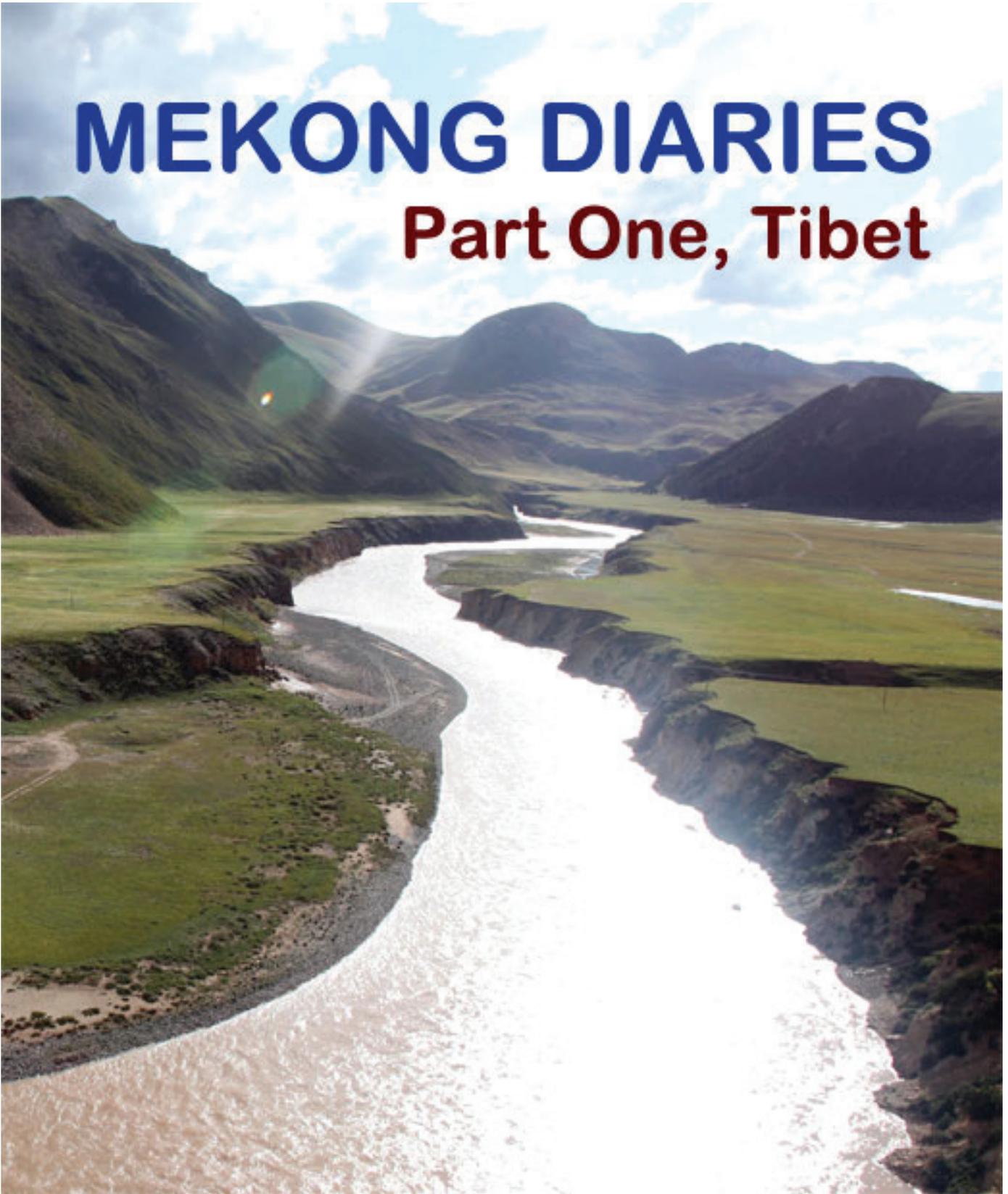


# **MEKONG DIARIES**

## **Part One, Tibet**



## Day 1 – On our Way

We land in Xining, the capital of Qinghai province, and go to our hotel, which is flanked and fronted by karaoke bars. We have dinner in a Muslim café. Some of our fellow diners are pale-skinned Han people. Others are sunburnt dark brown with distinct red patches on each cheek and wear gangster hats and cheap sports jackets. They're cowboys—the real thing.

