

RESEARCH ARTICLE

Raising Dogs that Bite: How Pastoralists and Breeders Care for Tibetan Mastiffs

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Abstract

Tibetan pastoralists have long been using dogs as guards. Since the late 1980s, the same dogs, called “Tibetan Mastiffs,” have become valuable pets for Han Chinese consumers. This paper discusses how commodification transforms the value of these dogs, and the care relationship between humans and dogs. Tibetan pastoralists and dogs participate in a reciprocal yet distanced care relationship through raising and guarding, which is not confined to a pursuit of dogs’ ferocity. In contrast, a taste for ferocity prevails in the Tibetan Mastiff market, and breeders care for dogs in a more dedicated, and yet more unilateral and dangerous, way. The unintended consequence of breeders’ care is that they raise dogs that sometimes bite; this is explained based on a process of value transformation in dogs’ guarding abilities, from ethical virtue to commercial price.

摘要

藏族牧民一直以来使用狗作为护卫犬。上世纪八十年代后期以来，这些被称为“藏獒”的狗成为汉族消费者的名贵宠物。本文探讨商品化过程如何转变了这些狗的价值，同时还转变了人和狗之间的照护关系。通过饲养和护卫，藏族牧民与护卫犬之间形成一种相互的照护，同时二者也保持了距离感。这种照护关系使得牧民并不仅仅追求狗的凶猛。相反，藏獒市场中盛行对凶猛的欣赏。因此，养殖户们对狗的照护也更为投入、单向和危险。这无意间造成的后果是，养殖户培育的狗有时会咬他们自己。对此，我从价值转变的角度给出解释：狗的守护能力在牧区被视为一种伦理美德，但在市场中却转变为了商品价格。

Keywords: China; Tibetan Mastiff breeding; Tibetan pastoralism; ethics; commodification; value; human–dog care

关键词: 中国; 藏獒养殖; 藏族牧民; 伦理; 商品化; 价值; 人狗照护关系

In a Tibetan Mastiff (*zang’ao* 藏獒) breeding farm in suburban Lhasa, Tibet Autonomous Region, where I worked as an apprentice breeder,¹ one day a dog ran out and bit the boss’s wife. The workers would call this dog “the mad dog,” because he would attack anyone except the old worker who fed him. He was so aggressive that we would cage him alone in the corner of the roughly 1,000-square-metre farm. Ironically, the reason my boss had purchased him had been his size and ferocity. The more “ferocious” (*xiong* 凶) a dog is, the more expensive it tends to be in the Tibetan Mastiff market. Her leg swollen with internal bleeding, my boss’s wife scolded the old worker for not locking the cage. Although it had been the dog which had hurt her, she did not blame the dog, but his caretaker.

1 This article is based on 24 months of fieldwork from 2017 to 2020 in Lhasa, southern Gansu and northern Sichuan. I collected all the data through immersive participant observation in the everyday lives of Tibetan Mastiff breeders, consumers and pastoralists.

This was not the first time in my 10-month stay that such an accident had happened. On one occasion, a bitch had hurt a customer, trying to protect her newborn pups. Because of this, my boss had to pay compensation. Outside the breeding farms, stories about this breed attacking, and even killing, owners, guests and strangers are no longer shocking news in Chinese cities. The Tibetan Mastiff, known for its size and ferocity, has long posed a threat to those who keep, breed and trade them. Yet, this does not stop consumers, breeders and self-proclaimed “Tibetan Mastiff friends” (*ao you* 獒友) from yearning to own a purebred Tibetan Mastiff.

In the Tibetan pastoral areas where the Tibetan Mastiff is believed to have originated, I had a different experience. Many dogs I encountered there were not as ferocious as the ones valued in the market. When I was staying with a pastoralist (*drokpa* འདྲོག་པ་) family in an Amdo Tibetan area, I befriended a neighbour’s dog named Janzhek རྩ་འབྲུག.² He was so gentle that he did not even get angry at our little pet dog who always barked at him. It made me wonder whether Janzhek was actually a competent guard dog.

To dispel my doubts, one night my host walked out of the house and shouted “Ho! Ho!” in Tibetan-style hallooing (*gege* ཀེ་ཀེ) into the dark. A few minutes later, Janzhek came running over the hill, barking. He arrived at our house and sniffed around. Then the host shouted: “Janzhek! Ho! Ho!” And Janzhek started running and barking again. Janzhek did not appear to have detected any sign of intrusion, because a few minutes later he ran back to his own house a few hundred meters away from our house that he was supposed to have been guarding.

Janzhek showed how he could change his temper when needed. Not only did he bark to alert his owners when threats were near, but he often ran to fight them. Meanwhile, he never hurt the owners’ friends or guests. Unlike the dogs pursued in the market that appear intimidating under any circumstances, Janzhek’s attack mode only switched on when enemies appear, or when humans called for help.

My host family said they were thankful for Janzhek, since their own dog had recently died. However, their thankfulness was usually concealed, because I never saw them praise, feed or pet Janzhek. On the contrary, they would chase him away or hit him whenever he came to the yard. Not even his owners showed him much intimacy. All they provided was simple food and no shelter – these are the typical living conditions of a Tibetan pastoral guard dog.

Tibetan pastoralists have a preference for dogs’ character which differs from the commercial Tibetan Mastiff breeders in Chinese towns and cities. They also treat dogs differently. Although some pastoralists fancy ferocious dogs (*zanbo* བཙན་པོ་), others prefer *xokyeng*³ dogs that are mild, but also attentive, energetic and hard working. As for dog treatment, Han breeders often say that pastoralists do not love dogs, because pastoralists do not “care” (*guan* 管) about improving dogs’ living conditions as they do. Even though these dogs are potential human killers, breeders “take care” (*zhaogu* 照顾) of the dogs in the breeding farms. In fact, pastoralists also accuse breeders of “not caring” (*semker me xed* རེམ་ཀར་མེ་མེད་⁴), because breeders make money from dogs, which the great majority of pastoralists would not do. Meanwhile, the controversy over care transcends human agents who care for passive canine objects. By thinking about dogs’ responses to human care, e.g. the ruthless attacks of “the mad dog” and Janzhek’s committed night watch, and how human caretakers perceive and value these responses, can we broaden our understanding of care to include the qualities and behaviours of dogs? Can we determine whether a dog is “caring”? Can we as humans enter a reciprocity of care with dogs, or any other animals?

