14 Yachen as Process

Encampments, Nuns, and Spatial Politics in Post-Mao Kham

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Abstract

This chapter examines a distinctive form of Buddhist space, called an ‘encampment’ (*gar*), that is being built by Tibetan Buddhist nuns in Yachen. By ethnographically focusing on the nuns’ material engagements, I show how the inherent incompleteness and inclusiveness of an encampment provide a space for the nuns to flourish in a politically restrictive situation. I also explore the spatial politics occurring between the nuns and the Chinese state in and through Kham in the post-Mao era. I argue that Yachen is continually being made and transformed by various actants, including the nuns and their material activities, within the unique geopolitical malleability of Kham, and that the emergence of this encampment allows us to see Yachen as an unfolding process.

Keywords: encampment (*gar*), spatial politics, nuns, Tibetan Buddhist revival, Yachen Gar

Introduction

Few people visiting the eastern Tibetan plateau would fail to notice the ubiquitous presence of the massive grasslands where herds of yak graze freely, each animal maintaining a good distance from the others and from the herders’ tents that are scattered sparsely across the steppe. It is within this kind of nomadic landscape, deep within Kham, that Yachen Gar, a mega-sized Tibetan Buddhist encampment, can be found. More specifically, the encampment (*gar*) is located in the northwestern part of Sichuan province, not far from the provincial border of the Tibet Autonomous Region (T.A.R.). ‘Yachen’ is the name that nomadic people used to refer to this area

before the encampment was established. From a nearby hilltop in Yachen Gar, one can see a large residential area in the valley below with several thousand individual shacks built by Tibetan nuns.¹ The zone filled with these rough-hewn quarters is partially hemmed in by a river that makes the entire area resemble an island (see Figure 14.1). Many who visit Yachen for the first time do not expect a Buddhist ‘monastery’ to possess such a large shantytown within it and are often awestruck by this scene; this is why the nuns’ quarters have been a popular subject for photography.

Yet beyond its photogenic appeal, what makes this ‘island’ zone, and all of Yachen, truly astonishing is the way in which this enormous, if squalid, Buddhist enclave and the grand natural vistas that surround it invoke a sense of triumphant Buddhist spirituality in its earthly form. Among visitors and practitioners (both Tibetans and non-Tibetans), the challenging living conditions of the enclave are easily read as proof of the nuns’ firm devotion toward their practices and their nunships; and the wild natural environment is often perceived as a necessary condition for containing and transmitting spiritual purity and sacredness. Even at a sensorial level, the devotees whom I encountered often told me that they felt a sense of spiritual and bodily purification just by walking around Yachen, eating and drinking there, and breathing its air (not to mention meditating or receiving teachings in Yachen). However, this fascination with Yachen does not arise only from such a heated religious ethos; in fact, in part, it arises from and is strengthened by a submerged, secular ‘mystery’ about how such a gigantic ethnic-religious community could emerge in a region of China where ongoing political (spatial) restrictions are the norm.

Securing firm and stable territorial boundaries is one of the quintessential components of the modern nation-state, and territorial sovereignty has been a ceaseless source of wars, disputes, and tensions. This issue is bound to be particularly acute for the People’s Republic of China (P.R.C.) since its massive border regions are occupied largely by ethnic minorities, many of whom may not entirely agree with their incorporation into the spatial and cultural project of *Zhonghua*, the Chinese nation. In particular, since their land was taken over by the Chinese army in 1951, Tibetans have continued to express their dissatisfaction with the state-led myth of a homogenous Chinese nation. (This dissatisfaction was expressed most recently in the protest in Lhasa in 2008 and the wave of self-immolations that followed

1 In 2017, the number of nuns in Yachen exceeded 10,000. A smaller number of monks (no more than 2000) were settled on the upper side of the encampment. The monks also build their own huts, which are more spacious and made of much higher quality materials.

Figure 14.1 The nuns' residential sector in Yachen

Photograph by Yasmin Cho 2010

after.²) Given the fact that Tibetan-populated regions in China constitute almost one fourth of the entire national territory of China, it is crucial for the Chinese state to secure a sense of territorial belonging from Tibetans, in other words, to achieve the 'territorialization' (Yeh 2013) of Tibetans to the motherland of China. For this reason, the Chinese state's ethnic policies have been geared toward soliciting ethnic minorities' recognition and submission of their ethnic territories as firmly bounded under the P.R.C.'s sovereignty.

Within this particular geopolitical context, the emergence of Yachen Gar can be seen as an unusual instance of spatial dominance, or deterritorialization, exercised by Tibetans. By saying this, I do not mean that Yachen is a 'successful' deviation from the Chinese control scheme or that it has achieved a static, independent position once and for all. The stories about Yachen that I will present in this chapter are much more complex. Since its inception and by its nature, Yachen has been undergoing a constant process of formation and transformation through the interventions of various actors, or 'actants'

2 McGranahan, Carole, and Ralph Litzinger. 2012. 'Self-Immolation as Protest in Tibet'. *Hot Spots, Fieldsights*, 9 April. <https://culanth.org/fieldsights/series/self-immolation-as-protest-in-tibet>

(Latour 1999): Tibetan lamas, monastics, Chinese lay disciples, the state's policies, Buddhist devotion, the landscape, building activities, and so on. The structurally embedded uncertainty, openness, and unexpectedness of the landscape and the politics in Kham have crucially defined the present form of the encampment. This chapter is dedicated to showing ethnographically how the encampment is being formed and deformed through the Tibetan nuns' material engagements – their hut building and migratory practices in particular – within the specific spatial and temporal process that is 'Kham'.