We are heading to the land of the Khampa nomads, who still live in black tents made of yak hair and graze their herds in China's northwest. The Mekong River is born in their land. Tibetans call the river Dzachu, the River of Rocks, and the county we are headed for takes its name from the river. We think we have located the source of the Mekong on the map, some two days' drive from the town of Moyun, in Yushu.



*A Khampa nomad woman washes her family's clothes on the banks of the Mekong. It is a scene that will be repeated a million times by women from over 70 cultures as the river travels around 5000 kms to the South China Sea.*

People tell us about the Tibetan practice of river burial for babies. Because infants have pure and innocent hearts, they are given to the river, a pure body of water, when they die. The upshot is that Tibetans don't eat fish—a dietary restriction that we hastily adopt.

## Day 2 – Xining to Yushu

We arrive in Yushu late after a 14-hour, 800 kilometer drive up onto the Tibetan Plateau. Our driver's driving style, though consistent, is clearly not designed for well-surfaced roads, being a rather bipolar attack-and-stall approach.

Locals explain that the rows of low-built houses set in the empty plains that we pass on the drive are the destiny of the nomads. Apparently, the Chinese government selects them in loosely associated groups and orders them to send all their kids to school or face jail.

We have traveled through vast plateaus of grass, while above, continents of weather form and boil away in an endless sky. It is a world without trees, where grass rules.

There are signs of Tibetan Buddhism everywhere: cairns, flags, temples, and monasteries, in the mountains, on the plains, beside rivers—everywhere. The white flags are markers for the dead. Colored flags represent magic circles that can be seen by specially gifted monks as energy patterns from the sky impressed into the soil, and are erected to protect all life, human and nonhuman.

### **Day 3 – Yushu to Zaduo**

We had a rough sleep last night, as we are still getting used to having less oxygen. We leave Yushu in the rain, with construction equipment teeming on the walls of the Mekong's valley. On this cold gravel road we see a chain of pilgrims making their way toward Lhasa in between the roaring bulldozers, graders, and trucks.

They proceed in a long line, flinging themselves down, sliding along the cold rough ground, standing, and then flinging themselves down again.



*The red water of the Mekong, called the Dza Chu in Tibetan, is a sign of summer when the melting snow and ice on the Tibetan Plateau carry a thick load of mud and clay. In winter the Mekong is clear and blue, a seasonal temperature gauge.*

We speak with one man who explains that his journey from Yushu to Lhasa will take six months, with every inch of it performed in this aesthete's masochistic ritual. He explains that these pilgrims pray for everyone and everything, with their prayers intended even for the smallest bugs in the prairie.

We continue on over hills, shadowing a little stream which soon delivers us to the first length of the Mekong River we have seen in Tibet, a wide bend where the small stream mixes its clear water with the turbid Mekong.

In summer the river is red, and in winter it is blue as the warm weather melts the ice, lifting the earth into the waters. Continuing upstream, we encounter a surprise, a small dam and a hydroelectric station, surely the highest hydroelectric power station on the river.

As we continue, we stop at a place where a reservoir of the Mekong's water laps at the edge of wide, flat grassland. Here, a black tent and two highly decorated white tents form a camp, and we speak with a father and mother who are washing clothes in the river.

Then, continuing on from the nomads' camp, we soon reach Zaduo, a muddy, strange town with a shifting population of unwashed nomad cowboys with decorated chopper-style motorbikes, long black hair, and slouch hats.

