

# New Road, New Rules

## Modernized Road and Certified Mobility

John Smith

Fig. 1: A dirt road in Yangden. Most dirt roads looked like this after the community's land was divided into individual family plots and fenced in the 1990s. (Photo by the author, 2018)



### Modern road and more requirements

The Tibetan yak and sheep herding community of Yangden, where I conducted fieldwork in 2021, is located on a vast grassland surrounded by mountain ranges at about 4000 meters above sea level on the eastern Tibetan Plateau in Amdo, Qinghai Province (People's Republic of China). It is connected to the vibrant Galkar Town, located at the bottom of a valley and reachable by a 50-kilometer-long road.

"What is the point of having this shiny road if I am not allowed to drive on it?" Tsering said in frustration as we waited for the night to come so he could drive his car from Galkar to Yangden.<sup>1</sup> Tsering knew police were stopping every car on the road that day, asking drivers to show driver's licenses and insurance papers. Consequently, we waited until around 7:00 PM when the police left. Tsering was a 45-year-old father of three children. He was a good driver who had been driving between Galkar and Yangden without a license for decades, as documents were not previously required and transportation regulations were less restrictive. In 2007, for example, Tsering drove his family to the famous Labrang Monastery on pilgrimage without any problems. Every year between 2005 and 2008, he also often drove to Golog during the caterpillar fungus season. But that was before the tightened road regulations and requirements for driver's licenses and insurance registrations. The contemporary situation includes surveillance cameras, police checkpoints, and new driving rules. The only way Tsering and many other drivers could cope was to drive at night or at other times when surveillance was relaxed.

Before it became a concrete road, Yangden residents used this road to trade, embark on religious pilgrimages, and visit neighboring communities. Today, they depend on this road more than before to send children to schools, take ill community

**In the past decade, the Chinese state settled many mobile pastoralists in the Tibetan region of Amdo. Primary features of their newly sedentarized life were new forms of housing and new forms of mobility. For some pastoralists, mobility now entails driving on a newly built road that replaced a rough, bumpy dirt road. Despite the smoothness of a glimmering concrete road, the road has proven more complicated to use for drivers than the previous road because it requires something that is very difficult to access: a government-issued driver's license.**

members to hospitals, and buy goods in Galkar Town markets. The government rebuilt this road in 2013 as part of a campaign to bring modern development to Yangden. Local nomads are pleased that the bumpy dirt route [Fig. 1] was transformed into a concrete road that made travel much more convenient [Fig. 2]. However, driving on this road is now inconvenient due to the government-certified license requirement. Ironically, therefore, the locals' excitement about this road is paired with a lack of easy access to actually use it.

### Changing regimes of mobility

Galkar Town did not exist before 1953. The track between Yangden and contemporary Galkar was a broken, narrow path leading to a key local monastery – Changchub Ling. It also linked Yangden to the residence of a local Tibetan chief and several neighboring Tibetan farming villages at the base of the mountains. When the local chief administered the Yangden community, there were vibrant interactions between the nomadic community of Yangden at the top of the mountains and the neighboring farming villages located in the warmer valley bottoms more suited for farming. The track accommodated local trade between the farming villages and nomadic Yangden. Every autumn, men in Yangden families packed yaks and horses with sheep wool, meat, butter, and cheese and took them to farming villages to trade for barley, wheat flour, rapeseed oil, fruit, wooden milk buckets, and the like.

Locals called the trail between Yangden, Changchub Ling Monastery, and the farming villages a *kang lam* (Tib. རྩོལ་ལམ།, a "footpath" for walking and riding horses or yaks). The path came into being through repetitive use over generations. There were no signs along the path. The path itself disappeared in places and was again visible only in certain areas. But names of different parts of the trail were learned through experience and shared stories. Passing through rocky and forested mountain ranges and grassland, locals knew where to find the safest and most convenient areas to walk and ride. Part of the path was also a *kye lam* (Tib. རྩོལ་ལམ།), which refers to wider transportation paths Tibetan nomads used when they packed belongings on yaks and horses and moved to seasonal pastures.

In 1953, Galkar County Town was established as the local government seat not far from the chief's residence. In the era of the People's Communes (1953–1983), the old footpath linking the residence to Changchub Ling Monastery and Yangden was turned into a wider road for tractors and a few trucks known as the "liberation vehicle" (Ch. *jiiefangche* 解放车) used for collecting wool, cheese, butter, animal skins, and more for the commune and transporting them from one place to another. The tractors were brought to Yangden for agriculture. During the People's Commune period in the 1970s, a large part of Yangden's wide grassland was plowed for farming. I talked to Yangden elders who were part of a local team assigned to build the road between Yangden and Galkar, which involved using hand-held shovels and occasionally explosives. Lhundrub said, "I can never forget this.

Explosives were used to clear the roadway through the foot of Dram Mountain, which caused the death and injury of many frogs." Lhundrub chanted Om Mani Padme Hum, a Buddhist mantra, three times and then continued telling the story of making the road when he was about 21. "It took about three years to complete. Winter was too cold, and the earth was frozen, so we had to wait for spring to continue the work. We were afraid of digging the earth, especially where there were springs, boulders, and trees, without proper consultations with a local lama. But it was a time when we were told, 'There are no gods and no ghosts,' so we dug where we were told to do so."