2 In this article, I transliterate Tibetan words according to their pronunciations in the local dialect.

3 The spelling and source of this colloquial word in written Tibetan remain unclear and exceed the scope of this paper, but it is most likely to be *kxokyang* ཀམ་ཀྱའང་ or *pxokyeng* ཕུ་ཀྱའང་.

4 *Sem* རེམ་ means “heart,” and *ker* རྩར་ means “carry”. *Semker* རེམ་ཀར་ literally means “taken to heart,” similar to *fang zai xin shang* 放在心上 in Chinese.

Human-dog care, value and commodification

This paper discusses care relations between humans and Tibetan Mastiff dogs in contemporary China. Since the late 1980s, traders from Chinese cities have been buying guard dogs from Tibetan pastoral areas, breeding and selling them at scale (and for escalating prices) to wealthy consumers in Chinese cities. There is even a term for this trend: “Tibetan Mastiff Fever” (*zang’ao re 藏獒热*). The great majority of Tibetan Mastiff breeders are Han Chinese, but the aim of my comparison is not to determine an essentialized distinction between the Han and the Tibetans. Rather, I explore the intricacy within the concept of care, which manifests through how pastoralists and professional breeders enter into care relations with their dogs.

To care requires attention to what others need, and effort to satisfy those needs.⁵ It exists not only between humans, but also in what María Puig de la Bellacasa terms the “more-than-human” worlds.⁶ Previous anthropological studies of human–animal relations have explored how human subjects pay attention to, empathize with and subsequently act upon non-human animals, plants and other beings,⁷ as species, as breeds or as individuals.⁸ Nevertheless, these studies have focused on human actors as the sole caretakers, or subjects of care; they overlook the possibility, both theoretically and empirically, of conceiving of other beings as equal subjects of care, rather than as merely passive objects or receivers of care.⁹ For example, when we say that the dog is a “companion species” of humans,¹⁰ which has entered into long-term coevolution and cohabitation with us, we must take the dog side of the “co-” story seriously. Can humans and dogs enter into care relations that are tantamount to inter-human care relations, or as Hans Steinmüller in this special section terms it, “attentive co-growth”? Eason makes such an attempt in her anthrozoological study of assistance dogs who use their nasal prowess to alert human companions who have type 1 diabetes.¹¹ These human companions acknowledge their dogs’ work as care work, and consider them to be “fully deserving of respect, recognition, and gratitude.”¹² My case study of the Tibetan Mastiff follows this attempt and explores the possibility of care in the relations between human owners and guard dogs. I examine not only the ways in which some owners care for their guard dogs, but also how they see the dogs as caring subjects, endowed with a specific character, willpower and sense of obligation to reciprocate care to human owners via their guarding.

I approach this from the angle of the ethical, economic and symbolic value of the Tibetan Mastiff’s care. First, if care relations are essentially ethical relations, the discussion of dogs’ care is enveloped in a broader discussion in the anthropology of ethics about non-human ethical subjectivity.¹³ Unfortunately, a dive into dogs’ inner ethical lives would be beyond the capacity of socio-cultural anthropology’s participant observation methods. However, it is feasible and necessary, even if limited, to ask whether Tibetan Mastiff owners *consider* their dogs and their actions as having ethical motivations and judgments. Moreover, do pastoralists and breeders *recognize* ethical value or virtue in their dogs’ guarding activities?

Second, care between humans and Tibetan Mastiffs is also conditioned by the context of the market, in which the valuation, transaction and consumption of the Tibetan Mastiff constitutes a defining dimension. Therefore, we need to study the dogs’ economic value based on its new consumptive meanings, and its effect on human–dog care. In this light, the multi-dimensional concept of “value” is productive, because of its capacity to cross boundaries between the economic, symbolic

⁵ Noddings 1984, xviii.

⁶ Münster et al. 2021; Bellacasa 2017.

⁷ Parrenas 2012; Hartigan 2017.

⁸ Bird-Rose 2011; Wanner 2017.

⁹ Coulter has offered a conceptual, yet not empirical, framework, for conceiving animals’ care labour. Coulter 2016.

¹⁰ Haraway 2003.

¹¹ Eason 2020.

¹² Ibid., 2.

¹³ Keane 2016, 15; Laidlaw 2018, 176–177.

and ethical spheres.¹⁴ Many previous discussions about the value of care have been framed within the ethical aspect of value. However, in this paper, I see the economic and symbolic forms of value, along with their interaction with the ethical, as equally important facets of an analysis of human–dog care.

This interaction emerges as a process of value transformation triggered by the rise of commercial interest in Tibetan Mastiffs among Han Chinese consumers – the aforementioned Tibetan Mastiff Fever. Like many other prized commodities such as medicinal caterpillar fungus (*dongchong xiaocao* 冬虫夏草) that travel along the commodity chain from the mountains of the Tibetan plateau to wealthy Han Chinese consumers,¹⁵ the value of this Tibetan pastoral dog transforms as it travels a similar route. Nevertheless, what separates this trans-valuation process from other commodified forms of Tibetan nature-culture is that it exceeds the framework of the “social life of things,”¹⁶ where commodities are usually viewed as material and passive objects. The “thing” in this case is a living dog, being cared for and possibly caring by itself, which is not passive.

This is where divergent and evolving values of human–dog care shaped by commodification loom large and call for ethnographic analysis. Among breeders’ circles, their care for dogs is defined by the unilateral and material provision for dogs, because they raise dogs in order to sell them. In contrast, pastoralists care for their dogs by *not* selling them, because pastoralists enter a long-term care reciprocity with dogs through their raising and their dogs’ guarding. This is also being challenged and reshaped by waves of marketization and commodification.