Looking at the changing physical and residential (especially architectural) properties of the encampment of Yachen is useful for properly understanding 'Kham as a process' (see Gros, in the Introduction). The studies discussed in this volume all point out, with different emphases and approaches, that Kham is not simply a background or a container of actions and histories that have unfolded; instead, Kham, with its own contested and elastic geopolitical and historical vectors, plays the role of an active medium through which various participants seek to confront, challenge, and negotiate with one another. Yachen's emergence and expansion, at least before the infrastructural and biopolitical interventions³ that the Chinese state has gradually made in recent years, owe a great deal to 'the malleability of Kham' as represented in the trope of 'the Möbius strip' that Gros aptly elaborates in the Introduction. More specifically, in the emergence of Yachen, an extensive political and gendered repression, occurring both within Tibet and in relation to the Chinese state, is one of the fundamental conditions for so many Tibetan girls who migrate to this remote region of Kham. In other words, Tibet's internal dynamics, tensions, and uncertainties as well as the external pressures and changing politics on the plateau play essential roles in the making of an active and unbounded Buddhist space (in de Certeau's sense)⁴ at the outer rim of Tibet, and these complex entanglements return to and enhance the already conflated nature of Kham. I believe the notion of Kham-as-a-process, rather than simply Kham as the name of a region, has profound analytical value for helping us to likewise understand 'Yachen as a process'. Only when we can see Yachen as a changing phenomenon or movement – and not as a bounded place, monastery, or religious site – will we be able to recognize and

3 The Chinese authorities have initiated a large-scale demolition and rearrangement of the nuns' quarters under the pretext of infrastructural and hygienic improvements for the residents. These include expanding the number of streets, dismantling huts, and removing the wild dogs that roamed the encampment.

4 Michel de Certeau argues that space involves mobile elements and variables: things occurring, the organizing of movements, not simply being-there (place). Therefore, to de Certeau, 'space is a practiced place' (1984, 117).

see the nature of the encampment and what it entails: the specific forms of political tension and negotiation in its emergence and expansion, and, most important of all, the Tibetan nuns' unique contributions to each of these.

After all, Yachen's 'island' zone is spectacular not only because it is large and densely crowded, but also because it conveys a sense of infinite potentiality in movement and growth. The zone literally merges with the vista of endless grasslands and by doing so, it can also embrace a sense of unbounded Buddhist spirituality. Borrowing from Tim Ingold's contrasting juxtaposition of 'line and blob' (2015), the 'island' zone, at first glance, resembles a blob consisting of mass, materials, and forms; yet in fact, the real spectacle of the zone lies in its unbridled – thus almost illegible and unexpected – paths, threads, and traces that produce many 'lines' (Ingold 2007, 2015); for example, the routes of individual nuns' migrations from their hometowns to Yachen, the life paths they choose and negotiate, the traces of the religious desires they follow, and the limitless material extensions (huts, roads, halls, etc.) they add to the encampment while living in Yachen. By using an ethnographic vantage point, in the first part of this chapter, I will detail the spatial effect of the nuns' ongoing hut construction in shaping Yachen. To this end, the particular manner and politics in which the huts are built will be examined; and also, equally important, I will focus on how hut construction creates unruly pathways and routes across the encampment that make it harder for the Chinese authorities to read and control the space, as well as how the Chinese state has responded to this spreading illegibility of Yachen in recent years. In the rest of the chapter, I will address the spatial challenges the Tibetan nuns face when they exercise their mobilities.

The term 'encampment' (*gar*) suggests so much more than its functional proximity to a traditional monastery; it represents the movement, change, and unruliness that Yachen uniquely stands for and is based upon. Ultimately, I show how it has been possible in this environmentally challenging and politically conflicted region for the nuns' 'encamping' to evade the P.R.C.'s sovereign mapping; and how Kham is a good-to-think-with category for recognizing a new kind of engagement with Sino-Tibetan spatial politics that has been initiated and continued by ordinary Tibetan nuns.

Encampment and Its Unruly Presence

What does it mean to have total physical control over one's residential structure? What if one could be the designer, builder, and resident of a built-form all at the same time? It is quite unusual in modern urban settings

for an ordinary citizen to assume all three of these roles, yet it is often the norm in a religious encampment like Yachen. Beginning in the 1980s, over 10,000 Tibetan nuns have migrated to this remote region of Kham and have remained there by building their own huts. The conditions for hut building have been challenging; construction materials are not easy to come by – one must either rely on limited market supplies or collect natural resources such as mud and gravel – and, until recently, few modern amenities, such as electricity, were available to make the construction process more efficient (for example, some nuns now use electric-powered saws). Nevertheless, the nuns' migration to Yachen has not been stopped and their building activities have increased; this is constantly redefining the spatial limits of the encampment.

When I first met Drölma in 2012, she had been in Yachen for almost fifteen years. She and two other nuns had built their huts close together and later enclosed them using several large pieces of plywood to make a small communal yard for themselves. Since coming to Yachen, Drölma, like other fellow nuns, has ceaselessly repaired, remodelled, and rebuilt pieces of her hut and yard by utilizing all the available materials, tools, and skills at her disposal. The three nuns are very collegial, all are from the same village in Kham, and they share the same religious path and the hope of spending their entire lives practicing in Yachen. Despite such closeness and similar life experiences, however, they strictly respect each other's individual spaces and rhythms. Nuns in Yachen usually do not share or merge their kitchen areas, not even for the sake of convenience. They prefer to set up small stoves and a few bowls and plates at the feet of their beds and to have their own spaces for cooking and eating, rather than creating a more properly sized kitchen and sharing meals. The fact that Yachen has over 10,000 small huts means that it has almost the same number of 'mini-kitchens'.⁵ This is one reason why small-scale constructions by the nuns go on ceaselessly and are of such importance in Yachen.

Over the years of visiting Drölma's hut, I noticed that she was constantly, albeit slightly, changing the structure of her room. On one occasion, she had moved the dividing wall between the room and the kitchen, sacrificing space in the kitchen area to create more space in her main room. Drölma

5 One person per hut is preferable because of the nature of the practices that Yachen promotes. These practices focus on solitary meditation for extended hours. Cooking and eating together might disturb the meditative flows of individual practitioners. Yet as the quarters-shortage issue in Yachen has grown in recent years, more nuns are compelled to share their spaces with other nuns (usually siblings and relatives), but this measure is usually considered a temporary one and each nun seeks to procure her own space.

used the same wallpaper and fabric to match the existing patterns of the interior of the room. She did such a good job that I could not locate even a trace of the original wall. It is obvious that tasks like moving a wall are simple enough for Drölma to accomplish, and her experience of over fifteen years of residence in Yachen gives her relative expertise in dealing with various construction matters. Many Tibetan nuns with whom I talked would frequently share their upcoming plans for transforming their huts and, in most instances, they succeeded in making these happen. Over their years of living in Yachen, they learn, share, and transmit the knowledge of hut-building to one another; and in doing so, they are equipping themselves with total physical control over their material environment.

