils of minimum value. By contrast, these women made a great effort to accumulate ‘modern objects’ and carve out their private space in
this migrant neighbourhood. These things expressed their socio-economic independence as well as their desires for building a permanent home in urban Tibet.

Curiously, in other cases, these women preferred using utilities in the factory. During lunch breaks (from 1:00pm to 2:30pm), some women often used the water fountain in the factory – not because they wanted to reduce their hydro bill, which was included in their rent, but because they found it more convenient than to boil water in their homes, and because in the yard they could take up more space without competing with their non-Tibetan neighbours. The managers allowed them to wash their hair or bathe their young children beside the factory’s fountain. These activities and loose regulations blurred the boundaries between these women’s private life and work.

These examples demonstrate how the real estate deals in part gave rise to a hybrid cultural space friendly to these women. In fact, the workers described the dorms as one of the most important reasons why they wanted to stay on in their underpaid jobs. They could not only benefit from the inexpensive rental but also derive a sense of security, autonomy, and belonging from this complex spatial-cultural arrangement. Also, there was another layer of politics that explains these women’s support of this housing project. Because these weavers were temporary workers without local residence permits, they were at first disadvantaged by the policy that entitled the state workers to public housing benefits. The commercial housing appropriated the public land and in turn partially solved the temps’ problem in creating a permanent home. I was told that some of these workers were persuaded to invest their savings in this real estate development, with an expectation that they would be able to live in this residential quarter in the long run. Thus, a migrant village became an integral part of the privatized factory.

Nevertheless, the hybrid living space can also provoke suspicion and criticism. The workers could be ridiculed for their migrant status, which was made more visible by their Chinese neighbours. Tseyang, a weaver at Lhasa Carpets, said that she wanted to rent a dormitory room next to her friends from the workshop. However, her brother opposed this idea. “He thought I would drink lots of alcohol with my co-workers,” said Tseyang. She was unable to refuse her brother’s demand and cohabited with her brother, sister-in-law and niece in a small one bedroom apartment in another district. Thus, in this hybrid cultural space, women workers want to explore the possibility of establishing their
urban subjectivity. At the same time, the ambiguity and perversity of this space might weaken women’s confidence in the power of their emergent urban identity and community solidarity.

**Gendered Workplace**

The factory setting displayed a different facet of hybrid cultural power. The new factory compound consisted of two main buildings: the workshop and the administration building. The administration building was laid out next to the workshop to form an L-shaped compound, facing the factory’s main gate on Jiangsu Lu (road). It housed the offices of designers and the production manager on the first floor, and had the offices of Nima, his assistants, and the accountants on the second floor. Behind the administration building, there was a small dye shop and a storehouse. Men predominated in the design office, the manager’s office, and the dye shop. The accountants were two Chinese women and one Tibetan woman. Women weavers only came to this building when they had to talk to the designers or the production manager.

Like the administration building, the workshop building was two stories high. It had only one entrance, although the internal structure was divided into two sections. Two-thirds of the internal space was taken up by the weaving workshop, which had fifteen iron looms in several different sizes. Sixty or more carpet weavers could work in this space. The other section had two levels. A shearing workshop was located on the ground floor. No more than ten women worked in this room, separated from the weaving workshop by a wall with large glass windows. Dyed yarn, cotton yarn, and other production materials were stored in a warehouse next to a small winding workshop on the second floor. I saw two or three women working there making balls of machine-spun and chemically dyed yarn for weavers’ use.

All the workers in this compound were women. Each workshop followed its own routine; for example, the winding and shearing workshops closed before six o’clock in the afternoon. When there were no carpets to work on, the shearing workshop shut down for a few days. Workers in these shops were paid piece-rate and generally speaking worked fewer hours than the weavers. The spatial organization of the factory prevented
women in the different workshops from interacting with each other during the day. I mainly spent time with the carpet weavers, following and observing their work routine.

Male employees did not enter the weaving workshop to casually interact with women workers. Occasionally, senior male employees, such as the designers, the production manager, and Nima, came to inspect the women’s work. Young Tibetan men, such as the manager assistants, entered the weaving workshop only when they had to, for example, when women weavers needed more yarn from the warehouse. I never saw young male employees chatting with women weavers during the breaks. In fact, whenever I spotted a young man in the workshop, he appeared shy and nervous in front of the weavers.

This gender dynamic in the weaving workshop was challenged when Nima hired a male master weaver to experiment with Chinese knotting techniques to make Tibetan-style hanging rugs. Master Ma was a Hui (Chinese Muslim) from Ningxia who had obtained his skill in Mongolia and then worked in Tianjing’s carpet factories for many years. In the fall of 2006, Ma, his wife and five-year old daughter moved to Lhasa to start a career in the carpet factory. None of them spoke Tibetan, which made it difficult for them to approach the workers. When I met him in the workshop, he had been working on a hanging rug with Tibetan auspicious symbols for a few weeks. A special loom had been set up for him, leaving a large space between his work station and the women’s looms. Visually, this layout separated Ma from the rest of the workers.

In the first few weeks, Ma’s wife and daughter accompanied him while he was working. The wife usually sat beside her husband while the child played around the loom. Sometimes, a few women workers would come to play with the little girl and offer her snacks. After a few weeks, the daughter was sent back to the grandparents and Ma’s wife found a job in a grocery store. After that, he worked quietly and rarely interacted with the women workers. My impression is that his presence made the feminine culture in this workplace more obvious. I was teased by some women workers several times about my interactions with him. It was not that Ma’s language and religion were unfamiliar to the Tibetan women, who in fact often bought meat and groceries from Hui butchers and shopkeepers. Nevertheless, his presence in this feminized workplace
seemed to make the women workers feel uncomfortable and they seemed less than enthusiastic about the skills that he brought to the workshop.

Ma’s technique was actually identical to that taught by Chinese masters in the Kashag workshop, more than a half century ago. After this organization was taken over by the socialist Chinese government and converted into Lhasa Carpets, Tibetan artisans continued to use Chinese rather than Tibetan knotting techniques. It was not until the early 1970s that the TAR government ordered Lhasa Carpets to replace Chinese knotting with Tibetan knotting for export. Nima, whose Lhasa Carpets Inc., was the third reincarnation of the workshop, decided to pick up this legacy again. Ma told me that Nima was keenly interested in his skills and paid him one thousand yuans per month, the highest salary in the factory. He also said that he was negotiating about teaching his skills to women workers in the future.

Near the end of my fieldwork, Ma invited me to his home for lunch. He and his wife rented a room in the factory residence quarter. When the day came, he regretfully informed me that his wife was too busy to prepare good food, but he insisted that I should come to have a chat with him. During our conversations, he told me how difficult it was for him to pursue a career at Lhasa Carpets Inc. Some employees, especially the production manager, opposed his hiring because they believed that Tibetan carpets were superior to Chinese ones and that therefore there was no need to hire a new master. One of his finished rugs was mysteriously slit by people who were jealous of his ability and salary. He was once so disappointed by the situation in the factory that he thought of giving up his weaving job. He pointed me two large sacks of dried raisins, apricots, and dates. He said that many Hui people in Lhasa sold dried fruit and that there was a good business network. However, he found making carpets much more fulfilling than selling food on the streets. Then, he revealed to me that Nima had agreed to hire him to teach women workers his weaving technique.

A few days’ later, I had an interview with Nima in his office and spotted the mysterious sabotaged rug that Ma mentioned. I asked Nima to tell me the story behind this rug. Nima said:

I want my workers to learn the Chinese-knotting technique. But some of the workers and managers oppose this idea. They did not complain in front
of me. Look, this tapestry was slit in the workshop. They reported to me that nobody saw who did it. They guess that some workers’ children used a knife to slit the surface. I think this is an example of how they show their resentment.

T: Why did people not want to learn this skill?

Nima: I am a factory director. I conduct business from a businessman’s point of view. If we do not adopt this technique, then we will eventually lose our competitive edge one day. Therefore, I want my workers to learn this skill. But my workers do not think in this way. They said that Tibetans make Tibetan carpets from generation to generation. They do not want to learn Han-knot rugs.

Nima suggested that workers were conservative and suspicious of his initiative, but Ma said that the opposition came mainly from the production manager, who felt threatened by his rising position in the factory. Were women workers as conservative as Nima claimed? Perhaps Nima’s image of workers resisting change is another product of the stereotypical view of women workers. Again, he portrayed himself to me as the agent of economic reform, while glossing over the real conflicts of interest.

**Concluding Remarks**

This chapter analyzes a few practices and policies that came along with the establishment of Lhasa Carpets Inc. These factory-level rules operated through various and interconnected cultural ideologies, and they produced intended and unintended consequences that shape labour relations and affect individuals’ subject formations. First, the piece-rate wage policy, the regulation on workshop’s opening hours, and the distribution of bonuses constitute a flexible labour regime, which is built on gendered notions of labour time and work. This regime incorporated married women who did not bring a demand for a minimum wage into the workforce; the hiring of married women created an illusion of labour supply and made it difficult for unmarried women to seek
wage increases. Second, I examine the non-pecuniary policy that Nima deployed to demonstrate his cultural affinity with the workers in the context of low wages and absent pension rights. This policy ostensibly accommodates workers’ religious customs, but its real objective is to stabilize the workshop order after the transfer of the factory ownership. The third case is a few real estate deals which started in 2002 to generate extra income for the factory, in part to solve temporary workers’ residence problems, and finally led to the complete privatization of Lhasa Carpets. These slightly shady business deals tied Nima and workers together, as they both benefited from the revenues generated by the commercial rentals and privatizing the public property. For Nima, the main prize was the ownership of Lhasa Carpets Inc.; for the workers, the affordable downtown apartments facilitated their desire for “owning” a home in Lhasa. These practices in one way or another contributed to the evolution of a hybrid cultural space inside and outside the gendered workplace. What is important is that recent developments enabled people at Lhasa Carpets Inc. to construct their subjectivities in complex and profound ways.