Commodification changes not only how owners value dogs and deliver care to them, but also how they value dogs’ care. Pastoralists recognize dogs’ guarding (*shong* ཤོང) function as care and in return give dogs respect and gratitude. As such, dogs’ caring qualities and performances are an essential part of an ethical relationship. The moment a dog is sold into a non-pastoral environment, however, these qualities and performances, along with the relationship itself, are decontextualized, essentialized and objectified into a feature of a commodity – the symbolic meaning and economic price of “ferocity” (*xiong* ཁྱེད). This accommodates the desires of the Tibetan Mastiff consumers and has spread among the wider Chinese public.

Finally, changing ways to value dogs’ care also present new challenges to humans’ care for dogs. When ferocity becomes a goal in raising dogs, the Tibetan Mastiff breeding business becomes a dangerous, laborious and paradoxical enterprise. This is because ferocity is also obstructive to the process of raising when the objects of care threaten and attack their dedicated caretakers.

Yang/Kso: Raising as a Form of Care

In the Tibetan and Chinese languages, to “raise” a dog is, respectively, “*kso*” ཁས and “*yang*” 养.¹⁷ Similar to English, these two verbs entail the affective labour of mothering, nurturing and assistance. This necessitates watching out for the cared, knowing what they need and satisfying those needs. There is no difference in their literal meanings, but the actual attitudes and practices of raising dogs showcase the differences between Tibetan Mastiff breeders and Tibetan pastoralists. While breeders strive to develop their caring skills and improve their facilities for dog raising, pastoralists pay limited attention to such matters. How can we explain the discrepancy?

A Tibetan Mastiff farm (*ao chang* 葵场 or *ao yuan* 葵园) is a yard or park dedicated to trading, keeping, showing and reproducing Tibetan Mastiffs. Besides the sale of dogs, such farms also satisfy dogs’ various living needs, such as eating, excreting, sleeping, exercising, mating and giving birth, and so the primary type of work can be characterized as care work. In one breeding farm where

¹⁴ Eiss and Pedersen 2002, 287; Graeber 2011, 489–490.

¹⁵ Yeh and Lama 2013.

¹⁶ Appadurai 1986.

¹⁷ There are many words in both languages with similar meanings. I just use the most common ones.

I stayed, usually three “workers” (*gongren* 工人) would be employed to care for the dogs. Workers’ daily work not only adhered to a routine, but also required constant vigilance over dogs’ changing conditions, such as whether they were lethargic or had diarrhoea, so that they could report this to the boss and take appropriate measures. As for the boss,¹⁸ he would be focused on the dog trade and farm management, such as designing plans for the new breeding season. Although he would not follow workers’ daily routines, he would still spend a lot of time with the dogs, observing and checking them.

In the eyes of my boss and many other affluent breeders, profiting from dogs and their offspring does not necessarily equate to exploitation or abuse. Rather, it is precisely due to the profit motive that a breeder must take good care of the dogs. There are indeed some small farms that are run poorly, but at the centre of the Tibetan Mastiff social circle (*ao quan* 葵圈), the most powerful players are in regular competition over how much they invest in the facilities and services they provide for dogs. Sometimes the degree and means of care are excessive. One boss in Shanxi province installed under-floor heating and built playgrounds for several hundred dogs, and employed a team of ten to shower them and blow dry their hair. My own boss would stay up all night by the side of any bitch that was giving birth, and ensure that every pup came out safely, even using his own mouth to suck out amniotic fluid from the mouths of pups. He regularly boasted about his dogs’ high birth rates and newborn survival rates, thanks to his exceptional breeding skills and hard work. And when a dog died, he scolded the workers for taking insufficient care.

Vis-à-vis the breeders’ extravagant care for dogs, my pastoralist informants provided only for their dogs’ basic living necessities. For example, their dog food consisted primarily of humans’ leftovers, such as buttermilk mixed with old *zamba* རྩམ་པ་ (fried Tibetan barley powder), yak or sheep blood mixed with noodle soup, or a sick lamb that had just died. However, for the breeders, some even feed their dogs artisanal recipes in which the nutrition and calories are calculated. During breeding season (only once a year, in autumn), pastoralists spend less time and effort on their dogs than do the breeders. Every breeder invests a considerable amount of time and energy designing plans for which dogs to mate, and ensuring that the bitches get pregnant and give birth without a hitch. In the pastures, breeding season is only an event for dogs, as male dogs run up and down the hills chasing traces of females in heat, fighting each other for chances to mate. Owners know little about where their dogs have been. Likewise, many pastoralists lack the specialized knowledge breeders have for canine hygiene and medical treatment. Few of the pastoralists I interviewed know why a dog gets ill and what medicine should be taken. When dogs seem ill, pastoralists leave them to recover alone. It is common for pastoral dogs to suddenly die for unknown reasons.

There are also exceptions. For the few pastoralists who participate in the local dog trade or the broader Tibetan Mastiff market, most are willing to learn about vaccinations, anti-parasitic drugs and (the folk versions of) genetics. However, they lack breeding farms and just breed their one or two bitches behind their tent or house, selling the pups to supplement family income. This group is only a tiny minority of the Tibetan pastoralist population. Mainstream pastoralists take little interest in such matters. To the contrary, they often criticize fellow pastoralists who breed dogs commercially.

Most pastoralists do not sell dogs. When they have pups, they give them to neighbours, relatives and friends as gifts. Sometimes people give the owner something in exchange, such as a sheep or some food. Money rarely changes hands.¹⁹ When pups are given away, small rituals are performed, such as tying a wool string to the pup’s neck and saying auspicious words. I heard many pastoralists say that no matter how well you raise a dog, you should never abandon the dog for money. They

18 Both the boss and the workers in this farm are Han. Some other farms are run by Tibetan bosses and workers, although they are not the majority.