When I visited Drölma's hut again at a later time, I found a new construction project being undertaken right next to her yard. This was a common scene given that the nuns were, almost by default, continually engaged in building or repairing their huts. Drölma told me that a Chinese nun would be moving in soon. Unlike Tibetan nuns, Chinese nuns usually hire carpenters from outside if they build a hut (they usually rent one). This is mostly because their numbers are not large enough to mobilize a group to do construction work, and they have little experience and few skills for building huts.⁶ As I passed two male carpenters working on the hut that day, I noticed that the construction site seemed too small for a residential hut. But the new hut had an innovative design that maximized the utility of the tiny piece of land it was built upon. The Chinese nun designed her hut to be a double-decker space (see Figure 14.2); she asked the carpenters to build a kitchen on the first floor and an attic-style bedroom on the second floor. Interestingly, around the same time, I also found that in other sections of the nuns' residential area, Tibetan nuns were increasingly adopting this double-decker system to deal with the hut-shortage issue.

The double-decker system is one good example of how the nuns have direct physical control over their residential structures and do not seek official approval or wait for the intervention of the authorities. Furthermore, this innovation reflects the unique ways that the residential environment is arranged in Yachen by the nuns themselves, and how they exercise and authorize spatial and architectural freedom – that is, the freedom, within the

6 Some of the Tibetan nuns who can speak Chinese have good relationships with Chinese nuns. It was extremely rare to see any Chinese nuns speaking Tibetan or interacting with Tibetan nuns in Tibetan in Yachen. The number of Chinese nuns in Yachen is at most only a few hundred, and the kinds of activities and classes that these two groups participate in are largely separate; therefore, their daily interactions are usually limited, even though they live side by side.

Figure 14.2 The hut construction next door to Drölma's hut

Photograph by Yasmin Cho 2015

given circumstances, to design their own structures and to transform their physical living conditions as they choose. This does not mean that Yachen is a restraint-free space or a space in which anyone can exercise a right to build. In fact, the Chinese authorities have always expressed concern about Yachen's rapid expansion and, as one of their control measures, they have encircled the nuns' residential area with a cement ring road to mark the boundary of the community (see Figure 14.1). Any hut-building activities outside of this ring road have practically been prohibited (although as we will see below, the state itself is now expanding and rearranging the nuns' community in the prohibited zone.) In addition to double-deckers, whenever the level of the state's surveillance becomes loosened, the nuns also frequently seek out opportunities to secretly build other kinds of residential structures (tents, for example) in the supposedly prohibited zone. Both in and outside the ring road, the nuns continually design ways to maintain their nunships in Yachen.

The hut that was being built next to Drölma's was near a narrow, winding passage that would not normally be suitable for a residential structure. But this unfavourable location turned out to be a lucky factor in its smooth completion. The site was too deep in the maze of huts for the Chinese

authorities to be able to spot it and to immediately exert control over it.⁷ Tibetan nuns usually take on the risk of building a hut by quickly mobilizing more than ten nuns at a time and finishing the hut within a day or two. As a result of their nimble execution that eludes the Chinese authorities, the nuns literally and repeatedly make new passages, routes, and pathways, along with huts in new shapes and sizes, within their already intricate surroundings (see Figure 14.3); they are continually overlaying the old maze with a new one. If a cartographer were to try to map out the nuns' residential area, she would have to redraw it every month, if not every week, and to accept that it will always be incomplete. What also stands out here is that the nuns' hut-building in Yachen is an outcome of a collection of under-analysed and ignored forces, such as the nuns' material and spatial needs, their construction techniques, their collaborative mindsets, and the micro-spatial politics between them and the Chinese authorities.

The encampment itself, in its inherent incompleteness, is therefore the outcome of these complex and ongoing entanglements around the nuns' hut-building activities. In Yachen, nuns may need to wait before finding open spots in which to build new huts (as the Chinese nun did in Drölma's neighbourhood), but they do not wait for the head office to allocate residential cells to them, or for the government to send them permit papers as a precondition for admittance to the community. Upon their arrivals, with the help of fellow nuns, the nuns exercise direct control over their residential spaces; and this is significantly different from the spatial and bureaucratic thresholds typically imposed for initial admission to monastic communities in the more formal monasteries in the T.A.R. and elsewhere. Yachen's distinctive spatial arrangement, with its self-organizing and improvisational nature, thus serves as extraordinary testimony to what an encampment can achieve that formal monasteries, which are structurally and politically associated with the characteristics of fixity, finality, and completeness, typically cannot.

Encampments and mountain hermitages have long existed as alternatives or complements to formal monasteries and have served to enrich Tibetans' religious lives. Religious encampments (*chögar*) appeared in the fourteenth century in the Kagyu school (Terrone 2008), yet it seems that there are

7 In many Tibetan monastic communities, there is a governing unit called the Work Team (Ch. *gongzuo zu*) that has been dispatched by the government. Its aim is to exert control over any issues that disturb the general social harmony. One of the Work Team's main tasks in Yachen is to monitor new hut-building activities in the nuns' area. Given the tension around the community at that time, the Chinese nun's hut building might have been stopped and the hut destroyed if it had been caught by the Work Team.

forms of outdoor teaching communities in remote regions that have an even older history than this.⁸ In many places in Tibet now, ‘encampment’ and ‘monastery’ interchangeably refer to spaces where Buddhist teachers and practitioners live and practice together, and share the same rhythms and practices provided by the community. Thus, it is not entirely productive to scrutinize the similarities and differences of these two forms of community in Tibet since, regardless of what Yachen is called – a monastery (Ch. *si*, usually by Chinese disciples), a ‘quasi-monastery’ (Terrone 2009), or an encampment – it plays a role in the fullest sense of transmitting Buddhist teachings and knowledge to wider audiences.