The Mekong races through the town, eating at the rocky soil. This is a world of mud and money, with the river's water gaining volume along with the region's wealth.

The world in every direction is a construction site, the works of man—our roads, bridges, dams, and buildings—appear tiny before the immense projects of nature, the crumbling mountains, global weather patterns, and continental rivers being born.

## **Day 4 – We Stop in a Camp**

Before us, literally rising into the clouds, is a singular peak topped with ice and stones, marked with one zigzag road carved on its sheer flank and leading up toward its awesome shoulders. For the first time, we sense the character of our journey and feel the anxiety of going into an unknown place.

At the base of the mountain we cross a new bridge over the Mekong and climb the mountain past black tents where, perched on these steep slopes, nomads tend their black-haired yaks.

Today is a journey through an ocean of mountains, with every wave a stony peak over 5,000 meters high. In the valleys are alpine streams, some small and easily crossed, others wide and difficult. We are racing against the sun in the sky to reach the Mekong crossing before dark when, to our surprise, we find a brand-new bridge, making the crossing effortless.

We see a large herd of deer high on the side of one peak. Our good fortune in finding a crossing is momentary, though, as our car breaks down, and we are stranded for a couple of hours in the bed of a small creek on the wide ridge of the ranges while the car gets fixed.

Finally we drive on until, in the dimming light, we see a small group of black tents. Driving over the hill over the cottage-cheese mossy ground, we pull up next to a tent just as the sun catches on the lip of the opposite rise. The family of Khampas welcomes us into their tent with salty yak-butter tea, and just like that we are invited to spend the night.

The black tent is impressively suited to the world of the nomads. In rainy weather the weave tightens, and the intrinsic water resistance of yak hair—evolved over millions of freezing, wet years—renders the whole structure waterproof, a dry, warm, and very, very smoky space in the middle of a wild and lethally inhospitable isolation.

Touching the hairy walls of our new home at 4,600 meters causes a tiny dam-break of cold water. In this unexpected, smoky blackness I spend a nearly sleepless night, fighting a sense of asphyxiation and claustrophobia, but altogether grateful for the hospitality of these hardy and beautiful people. I wait for sleep, listening to the family laugh and speak softly in the darkness.

## Day 5 – Nomad Life

When we wake, our Khampa hosts have been up for many hours, gone with the herd to take them to the best grass. We have a few cups of salty tea, which are beginning to taste better each time we drink it, and we are well set for a day of hiking.



*On the rolling hills above one of the local sources of the Mekong, this black tent steams in the frosty morning light, smoke from the family's stove rising as they boil water for tea. The sun catches on a rise and its shadow draws back, revealing a single yak and a child beside the tent.*

It should be noted here that the Khampas are a noble and warlike people without an economy of coins or notes. Rather, a man's wealth is completely measured in cattle, with yaks being the most desirable beasts, far outweighing sheep and goats. A single yak can be worth more than 3,000 yuan, and a large concern will number many hundreds of animals.

At the end of the summer grazing period, a herder will slaughter one animal whose meat will sustain the family for up to half a year. When they sell yaks for money, they exchange this for jewelry, ivory bangles, gold earrings, and turquoise and amber headdresses. A husband will adorn his wife with these signs of his wealth, and will show off his success with jewelry for himself.

We discover that we are in a camp quite close to the source of the Mekong. We are not clear on where this is, but a man comes to visit us in the tent and confirms that the source is a spring that we can reach today.

We are a bit confused about the geography of our objective. We are in a bowl whose sides are made of the world's greatest mountain range, locally referred to as the Mekong Mountains, the Land of the Mekong. For a while, we follow the road as it winds over the smooth hillsides of the area.

After a while we can see the spot we are looking for, but the weather looks like it will get wet soon. The car will go no further, so we continue on foot. We realize that the streams we are following must be the Mekong.