19 Pioneering Tibetan Mastiff traders had to barter dogs from Tibetan pastoralists in the late 1980s.

view it as especially wrong to sell a grown-up dog, because this dog has become part of the family. Professional dog breeders are looked down upon the most, because they earn a living from selling dogs. Indeed, pastoralists care little about dogs' material needs. However, when it comes to the issue of the dog trade, they care a lot. While breeders care excessively for dogs' lives for commercial purposes, pastoralists reverse the logic and argue that to truly care for a dog means not to sell it.

This invites us to consider the conceptual relationship between care and marketability. Selling dogs is different from the case of "care for sale" documented by Ana P. Gutierrez Garza, in which domestic and sex workers sell their care labour as a commodity.²⁰ In that study, care work is sold as labour, whereas in my case, it is the results of such care work, or the "product" of care, that is being sold. In other words, what becomes a commodity is not the performance of care itself, but the one being cared for. A more relevant practice for comparison is the "pricing of priceless human children"²¹ – that is, the problem of payments in and for adopting children: this presents a similar conflict between ethical values and monetary value. The difference is that when it comes to the Tibetan Mastiffs who are bred and traded, and animals in the pet industry more broadly, being sellable and being a receiver of care do not contradict each other. Furthermore, it is precisely due to the selling motive that breeders need exceptional care for the dogs, a practice that is intersubjective and communicative.

For breeders, the care and the sale of dogs are not only compatible, but also intertwined. However, this also means that such care will become fragile when selling meets obstacles. When the Tibetan Mastiff Fever waned in the 2010s, many breeders who had entered the market out of a utilitarian drive gave up on dog raising, because dogs were no longer profitable. Many dogs were alleged to have been abandoned, sold to butchers for meat, or even left in cages to starve to death. In comparison, while ordinary pastoralists might take less assiduous care of dogs than breeders, they do not abandon or kill a dog due to price fluctuation. Their decisions about whether, and how, to raise a dog are not premised upon marketability.

Another concern is whether care for commercial purposes constitutes real care. Within the breeders' circles, debates sometimes focus on whether a dog's needs are actually being met, or whether those needs being met are the dog's actual needs. Some breeders criticize others for incorrect dog care, such as implementing heating in kennels. They think that those who do this misunderstand the breed's innate capacities: the Tibetan Mastiff has strong resistance to cold due to its adaptation to the plateau habitat. Due to commodification, breeders sometimes not only care "too much," but also cause dogs excess discomfort and pain precisely because they are so eager to help so as to harvest more prized dogs for sale. Pastoralists do not seek to maximise profits from dogs, so they are not concerned with improving or innovating in their dog-raising techniques. Their care for dogs is configured less through material provisions than through ethical recognition and treatment of dogs. Dogs are recognized as caring for pastoralist owners and contributing to the pastoral livelihood. This is why they believe selling dogs is not only harmful in utilitarian terms, but also morally wrong. In other words, pastoralists refuse to sell dogs not because dogs are taken care of, but because they believe dogs *care*.

Shong: Guarding as an Ethical Virtue

Tibetan pastoral guard dogs are perceived as caring for their owners through their attention to owners' needs for the safety of property and their efforts and sacrifices to satisfy them. This urges owners to repay them with trust, respect and care. Not only do dogs function as gifts between individuals, but a gift relationship sustains people and dogs, that is, a reciprocity between dogs'

²⁰ Gutiérrez Garza 2018.

²¹ Zelizer 1985.

“*shong*” མུང (guarding) and owners’ “*hso*” ཁས (raising).²² This reciprocity is not just utilitarian, but also has ethical weight and exerts a sense of responsibility, at least on the human side, including the responsibility not to kill, eat, abuse, abandon or sell dogs. Dogs’ guarding care can be accomplished by dogs of various abilities and types. It is not dogs’ innate qualities that matter most, but the ways such qualities serve human–dog cooperation in a pastoral livelihood alongside its recent transformations. Ironically, when dogs are traded from their original owners to a breeding farm, the direction of the guarding flips: the one that used to guard is now the guarded.

“Tibetan Mastiff” is a breed name authorized by the Fédération Cynologique Internationale (FCI),²³ which, along with other “mastiffs,” are usually used for “guarding and general intimidation.”²⁴ This term does not come from the Tibetan language, where there is no equivalent for “mastiff.” Normally, pastoralists call this type of dog *drokqe* འདྲོག་ཁྱེ, meaning “pastoral dog.”²⁵

The job of a *drokqe* is to detect and deter human and animal intruders. Every night before bed, pastoralists set free their dogs that are chained up throughout the day. After resting for the day, dogs get energetic and prepared for the night watch. Some owners might also halloo to the dogs, activating their *shong* mode. Dogs’ senses will be sharpened by the call, with attention drawn to potential threats. They run around the house/tent and the sheep pen, sniffing, listening, watching, sometimes barking, sometimes fighting, until owners wake up at dawn, leaving their tents/houses to lock them up again.

Due to methodological constraints, it is difficult to ascertain whether dogs guard out of their own genuine “caring” motivations, but as far as we can know, pastoralists appreciate the hardship dogs endure for guarding, so they keep, raise and respect them in return. Among the local “tribes,”²⁶ there are numerous proverbs and customs about dogs. Many of them stress the importance of dogs for pastoral well-being, and how pastoralists should respect dogs.²⁷ For example, an idiom says that the dog is the protector-deity guarding the gate to the fortune-endowed enclosures of yaks, sheep, horses and goats.²⁸ In this idiom, the dog is not just a protector of livestock, but is deified like the *shongma* མུང་མ་, or guardian gods, in Tibetan Buddhism. Another proverb says that one should never eat horse meat, however hungry one is, and never sell dogs, however poor one is.²⁹ Pastoralism, in Tibet and beyond, is defined by animal husbandry as a close engagement with animals,³⁰ but this does not mean that pastoralists treat all animals alike. Indeed, in the Tibetan context, the domestic animals (*gonang* གོང་ནང) are all sentient beings (*namxi* ནམ་ཁྱེས) whose lives should be respected, and they are all important means of subsistence that contribute to a “multifaceted interdependence” of the pastoral livelihood.³¹ However, the saying above implies an inner moral hierarchy among them. Yaks and sheep can be sold and eaten.³² Horses cannot be eaten, but can be sold. Dogs can be neither sold nor eaten. Although dogs’ material needs do not receive as much care as yaks and sheep, and owners do not talk about their dogs as much as they talk about their horses (due to their high prices and horse racing), the dog constitutes a special category,

22 This owner–guard dog gifting relationship can be compared to the gifting relationship between hunting peoples and their companion animals. See, for example, Nadasdy 2007.