However, we should be cautious about an insidious effect that is produced when one *uncritically* applies the term ‘monastery’ in the case of Yachen. When Yachen is understood as a (traditional) Tibetan Buddhist monastery, the focus rests on the founder’s or the authorities’ will and power, and on the symbolic representation of the community as a completed form with a fixed role, rather than on the various processes, movements, and activities occurring in and around the community. In this regard, within a monastery framework, Yachen is tacitly presented as an already-planned structure that was foreseen centuries ago in the vision of its founding lama and is now fully instantiated in its final and static form (See Treasure movement).⁹ Transformations, disorderly arrangements, and the explosive migration of nuns and the roles they play in Yachen are neither recognizable nor important in that framework. When Yachen is conceived as a crystalized, abstract, and conceptual edifice – as it is in the sacred prophecies recorded in the biographies of lamas in Yachen, the soaring number of nuns and their activities goes unmentioned; we fail to raise – not to mention fail to recognize – questions about why and how so many Tibetan female practitioners have gathered there and why and how Yachen continues to change.

8 Based on a lecture given by Khenpo Tsultrim Lodro, entitled ‘The History, Role, and Re-emergence of Tibetan Buddhist Encampments’, on 14 August 2017, at Columbia University, the beginning of encampments and outdoor teachings and practices nearly coincides with the beginning of monasteries.

9 The claim is made that Yachen is linked directly to the ancient master Padmasambhava’s or Guru Rinpoche’s prophecy. Guru Rinpoche’s prominent methods in transmitting Buddhist teachings in the purest form are known as the Treasure (Tib. *terma*) tradition, according to which teachings (written scriptures) and other sacred objects were hidden by Guru Rinpoche and are to be found by the right figures in more peaceful times. In this way, Buddhism can once again be resuscitated in Tibet. Yachen’s founder, Achuk lama, was known to be one of the revealers (Tib. *tertön*) of the treasures; and Yachen’s spiritual basis therefore lies in the undisturbed, direct teachings from Guru Rinpoche in these revealed teachings. For more information about the Treasure movement in Kham, see Doctor (2005), Gyatso (1998), Germano (1998, 2002)

In other words, the problem of seeing Yachen through the perspective of architectural finality is that it prescribes to its members only fixed roles that do not deviate from a high religious purpose. This perspective automatically and conveniently dismisses the enormous number of physical activities that make possible and maintain the system of religious practices and the continuation of the sacred legacies. As one would expect, the nuns in Yachen engage in various religious practices and follow the teachings and instructions given by teachers – they pray, chant, and meditate. And yet, quite unexpectedly, they also engage in a significant amount of physical labour throughout the encampment, from building and repairing their own huts to working on large communal projects such as stupas, halls, and roads.¹⁰ As Drölma and other nuns show, they constantly build and alter their rooms, cells, and pathways, thereby remodelling the physical shape of Yachen; creating new spaces from non-spaces; embracing new members despite the government's controls; and in doing so, generate new spatial possibilities. These unexpected and piecemeal transformations that the nuns make on a daily basis have a direct impact on the unusual expansion of the encampment under repressive political conditions.

Michel Foucault (1977) discusses how regulatory power in modern society is deployed through the meticulous spatial layouts of buildings (schools, hospitals, prisons, etc.). He notes that 'stones can make people docile and knowable' (1977, 172); in other words, buildings, with their distinctive materiality, operate as an invisible mechanism for directing and regulating individual behaviours and minds. Yet, from the perspective of the nuns who directly create the spatial and material transformation of their huts, power is deployed in favour of the nuns in a way that makes them less docile and less predictable and thus less susceptible to the government's controlling grip. In Yachen, how many small residential huts will end up being built, dismantled, and remodelled by the nuns through their circumvention of the Chinese officials' patrols and surveillance; how many more nuns will be moving in or moving out of Drölma's neighbourhood; and what portions of Yachen are reconfigured and reshaped will therefore always remain open and undecided.¹¹ The architectural properties of the encampment must be taken seriously not only because they allow the nuns to manoeuvre relatively

¹⁰ The monks in Yachen are usually exempt from communal physical work.

¹¹ By saying this, I do not mean to dismiss the essential vulnerability of ethnic religious communities under the P.R.C.'s regime. But given that the Chinese state may exercise a Machiavellian sovereign power over its subjects, it is all the more interesting to examine how Yachen has sustained and expanded itself. The undecidability and openness-to-transformation of the encampment have had a significant effect thus far.

Figure 14.3 The maze-like pathways in the nuns' residential sector

Photograph by Yasmin Cho 2013

freely in their spaces, and to create, dissect, and merge these spaces based on their needs, but also because the encampment is a distinctive kind of arrangement that disturbs, in a subtle and insidious manner, the spatial control of the Chinese authorities.

What has been clear so far is that Yachen is a space that 'occurs', is 'found', or 'produced' (Lefebvre 1991) through the active material engagements of the Tibetan nuns who have sought out alternative paths in and through Kham. The existence of Yachen as a space is indebted, in part, to Kham-as-a-process.

Tibetan Nuns and Spatial (Im)Possibility

How does one join a monastic community in contemporary Tibet? How does one become a Buddhist nun in a Tibetan context? Given that Buddhism is so deeply integrated into Tibetan life, and given that monastics occupy a concrete social position that is very well recognized and respected in Tibet, it may at first seem absurd to pose such questions as these. In general, it appears that monastics, as well as nuns-to-be and monks-to-be, have more

or less full material and psychological support from their families and society; and therefore, for Tibetans, the process for joining a monastery is supposedly fairly straightforward. However, this general understanding of Tibetan monastics often obscures what typically happens when ordinary Tibetan women attempt to join a nunnery. Historical records regarding Tibetan female monastics and practitioners are rare when compared to the number of texts that exist about their male counterparts; but even among the handful of materials about women that are available, the focus is usually on figures who have demonstrated extraordinary achievements or had unusual social and familial backgrounds.¹² Therefore, the glimpses we have of the lives of ordinary Tibetan nuns are limited to understandings that are, at best, based on inferences and conjectures extracted from accounts of a few exceptional female figures, the lives of monks, or from the words of male teachers. Now, however, with the emergence of Yachen, an encampment with an unprecedentedly large number of ordinary nuns, we have a crucial opportunity to acquire a better understanding of the hitherto ignored processes by which ordinary Tibetan females join monastic communities. Looking at Yachen from the nuns' perspectives will provide insights into the lives of Tibetan nuns themselves and into the specific kind of space they are making, both of which have left a significant mark on the Tibetan Buddhist revival occurring in Kham over the past few decades.