One example is Tibetan cadre-capitalist Nima, who skilfully selected and blended varied cultural perspectives from Buddhism, socialism, neo-liberalism, and many others to re-invent his moral framework and define his Tibetan subject position: a Buddhist businessman. This embrace of cultural hybridism is the result of a careful reckoning of the neo-liberal power dynamism that he wanted to take advantage of. As I describe in the picnic scene, Nima celebrated the privatization as his triumph over the state bureaucracy. His construction of himself as a new Tibetan subject, (as he demanded me to describe him), was to challenge the Chinese “civilizing” project. Nevertheless, he wanted to join the dominant economic power and closely engage in the global capitalist market. This will and desire ultimately bind him tightly to the unification and modernization projects authorized by the party-state.

Women carpet workers also actively took part in producing a hybrid cultural space. In so doing, they invested in both building an urban home and reinventing their urban subjectivity to express their economic autonomy, spiritual merits, as well as city sophistication. Such concerted efforts might be seen as a response to migrant women’s marginalized socio-economic status in the city and the denial of their full labour rights by the government. However, their determination to settle into urban Tibet made them
complicit in the commercialization and privatization of public properties, a centrepiece of the New Tibet developmentalism. Furthermore, they entered into patriarchal relations of production, which, under the impact of privatization, increasingly marginalize these women. I continue to explore these questions in the next chapter by looking at weavers’ work and life transitions in moving from the rural areas to the city.

My last example is about the politics of hiring a Hui master. Master Ma’s tapestry was slit secretly; the knife cut the Chinese knots that tie the yarn together to create auspicious Tibetan symbols on this rug. What are the cuts saying to us? Nima and Ma had their interpretations. I think perhaps the cuts across the Tibetan motif reveal a form of resistance that emerged from people’s conflicted attitudes towards the hybridized culture and their anxieties over the widening socio-economic gap at Lhasa Carpets Inc. and beyond. Also, Ma’s presence disturbed the Tibetan patriarchal order in the factory; he was entering a power game with the Tibetan male managers. In this incident, the women’s children became scapegoats for someone’s angry act, and this accusation implicitly placed the married workers in an awkward position and exposed their vulnerability under the patriarchal-managerial power. If Ma continued to work in the factory, then his activity would complicate the cultural dynamics that sustains the patriarchal production relations. For women workers, learning new skills might bring new opportunities and help to break up established power relations.
Photo 7: Mounting the cotton warp on a large iron loom

Photo 8: The weaving workshop

Tracy Y. Zhang © Lhasa 2006
FROM PEASANT DAUGHTERS TO FACTORY “NUNS”: CARPET WEAVERS’ SUBJECT FORMATIONS IN MODERN LHASA

The carpet weavers’ work and life experiences, as documented in this chapter, are basic to an understanding of these women’s career and residence choices, and more importantly how they changed their subject positions and improved their socio-economic status in Lhasa. Exploring subject formation is to think about strategies which migrant women workers can use to have their voices heard and challenge the patriarchal nature of the production process. Further, this chapter discusses the similarities and differences between Tibetan workers’ responses to privatization and the labour struggles that emerged from similar social processes in Chinese regions.

The chapter is divided into four sections. First, I present a demographic picture of the weavers from Lhasa Carpets Inc. (privatized in 2005), based on surveys conducted in the fall of 2006. One of the important findings is that the majority of the weavers had been “temporary workers,” a status that was used to justify their low wages for more than a decade. In the second section, I explore the factors that contribute to the weavers’ long-term commitment to Lhasa Carpets Inc. Using interviews with nine weavers I examine the interplay of family patriarchy and capital accumulation in the formation of a stable female labour force. The third section explores how these weavers responded to or challenged the imposed labour category of “temporary” worker. I elaborate on two examples of women who were able to obtain a different occupational status by drawing ideological and symbolic resources from socialism or Buddhism. I examine how shared interests and beliefs facilitated collective or individual actions by the weavers. In the final section, I look for signs of worker organization. The available evidence suggests that for long-term support, the weavers tend to form alliances with their families rather than with their co-workers.
Veterans of Lhasa Carpets: A Demographic Overview

Age, Marital Status, and Length of Stay at Lhasa Carpets

The average age of the 58 women weavers in my survey is thirty-three. Their average length of service at Lhasa Carpets was fourteen years. When they first entered the carpet factory, they were between seventeen and nineteen years old. In 2006, 31 out of 58 women were not married (three were divorcees, two widows).\(^1\) Married women accounted for 50% of the weavers employed in the factory before 2000. Many women remained single into their early or mid thirties.

In 1987-88, Lhasa Carpets transformed its structure from state-ownership into collective ownership and completely stopped recruiting workers through the municipal labour bureau. Twelve weavers entered the factory before 1988. However, only three of them obtained collective worker status, which grants them pension rights. Approximately 70% of the weavers were drafted into Lhasa Carpets between 1988 and 2002, before Nima started his directorship. Six weavers were recruited between 2003 and 2005. Government statistics also show that the number of employees at Lhasa Carpets increased significantly in the early 1990s: 213 employees in 1991 versus 320 employees in 1994.\(^2\) This hiring pattern confirms that the use of temporary weavers at Lhasa Carpets, which was still a public-owned enterprise, intensified in the mid 1990s. All but three collective weaver-workers were still classified as “temporary workers”, paid by piece-rate wage and without pension rights or health insurance in 2006.

Origins and Residence Status

The majority of the weavers (95%) came from three bordering regions: Lhasa, Shigatse, and Lhoka. Some were daughters of peasant families in Lhasa’s seven counties: Nyemo, Tolun Dechen, Taktse, Lhundup, Medro Gongkar, Chushur, and Dam.

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\(^1\) When I found that many weavers remained single in their early thirties, I realized that this phenomenon is not simply an indication of women’s socio-economic independence but a result of complex working and living arrangements.

The others came from the nearby counties in the Lhoka (Gonggar, Danang and Lhuntse) and Shigatse regions (Rinpung, Panam, and Gyantse). Most women’s natal families resided within a few hours’ bus ride to Lhasa city. Although most women had lived in Lhasa for more than a decade, only 18% of the weavers claim that they had permanent residence permits there. These women either inherited residence status from their parents or obtained it through marriage. Later, I discovered that several women had used personal connections to buy residence permits for their children because the local public schools required additional fees for children without resident permits.

**Skills and Education**

Born in large peasant households, my interviewees reported that they were not the main agricultural labour in their families before they came to Lhasa. Elder siblings usually carried out the family’s agricultural work, tilling the fields with parents. None of my informants had farming experience though some remembered having herded animals. It is reasonable to say that these women, when they were young, had few family obligations. They were considered surplus labour and could leave their parents to pursue different lives outside their natal villages.

Nearly eighty percent of the survey subjects said they first studied weaving at Lhasa Carpets. Only two women had learned the craft from their parents. All claimed their families had mobilized intricate social connections to secure them positions in the factory, financed their early years of training and encouraged them to stay on the job despite many hardships. They also suggested their parents had little interest in sending them to school. The average number of school years was only two; nearly sixty-seven percent of the surveyed weavers had received one year of schooling or less. Ten out of fifty-eight women had finished elementary school. Several stated their lack of education made them feel increasingly insecure in Lhasa. They were aware that although the government currently champions a development strategy that creates jobs for skilled workers, (many of them are migrants from “inland” China,) few opportunities exist for illiterate and semi-literate labourers. The women often stressed that their craft skill is essential to their survival in the urban labour market.
Compared to other private carpet factories, Lhasa Carpets lost few skilled workers to the industrial competition. The vast majority of the weavers had been “temps” for very long periods, and some had worked as many as twenty-three years. In the other large privately-owned factory, my survey results show, only twenty-five percent of the labour force stayed for more than five years. The different hiring patterns in the two factories may have resulted from discrepancies in working conditions and wage schemes. In fact, workers at Lhasa Carpets Inc. earned less than their counterparts in the other factories. So what factors contribute to Lhasa Carpets’ relative stability?

To answer this question, I chose to interview weavers from the groups drafted into the factory in the 1980s and 1990s because these weavers constituted 80% of the total workforce, and on average had worked in the factory for more than a decade. These women’s experiences in the transforming carpet industry and their perceptions of the shifting values of women’s labour could have been influenced by varying strands of cultural ideologies and social practices that constitute two decades of economic-political reforms. Patterns in their narratives pointed to the particular cultural and social forces that bind the weavers to the factory. The following sections will discuss these two job-entry cohorts—the 1980s and 1990s cohort separately.

**Entering Lhasa**

**A Good Path for Peasant Daughters: The 1980s cohort**

Pasang (married to a state employee) came from Tolun, a county under the jurisdiction of the Lhasa municipality. Born in 1970, she was her parents’ youngest child. She said that she did not need to work at home so attended elementary school for five years. Subsequently, her parents started to plan a future for her in Lhasa.

My parents asked my aunt [who lived in Lhasa] for help. She knew someone in this factory and helped me get a job. So I moved to Lhasa to work and lived with my aunt’s family.