23 FCI 2015.

24 Bradshaw 2011, 59.

25 Similar Tibetan pastoral dogs can also be called *wodqe* བོད་ཁྱེ, *ngoqe* གོང་ཁྱེ, *ndokqe* འདྲོག་ཁྱེ, *bzangqe* བཟང་ཁྱེ, *sangqe* བསང་ཁྱེ, *weqe* བཞེ, *lawo* ལའོ, *laqe* ལཱེ, *stodqe* མུང་ཁྱེ, etc. in different areas and contexts.

26 Called *tsowa* ཚོ་བ, *xokkha* ཤོག་ཁ, or *re’nde* རེ་ནེ.

27 Tibetan pastoralists’ ambivalent treatment of dogs in terms of poor material provision but highly ethical recognition is comparable to that of the Mongolian pastoralists for whom the dog constitutes an intimate “Other.” See Terbish 2015.

28 *Kyang ge rawa go bzhe, shong ma qe dang bji ba* གཡང་གེ་རའ་བ་གཞེ། མུང་མ་ཁྱེ་དང་བཞི་བ། མུང་མ་ཁྱེ་དང་བཞི་བ།.

29 *Stok rung rta me bxa, med rung qe me bzong* མུང་རུང་རྟ་མེ་བཤལ། མེད་རུང་ཁྱེ་མེ་བཟོང་།.

30 Galaty 2015.

31 Levine 2019.

32 This does not mean that livestock can be killed *ad libitum*, especially against the background of the Slaughter Renunciation Movement, which has exerted its greatest influence in the Kham area. See Gaerrang 2017.

and wins owners' special respect. In the metaphysical dimension, this category approaches that of humans in terms of reincarnation, as encapsulated by the proverb "the previous life of a human is a dog."³³

Therefore, a relevant question is: if dogs are needed and respected as guards, why do some Tibetan pastoralists prefer dogs that are not ferocious? Isn't ferocity a useful trait in guarding? As counterintuitive as it might seem to be, ferocity is not a prerequisite for dogs' capacity to guard. In many Tibetan pastoral areas, a distinction between two ideal types of guard dog is common. A *zanbo* dog is aggressive and combative, closer to common understandings of "ferocious." It does not bark so much, but aims vigilantly at the approaching enemy, before making sudden and fatal attacks. A *xokyeng* dog is attentive, energetic and hardworking. It does not usually make direct attacks, but tirelessly watches and patrols, barking vigilantly at any sign of danger to alert the owner and other dogs. It is also more tame and responsive to its owners, as if it can see into their hearts (*semxi* རེ་མཁའ་ཤེས་). *Zanbo* and *xokyeng* are not mutually exclusive. A dog can be both *zanbo* and *xokyeng*, with different degrees and manifestations in different circumstances. Either of them makes a good guard dog.

Zanbo and *xokyeng* have respective limitations too. *Xokyeng* dogs are good watchers but not good fighters, Janzhek being a precious exception. In this sense, most *xokyeng* dogs are less adept at defending against human intruders who can subdue or even kill a dog with weapons and tactics. Before being incorporated into the Chinese state in the 1950s, Tibetan pastoral tribal communities regularly struggled with one another for resources.³⁴ Pilfering other tribes' livestock and supplies was considered a heroic contribution to one's own tribe. During my fieldwork, I heard many elderly pastoralists recall experiences and tell stories of stealing and fighting thieves. When mutual raiding between tribes was commonplace, dogs that could defeat humans were prized. It was for this reason that Tibetan pastoralists believe it is better to keep ferocious, i.e. *zanbo*, dogs.

Zanbo dogs not only join inter-tribal wars, but also shape inter-household relations within each tribe. Ekvall has observed that "dogs establish a zone of danger around each tent and create needed social distance" between households.³⁵ People often carry weapons, like stones and sticks, when they travel far from home and visit others. In turn, a host's control over dogs is considered a sign of hospitality. Those who are less armed, cautious or experienced, especially children, are in greater danger of being hurt by *zanbo* dogs. In comparison, *xokyeng* dogs are more friendly to strangers, and if they acknowledge the strangers as the owners' friends, they will not attack. *Xokyeng* dogs also adapt to the contemporary transformations of Tibetan pastoralism better than *zanbo* dogs. As the tribal authorities declined, legal conceptions of property took root, and tribal feuds were reconciled. As such, more and more pastoralists are willing to keep less aggressive dogs because there are fewer thieves. At my fieldsite, the dominant remaining threat is wolves that raid sheep. Most of the time, *xokyeng* dogs are sufficient to alert the owners of the coming wolves. Sometimes wolves will retreat upon being noticed by dogs.³⁶

With the recent marketization and development processes challenging the traditional pastoral lifestyles,³⁷ the guarding care provided by dogs is becoming less needed, especially that of *zanbo* dogs. Additionally, new technologies such as iron fences, flashing lights and loudspeakers are now used to scare off wolves. Moreover, some pastoralists have moved to settlement villages (*mumin dingju dian* 牧民定居点) and given up on herding entirely. Although some of them

33 *Me sje len kar qe sje* མེ་སྟེ་ལེན་ཀར་ཀེ་སྟེ་.