Tibetan nuns in Yachen hail from all over the Tibetan plateau. Many are from remote regions in Kham while, at the same time and rather unexpectedly, nuns from Lhasa and its near vicinity are also frequently seen in Yachen.¹³ Given the general respect that Tibetans have for Lhasa, in particular the life-time desire popularly expressed by Tibetans living outside

12 A few works, based on limited written records, about extraordinary female practitioners are available. For monographs focusing on a single figure, see, for example, Allione (2000), Bessenger (2016), Diemberger (2007), Jacoby (2014), Schaeffer (2004); see also several articles by Hofer, Jacoby, Robin, and Schneider in a special issue edited by Schrempf and Schneider (2015). There are some ethnographic accounts of ordinary Tibetan monastics; see, for example, Grimshaw (1994), Gutschow (2004), Havnevik (1989), Makley (2005), and Shneiderman (2006). But these works, except for Makley, focus on female practitioners in the Himalayan region; there are very few studies in the English language on Tibetan nuns living in contemporary Tibet.

13 Although the record is rather outdated, Padma'tsho (2014) provided a survey, based on a governmental report produced in 2007, of the origins of the nuns in Yachen. In this report, 1711 out of a total of 5070 nuns (at the time of her research) were from the T.A.R. It must be noted that it is tricky to track down precise population statistics for Yachen because of the dynamic daily movements of practitioners in and out of the community. In addition, the political pressure to limit the number of new admissions in Yachen often means that the real number of practitioners may not be disclosed by Yachen's head office. Through various informal sources and my own estimates, I can say that the number of nuns was well over 10,000 as of 2017.

Lhasa to visit and to spend time there, it comes as a surprise at first that some nuns give up the opportunity to remain in Lhasa and instead relocate themselves to a marginal region.¹⁴ Before going into detail about why these nuns do so, it is worth addressing some of the widespread experiences of Tibetan women when they attempt to join monastic communities. Among the various obstacles women face in becoming nuns, a particular kind of story repeatedly stood out over the years of my field research. Most of the nuns with whom I talked in Yachen told me that, at the beginning, they did not receive full support from their families. Based on my numerous interviews with nuns and the parents of nuns, I have come to see that familial disagreement originates largely from a deeply embedded misogynous belief in Tibetan society about females' indeterminate minds and their lack of the spiritual capacity needed to carry out a lifelong religious commitment. In the dominant narratives in Tibetan Buddhism, the ideal form of the body for making a serious religious commitment is the male body. Those with female bodies, which are considered an insufficient tool for achieving a lifelong commitment, may try to maintain such a commitment, but the effort will be longer and more arduous. In addition, the constant demand for female labour around the home is often a crucial factor in the initial familial rejection. Some girls, in responding to this domestic call, decide to remain at home as semi- or informal nuns who maintain celibacy while continuing to help in the household.¹⁵

Considering this unfavourable situation that is widely experienced by Tibetan nuns across regions, I would like to focus on the specific structural (political) conditions that the nuns from Lhasa, or the T.A.R. generally, face when they join Yachen, and look at how those conditions force or allow them to seek out this alternative spatial possibility. The permanent relocation from Lhasa to a nomadic region in Kham to fulfil one's religious desire has not been a widely chosen path among Tibetans until recently. Yet the prolonged and intensified spatial and political repression in the T.A.R. by the Chinese state has given the malleability of Kham more visibility – this is particularly true for those Tibetans who are more vulnerable and more deprived of their space due to the recent political restrictions. Tibetan nuns

14 See Katia Buffetrille's discussion in this volume.

15 There are very limited accounts of the existence of this type of 'household nuns' – those women who maintain celibacy (either previously married or not), keep some basic vows, and remain at home to help with house chores for their entire lives. By accumulating merits in this way, they hope to gain a better rebirth and to join monasteries in their next lives. Ethnographers working in Tibet, including myself, recognize the presence of such female semi-monastics, with variances, across Tibetan villages. See Grimshaw (1994) and Makley (2005).

in Lhasa are among those who have been active in seeking out an alternative space and opportunity for themselves in and through Kham. Chenco is one of the many nuns from nearby Lhasa whom I met in Yachen.¹⁶ Her initial goal was to join a nunnery in Lhasa, as other young nuns-to-be in her town often wish to do. Maintaining a short distance between the nunnery and one's hometown is common in her village.¹⁷ However, when Chenco applied to join a nunnery in Lhasa, she learned that she would have to wait for several years before she could obtain a permit that would allow her to be a nun there. 'I was told that there is a long waiting list of girls who want to be nuns, and I worried that I wouldn't be able to obtain a permit for the next few years', she told me.

The permit system, one of the many control policies imposed by the Chinese state on Tibetan Buddhism, was put into place when the monasteries in the T.A.R. were allowed to revive themselves after the devastating era of the Cultural Revolution (Goldstein 1998). Historically and symbolically important monasteries in the T.A.R., such as Drepung, are the primary targets of the system, and other monastic institutions in the T.A.R. are quickly affected as well. These monasteries have been assigned quotas for the number of members they are permitted, which results in communities that are significantly smaller than they used to be. Allowing the monasteries to 'revive', yet at the same time limiting the number of admissions, demonstrates both the dilemma and the tactic of the Chinese state when dealing with Tibetan Buddhism in the post-Mao era. The Chinese state fundamentally fears allowing the important monastic centres to recuperate themselves and serve as main spaces for aggregating Tibetan dissent toward Chinese rule. But it is also unwise to entirely prohibit Buddhist activities in Tibet given that the state has decided to move away from a focus on ethnic political struggles and to concentrate instead on economic development. The state's message is that monasteries can exist in the T.A.R., but they must show restraint in their role of providing religious, or other, inspiration.

16 The nuns' names used in this chapter are pseudonyms. In addition, the names of the natal towns of the nuns discussed here are not revealed.

17 In my research, Tibetan nuns and monks usually continue to maintain close relationships with their families after they join monasteries; they and their families support each other through ongoing spiritual and economic exchanges. Due to the lack of any support mechanisms other than their families, nuns usually rely on their families more than monks do. Also, in the case of smaller and more marginalized nunneries, the nuns are often mobilized for various labour needs in both their families and their monastic communities; therefore, the proximity between hometowns and monastic communities is preferable in many ways. See Kim Gutschow's work (2004) on Tibetan Buddhist nuns in northern India where she argues that the nuns are trafficked between homes and monasteries.