Tracy: why didn’t you continue school?
Pasang: My parents thought it was better for me to learn a craft skill. I am the youngest child in my family. They didn’t need me to make money for them. But, [my parents thought], if a girl has a skill, then she can live on her own and find her way. Also, I liked the idea of living in Lhasa. The city is prosperous and beautiful, unlike the countryside, where people have to work in the fields. If I have a skill, I don’t need to work in agriculture. When I first started this job, I missed my parents because I could only visit them on Sundays. I always cried when I went to work. But, my parents told me if I wanted to succeed, I would have to go through this. So, I didn’t give up.

Nima Dolkar (single) was born in 1974, and her parents worked on a state farm in suburban Lhasa. She said that she dropped out of school early. Her parents supported her decision but did not want to let her miss the opportunity of learning a craft skill. She recalled:

The school was very far from my home. I could only go home once a week. Nobody took care of me in the school. So I decided to quit when I was thirteen or fourteen. After that, I studied Tibetan language in my parents’ work unit and didn’t have a formal job. After a few years, my parents’ co-worker told us that this carpet factory was hiring new workers. We heard that it was hard to get a job. So, I first spent a month learning and practicing basic weaving techniques with my parents’ co-worker in order to excel in my job interview.

Living in the countryside further away from Lhasa, Pema (married to a driver, born in 1968) and Sonam (married to a travelling businessman, born in 1967) never attended school. Pema was originally from Gyantse. She was about eight or nine when her parents sent her to work as a shepherd for relatives in the Lhasa area. Then she moved to live with her cousin and looked after her niece for several years. When she turned fourteen, she started to worry that she would be a domestic helper for the rest of her life.
I was very naive and even foolish. [I] didn’t think much about my life. [I] always did what the adults told me to do…and I didn’t have any education. People told me this skill [carpet-making] was very good. So, [my cousin] used her connection in this factory and found me a job.

Sonam was from an agricultural family in Chumdo (East Tibet). “[My parents and I] thought it would be easier to find a job in Lhasa and my life could be better there,” she said. When she left home, she was seventeen and first worked in a restaurant. After a year, she found a job in this carpet factory with the help of her relative. “I didn’t want to work in the restaurant anymore,” she explained, “Carpet-making is a skill. When my parents heard that I learned a craft skill, they were pleased. This job is secure and stable.”

What is implicit in these narratives is that these young women left their villages in the context of rural de-collectivization, implemented in the TAR after 1980. This policy was part of China’s early economic reform that disbanded the collective farms and redistributed fields, animals, and grazing land among peasants and nomads according to household size. Under the new policy measures, Tibetan farmers and nomads have more autonomy to control their own resources, household labour, and agriculture outputs. Like peasant households in agricultural regions elsewhere, heads of the Tibetan family attempt to maximize family income by directing the energies of family members to different employment opportunities in the local economy. For example, from the parents’ point of view, children should participate in productive work at home. If the family has no immediate need for child labour, the parents prefer their children to receive vocational training that prepares them to participate in the local economy. In addition, when the family is under the pressure of decreased land holdings per capita, the parents generally prefer not to divide properties among their children. Children who are not needed to


work in household-based agriculture or expected to take over the land, are often asked to seek alternative ways of living. At the same time, the enterprise reform enabled urban factories to increase their hiring of temporary workers. This created employment opportunities for the rural population who no longer need an urban residence permit to secure a city job. From Tibetan peasants’ point of view, this carpet factory was similar to prestigious government institutions: a place where people could acquire useful knowledge and lead stable lives distant from the rural economy. Significantly, these women’s memories of her childhood suggest that cultural factors, especially patriarchal ideology, affected their parents’ decisions on who inherit land; who look for off-farm work; what kind of work is suitable for young women. Daughters were convinced by their parents that they were better candidates for non-agricultural work (weaving carpets) than their brothers, who would take over the land. All of these factors explain why my carpet weavers’ families mobilized their kin to secure their daughters positions in a state enterprise. Some parents not only supported their daughters’ trainings but also financed their living expenses in the early years.

These cases demonstrate that customary practices, embedded in local gender and cultural norms, shape how Tibetan peasants respond to the socio-political forces that foster new forms of labour market, agricultural production, and industrial organization. Within the rural family structure, these women played roles as “good daughters,” who were encouraged to behave as docile, obedient women and to adapt themselves to a new social environment. The patriarchal household organization was an implicit but important factor contributing to the creation of a female workforce for the carpet industry. The next few interviews continue to explore this on-going interplay of patriarchy and

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5 Goldstein, Ben Jiao, Beall, and Phuntsog Tsering, 774-779.
6 Melvyn C. Goldstein discussed the patterns of Tibetan marriage and family in relation to rules of land tenure and the semi-feudal political-economic system in pro-1959 Gyantse. Goldstein, Stratification, 68-70. My findings suggest that my interviewees’ families adopted some aspects in these customary practices, such as patrilocality and monomarital principles. Also, Ben Jiao found the resurgence of polyandry in the post-1978 Shigatse region, despite the illegality of polyandry. He suggests that this social phenomenon has been greatly influenced by rural families’s economic strategy in the economic reform context. He gave several examples on inheritance practices that confirm my interviewees’ stories. Ben Jiao, “Socio-Economic and Cultural Factors Underlying the Contemporary Revival of Fraternal Polyandry in Tibet” (Ph.D. diss., Case Western Reserve University, 2001), 145-150. I speculate that the rural economic reform, such as the household responsibility system, to some extent revived the ideology of household-based “corporate wealth,” which was also the centre of inheritance rule in pre-1959 Shigatse. Tibetan farmers picked up some traditional inheritance practices to form new strategies, guarding their household wealth in a new socio-economic environment.
capital accumulation by looking at the life transitions of five young women who entered the factory in the 1990s.

**Pursuing a Different Life: The 1990s Cohort**

When I was taking photos inside the workshop, Tseyang (single, born in 1978) came to me and asked if I could take some pictures of her. I agreed and offered her free prints. A few days later, Sangmu (single, born 1973), Lhamu (divorced, born 1979), and Tseyang, who worked in a team, invited me to their dormitory, explaining they had just finished a large carpet so could take the afternoon off.

In Sangmu’s room, the small dining table was quickly piled with cooked potatoes and dried watermelon seeds. Sangmu also started to prepare butter tea and noodles. Other women turned on the TV and played a DVD to show me their favourite Tibetan music videos. Lhamu and Tseyang began to sing the lyrics, and then asked me to sing Chinese songs. One of them went out and returned with a large bottle of Tibetan barley beer and several cans of beer. We toasted each other and sang. They then said we were friends now. I understood that they were performing a ritual to begin a friendship with me.

Two other women whom I got to know well were Samgye (single, born 1977) and Lobsang (single, born 1971). Both of them were shop assistants. I met them during my first field trip in 2005. We formed a language exchange partnership and communicated only in Tibetan and English. I kept in touch with Samgye through e-mail after I returned to Vancouver. After I arrived in Lhasa in 2006, I first visited Samgye’s home. During her free time, she took me to monasteries, restaurants, and cyber cafes and we hung out with her friends who were learning English.

When I asked these five women why they moved to Lhasa, some described how attracted they felt by big cities when they were teenagers and by the opportunity to live different kinds of lives. Lhamu recalled,

Even when I was a child, I had this thought of going to Lhasa. I thought that Lhasa was better than the countryside. When I heard about a family that needed a nanny in the city, I told [my parents] that I wanted to go. I
was sixteen when I left the countryside. The family that I worked for had personal connections in the factory. I worked for them for three years. Then they helped me get this job. I wanted to learn a craft, because I never went to school and didn’t have any education.

Similarly, Samgye wished to see Lhasa. “I thought Lhasa was a very pleasant place. When my parents asked me if I wanted to live with my aunt in Lhasa, I did not hesitate.” Samgye first studied Tibetan language in a neighbourhood convent. “After a few years, I decided not to continue my studies, but I didn’t want to stay at home either,” she said. In 1996, with the help of her relative, she landed a job at Lhasa Carpets. She remembered, “In the beginning, I thought it was fun to work and sing with other women in the workshop. After a while, I realized weaving carpets is a skill. I wanted to learn it because I could depend on it to make a living.” Although the training was very stressful in the first few months, she became more confident. “When new students came, I was asked to teach them how to weave. I felt very good that I could do this.”

Tseyang and Lobsang’s stories also show the growing urban influences in rural areas and how such cultural changes could affect life expectations. Tseyang told me that she saw many women who had jobs in the cities return to her village for holidays. “I envied these women. They wore foreign clothes and looked very pretty,” Tseyang remembered:

In my village, girls braided their hair. These women pulled their hair back to make pony tails. They looked very happy. I thought if I went to the city, then I would be like them. At that time, I didn’t know the nature of life in the city and didn’t realize that I would have to find my way out.

When Tseyang was fifteen, she found a nanny job in Lhasa. However, her first experience in the city was unpleasant. She stayed for only four days. “I didn’t like it because in our village, children could play together in the evening. I could not have fun time in my employer’s home.” Tseyang said she begged the family to send her back. Two years later, another opportunity came to her. “We knew a woman from our village who worked for this factory,” Tseyang explained, “She said that I could make a living by
weaving carpets. I liked this idea and decided to go with her.” This woman had a loom at home and taught Tseyang how to make *khaden* rugs. Initially, Tseyang planned to get a job in the factory. However, because the factory was not hiring in 1991-2, she had to weave rugs at home, and the woman sold them in the market. She remembered how bored and lonely she felt the first year. Nonetheless, Tseyang said that she never wanted to go back after she got the factory job. She explained factory work gave her more autonomy, space, and social contact than work in a household.