34 Levine 2015, 167–170.

35 Ekvall 1968, 74.

36 The wolf problem is complicated nowadays and awaits further investigations, especially in those areas in which it is becoming palpably more serious.

37 Huatse Gyal 2015.

still keep their functionally useless dogs, more and more dogs are being sold into the Tibetan Mastiff market.³⁸ The dogs' ecological and social surroundings, relations with humans and other animals, and purpose of living are transformed. As a result, the human–dog caring reciprocity of *shong* and *hso* loses its context and has to be adjusted. The adjustments are apparent in breeding farms. While pastoralists raise dogs to guard property, dogs transported to breeding farms become property that is not only cared for unilaterally, but also needs to be guarded or confined (*guan* 关). As a result, guarding people *from* the dogs becomes part of breeders' care work. The dogs' guarding instincts, habits and virtues are rendered useless, and even detrimental, in the new environment.

In the pastoral areas, albeit a reciprocal cohabitation, people usually maintain distance from their dogs, whether or not they are *zanbo*. In the breeding farms, that reciprocity no longer exists, while the distance has been truncated. When customers or tourists visit, dogs get angry and jump on the bars, shaking the cages which appear as if they are about to break apart. The ferocious ones pose significant danger. A crucial part of workers' job is to ensure dogs do not get out, and they will take responsibility when accidents happen, as in the story of “the mad dog.” Just as one Mastiff fancier writes on his WeChat blog, “If a Tibetan Mastiff does not bite, what do we keep it for? However, it is up to the owner whether people actually get bitten.”³⁹ When the Tibetan Mastiff market was peaking and the price of dogs was higher than that of cars, breeders would guard and protect dogs with even more care, because of the threat of dog thieves. Ironically, the dogs that were supposed to guard against the thieves became the object of theft and the object of guarding.

The way dogs are “guarded” in breeding farms is analogous to the treatment of mentally ill patients by the Chinese state, family and community through the lens of the political culture of *guan* 管, which can mean both care and custody in Chinese.⁴⁰ Another character with a similar pronunciation – *guan* 关 – entails similar binarity, with *guanxin* 关心 meaning “care/concern” and *guanya* 关押 meaning “custody/guarding,” for which the *guan* 关 of the Tibetan Mastiff is the preeminent example. The ambivalence revealed by the breeding farms' guarding of guard dogs shocks many pastoralists who visit. As one commented, “What is the point in feeding them so much that they get fat and become lazy?” Actually, in the pastures there are also many *zanbo* dogs who are in chains all day and do not enjoy this freedom. Nevertheless, this shows that pastoralists see the dogs' guarding as not only their duty and an ethical virtue, but also their calling, and this is worthy of care. In breeding farms, dogs are not only deprived of guarding, but guarding is also imposed back on them. If guard dogs' capacities cannot be exerted to the fullest, why do breeders invest in them in the first place? What value do breeders see in the dogs?

Xiong: Ferocity as Economic Value

A dog's guarding quality is indeed appreciated by breeders and consumers, but they value different aspects of it than do the pastoralists. As the aforementioned blog post questioning “if a Tibetan Mastiff does not bite, what do we keep it for?” encapsulates, the dogs' ferocity holds an irreplaceable attraction for many Tibetan Mastiff fanciers. Called *xiong* 凶 in Chinese, ferocity is one of the most oft-mentioned and appreciated qualities of a good Tibetan Mastiff. However, as we know, not all good guard dogs in the pastoral areas have *zanbo* qualities. Why are breeders obsessed with *xiong*, and what do they actually mean by it? It involves a transformation of dogs' value from the Tibetan concept of *shong* in the pastoral areas to the Chinese concept of *xiong* in the Tibetan Mastiff market. It is an uneven and creative process of essentializing an ethical virtue in

38 The market influence on pastoralists' decisions about dog raising is comparable to the contested commodification of yaks. See Gaerang 2017.

39 Aoxuebu, “Zang'ao, bu yaoren yang lai ganma?” (If a Tibetan Mastiff does not bite, what do we keep it for?), *Weixin*, 20 April 2020, https://mp.weixin.qq.com/s/QInt1__TFjDOQv5hyvf30g. Accessed 22 February 2023.

40 Zhu et al. 2018; Ma 2020.

a human–dog reciprocal relationship into the symbolic and economic value of a commodified dog. This complicates owners’ care for dogs because the purpose of care is to produce dogs that might hurt their caretakers.

A pastoral guard dog is not born a Tibetan Mastiff, but *becomes* a Tibetan Mastiff, especially one that is *xiong*, through a process of value transformation fuelled by commodification. It starts by removing the dog from the context of *shong*, which is rooted in the pastoral environment, livelihood and relations between dogs, humans, sheep and wolves. The moment a pastoralist sells a dog and puts it in a cage in a breeder’s pick-up truck, the dog’s identity changes from a guard, co-worker and family member to an atomized commodity. What follows is the essentialization of the dog’s abilities and qualities. *Xiong* becomes an essence crystallized in the dog itself and disconnected from the dog’s previous experiences and purpose. Eventually, whether a dog is *xiong* becomes part of the criteria for determining the dog’s quality and price.

Not just individual dogs, but the Tibetan Mastiff as a breed, is now associated with *xiong*. As such, *xiong* has become one of the indicators of an authentic (*zhengzong* 正宗) Tibetan Mastiff. Although there are a dozen other criteria according to which breeders judge whether a Tibetan Mastiff is “purebred” (*chunzhong* 纯种), they consider *xiong* fundamental. This is especially so in the “primordial Mastiff” (*yuansheng ao* 原生獒) circle, a group of breeders who prefer dogs closer to the breed’s “nature” (*tianxing* 天性), rather than those with “improved” appearances. As my boss would say, “If it is not *xiong*, it is not a Tibetan Mastiff at all.” As the Tibetan Mastiff Fever became a social phenomenon, the public image of the Tibetan Mastiff as *xiong* became engrained. Many customers, and the broader public, do not even know what these dogs look like, where they come from or the fundamentals of pastoralism, but they believe a Tibetan Mastiff is definitely *xiong*. In turn, the Tibetan Mastiff becomes a symbol of *xiong* in other social contexts. For example, Zhang Jike 张继科, a table tennis player for the Chinese national team, earned the nickname “the Tibetan Mastiff” from his fans, because his table tennis play gives the audience a *xiong* feeling.