The state prefers that they serve as inert religious centres and lively tourist attractions.

In the case of nunneries in Tibet, the situation is worse. Since nunneries are in general much smaller and, compared to monasteries, less connected to lay communities, the revival processes have been slower and more onerous due to the difficulties of raising donations, patrons, and other forms of social support that are needed to resuscitate these ruined communities. Girls who wish to be nuns in Lhasa end up having longer waiting times and thus face more uncertainty about their futures as nuns. Some of the girls who are on waiting lists live together temporarily in low-priced housing in the city until they can obtain permits. The idea is that girls who have the same goal can rely on one another to overcome the difficult and uncertain waiting period. But these self-organized living arrangements often extend for several years, and the combination of prolonged waiting and the low odds of success in obtaining a permit, not to mention the financial burden of living in this way, cause many girls to look for other options. Chenco told me that, during this time, some girls are forced to abandon their initial decisions to become nuns, often due in part to growing pressure from their families about marriage and other obligations at home.

But while the Chinese state's fixed quotas for monastic admission surely have a dampening effect on the girls who wish to join nunneries, the extended waiting period is ultimately not the only or even the most important reason that pushes Chenco and other girls to leave Lhasa. Chenco and other nuns say that the real issues these days are the serious doubts that practitioners themselves hold about the efficacy and true benefits of practicing Buddhism in Lhasa. The Chinese government not only regulates the size of the monastic communities in the T.A.R., it also controls the types and levels of religious activities – including rituals, initiations, and lamas' lectures – that originally fell under monastic authority. Chenco perceives this situation to be much worse in the case of nunneries: 'In Lhasa, there are many restrictions on what the lamas can lecture about and what teachings they can transmit in monasteries. The teachers cannot teach what they want. They are monitored. In the case of nunneries, it's worse. Even fewer lamas wish to serve at nunneries and fewer religious activities are undertaken.' She simply could not see any hope of freely and rigorously practicing Buddhism in the current religious environment in Lhasa.

Chenco's statement touches on an old issue that nuns face in Tibetan Buddhism: a lack of spaces for practicing Buddhism and a lack of proper and durable social support. The lack of spaces, teachers, and mental and material supports for nuns is simultaneously both the outcome and the

cause of a deeply rooted misogynistic attitude, if not in principle then in practice, toward women in Buddhism. Kim Gutschow (2004) shows how the status of Tibetan nuns is considered lower than monks almost by default, and how this status operates and is constantly reproduced in Tibetan society through the unquestioned monastic order and tradition, as well as the nuns' own acceptance of their lower status (see also Schaeffer 2004). Charlene Makley (2005) also argues that 'monkhood', the ultimate ideal of monastic embodiment, serves as a third gender in the gender-sex system in Tibetan society. Buddhism, in principle, liberates sentient beings from fundamental hierarchies; but as several studies show, in practice, it acquiesces to, if not actively promotes, gender asymmetries that are exercised in both monastic and lay lives.¹⁸ To state this more directly, the general lack of resources, and thus respect, for nuns has been taken for granted as a social fact in Tibet, so that the response given to me by most nuns and monks (and lamas) in answer to my simple question about the reason for such a lack usually went like this: 'This is the way it has always been'.

Therefore, many nuns in Tibet have ended up walling themselves up in small, isolated, rundown nunneries – if and when they are admitted to one – with little support from outside other than from their kin groups. There are few active teaching and practice systems available, few donations made, and virtually no invitations given to nuns to perform rituals in villages. Performing various rituals in villages is a respectful way to generate income for seasoned monks. They can showcase their specialties and knowledge by serving the public in unique ways; and by doing so, they gain a warm reception, esteem, and material compensation. But villagers almost never invite nuns to do rituals because of the inferior capacity and education that the nuns usually possess, which is deemed to make them unqualified for doing such tasks. And the nuns themselves, even those who are properly educated and receive good teachings, have also been inculcated in the belief that the task of performing public rituals rightfully belongs to the monks. For many ordinary Tibetans, a self-evident question is: 'Why invite nuns when there are so many monks around?'

Given this situation, Chenco's choice (and that of many other girls like her) to travel outside of the T.A.R. no longer appears odd. It has become obvious to Chenco that because of the long-standing repressive religious policies imposed by the Chinese government, Lhasa and the T.A.R. in general are no longer active religious centres for Tibetan Buddhist education in the same way that they used to be. And this especially affects the nuns and

18 See also Grimshaw (1994), Havnevik (1994), Makley (2005), Willis (1989).

nuns-to-be in the T.A.R. Chenco had heard of a new place called Yachen that had no such quotas or waiting lists, and where several renowned lamas offered teachings to nuns and monks equally. She and many girls from the T.A.R. have thus turned their attention toward a place they once thought of as belonging to the margin, but which is now a place where they can find a large gathering of nuns, illustrious teachers, and the systematic support they have never had, nor even imagined (for a discussion of the larger context of this, see also Buffetrille, this volume).

Chenco's story tells us that many of the nuns who join Yachen have experienced, all along, forms of gender discrimination that are structurally and culturally embedded in Tibetan society. Whether they conceive of this as unfair gender bias or as the outcome of unwholesome karma linked to female bodies, they hope to overcome these predicaments by seeking to find in Yachen the superior teachings and practices that have rarely been available to them. Contrary to what the existing literature implies, I do not view this unprecedented opportunity for the nuns as something simply provided by lamas or the Chinese government's somewhat less restrictive policies in the 1980s. What makes this exceptional opportunity a viable one is, in significant part, the inherent inclusiveness and incompleteness of Yachen's material status, i.e. encampment, and how the nuns utilize this for their own purposes. What Yachen most crucially offers to the nuns is therefore a spatial possibility (with its accompanying educational chances and other opportunities) that is brutally disappearing in the nunneries in Lhasa.