Lobsang recalled that one of her childhood friends lured her into the city.

I didn’t have any clue why I wanted to live in Lhasa. I first came to the temples and monasteries in Lhasa. Then my friend wanted to find jobs. So, I followed her. But I didn’t have any goals or plans to make money for my family. My parents cared about me very much. I am their youngest child. They thought I was a reincarnation of a deceased son. So, they actually didn’t want me to live in Lhasa. They thought I would become a bad person, and would be killed by cars. But my friend said that I should find a job and learn a skill. If I had a job, then I would have a stable life and would not become a bad person. And I could make a living on my own. It would make me feel good. So, I didn’t listen to my parents and insisted on going with this friend. First, I worked on a construction site for three months. Then, my friend got ill. We returned to our home town. In 1994, we came back again. Some friends helped me find a job in this factory. The training was very difficult. My fingers hurt. I felt pain in my bones. I told my family that I did not want to make carpets anymore. But my elder brother said that this skill was very important. He said I would not be able to make a living without a skill. So, I didn’t give up and finished my training. I was happy about what I learned.

The personal aspirations for an urban lifestyle of this cohort seems to be shaped by both historical and new images of Lhasa, first as the centre of Tibetan religious culture and currently the heart of Tibetan modernization. These imaginings of Lhasa, fostered through their interactions with parents, kin, or friends, affected their expectations and
participation in rural-to-urban migration. Especially as adolescents they were eager to become independent from parents and to explore possibilities that the village could not provide. However, as I probed into the question of residence choice, the responses from this group revealed the family’s influence.

Making a Home in Lhasa

My interviewees from the 1980 cohort had all found ways to settle into Lhasa. Pasang and Pema married into local families and obtained residence permits. Nima Dolkar got her residence permit through her parents who had retired from a state farm to Lhasa. Sonam was married to a businessman from her home village, and although neither of them had a legal residence permit, she was able to buy a permit for her daughter. Lhamu’s (from the 1990 cohort) situation was similar to Sonam’s: she herself did not have a residence permit but bought one for her son. None of my informants, whether married or not, thought of returning to work in their home villages. I quote the following responses from the unmarried interviewees because they shed light on women’s motivations of working in the city and maintaining their memberships in the rural communities.

Sangmu’s parents passed away when she was very young. Her elder brothers supported her while she started working in the factory. Now, she visited her natal village once a year during the Tibetan New Year for about a month. She said before she disliked agricultural work. Nonetheless, she commented village people seem relatively happy. In the village, people work together from time to time and don’t need to worry about buying food. In the city, we have to work hard to earn a wage. But I cannot return to the village like this. My brothers have wives now. I don’t know if we would get along well with each other. If I went back, I wouldn’t want to stay with them. I would need to build my own house, buy animals and start everything all over again. Then, I would ask for farmland from my brothers. It would be very difficult and unpleasant. Our neighbours would gossip about us. I wouldn’t like it.
Lobsang had a slightly different attitude. She insisted that she remains aloof from city life. “For me, living in my home village and in Lhasa are the same. When I stay in my village for several weeks, I don’t miss Lhasa. When I am in Lhasa, I don’t miss the village very much.” Then, she admitted that her elder siblings are all married and work on the inherited land. Like Sangmu, she did not have direct access to land and animals in the village.

As I have described, parents and brothers played crucial roles in securing jobs for these women by financing training and even sending foods and money. The family actively invested in the daughters’ settlement in Lhasa probably because they did not expect these young women to go back to work in the villages. When the daughters obtained permanent jobs in Lhasa, they automatically relinquished their shares of land. As Sangmu elaborated, reclaiming her land could become a source of family friction. Thus, the rural family’s economic strategy greatly influences these weavers’ residence choices and encourages them to keep jobs regarded as stable and secure.

The weavers’ relationships with their rural kin were not completely broken. Commonly the weavers visit their villages during the Tibetan New Year holidays, and the factory closes for a month to accommodate them. Tseyang, although she aspired to city life, admitted that in addition to the New Year, she asked for leave in August to attend her community’s annual Ongkor Festival—a special occasion to celebrate the harvest. These activities, whether symbolic or economic, were important to the women because their village membership is also connected to their urban social networks founded on the basis of kinship and village origins. I observed that these relationships not only provide them information and/or material resources (e.g., employment opportunities, short-term loans, or inexpensive medicine supply) indispensable to their everyday activities, but also give them a sense of belonging in Lhasa. The rural families foster these relationships probably in hopes of opening opportunities for members of the next generation to carve out similar life paths.

Clearly, the 1980 and 1990 cohorts view their agency differently. The 1980 cohort attributed their migration to parent interest, while the 1990 cohort emphasized self-determination. More importantly, all of their stories reveal different scales and levels of power that affect their immigrant life in the city. First, government policies, such as
the household responsibility program, aimed to mobilize rural households towards capital accumulation. This policy was gradually adopted by the peasants to accommodate their customary practices of property distribution and inheritance. In this context, through the lens of local patriarchal culture, most of my interviewees were seen as surplus labour by their parents and were encouraged to work outside of agriculture. Motivated by mixed family and personal interests, these women left their hometowns to seek livelihoods and subsequently entered the factory.

Second, cultural mechanisms, such as patriarchy, oriented young women’s migration and also affected how they perceived an “ideal self,” in particular, how to reconcile the role of “good daughter” with desires for economic independence in Lhasa. The cultural assumption is that a “good daughter” practices self-denial and accepts subjugation to authority (parents or brothers); an “independent woman” believes in learning and self-improving. However, the following section will show that independence, if coupled with a strong sense of loyalty to parents and brothers, does not conflict with patriarchal norms; on the contrary, young women’s economic independence eases the burden of the brothers and enables them to reproduce their own patriarchal families.

This cultural system encourages the young women to behave as patient and tough workers in the face of economic hardships and social discrimination. Nevertheless, their acceptance of these cultural assumptions is not stable and can change, as they immigrate from village to city and encounter unanticipated emotional stress, alienation, boredom, and economic challenge. Their new working and living environments play an integral part in the making of their new subjectivity. For these women, Lhasa Carpets, as a state enterprise, not only provides them with a relatively stable source of income but also came to symbolize a workplace, laden with cultural significances such as: urban prosperity, freedom from farm work, and independence from family. The factory working experience might reinforce or challenge cultural norms that dictated how these women performed their gender roles in the village and to make sense of the changes in their lives.

Finally, both cohorts and their families identified carpet weaving as an opportunity or a special skill assisting them to achieve independence. Over the years, the employment of rural women led to changes in the definitions of carpet weaving; carpet
weaving became not only women’s work but also migrant women’s work, and this process involved transformations in the conditions and compensation for weavers’ labour. In 2006, in the Lhasa carpet industry, the majority of weavers were young rural women who do not have the basic labour rights, such as sick leave, pension, and health insurance—that the weaver-workers under the socialist factory welfare policy had. Confronting the shifting relations of production, how did these women make sense of and come to contest the imposed labour category—temporary workers?

“Lhasa Carpets” under the Eyes of Weavers

Surprisingly, the LC weavers described their factory as a model enterprise with a long history. Also, many weavers told me that they stayed in the factory because they hoped to “retire” (tui xiu in Mandarin) in the future. (Workers in state enterprises, after working a specific number of years, can qualify to receive fixed pensions.) Such responses were not found in the survey I conducted in a private factory. Very likely, this group of long-term weavers drew this “tui xiu” idea from their observations of the factory’s previous incarnation in the socialist era. Especially, the 1980 cohort openly questioned the absence of retirement rights.

Fighting for Worker Status

Several senior women weavers preferred to be interviewed together. Pasang proposed that we talked in Sonam’s home because her husband was away and her apartment was in the factory dormitory quarter. Six women participated in this interview session. These women entered the factory in the early and mid 1980s as “temporary workers,” and made carpets along with the “formal workers,” who were largely Lhasa residents. Among them, Pasang and Pema have pension rights; their current status is not

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8 I interviewed Pasang, Pema, Sonam, and Nima Dolkar and recorded our conversations. The two other workers declined to be interviewed but participated in our discussion about the factory’s work conditions in the 1980s and 1990s.
“formal worker” but “collective worker,” which means they are not entitled to healthcare, childcare, and housing allowances, but they qualify for pensions upon reaching age fifty. Even this limited privilege was accessible to very few workers in the weaving workshop. I was curious to discover how these women had managed to improve their status at the same time that Lhasa Carpets moved to a policy of exclusively recruiting young rural women as temporary workers.

Pema: Around the early 1990s, some workers started to talk about the possibility of getting pensions. They argued that we would have nothing to depend on after we retired. They hoped to receive some forms of stipend from the factory.

Basang: In fact, we heard...some high-up people knew that workers like us could apply for formal worker status. We decided to negotiate with our factory for our pensions. We first spoke to our factory cadres. But, they rejected our request. At that time, our relationship with the factory director became strained [the director Chophel, ran the factory in the 1990s and resigned before 2000]. He was angry and said that he did not care if we sued him. So, he taught us to sue him. We did it. (Pasang laughed)

Tracy: How many of you went to sue him? Where did you go?

Pema: We were about thirty people.