We reach the spot, but the stream clearly continues to climb through the meadows and points to a new goal. Yet the site we have reached indeed has a marker identifying it as a source—a local source—of the Mekong.

We spend the afternoon filming and investigating the place.

The glacial source is only four hours away, or so we are told. We draft a rough plan to travel there tomorrow, but it is difficult to get a sense of the best way to go. Also, we are warned, there is a serious danger of being attacked by wolves. One wolf will not trouble us, but three or more will have a go and attack.

We decide that unless we can get a guide, a local who really knows where we are going, we will not pursue the idea in the morning.

## **Day 6 – Back to Zaduo**

Unfortunately, our plans for the trip to the source change, and we decide to return to Zaduo, as none of the local guides are prepared to take the risk that day.

After a drive through the magnificent landscape, we finally arrive at the last peak, where the road zigzags back down into the Mekong valley. As we arrive at the base of the mountains, a short-lived squall lifts the dust and then leaves us to make our way back to the hotel, which has a typically horrific toilet.

After dinner, while we are washing our clothes in the communal washroom, a well-dressed man overhears our conversation about getting to the source of the Mekong. Talking to him, we discover that this is none other than Kitamura Masayuki, one of the co-discoverers of the river's sources.

We are deeply amazed at our good fortune—and not a little paranoid and suspicious about just bumping into someone claiming to be a discoverer of the Mekong's source by chance in this lonely town. He agrees to join us for a chat in the morning, and we decide to play dumb about our greater purpose while plumbing him for as much information as possible.

## **Day 7 – Help From an Explorer**

We meet with the Japanese explorer over breakfast. Kitamura explains, and shows us on a map, that the Mekong has two geographical sources and three sources recognized in Tibetan Buddhist beliefs. The place we had reached is called Dzachu Chiwa.

It took him eight days on horseback in 1994 to make the journey from Moyun to the Lasagoma Glacier. At the time, there was a race between two expeditions to find two competing possible sources. Kitamura was part of a joint expedition by Japan and the Chinese Academy of Sciences. The other team was a French and English party aiming for the Chacharima source at the Rupsa Pass.

The CAS expedition traveled from Moyun to Zana Sondo to measure the water volume of the two longest tributaries that join at this point—the Dzaya Chu and the Dzana Chu. The results pointed to the Dzaya Chu as the main channel of the river.



*These nomad children were born on the Tibetan Plateau where their family lived the traditional cyclical life of summer grazing and winters spent in a stone house. But in recent years, Chinese government plans have stripped these families of their herds and transported these children to new urban slums where there is little to do.*

The positive news for us is that the river that passes our destination is the one that flows to the scientific source.

When we ask the only question about dams that we dare to ask, Kitamura's answer is succinct: Dams mean no rapids, no culture, no nature.

After our good fortune in meeting Kitamura, we drive through the town to a monastery which sits at the end of a valley emptying into the Mekong's cradle just before it flows through the center of Zaduo.

We wander among its many stupas until we find a Khampa camp perched on a small, flat piece of land. Stopping to speak with the 19 people living there, we discover that these families are the wealthiest nomads we have encountered so far. We learn from one woman that they have a connection to the Mekong of love and pride.

We drive back down the hill, and on the way stop to photograph some young boys playing pool on a table outside next to the river. This is the nomads' destiny if the Chinese government is successful—urban slums with no culture and nothing to do.

We leave Zaduo for the last time, and it seems that the purity of the grasslands slips behind us as we start downhill into the modern world.

Finally arriving in Nangchen, we see that this looks less like a holy city than a typical Chinese industrial provincial satellite. After dinner at a restaurant, a local builds a map of the Mekong on the

table top with chopsticks. In the darkness outside, a large anti-aircraft gun provides a strange reminder of the volatility of this region.

## **Day 8 – In Nangchen**

Nangchen used to be the seat of the Khampa kings, but the Chinese tore down the palace during the Cultural Revolution. In the era of Nangchen's power, armies of Khampa warriors would assemble in the broad valley rolling down toward the Mekong to be instructed and blessed before going to war.