Yachen's open-ended nomadic environment signals a virtually unlimited space for determined practitioners. As the number of nuns has continued to increase, the priority of the head office has slowly begun shifting to focus on the nuns' education and their welfare. Yachen was not initially designed specifically to improve the nuns' welfare and education, but the ever-increasing population of nuns has made this a greater priority.¹⁹ This unruly space that the nuns are making and remaking in Kham has the effect of attracting a large number of socially disadvantaged people, because the form of encampment places few, if any, obstacles to entry into the community. In this space, the nuns have become an overwhelming majority, and they have acquired equal footing with monks in terms of education

19 Some might say that 'letting the nuns stay' should be considered as an unusually gracious action by the previous head lama. However, even in the biographies about the lama that are produced by Yachen's head office, the large number of nuns that have gathered is not recognized as a great feat or a compassionate action by him. Accounts usually treat the massive number of followers as androgynous, classless, and ethnicity-free anonymous bodies.

and access to high-ranking teachers. In turn, such opportunities, which are rarely available elsewhere, have been a major source of attraction bringing even more girls to Yachen.

Emerging Geometrical Control

The spatial unruliness of Yachen serves as a way for the nuns to stealthily venture out and extend their presence both deep inside the encampment and at times even into the unbounded nomadic grassland beyond the 'island' zone – for a few years, a growing number of nuns living in tents outside the ring zone formed a tent city.²⁰ But for the Chinese authorities, such unruliness invites confusions and illegibilities that require an alternative (and equally spatial) response. Recently, Yachen's form has been substantially altered, not by the small, daily material engagements of the nuns, but by large-scale infrastructural constructions authorized by the Chinese government. The extensive street repairs in both the nuns' and the monks' residential areas are the most noticeable of these.²¹ At a superficial level, one might see this positively, as a sign that Yachen is modernizing and the standard of living is rising. In fact, the head office has been promoting these street constructions for years by saying that, with paved roads, practitioners will no longer become mired in the streets when it rains or snows. Most of the nuns with whom I have spoken seem to welcome the idea of having the main streets cleaned up and paved because this would no doubt make their mundane chores less exhausting. On the other hand, however, the construction processes have entirely upset the residential environment of some of the nuns. Those who lived in huts bordering the main streets were ordered to move out; their huts had to be removed because the newly constructed streets are twice as wide as the original dirt-filled streets. The new streets are wide and straight enough to accommodate two lanes of minivans (see Figure 14.4 and compare it to Figure 14.1 taken in 2010).

20 The Chinese state allowed the tent city to grow for years because it did not see the tents as solid residential structures that fell under the category of surveillance. The new metal hut complex eventually absorbed the tent city, and the nuns who used to live in the tents moved into the complex. But for a time, the growth of the tent city literally redrew the legal boundaries of Yachen.

21 In the summer of 2019, as this chapter is going to press, there are new reports of demolitions in the nuns' quarters by the Chinese authorities. The size of the demolitions needs to be confirmed, but it appears that the government's infrastructural rearrangements have been extended to the nuns' residential area.

Figure 14.4 The nuns' residential sector in Yachen in 2016

Photograph by Yasmin Cho 2016

Here, a return to our focus on encampment points to an alternative perspective from which to understand these recent infrastructural constructions taking place in Yachen. If we set aside for a moment the discussion of whether or how the streets improve the nuns' daily lives as these straight, aligned streets appear in the middle of the nuns' residential areas, the essential character of the encampment as a space, with its meandering pathways and routes created by the nuns, is slowly disappearing. What makes an encampment an encampment – that is, a distinctive Buddhist space in contemporary Kham – is lost as the maze-like routes and paths, the freely erected huts and cells, and the surprises and unknowns built into this ever-changing space are gradually incorporated into the realm of the visible and the knowable. We are now beginning to see geometrical street grids that run across the middle of the nuns' residential area.

After years of negotiation between Yachen's head office and the Chinese authorities, the nuns who had been displaced ended up moving to a complex of metal shacks located on the outskirts of the encampment where it had long been forbidden to build huts. The Chinese authorities brought in makeshift, rectangular, prefabricated metal quarters for the nuns who had lost their quarters because of the road construction. In addition to the displaced nuns, newly arrived nuns and those who had no space of their own and were

Figure 14.5 The complex of prefabricated metal quarters

Photograph by Yasmin Cho 2015

staying with other nuns were also moving into metal shacks. Facing the endlessly growing number of nuns and their never-ending secret hut-building activities, the Chinese state seemed to be responding by making the nuns' residential arrangements more open and visible, even if this meant forgoing the original spatial prohibitions on hut-building.

These prefab metal units are arrayed in straight lines like an army complex; each has an identical layout, divided inside into a room and a kitchen (see Figure 14.5). The nuns' reactions are mixed. With the exception of their distance from the main halls and the main market areas, these quarters are considered by some nuns to be as good as, or even better than, the huts the nuns themselves build. The rooms are spacious, the ceilings are high, and the quarters mostly come with front yards. Some (young) nuns even intentionally gave up their existing lumber- and mud-built huts and moved into these metal quarters. Other nuns hold the opposite view; they dislike these metal quarters because metal transmits both heat and cold too quickly into their indoor spaces, making it especially difficult to endure the highland's cruel winter season.²²

²² When a nun voluntarily decides to move into a prefab unit, she either rents out her original hut or sells it. (All hut-related transactions are strictly monitored by the head office, and the prices are decided by the office as well). The head office requires the nuns to pay half of the price of the unit (about 10,000 RMB) when they move in. They can stay there without making further instalment payments as long as they maintain their nunship in Yachen. But if the nun decides to leave Yachen, she must pay the rest of house's price to the head office.

At the time of my first visit to Yachen in the summer of 2010, there were no prefab metal quarters, no wood-and-mud quarters built in lines and rows, and the streets were serpentine, dirt-filled, organically created routes. I used to find the locations of the huts of nuns with whom I was acquainted by memorizing the detailed architectural traits of their quarters and the material environments of their neighbourhoods: the shapes of doors, the types of materials and fabrics used for the exteriors of the huts, the number and forms of cells on the roofs or yards, the patterns of the pathways that linked their huts, and so on. Since each hut had its own distinctive individual features that had grown out of numerous repair and rebuilding activities, this was almost the only possible way to recognize them. Yet, locating huts in this way remained challenging. No matter how carefully I inscribed the peculiar features of the huts into my brain, I often failed to find the one I was looking for because of the nuns' constant rebuilding and repairing activities. I would find myself drifting along the streets or wandering in the wrong area and being chased by the wild dogs that were guarding the area from strangers. The nuns' residential zone was a maze with few signposts or markers.