In the late 1990s and 2000s, the road between Galkar Town and Yangden was used by a few locals traveling on foot and riding horses or bicycles, and a few driving tractor-trailers or motorbikes. During the late 1990s, a section of this road was known among the locals for its ghosts. This understanding was based on several tractor-trailer accidents at night. The drivers lost control and the vehicles tumbled down the narrow, zigzagging mountain road. One family lost their parents, and some others were seriously injured. Until about 2005, night driving on that road was not recommended. Rumors abounded of encountering frightening images and hearing cries while driving on the curved, steep part of the mountain road. Locals blamed ghosts as well as poor road conditions for accidents. Stories of ghosts on the road are no longer heard very often, however. No one is afraid of driving and encountering ghosts at night. Instead, they are afraid of driving in the daytime and being caught by the police for driving without proper licenses.



Fig. 2: Part of the new concrete road in Yangden. (Photo courtesy of Gur Gon, 2023)

As Yangden residents increasingly bought motorcycles in the mid-2000s, the number of pedestrians, bicycles, and horseback riders decreased. The number of tractors, which were popular in the late 1990s and early 2000s for transporting families' belongings from one pasture to another during seasonal movements, also gradually diminished after the community's land was divided into individual family plots and fenced. Around 2015, the dirt road between Galkar Town and Yangden that local Tibetans had built in the 1970s was turned into a shiny concrete road with the help of giant bulldozers, road rollers, and excavators. In 2018, a section of the road near Galkar Town became an asphalt road. Many locals were hired and paid to help build the road that became known as the *lang khor lam* (Tib. ལྷོ་ཁོ་ལམ་ལམ་, "vehicle road").

### Challenges of motorized life

Road construction was also linked to establishing a nomad settlement town in Yangden for approximately 400 herding households beginning in 2015 and continuing today. The number of vehicles has increased since the establishment of the new road and the community's changing lifestyle.

New road signs and billboards in Chinese and Tibetan were displayed along the road, welcoming and celebrating this modern development project. For about two years, car ownership in Yangden increased as locals enjoyed driving on the road. Locals' lives became more dependent on vehicles, especially for settled families who no longer herded livestock. Many families who relocated to the settlement town sold their livestock and used the money to buy vehicles. Many young people became truck drivers, transporting goods and construction materials, and unofficial taxi drivers. Most local car owners drive the China-manufactured Xiali, a five-person car, or Wuling, a mini pickup truck [Fig. 3].

Each vehicle costs about ¥50,000 (\$7100 USD). According to the locals, these two types are appealing because they are more affordable and fuel-efficient than other vehicles. A popular phrase goes, "Xiali and Wuling only smell gasoline while other vehicles drink gasoline."

Driving rules and regulations enforced on the road between Yangden and Galkar Town now require that motor vehicles be certified and that their operation be properly learned from driving schools. For many herders, initial delight about road improvement turned to disappointment and concern. Document requirements have created new barriers for local drivers to legally access the road. Although the government mandates a driver's license, acquiring one is challenging. Passing the highly technical Chinese language exam (or the inadequately translated Tibetan exam) to qualify for a license is one barrier. For some, this entails living for months at certified driving boarding

schools. For many, getting a driver's license is a prohibitive personal expense that takes years. It costs from ¥3500 to ¥10,000 (\$491 to \$1400 USD), depending on an individual's driving skills, location, knowledge, and time commitment. Most Yangden residents above age 35 cannot read and write well in Chinese, making passing driving tests more challenging.

I met Tsering in Galkar Town in the summer of 2021. Tsering's two children were enrolled at the County Town boarding school, and Tsering came to visit them on the weekend. When Tsering came to town, he had to get up and drive at 4:00 AM, when few were awake, to avoid the police because he was driving illegally without a driver's license. When we drove his Xiali car back to Yangden that night, Tsering told me he had been attending a driving school in Galkar whenever he had time. Two years had passed and he still had not received his driver's license. Although Tsering is an

experienced driver and had been driving safely for decades, he had to relearn how to drive according to the standardized and prescribed driving rules.

For Tsering, like many others in Yangden, the most challenging barrier is passing the written test. He reads some Tibetan but knows no Chinese characters. He is unsure if he will ever be issued a license. Many locals never successfully pass their license requirements despite trying for years due to their lack of reading ability in Chinese or Tibetan. Tsering had heard of a few people his age who eventually received their licenses and was determined to continue trying.

A modern, shiny road seems promising to ensure safer and more accessible mobility. Tsering and many other drivers wanted it; however, its arrival has also brought new demands, such as learning legalized driving skills and acquiring licenses, which have decreased access to legal mobility. This raises larger questions of mobility on the Tibetan Plateau and in other areas. As more people are sedentarized through urbanization, mobility is increasingly dependent on motorized forms of transportation legalized through licensing. These transformations raise questions about the accessibility of roads and what might be done so that locals have worry-free access to motorized mobility.

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### Notes

- Names of the people and specific places in this article are pseudonyms for confidentiality. Tibetan scripts are provided for some important local Tibetan terms. Non-English terms are Tibetan ("Tib.") unless indicated as Chinese ("Ch.") and provided in Pinyin.



Fig. 3: A Wuling pickup truck in Yangden (Photo courtesy Gur Gon, 2023).