The Bami Monastery is beautiful, but dank and dark. Its monks gather around us like children starved for activities.

Taking its lead perhaps from an ancient system of animism, and perhaps from the corporeal directness of the Hindu faith, Tibetan Buddhism treats this earthly coil as a mere vehicle for the soul.

We drive to the feet of a rocky protrusion—all that is left of an earlier mountain carved back between the Mekong's broad channel and a small stream on the eastern side. This is Jae Gora. It is festooned with prayer flags and is the beautiful site of a nunnery built into a rocky overhang of the hills alongside a stream, just as it empties into the Mekong.

It is said that in the 17th century, the Fifth Dalai Lama, apparently a very well-traveled man, visited the area and this hill. It is also claimed that the footsteps of the Buddha can be seen on the side of the mountain.

A statue of the founder of Buddhism looks out over braided plains patterned with conical haystacks drying in the late summer sun. These are the first farms we have seen, and mark our descent along the river.

After driving over a small bridge and leaving the car at the hill's foot, we climb a path toward a plethora of flags, wheels, and carved painted tablets.

We emerge high over the broad Mekong valley. In the softening afternoon light we climb toward the highest point on the hillside, a rocky protrusion with sheer sides but with a steep, grassy slope on its river-facing side which makes climbing relatively easy. Seen from a thin rock platform at its top, the world spreads out below with the brown river shining in grandeur.

The silt from mountains above this point forms sandbars and braids the previous narrow channel into many thinner lengths. On the opposite bank just beyond a terraced village of mud-built houses, the sunset begins to catch on a white temple positioned at the base of a huge, sheer cliff.

This temple was erected for the 5th Dalai Lama, who had stopped to meditate in that spot many centuries before.

Climbing down just in time, we set up for a time-lapse of the powerful river water as the sun disappears behind a ring of dramatic mountains, its shadow drawing up over the facing shores, the village, and the white temple.

Two men stop to speak to our group. They say that they are lucky here to have the Dzachu, a river that "will never dry up." One explains that the Buddha himself, in order to feed Tibet, had blessed this river, and that for Tibetans, the Dzachu is the Mother of Tibet. This reiterates statements by many Tibetans, both nomads and now farmers, who are tied to the same ancestral land.

## **Day 9 – On to Jyekundo**

With delicious dumpling soup in our stomachs, we set out for Yushu, leaving the Mekong to follow

its course until we rejoin it at Deqin, in the very northeast of Yunnan province.

Just out of town, we stop to take pictures of a weir across the river and a disused power station. After only 10 years, the growth of Nangchen has left the station too small for the power needs of the expanding population.

The valley narrows, and just before the road forks away from the Mekong, we stop across from a small village. A woman collects water from the river as we cross the suspension bridge leading to walled homes gathered together and surrounded by fields of corn and grain.

It is the ripening season, and the crops are yellow and brown. On the balconies, concrete landings, and eaves of every house, golden cobs of corn that have been stripped of their leaves are drying.

As we walk up the little road to the village, every dog in town begins to howl and growl. An old woman at the first house on the edge of the village comes to her gate and advises us it would be dangerous to venture any farther, as some of the dogs are not tied up.

Her ancient husband joins us, and they tell us they have both lived in this village for their entire lives. The lady says that the Dzachu's water is clean and that they can drink it without every getting sick. She says, "It treats us well because we treat it well."

They channel water from the river to irrigate their crops of corn and tsampa and to drink.

Our drive this day is uninterrupted by sightings of the river, and so we quickly reach Jyekundo. We spend the afternoon shopping in a small, densely packed market that sells Tibetan clothes, implements, and food. Among our many purchases are colorful belts, an ancient iron, and a leather flint pouch stuffed with old moss for tinder.