Pasang: We had a Han-Chinese Ayi [“aunt,” here refers to an older woman worker] in our group. She came to the factory in the 1970s. She spoke to the leaders. She said that the factory cadres had no responsibility (fudan) anymore because they only hired temporary workers. But, we joined the factory in the 1970s. We are old workers. [She implied that “we” should be treated differently from the new temps. And the factory had the money to improve old temps’ welfare.]
Pema: We went to the government Economic Planning Commission (
*Jingji jihua weiyuanhui*, or *Jingjiwei*). We told them that we had worked 
in this factory for so many years and did not get anything. We were still 
temporary workers. They first responded in a friendly way, taking us to a 
meeting room, writing down our names and the numbers of years we had 
worked in this factory. They made photocopies of these documents. 
However, after we came back to the factory, we saw nothing happening. 
One cadre from the committee came to inspect the situation. He asked us 
what we really wanted. One of the workers shouted, “We want a name 
(*mingzi*).” [In Mandarin, *mingzi* literally means a person’s name, but *ming* 
also refers to a person’s reputation and status.] He jokingly said if we just 
wanted a name, then he would pick a good date to give us names. He 
made me very angry. Although we did not have much education, the 
leaders should not have treated us like this.

Pasang: When I was seventeen, a cadre from the Women’s Federation 
came to our factory. We shook hands. And I had a chance to speak to her 
about my work in the factory…In the 1990s, we heard that there was a 
policy that said temporary workers could have rights to access government 
welfare benefits. So, we found this document and took it with us when we 
went to see the leaders.

Tracy: Do you still have this document?

Pema and Pasang responded together: We do not know where it is now. 
[Recently,] the factory said that there is no such policy anymore.

Pasang: That was not the end. We kept on requesting pension rights, 
arguing and having meetings with them. It took us a few years but in 1994 
we got our pension rights.
Both women stressed how some Han and Tibetan workers, despite their ethnic differences, organized to contest and fight for classification as “temporary workers” and for pension rights. Pema’s memory of weavers’ confrontations with the cadres from the Economic Planning Commission demonstrates how state power worked in collusion with the factory to undermine workers’ labour rights in the name of economic development. The party cadres’ indifferent responses agitated these women, who had been exposed to the socialist factory culture that supposedly defends workers’ (especially senior workers) interests.

Ching Kwan Lee found that Chinese workers from bankrupt state factories frequently turn their memories of socialism into “powerful moral and social critique of the present.” She demonstrates that workers’ experiences of socialism can be a source of moral solidarity, and that workers, in confronting police and officials, often employ socialist symbols or discourses to legitimate their protests. I argue that state workers’ subjectivity is constituted through their engagement with the hierarchies of difference and with the exclusionary policies. For example, temporary workers, like Pasang and Pema, were excluded from the category of “formal worker,” even though they worked for a state factory for more than two decades. They had to use their knowledge of socialism differently to legitimatize their actions against factory authority.

The insertion of an earlier visit by a woman cadre to Lhasa Carpets is revealing. This flashback to the socialist era implies a facet of Tibetan workers’ experience with socialism, which used such rhetoric as “workers are masters of the state” (guojia de zhurenweng) to stabilize socialist workplace orders. Pasang recalled this event to illustrate how she saw herself as a member of the larger state workforce and remembered that the state, represented by the Women’s Federation, was receptive to workers’ demands. Nonetheless, she also understood that in her factory, the official category of “state worker” did not acknowledge or give equal rights to workers, like her. Precisely,

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10 Ibid., 161.
11 During the interview, the words linshi gong and zhengshi gong were used to refer to “temporary worker” and “formal worker” respectively. My understanding is when they used the word gong ren (worker), it meant guojia gong ren (state worker) in a general sense.
these old temps’ self-identification as “state worker” and their incongruity in the hierarchical factory regime became the source of despair and agency. It is important to note that their protest was staged when the socialist work unit system was under multiple attacks by party reformers, who represented “formal workers” as the burden of state enterprises. This group of women tactically asked for a “name”—a formal recognition from the government and used their records of service to justify their specific demand for pension rights. Such strategy gives workers greater leverage to negotiate with the factory authority that was in fact eager to get rid of “formal workers.” I argue that this protest indeed problematizes the classification of “temporary worker” and questions the legitimacy of a discriminatory labour policy that engenders a marginalized female labour force and fosters new forms of social-economic inequality in the name of economic reform.

However, this form of protest has its limitations. Because these women advocated their pension rights in accordance with state policies that make fine distinctions among workers based on starting dates of employment, none of the workers who came after 1985 participated in the 1990s’ protest. “In the beginning, we often said to our cadres that we hoped to have pension rights,” Pasang turned to Sonam, Nima Dolkar and a few other women workers in the room, “Look, you are also hoping to have pensions. But hope can grow old.” There was a brief silence in the room. I realized that both women had told the story not only for me but also for their co-workers. They were recounting their success to those who had similar interests and problems. Before I left Lhasa in 2006, I noticed that some of the 1980 cohort members were negotiating with the factory owner over their pension benefits. Nonetheless, negotiation with the factory owner is not the only method taken by the weavers.

**Preparing for the Next Life**

Samgye and Lobsang took English lessons at night schools when they began to work as carpet weavers. The factory rewarded their efforts by transferring them from the weaving workshop to the factory showroom where they received higher wages than other workers. At first, I regarded this as a good example of the more individualistic approaches taken by young workers to cope with the challenges and advantages of the
new social environment. However, as I came to know more about the ways in which my informants perceived their changing status, I became aware that my assumption overlooked Tibetans’ understanding of human agency and social relations. An historically formed “Tibetan” cultural framework or mode of cultural communication is shared by Samgye and Lobsang.

Lhasa Carpets Inc.’s main marketing venue was the showroom which stores, displays, and sells different sizes of carpets. Shop assistants were expected to interact with non-Tibetan speaking customers. In addition to Samgye and Lobsang, two other Tibetans, graduates of government vocational schools, who spoke fluent Mandarin and never worked in the weaving workshop, were assigned to the showroom. Unlike them, Samgye and Lobsang had worked as weavers for almost six years before joining the showroom only in 2002. Neither spoke Mandarin. Lobsang had studied Tibetan in a village school for two years, while Samgye learned how to write and read Tibetan in a nunnery.

I conducted an in-depth interview with Samgye in my apartment and with Lobsang in her dormitory room. The interviews were designed to map out the different stages of their lives from young village girls to carpet weavers to shop assistants. Through their stories, I wanted to understand how they made sense of their life changes. Part of the interview transcripts have been incorporated in the previous section on workers’ ideas of rural and urban lives. This section focuses on Samgye and Lobsang’s learning experiences in Lhasa.

Lobsang described her initial interest in learning English as a preparation for her next life:

One year after I joined the factory, I started to take English lessons in a night school. I did not expect to be good at it or talk to foreigners. I was thinking of my next life. We [Tibetans] believe that if a person learns something in this lifetime, then she can learn it more easily in her next lifetime. I never complained about my wage and never looked for new jobs. The new factory director [Nima] might hear that I was studying English. Then, he gave me and Samgye money to take English lessons. He
might think that it would be easier for us to study English, since we had built a foundation.

By describing her efforts to learn a language as a preparation for transmigration, Lobsang deliberately undermined the notion of pursuing a better-paid position and presented her “unintended” career change as the result of a Buddhist desire to accumulate merits and skills throughout the endless cycle of rebirth that ultimately leads to an enlightened state. Unlike Lobsang, Samgye at first admitted her dissatisfaction with the workshop condition:

There was a night school near my home. I thought it would be fun to learn English. But I wasn’t very persistent at first. I stopped my study for almost two years. Then I got tired of my weaving work because it was hard and not paid well. Although my parents encouraged me to keep it, I began to wonder. I did not have a chance to go to school when I was a child. If I learned more English, I could perhaps find a new job. So, I went to see my factory director and told him I wanted to quit my job to learn English. The director said I could learn English and keep my job. He would pay my English lessons for a few months. After that, I came back to work in the shop.

When I asked about her progress in learning a foreign language, Samgye also described her study as a preparation for her next life and explained that she did not want to push her career any further.

My salary is good now and I do not want to change my job again. Since I am getting old, I do not want to go back to school. I still spend my spare time reading books that teach people to be good person. Also, I study English by myself because if I study more English in this lifetime, then I can speak it well in my next lifetime.

The Tibetan philosophy of reincarnation may be seen as a cultural tool used by Samgye and Lobsang to rationalize their projects of a “present” self or to give meanings to their
lives, affected by worsening working conditions. They relied on these meanings to legitimize personal interests and guide their activities for self-improvement, as they manoeuvre through complex webs of social-economic powers inside and outside the carpet factory.

There are several epistemological and ontological implications in this form of articulation of agency. On the one hand, this expression can be understood as an attempt by Samgye and Lobsang to deny that they have a desire for individual success or better material rewards. Like their co-workers, they prefer thinking of themselves as “good daughter” or good Buddhist, and this mentality in part influences their ideas of “good workers” and how they interact with capitalist managers. On the other hand, the same cultural system gives Samgye and Lobsang a strong sense of fairness and justice. In particular, human agency is understood as a relational concept—karma: accumulating merits in relation to other people within the endless cycle of rebirth, and the effects of all actions to actively shape an individual’s past, present, and future. In this sense, both women actively pursue new knowledge and skill to start good karmic cycles. Their Buddhist convictions allow room for personal aspirations that transcend imposed subject positions, and they in turn aid Samgye and Lobsang to believe in the legitimacy of challenging authority and/or questioning the social order.

The stories of the four carpet weavers suggest that they live in a hybrid cultural system—a mix of socialist, Buddhist, and other ideas. Spontaneous actions, whether collective or individual, demonstrate these women’s creativity and capacity to initiate change by drawing power from available cultural resource. They at times re-invent ideological tools to celebrate shared workplace identity (in Pasang and Pema’s case), to legitimatize their actions, or to explore possibilities of contesting power relations in the family and the factory. Very often, these personal or collective strategies exhibit the weavers’ ambivalent, contradictory interests in relation to their unstable positions in the social environment.