Curiously, if we analyse what “feelings” Zhang’s table tennis play emanates, from his bodily gestures, facial expressions and voice, we will realise that the “*xiong*” signified by the Tibetan Mastiff has already become a hollow signifier that can have an array of meanings to different people. This underscores that *xiong* is no longer tantamount to *zanbo*, with the latter representing the specific features of a type of pastoral guard dog. This ambiguity manifests not just among the public, but in some professional breeders’ perceptions and evaluations as well. Often, it is difficult to decipher breeders’ meaning when they say a dog is *xiong*. Different dogs can all be deemed *xiong* in the Tibetan Mastiff farms: Those that bark loudly and jump incessantly; those that keep biting the bars of their cages; those that lie prone on the ground, staring and growling, before dashing to attack; etc. These variously “ferocious” dogs can be said to embrace both the *zanbo* and the *xokyeng* types.⁴¹

All of these mismatches suggest that the essentialization of the *shong* virtue is not merely extracting *zanbo* qualities and translating them into *xiong*. Rather, it is a process of filling a new box labelled *xiong* with various new understandings. If breeders are applying the concept of *xiong* ambiguously, customers, and especially tourists, can perceive the nuance even less. For many of them, *all* Tibetan Mastiffs are *xiong*. In this sense, when people want to buy and own a Tibetan Mastiff, *xiong* becomes a mystified object of consumptive desire, the bodies of diverse dogs serving as containers. This begs several questions: Why do wealthy urban consumers want a *xiong* dog? What is the core attraction of *xiong* for them? What are the new contexts created for consumption?

The simplest reason for a preference for *xiong* dogs is pragmatic: many people want a dog to guard their possessions. The Tibetan pastoral dogs used in this way continue to fulfil their duty as guards. However, this type of customer is often discouraged by the high prices, and opts for a

41 To complicate the case, dog cognition and behavior research suggests that many dogs bark or attack out of fear, rather than anger, see Bradshaw 2011, 163–180.

cheaper breed or a crossbreed. The typical (or stereotypical) owner of a Tibetan Mastiff is a male, wealthy businessman or bureaucrat who houses the dog in a massive cage or chains it up in the back yard,⁴² to show to guests when they visit. Some of them also allege that their purpose is to have a guard for the house. For reasons similar to breeding farms, it is usually the dogs that get to be guarded, and sometimes even family members need to be protected from the dogs as well. A more sensible explanation for the preference for *xiong* is that powerful people purchase the Tibetan Mastiff to represent their power, and this is why showing the dog to others is a crucial procedure in owning a Tibetan Mastiff: power needs to be seen, albeit in metaphorical ways. In breeding farms and the yards of owners' homes, there is usually a stage, or platform, or at least an open space where dogs are displayed. Aside from the breed's high price, the exhibited *xiong* itself becomes a signifier of owners' wealth, authority and masculinity.

In the Tibetan pastoral areas, there is also a saying that "ferocious dogs match tough guys."⁴³ But this "toughness" that implies physical strength and combative skills is different from the symbolic power worshiped in business and political circles. Although there is a small overlap between Tibetan Mastiff fanciers and dog-fighting circles, the majority of Tibetan Mastiff owners oppose dog fighting, condemning it as cruel. As phrased by some of them, the prime purpose of owning a Tibetan Mastiff should be ornamental (*guanshangxing* 观赏性). In this sense, the dog does not have to be substantively destructive by actually hurting people (as the *zanbo* type does), but only needs to *look* ostensibly ferocious with its size, appearance, jumping and barking, for which some *xokyeng* or anxiously defensive dogs would also count. Furthermore, the dogs' *xiong* is not merely a counterpart to the owner's personal qualities. For elite urban owners, it is also a relationship *between* master and pet, that is, that they have conquered and owned a recalcitrant subject like the Tibetan Mastiff augments their own intensity and power. Likewise, this relationship of sovereignty does not have to be substantive, since the object of modern consumptive desire tends to be imaginary, and the ideology of consumption is often about constructing identities through establishing an imagined sovereignty over the object of consumption.⁴⁴ Here, *xiong* becomes a symbol for power that simultaneously subjugates and is subjugated.

By "conquering" the Tibetan Mastiff, consumers believe they have also conquered nature. Although the dog is a domesticated animal, in advertisements and media descriptions of the Tibetan Mastiff, "primitive" (*yuanshi* 原始), "wild" (*yexing* 野性) and "natural" (*ziran* 自然) are common expressions. Similar to wealthy Americans who raise big cats,⁴⁵ Tibetan Mastiff raising is a niche taste for certain wealthy Chinese who wish to keep exotic animals at home. It is luxurious and considered high-class to use rare, pure and dangerous objects to decorate one's suburban garden. In the case of the Tibetan Mastiff, a taste for exotic animals is combined with a consumptive desire for exotic cultures. As such, the Tibetan Mastiff Fever is part of a greater Tibet Fever (*Xizang re* 西藏热) that began with China's market reforms in the 1990s, in which the Tibetan landscape, medicine, animals, handicrafts and even people are commodified and consumed.⁴⁶ The epitome of this fever is that of the "Kham male" (*Kangba nanren* 康巴男人), whose stereotypical image is tall, strong and tough, manifesting the dangerous glamour of the Tibetan masculinity.