We also foolishly buy beautifully painted but fragile Chinese bowls. Half of them survive for perhaps 10 minutes until "someone" drops the bag.

Tonight we are taken to a surprisingly postmodern bar where we are joined by Tibetan cowboys. One of our drinking companions wears a wide-collared shirt opened at the neck to reveal a tooth hung on black leather. He is dressed in pale purple with a jacket worn off the shoulder, with long straight black hair and fingers heavy with silver rings. Quite a look!

The conversation quickly turns to our travels: Why are we interested in the Mekong? To our practiced answer about being on the trip of a lifetime, the cowboy replies with another question: What do people downstream think about the Chinese dams? Did we think these were a bad thing, and if so, how else should China supply itself with power? Our answers are less interesting than the fact of his awareness of this conflict.

We leave the cowboys drinking, and fall into bed.

## **Day 10 – A Desolate Life**

Leaving early in the morning, we soon come to a small but growing settlement, one of the towns built by the government to house the nomads after they've been forced to sell their herds. Consisting of small brick homes set in lines behind high concrete walls along short, unsurfaced lanes, it is a sad and quiet place.

A few women and young children lean on the outside of their walls, dressed in colorful traditional clothes and doing nothing.

They tell us that this village is just two years old. On every side, the construction of new suburbs

of the same row cottages is in full swing. About 1,000 people live here in 50-meter-long rows, two houses deep.

Tibetan herding dogs send up a frenzy of enraged barking from behind the walls as we wander uncertainly along the uneven earth between the finished houses. Rounding the corner of one last lane, we stop to take a picture of some women when the gate opens to the first house in that row.

An ancient lady beckons to us to come in, and at first we think this is a happy invitation and a chance to photograph inside a home.

But once we are inside, she begins to tell us about her desperate situation. For three years, her stomach has been in terrible pain, and now that she has been moved into this place her family has left to go in search of work in the towns. There is nothing to do here, no industry or prospects.



*The blood on this old lady's hands is from a yak's skull, her only food. Suffering chronic stomach pains and abandoned by her children who have gone to seek work in the city, she cried as she asked for money.*

Even worse, she explains as she begins to sob—all the time pushing her bloodied fingers into her belly to show where the pain is—she has no food. To survive, she has scavenged a yak's skull, which lies in a corner of the small gravel yard. When we arrived, she had been trying to pick the last remaining red flesh from the nearly white skull. It is all she has, and she is alone.

We give her a little money and leave, filled with a sense of the end of the Tibetan story—an old lady abandoned in a brick house and stripped of family, culture, history, and future, and starving in a brand-new suburb.

The hours that we drive away from her take us under the shadow of the first bad weather we have

experienced since arriving in Tibet. Mountains on the horizon huddle in a cave of storm clouds, and we come upon the white caps of winter's first snow.

Local people tell us that process of ending the nomadic way of life began five years ago. Claiming that they wanted to preserve Tibet's grasslands, the government began to force herders to sell their yaks and sheep.

But most of the people we speak to tell us they have lived this way for thousands of years without damaging the environment.

In every town we pass on our way into the nomad kingdom, pool tables line the streets, and cowboys spend their days gambling over eight balls.

We stop several times to photograph the snowy peaks of several mountains. In a week, these fields and hills will be completely white. A single black tent sits below a white mountain next to road construction as we clear our last pass.

At about 7:00 p.m., we drive in the dimming sunlight past another Chinese school in an isolated, wet, and darkening valley. A nomad waits on his tasseled motorbike outside the gates under the Chinese flag for his child, who is still in the yellowy lit classroom.

As we drop from the clouds into the world below, it seems there is a sadness as large as the sky hanging over Tibet.

We sleep overnight in Maduo.

## **Day 11 – Leaving Tibet**

We spend our final day in Tibet buried under our own laundry while driving to Xining. As we get closer, we pass through a layer of fog and pollution that closes behind us over the road back to Tibet.

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