**Factory Nuns**

Not long after I started my research inside the weaving workshop, I heard workers refer to Samgye and Lobsang as ani la, which literally means “nuns” in Tibetan. This
surprised and confused me because both women wore modern clothes, had long hair, and spoke English. How could they be nuns? I observed that Samgye and Lobsang had little interaction with the other workers. They rarely went to the weaving workshop during their breaks; after work, Samgye went straight to her parents’ house without mingling with other workers. Lobsang rented a room in the factory’s dormitory quarter but led a separate lifestyle in the neighbourhood. It seems that the “nun” identity, given to Samgye and Lobsang, indicates social distance between them and the other women.

Some informants told me that they called the two shop assistants “nuns” because they were spinsters and did not want to get married. Neither Samgye nor Lobsang admitted their “nun” status, but declared their rejection of marriage. Samgye insisted she was happier as a single woman:

Some of my friends always fight with their husbands; others have already filed for divorce. I have learned enough. If I am single, I only need to think of my parents and don’t need to worry about children and husband. So, I can have more freedom.

Samgye’s parents had moved from their hometown to Lhasa a few years ago. She lived with them and her aunt, who was a house nun (having shaved her head and taken vows, but cohabiting with the family). Samgye was content with this living arrangement. She said that she only washed clothes while her mother and aunt took care of the other chores. Therefore, she had plenty of time to read books and meet friends. Her parents did not like this at first but eventually agreed with her. One of her brothers had promised to take care of her in the future.

Lobsang gave me more background information about the legacy of “nuns” in the factory:

In the past, our factory had “nun” workers. They were real nuns: they shaved their heads and took vows to never marry. Although some women were spinsters, people also called them “nuns”. Since then, single women in our factory who pass marriage age are all referred to as nuns. I don’t want to get married and don’t want to become a nun either. Marriage is troublesome. First, giving birth to children is difficult. Second, it takes lots
of time to raise and educate them. Women with kids work so hard in our factory but nobody gives them special care. I don’t want to go to a nunnery because one can’t get admitted to a nunnery without connections or going through a “back door.”

Tracy: If you have children, they will help you when you become old.

Lobsang: Today, when parents get old, they don’t get much help from their children. When I become old, my brothers and sisters will look after me.

Socialist China’s anti-religion policy aimed to reduce the number of monks and nuns transforming them into “productive” workers. For example, during the Cultural Revolution, when many religious institutions were forcefully closed down, nuns and monks were driven to toil in the field along with lay people. Lobsang’s memory of “nun” workers at Lhasa Carpets reveals that some nuns went to work in the carpet industry. Paradoxically, these nuns were able to retain their religious beliefs in a socialist factory, inspiring later imitations by women who were not primarily religiously inspired but, rather, attracted to a life characterized by self-improvement and freedom from marriage ties.

Samgye and Lobsang were outspoken critics of marriage, a view shared by many other interviewees. Their comments reflect the difficult lives of many married women, who confront marginalization both in the workplace and at home. Reluctance to marry was in fact quite widespread in the factory. As my survey shows, more than one half of the weavers were unmarried women in their early or mid thirties, and the majority rented rooms in the factory’s dormitory quarter. Marriage, these women felt, could force them to give up or cut back on the very jobs that offered them chances to escape the village and gain some degree of independence. Also, their low incomes and lack of leisure time made finding marriage partners problematic. Interviewee, Sangmu complained, “I cannot find a good man in this situation [when I earn little]. I’d rather look for a better job first.” She and her co-workers said they did not want to marry anyone who would look down on
them. Thus, Lobsang’s use of the term “factory nun” applies to most women in the workshop.

What intrigues me is that single women in their thirties and forties who continued to work in the workshop were not called nuns by their co-workers. When I asked my informants to explain why they gave Samgye and Lobsang special treatment, they laughed and said that they were different from others but did not explain.

During my interview with her, Samgye admitted she felt a growing distance between herself and her co-workers since she started English lessons. So, she made good friends with her classmates from the night school. These young Tibetans were tour guides, hotel staff, or school teachers. “The girls in the factory never went to schools,” Samgye said, “It became difficult for me to communicate with them. I like reading books with educational value and want to talk about my ideas to friends.” She found that the other women workers did not appreciate her interests. “They are only interested in daily life. I don’t have much to say to them,” Samgye concluded. After her night school education, she came to identify herself with the “educated” youth and felt frustrated by the low educational levels of the other workers.

Lobsang described her lifestyle as a transformation from stubborn child to filial daughter. She recalled how in her early twenties, she did not listen to her parents and went to Lhasa with a friend. Later, she felt guilty for having missed her father’s funeral because she was working in Lhasa.

I don’t go out very much. When my mom visited me, I never went to meet friends at tea houses. My friends say that I must have lots of free time, since I don’t have kids. But I worry about my mom. I don’t like going out with them [women from the factory]. Even when my mom is not in Lhasa, I stay at home, clean my room, and wash clothes. I never went out to meet guys. I usually stayed home and asked my parents to tell me folk stories. If you have lots of money, you can make lots of friends. But you cannot buy a mother. In this world, I only have one mother. I want to look after her well.
Lobsang’s mother went back and forth between her village and Lhasa. Upon several occasions, I saw this old woman holding her rosary and walking in and out of the dormitory quarter. She spent most of her time praying at different temples or circumambulating the city’s sacred sites. It did not seem that the mother would move to live with Lobsang in Lhasa. Rather, Lobsang sponsored her mother’s pilgrimage as part of a good daughter’s responsibility.

The changes in Samgye’s and Lobsang’s subject positions from carpet weaver to nun-salesperson can be seen as their responses to the patriarchal culture and the poor working conditions in the factory. Likely, they were motivated by positive attractions, such as the roles they chose – celibate, plain-living women intent on improving themselves – recognized and respected by others. More significantly, their descriptions of the weavers’ lifestyle and their desires to distance themselves from it demonstrate that they did not see the possibility of forming meaningful long-term relationships with co-workers. On the contrary, both women chose to tighten their connections with the natal family. Samgye told me that she preferred living with her parents, since she could be freed from some housework. Also, Lobsang strengthened her familial relations by taking care of her mother and by sharing this responsibility with her siblings who lived in the village. She said that her elder brother was her best friend. Whenever she had problems, she never went to her co-workers, but called her brother who would give her good advice and consolation. Both women said they expected to live with their sister’s or brother’s family when they reached retirement age. While distancing themselves from their co-workers, Samgye and Lobsang formed alliances with family because they thought their future would depend on family support. I do not suggest that their preference was only a function of carefully calculated economic strategy. Rather, I argue that Samgye and Lobsang’s seemingly banal practices contain certain socio-economic motivations which influence their interactions with the other weavers. The story of nun-salesperson implies (at least) two major factors that can facilitate or impede women weavers’ solidarity: the local custom associated with religious women in the family and the current working arrangements in the factory.

The Tibetan culture accepts the idea that women can lead celibate lifestyles outside monastic institutions; the Tibetan patriarchy family structure reserves a respectful
position for these women, who want to evade marriage and devote themselves to Buddhism. Samgye grew up in such tradition and was personally involved in supporting the family’s “nun.” As she recalled, her first mission in Lhasa was to look after her mother’s sister, who had no children and never married. Also, through this aunt’s personal connection, Samgye could learn how to read and write Tibetan in the local nunnery. Obviously, this aunt was a patron/member of the local women’s Buddhist community that existed beyond the confinement of official religious institutions. And this is not a unique case. Since the government deliberately limits the size of existing nunneries and prohibits building new ones, the practice of “house nun” has new significance. In this example, after having lived apart from their parents for many years, Samgye and Lobsang can return to the family and claim spinsterhood without being stigmatized. Their stories demonstrate that the “house nun” custom can become a legitimatizing tool and a source of family support for women weavers who resist marriage and patriarchal culture.

The privatization has changed labour arrangements, which reduces the carpet factory’s accountability but legitimates the owner’s full decision making power over weavers’ wages and benefits. Samgye and Lobsang were among the weavers who seemed to have little hope of obtaining retirement benefits and instead saw the family as the ultimate source of reliable, long-term support. Thus, I argue that in the absence of pension rights, the available option of returning home might have encouraged Samgye and Lobsang to form alliances with their families and to strengthen their spiritual-emotional connection with Tibetan Buddhism.

Elsewhere, factory spinsters have attracted the attention of historians and anthropologists because this phenomenon not only crystallizes complex dimensions in the interplay of patriarchy and capital accumulation but also demonstrates instances of women’s movement, generally absent in conventional economic and cultural histories. For example, in the late nineteenth century Shunde, Guangdong in South China, a so-called ‘anti-marriage’ movement was led by young woman workers from a silk industry at a time when such employment opportunities were not available to women in other

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12 Goldstein, Ben Jiao, Beall, and Phuntsog Tsering, Development and Change, 761-762.
parts of China. Unmarried girls could evade the power of patriarchy to work outside the household structure because their natal family valued this new source of income. Also, the Shunde entrepreneurs followed the local norms hiring only young women for cocoon processing and accommodating them nearby. Historians found some of the silk workers formed lay Buddhist Vegetarian sisterhoods and built their independent residence community outside the structure of Confucian family patriarchy. At Lhasa Carpets, the workforce, especially the unmarried women, resembles the Shunde silk workers. All of the weavers have shared religious beliefs and their long-term employment psychologically binds them to the factory and fosters a workplace-based identity. Are there any signs that women’s informal/formal organization exists or is likely to emerge? Or can the weavers’ demands for pension rights and their desire for freedom from the patriarchy be translated into collective actions against the exploitative patriarchal relation of production in the factory?