In order to appreciate and display their meaningful and valuable dogs, owners need to first raise them. However, raising a ferocious Tibetan Mastiff is not easy, especially for professional breeders and workers who need to deal with large inventories of dogs. The conceptual possibility of *xiong* as

42 Some even speculate the decline of the Tibetan Mastiff Fever to be partially due to the Chinese Communist Party's anti-corruption campaign. For example, see "Waimei: Zhongguo fanfu ting bu xialai, tianjia zang'ao lunwei huoguo pei-cai" (Foreign media: China fighting corruption nonstop, priceless Tibetan Mastiffs turn into side dish for hot pot), *Global Times*, 21 April 2015, <https://oversea.huanqiu.com/article/9CaKrnJKchg>. Accessed 10 February 2021.

43 *Me zan med de qe zan so e yod de* མེ་ཙན་མེད་དེ་ཁྱེ་བཙན་སྟེ་ཨ་ཡོད་དེ།.

44 Graeber 2011.

45 This is shown, for example, in the 2020 Netflix documentary *Tiger King*.

46 Yeh and Lama 2013, 330–332.

a symbol has concrete and embodied consequences for people who cohabit with and care for *xiong* dogs. This brings us back to the opening vignette, where the “mad dog” bit my boss’s wife, and back to the question about the hardship and dedication involved in the Tibetan Mastiff breeding business. Breeders must expend more energy on raising dogs than pastoralists, not only because of the profit motive, but also due to a paradox embedded in their care work. When *xiong* becomes the aim of raising animals, it simultaneously constitutes the very obstacle to achieving this aim. Therefore, the laborious caretakers of the Tibetan Mastiff face a constant contradiction between the means and the ends of their care.

Sometimes, the dogs kept and raised in breeding farms are even more dangerous and even harder to raise than those in the pastures, but this is not because dogs in the breeding farms are innately more aggressive and destructive than those in the pastures. These are similar dogs, with both groups containing *zanbo* and *xokyeng* dogs. Constant trading and breeding have integrated dogs from the pastoral and the market settings into a genetically connected population. One reason for this is the physical proximity between humans and dogs in breeding farms. While pastoralists often maintain a deliberate distance from their dogs, breeders are closer to theirs: they often physically touch the dogs, for instance, when they drag them from cars to cages, when they comb or wash their hair, give them health checks and treatment, display them to customers, and assist in mating, giving birth and raising pups. Physical contact with dogs exposes caretakers to an environment in which personal harm is more likely.

Nevertheless, the breeders I met were proud in showing me the wounds or scars dogs had caused. For them, it is a matter of complaint, but also proof of their dedication to their dogs and to their caretaking job. This sense of hard work, dedication and sacrifice reminds us of the aforementioned unilateral pattern of caretaking between breeders and dogs, where only the former is endowed with the ability and responsibility to care, and the latter are conceived of as merely awaiting and receiving care. It is worth noting that when “the mad dog” injured a human, it was the worker in charge of the dog that was criticized and took responsibility, rather than the dog itself. In this light, the difficulty of “raising dogs that bite” is also inseparable from the divergent understandings of the ethical subjectivity of dogs between breeders and pastoralists.

Conclusion

There are marked differences, relations and transformations in the patterns of human–dog care between the Tibetan pastoral areas and the Tibetan Mastiff market. They are demonstrations of the theoretical potential of “care,” which lies precisely in its complexity, ambiguity and possibilities of uniting activities such as raising dogs, selling dogs, dogs’ guarding and guarding dogs under the same framework to be compared and synthesized. Tibetan pastoralists and dogs participate in an ethical reciprocity of care which prevents the selling of dogs, while at the same time creating distance between humans and dogs. Meanwhile, in the breeding farms, the Tibetan Mastiff is a valuable commodity that needs to be guarded and managed and necessitates laborious care. The discrepancy comes from the valuation of the Tibetan Mastiff’s ferocity on the market, which is extracted, but altered, from the pastoral raising-guarding relationship, and essentialized to be a self-contained and diffusive quality of a commodity, pursued by powerful urban consumers as a symbol of taste and power. Ironically, the pursuit for ferocity threatens human–dog care relations and elevates the danger inherent to operating breeding farms.

The story of the commodified Tibetan Mastiff leads us to consider the relations between care and value. Commodification here is not merely attaching new meanings, values and prices to dogs, but also creating a new context within which human–dog care relations are positioned and unfolded. Echoing the other articles in this volume that discuss how economic changes influence the ways in which people care for each other, I have analysed how value transformation results in new purposes and means of taking care of dogs. Commodification results in changing conceptions about

dogs' ethical and caring subjectivity, when their caring qualities and performances transform from ethical virtues to marketable symbols with an economic price attached. Therefore, it is not just the value of dogs that changes, but also the value orienting owners' attention and action *towards* dogs. Precisely because dogs are seen as ethical subjects who care, pastoralists burden themselves with the ethical responsibility to care for dogs, which does not apply to profit-seeking breeders. The ethical reciprocity ceases to function in breeding farms and urban owners' homes, juxtaposing humans and dogs in a unilateral, difficult and dangerous care relation, which contains a paradox between the means and the ends of care.

In addition to a theoretical reflection on care, my discussion has utilized empirical data to answer a question which has bewildered many ordinary Chinese people outside the Tibetan Mastiff social circle: "Why is the Tibetan Mastiff so *xiong*?" I suggest that both the "Tibetan Mastiff" and "*xiong*" are meaningful constructions of the market which have become stereotypes circulating through the public imagination. The former is a renaming of the Tibetan pastoral dog which has traditionally served as a guard, not a pet. The latter is an essentialization of, and derivation from, a pastoral human–dog care relationship where dogs' function as guards is crucial. Through commodification, the image of the dog is disembedded from its original surroundings, relations and contexts of Tibetan pastoralism, and is recreated with resources from contemporary urban Chinese consumerist cultures. Therefore, in order to understand the Tibetan Mastiff's *xiong*, it is helpful to connect the stops along the value chain, and in doing so, to draw a comprehensive picture of the dog's journey from start to finish.

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