In the areas of Yachen that one was most familiar with, even a small task like fetching water required multi-sided and multisensory attentiveness. When fetching water in Yachen, even though the route from my hut to the well was relatively fixed and known, I had to meticulously check various things on the way: I needed to examine the conditions of the streets on that particular day to avoid stepping into water holes, mud holes, and dog stools; take care not to hit my head on the untrimmed construction materials jutting out from huts and walls; and avoid other new obstacles. Walking through Yachen to do chores and to visit friends or lamas resembled the experience of wayfaring in a new place without having a map or reliable information in hand. Michel de Certeau reminds us of the embodied role of walkers in cities: 'They are walkers [...] whose bodies follow the thicks and thins of an urban "text" they write without being able to read it' (1984, 93). These walkers claim new spaces and terrains that are not shown on the maps and itineraries; their unexpected and unplanned bodily presences, equipped with cautions and curiosities, produce new texts and new stories for urban spaces. In 2010, at least, before the new streets and metal quarters, before the governmental spatial controls were established, the nuns and visitors in Yachen were like the walkers in de Certeau's description.

In 2016 then, when I visited an old friend of mine in Yachen and attempted to locate her hut by recalling my memories of the physical traits of the hut and its surroundings, I realized there was no longer a need to memorize

every detail in order to find what I was looking for. After the new streets were completed, I did not need to pay attention to the changing curves of the ground or the routes that I used to use. When I visited a nun living in the metal quarters' area, I found myself checking the house number that marked each living quarter instead of memorizing specific features as I used to do. The metal quarters are virtually identical, with few visibly distinctive traits and few indications that transformations are occurring. The distinctive physical features of individual huts have been replaced with lifeless numbers, lines, and markers. In the complex of metal quarters, the flow of the nuns' movements is visible and predictable. There is no need for multisensory attentiveness when passing through the complex. The routes are fixed and unmovable, the concrete streets require little attention from those who walk along them; there are few water holes, mud holes, or animal excreta.²³

Since the completion of the new streets and the complex of metal huts, the geometry of the nuns' residential area is slowly transforming into a more legible form, in echo of James Scott's (1998) analysis of the technologies of 'simplification' deployed by the state to tame a space and ensure spatial control. The flows of the nuns' daily movements are more regulated and arranged than before. Less time is spent on the streets, and chores can be done more efficiently. Some might say that the overall environment for practicing Buddhism in Yachen is much improved because the nuns can now spend more time focusing on their practices instead of dealing with daily chores. The stories and reactions among the practitioners about the new streets and the metal quarters are complex and segmented, and are currently still unfolding and evolving. What is certain is that now there is less space left in Yachen for the nuns to freely reconfigure their own living structures, and more space that forces the nuns to move along fixed and planned routes. There is now less space for the nuns to 'write' their own texts and stories, and more space for the authorities to 'read' the nuns. The sheer physicality of the nuns' hut-building is reduced, and Yachen is now becoming more of a static and abstract 'monastery' with less texture or movement involved. Yet, interestingly, Yachen's monasticization this time

23 Almost all the wild dogs have been removed from Yachen under an order given by the Chinese authorities in 2016. The local governments in Tibetan regions have begun slaughtering a massive number of wild dogs over the past few years under the pretext of improving the level of hygiene in local communities. The order was made in 2016 that all dogs in Yachen, which had numbered three to four thousand, must be slaughtered. As a Buddhist community, Yachen could not allow such massive killings to take place on their watch. In the end, the head office negotiated with the government not to slaughter the dogs but to send them away.

is being executed by the state's specific projection of geometrical control onto the community, rather than through the high-ranking lamas' visions and prophecies.

Conclusion

I have argued that an encampment is a space that is being made – in response to the nuns' needs (both religious and secular) and through their active material engagements – in ways that are not easily recognizable, legible, or predictable to the authorities. The dominant approach to perceiving Yachen has not been conducive to properly assessing the nature of 'encampment' as a crucial architectural feature that makes possible Yachen in its current form. The intense focus on a handful of celebrated male lamas and their spiritual capacities, including their extraordinary prescience and political sensibilities, has overwhelmingly determined the ways in which the Tibetan Buddhist revival, as well as an encampment like Yachen, are typically understood. As a result, not only the vital activities of the nuns that shape the encampment but also the malleable politics of Kham that crucially facilitate Yachen's emergence are dismissed.

I have shown that the large number of Tibetan nuns in Yachen is neither accidental nor incidental; the unusually active level of female involvement is closely related to the emergence of this particular form of Buddhist space in and through Kham. In other words, the encampment in contemporary Kham is not a mere backdrop to stories about Yachen, but is the principal mechanism that allows this Buddhist space to grow through architectural freedom and material manoeuvrability, despite the unstable political environment.

Focusing on the nature of encampment also enables us to develop an alternative perspective for understanding the kind of political control executed by the Chinese state. From this perspective, the tensions that exist between Yachen and the Chinese state can be seen as fundamentally spatial in nature. The Chinese authorities continue to make efforts to 'read' their subjects through spatial control by imposing upon the encampment a geometrically measurable order; while the nuns constantly endeavour to escape this spatial control by creating new huts, pathways, and routes that undermine it. In Yachen, seemingly simple spatial rearrangements, whether created by the nuns or by the state, are, after all, a reflection of the political tensions and asymmetrical confrontations between the nuns and the Chinese government out of which Yachen continues to arise and evolve.

Glossary of Tibetan and Chinese Terms

Achuk Lama	a khyug blama
<i>chögar</i>	chos sgar
Drölma	Sgrol ma
<i>gar</i>	sgar
<i>gongzuo zu</i>	工作组
Khenpo Tsultrim Lodro	mkhan po Tshul khrim Blo gros
<i>terma</i>	gter ma
<i>tertön</i>	gter ston
<i>si</i>	寺
Yachen Gar	(Tib.) Ya chen sgar, (Ch.) Yaqing si 亚青寺
Zhonghua	中华

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