As I have shown, my interviewees actively maintain membership in their villages, or (in two cases) seek alliances with their families. Very few said that they ever borrowed money from their co-workers. When emergencies arose, they preferred receiving support from their kin or mobilizing the kinship-based social networks to locate jobs and other resources. Thus, the current working and living arrangements do not automatically separate weavers from their rural families but engender new kinds of meaningful linkages between these women and their rural kin. Samgye and Lobsang’s stories suggest that although the patriarchal family impels the young women to commit to long-term factory jobs, the extended family structure also preserves a unique socio-cultural space for them: they can return to the village for retirement and as Buddhist nuns. Since some weavers (if not all) have the option of retiring to the village, they might perceive participation in collective protests as risky, troublesome, and ultimately meaningless. If these weavers can eventually live with their families as respected “house nuns,” they do not need special residence communities (as the Shunde woman workers did) that shields them from social criticism and serves as the base of women’s organization or collective actions. Thus, I believe that the customary practice of “house nun” is an important

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cultural mechanism that contributes to women’s resistance against this society’s patriarchy. However, we cannot overlook the fact that this custom can profoundly impact the extent to which women weavers will form self-support sisterhoods or organizations.

**Concluding Remarks**

The preceding analysis has charted: 1) the origins of social arrangements that encourage the weavers commit to long-term employment in the carpet industry, 2) the weavers’ abilities to use socialist, Buddhist, and/or other cultural discourses to alter an imposed labour status, 3) the weavers’ shared cultural-economic interests and their tendency to ally with family. These stories together constitute a familiar picture of how the interplay of patriarchal culture and capital accumulation came to appropriate rural women’s labour in post-Mao China. Like the Chinese migrant women workers, the weavers from Lhasa Carpets Inc. were driven by mixed family and personal interests to participate in the expansion of market economy. At the same time, the patriarchal norms continuously affect the ways rural households and the society defines gender roles for women: women were discouraged from competing with men for family property or for better-paid jobs; they were not allowed to work under certain social circumstances. Many conclude that the post-Mao economic reform succeeded by creating and appropriating an inexpensive and obedient labour force that consists mainly of young rural women.\(^\text{14}\) My study demonstrates that there is an important difference in the mechanisms that realize this form of gendered capital accumulation in the Chinese and Tibetan regions. The Chinese village custom demands young women return to home villages for marriage after they have worked in the cities for a number of years. Therefore, these women were often placed in work arrangements, deemed “temporary” and posing no challenge to either household or supra-household forms of social organization that appropriate the product of their labour.”\(^\text{15}\)

In post-Mao Tibet, a different set of customary practices interacts with market-oriented policies and profit-driven activities at varied scales and levels. First, the de-collectivization coupled with the lax birth-control policy has led to a pattern of

\(^{15}\) Ellen R. Judd, *Gender and Power in Rural North China* (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press), 106.
decreasing land holdings per capita in the Tibetan countryside. In parallel to this, the nationwide economic inflation began affecting the prices of manufactured goods and chemical fertilizers; as a result, peasants’ need for cash income has increased. To relieve economic distress, my interviewees’ parents encouraged their daughters to secure weaving jobs in Lhasa Carpets, a factory regarded as prestigious, stable, and particularly suitable for young women. This long-term employment in part contributes to the development in weavers’ capacities to use varied cultural discourses to legitimatize actions against factory authority; the weavers have shared economic interests, religious beliefs, and anti-patriarchal tendencies; they strive to reconcile their desires for female autonomy with secure and viable living and working arrangements. Nonetheless, urban socio-economic organizations, including the carpet factory and the local government institutions, tend to marginalize these women, refusing to accept them as legitimate urban citizens. By contrast, the extended family organization, mediated by a religious culture, contains legitimate space for Buddhist weavers who are critical of marriage and wish to retire to their villages. Will these carpet weavers continue to fight for their pension rights or choose to ally with their families for retirement? In either case, they must figure out how to assert female agency, amidst the ironies and contradictions engendered by the interactions of state, capitalist, and patriarchal powers.

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CONCLUSION

Carpets matter because they teach us about the relationships between people, things, and ideas. By looking at the representation of carpets, we learn about the politics of value: why some carpets are more valuable than others; why some people use carpets to express cultural identity. Looking at the process of carpet-making, we see the interplay of patriarchy, ethnic politics, and different political economic regimes: why making carpets became women’s work; why women accepted underpaid jobs. These issues are the central concerns of my research; the most difficult question is how to make sense of the links between the politics of value and the political economy of production. As this dissertation shows, this connection is indirect and always mediated by specific institutional powers and various social agents, i.e.: carpet dealers, state planners, and development workers. Using an interdisciplinary approach, I explore how individuals interact across time and space to produce not only Tibetan carpets per se, but also gender ideology, cultural identity, discourses on modernity, and power relations in and beyond the Lhasa carpet industry.

Making an Ethnic Identity for Tibetan Carpets

From chapter 2 to 4, I investigate the ways in which Tibetan carpets acquired their “ethnicity” or “nationality.” In this story, Europeans, Americans, Tibetan exiles, as well as Chinese played different roles in classifying “Tibetan carpets” and giving the carpets meanings and values. In the first half of the twentieth century, British colonial officers discovered the export potential of Tibetan carpets and sought to incorporate them into the imperial trade. They described Tibetan carpets as exotic oriental objects and considered an export industry as instruments of “social progress.” By contrast, European romantics, dismayed by industrial modernity, travelled to the Himalayas in search of spirituality in the non-Western material culture. These individuals celebrated the simplicity of Tibetan weaving technology and represented Tibetan carpets as an embodiment of a pre-modern world or as “ethnic folk art” that survived despite economic globalization. These
discourses on Tibetan carpets were picked up by development workers, new romantics, carpet dealers, anthropologists, and governments in the next half of the twentieth century. The Cold War geopolitics in South Asia, in particular, created conditions, in which Tibetan carpet producers could continue practicing their craft in two different socio-political contexts. First, in Nepal’s Tibetan refugee craft centres, carpets were seen as the means of economic development: they were produced and sold to tourists; then they became Nepal’s leading exports. Parallel to the development of a commercial industry, a literature on “traditional Tibetan carpets” was growing; old Tibetan carpets were sent to Western Europe and North America where they were displayed in museums and galleries.

I argue that these activities, whether pro-market or anti-capitalism, ultimately inscribed in Tibetan carpets western notions of modernity, tradition, folk culture, high culture, and authenticity. Although such cultural practices have enhanced Tibetan carpets’ international prestige, this politics of value legitimates Europeans and Americans as key patrons of Tibetan heritage and/or as major distributors in the international Tibetan carpet business.

In the 1980s, Tibetan exiles started to appropriate “Western” vocabulary and invent new meanings for their carpets. One example is the marketing of “Tibetan refugee carpets,” claimed to be made by Tibetan refugees in Nepal and linked to the Tibetan independence movement. Another is the “cultural revitalization project” led by overseas Tibetans in Lhasa. These groups and individuals use carpets to express their Tibetan identity or to “bridge” gaps between their romantic construction of ancestry and socio-political reality.

Second, the history of Tibetan carpets inside Tibet sheds a different light on the politics of value. Chapter 3 charts the creation of hybrid Tibetan-Chinese carpets, in the transition from the Kashag Government to socialist Tibet. Under the Kashag regime, carpet production was loosely structured by local cultural institutions—artisan guilds and apprenticeship, under the influences of cross-regional trade and unevenly-distributed theocratic power. In the face of Chinese occupation, a group of Tibetan elites decided to build a Kashag carpet workshop, making high-quality carpets to furnish Tibetan architectural symbols, such as the Potala Palace. These carpets had Tibetan motifs but
were woven with Chinese knotting techniques. In some sense, these Tibetans used the carpet workshop not only to show the Chinese government their interest in collaboration but also to claim their political-cultural leadership in Tibet.

After April 1959, the production of Tibetan carpets was gradually and partially incorporated into the socialist handicraft system, consisting of mutual aid groups, cooperatives, collective workshops, and state factories. At first, the state agencies placed different values on hand-made carpets: they ordered artisans from the Kashag workshop to produce prestige Tibetan-Chinese carpets, which were however only displayed in the architectural symbols of socialism, such as the Great Hall of the People. In addition, the socialist government expanded the Kashag workshop into a textile factory, recruiting urban dwellers to produce coarse sweaters, blankets, socks, and aprons for the rural population. In doing so, the Chinese government used both prestige carpets and inexpensive textile items to claim its political rule and establish its legitimacy in Tibet. More significantly, this government adopted an evolutionary view of handicrafts based on Western notions of “progress” to evaluate indigenous carpets made by Tibetan artisans. State agencies regarded these carpets as no more than a folk craft unsuitable to rural development. Throughout the 1960s, no government resources were used to foster a carpet industry in Gyantse and Lhasa, and artisans were persuaded to work in agriculture or in mutual aid groups.

The socialist state’s negative evaluation of hand-made prestige carpets reached its climax during the Cultural Revolution (1966-68): all such carpets were labelled as “four olds;” Lhasa Carpets’ carpet workshop was shut down for three years. Not until some Chinese officials became aware of the international success of Tibetan carpets from Nepal did the socialist state begin to adopt a different framework for Tibetan carpets—carpets made with the Tibetan knotting technique. The state media began to represent “Tibetan carpets” as a fruit of five thousand years of Han-Tibetan cultural exchange. Significantly, this policy shift also engendered opportunities for Tibetan artisans in the socialist factory to use carpets as expressions of social status, cultural pride, and ethnic identity.

In the 1980s, the situation of the TAR carpet industry started to resemble commercial carpet factories in Nepal. Chapter 4 discusses four development discourses
and relevant social trends that gave rise to an export carpet industry in Lhasa. Pro-market policies after Hu Yaobang’s visit to Tibet in 1980 created conditions for the privatization of carpet factories. These included widespread use of cheap migrant labour, an orientation towards export markets, and the influx of foreign expertise and capital. Different carpet dealers and producers took advantage of their situations to participate in the cross-regional trade of low-end carpets, the Lhasa-centred export carpet industry, or the tourist carpet business. At the intersection of these commodity flows, we saw the creation of “Tibetan carpets made in Tibet-China” a cultural artefact of New Tibet economic development.

Within nearly one hundred years, these activities which intended to make Tibetan carpets significantly Tibetan ultimately submitted Tibetan carpets to what Michael Herzfeld has called “the global hierarchy of value,”1 thus perpetuating the domination of Western knowledge and political-economic power and tying the carpet industry to China’s pro-market development agenda. How does this politics affect labour relations on the shop floor? As Tom O’Neill’s studies on the Tibetan-Nepalese carpet industry have suggested, the relationship and mutual influence between the politics of value and the political economy of production is mediated by complex effects of state agencies, market transactions, and local socio-cultural systems. In Nepal, for example, Nepalese migrant labourers became the export carpet industry’s main workforce and were subordinated to exploitative labour practices. Ironically, as long as the dealers control the “authentication” of “Tibetan carpets,” it does not matter if these carpets are woven by Nepalese or Tibetans. By contrast, the Tibetan refugee camp factories and Lhasa-based carpet factories actively promote “Tibetan labour” as an integral part of the Tibetan identity of carpets and compete for the same niche market. From Chapter 5 to 7, I investigate the factors that mediated and created the links between the politics of value and the political economy of carpet production in the TAR. In particular, I focus on the history of Lhasa Carpets Inc. to explore the way gender ideology and ethnic politics influence the interactions between carpet weavers, the carpet workshop, and the state.

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Gender, Ethnic Politics, and the Political Economy of Carpet Production

Handicrafts, in particular those produced by “national minorities” such as Tibetans, were targets of China’s modernization efforts since the 1950s. Carpet production was partially harnessed by the centralized political economy system from the 1960s to the 1970s and has been gradually integrated into the de-centralized pro-market system since the late 1970s. This history can be analyzed from two angles: socialist industrialization and socio-cultural reorganization.

Socialist industrialization is characterized by varying degrees of technocracy and a mix of shifting political orientations and persistent economic rationalization. As I have suggested in the previous section, the changes in production orientation and industrial structure manifested the dynamics of this process in the TAR carpet sector. The literature and Jamyang’s recollection of the socialist carpet factory show that socialist enterprises pursued economic efficiency, invested in mechanization, and intensified divisions of labour; these institutional ‘behaviours’ shared similar patterns with capitalist enterprises.

In particular, I discuss the control over and use of machinery and new materials and investigate how managers gained control over the production process by adopting new production and managerial technology during several decades of socialism. Lhasa Carpets, like other socialist enterprises, was led by party members and technicians. They introduced electricity-powered equipment into the workshop; small wooden looms were replaced by large iron looms; hand-spun yarn was abandoned in favour of machine-spun yarn. The production process was divided into several steps carried out by different workers, and cadre-managers supervised the work flow. However, socialist managers had to negotiate with workers who were protected by the national welfare regime and thus could take advantage of their secure political status to ignore managers’ demands. Subsequently, the post-Mao enterprise reform gave managers more power over workers; managers now set wage policy, took charge of marketing and sales, and began hiring temporary workers. This phase of industrialization was further complicated by the influx of foreign capital and expertise which introduced new production methods, design ideas, management strategies, and marketing technology. As more linkages between the Lhasa
carpet industry and the overseas market were established, Lhasa Carpets came under the sway of cadre-capitalists.

More importantly, the history of Lhasa Carpets witnessed shifts in the gendered meanings of work; gendered hierarchies were formed and evolved in the workshop. I analyze this socio-cultural reorganization by looking at the cultural workings of a range of institutional practices, for example the work unit system, welfare regime, labour policy, and household registration system. These policies were mandated to create an employment framework enabling the socialist state to mobilize ordinary people to participate in development projects. I argue that the local patriarchal culture interacted with institutional power to stabilize workshop order, and I analyze this process by looking at how a gendered hierarchy was instituted in the factory.

New policies created new subject positions for Tibetans. Under the Kashag regime, apprenticeship was a cultural institution through which male artisans established their professional identities, fostered an artisan ethos, and protected their customary rights. Chapter 5 describes that the socialist regime no longer recognized this form of artisan subject but created new ranks of social positions and labour categories; these positions are designed to fit Tibetans into the official employment framework. Generally, the new positions of cadre manager, dye masters, and designers gave men opportunities to maintain their leadership roles in the socialist factory, whereas women were hired to weave carpets as state workers under the protection of a factory welfare regime. More importantly, these subject positions were never simply imposed on people but were consolidated or changed in dialogue with local patriarchal culture. Since the early 1990s, the pro-market policy gradually abolished the state worker position and enhanced manager status. This intensified gendered inequality on the shop floor in the carpet industry: women temporary workers were recruited to replace women state workers; male cadre managers turned themselves into cadre-capitalists. Chapter 6 and 7 use the example of Lhasa Carpets Inc. to elaborate commercialization and privatization as negotiated economic-cultural processes in which labour, gender, and ethnic politics took new shapes.

Chapter 6 demonstrates that Lhasa Carpets Inc. turned into a hybrid social space, in which cultural boundaries between Tibetans, Han-Chinese, and Chinese Muslims
could be unsettled or intensified by socio-economic forces. Also, I discussed how cultural
policies, such as Buddhism-inspired factory rules, were used to cope with workers’
discontents. And I show that the piece-rate wage policy incorporated gendered notions of
time and wage to subject both married and unmarried women to over-exploitation. It is
important to note that the cultural hybridity of Lhasa Carpets arose from socialist
industrialization and socio-cultural assimilation in the 1960s and the 1970s. In the midst
of privatization, the hybrid nature of the factory has different significance; in particular, it
teaches us about the emergence of new Tibetan subjectivities against accelerated
marketization and commercialization.

The Tibetan factory owner represented himself as a Tibetan Buddhist
businessman. He drew ideas from his previous cadre experience to profit from
government policies and used his cultural knowledge to stabilize labour relations. He not
only saw carpets as a source of profits but also represented them as a trademark of
Tibetan entrepreneurialism. Although he was critical about Sino-centrism, his business
ultimately tied him to the unification and development agenda authorized by the party
state.

With rural backgrounds and little education, the women workers at Lhasa Carpets
Inc. experienced social and political marginalization. They lived next to Chinese
migrants in the commercialized factory dormitory quarter where they strove to build their
urban “home.” However, this living arrangement also subjected them to social prejudice
and further alienated them from Tibetan society. On the shop floor, the hiring of a male
Chinese Muslim master threatened a few Tibetan male managers’ control over the
production and in turn disturbed existing patterns of patriarchal order. Whether the
women workers can benefit from this competition will depend on their capacity and
willingness to challenge the patriarchal production relation.

My last chapter explores the source of women’s agency and the social-cultural
constraints imposed on women. I tell the stories of several women’s work and life
experiences and discuss how these women changed their labour status in the factory. I
found that most women wove carpets for more than a decade as “temporary workers.”
Their working conditions resulted from the combined effects of pro-market policies,
patriarchal inheritance practices, and peasants’ income-generating strategies. However,
this long-term employment created different opportunities for these women. They formed bonds among themselves based on their shared economic interests, religious beliefs, and desire for social recognition. These women wanted to maintain their female autonomy by making carpets in Lhasa. However, the carpet factory and the local state agency do not provide them with basic social security in the city. As a result they tended to depend on their kin as the Tibetan extended patriarchal family structure contains legitimate space for Buddhist weavers who were critical of marriage.

**From Matter to Life**

This dissertation is about Tibetan carpets but these carpets are not just objects; they are cultural symbols saturated with meanings. Tibetan carpets constitute and are constituted by the dominant knowledge and political order that we experience every day. And this dissertation is about subject formations of carpet weavers. During the course of my research, I have learned about how people acted, what provoked them to act, what enabled them to act, what was enacted upon them, and in what capacity they acted. I consider the creativity and ambivalence involved in people’s actions and link these to social forces that pressure men and women influencing their capacity to act. Tibetan carpet weavers, in particular women workers, are like subaltern groups in other places—they strive to give meanings to their lives in a society, which they have low socio-economic status. My work looks at women’s agency from several perspectives and hopes to enrich a growing feminist literature on gender and labour in globalization.

This dissertation also represents my attempt to explore the complex effects of the Sino-Tibet history on individuals who live in Lhasa or in different regions, countries, and continents. Since I decided to undertake this research in 2005, I have met people, who are, like me, directly or indirectly affected by Sino-Tibet politics and by a problematic triangular relationship between Tibet, China, and the West. I hope that my work will contribute to the understanding of the complex power relations that constitute the carpet worlds, and I invite future researchers to explore these issues in other contexts.
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