

A Semantic Shift from Socialist Land Reform to Neoliberal Pastoral Development in China

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Abstract

This article explores a semantic shift within contemporary neoliberal discourses of pastoral land use and management systems in China. Drawing on historical semantics and interpretive analysis, the article analyzes relevant Chinese state documents to explore the changing meanings of the discursive concept of “free herding” from the establishment of the People’s Republic of China to the contemporary period (1949-2007). As socialist reformers embarked upon the project of collectivization in the Maoist period (1949-1976), developing pastoral animal husbandry was conceived not simply as a technical problem, but a political problem as well. While today the notion of “free herding” has been discussed by contemporary scholars in a technical and negative sense of unplanned, unmanaged, and thus unscientific pastoral grassland use, my analysis shows that earlier ideas of “free herding” meant the positive political consensus and democratic politics associated with the establishment of the new socialist political order and land reform. Therefore, this paper demonstrates that the analysis of language can contribute to our understanding of the discursive nature of China’s neoliberal shift to the market by illuminating the expression and realization of this shift in the new, depoliticized language of “pastoral land use policy.”

While scholars have explored China’s engagement with global capitalism and neoliberalism, few have sought to discover the new forms of political economic language and meaning it has made possible. Much of the popular media has celebrated China’s rapid economic growth and development, but market reform has also meant deepening efforts to control, transform, and remake the productive activities of the countryside – a new form of government of population (Greenhaugh and Winckler 2005). In the contemporary reform period, problems with rural areas – particularly concentrations of poverty in minority nationality areas - are associated with their traditional economy and land use (defined as primitive and backwards). The present government advocates –and through policy and projects intervenes in communities based upon - a modernization model based on scientific knowledge and technical expertise, and reflects what Timothy Mitchell (2002) calls a modern technopolitics, whereby the art of government (acting upon the action of others) becomes

framed in the language of science and technology, modernization, and neoliberal economic development.

This paper explores the history of the lexical item “free herding” (Mandarin Chinese, *ziyou fangmu*, 自由放牧) in the government of ethnic minority pastoral systems in northwest China. Government officials and development scientists use “free herding” as a discursive concept to understand and act upon contemporary ethnic minority pastoralism, particularly to make it profitable and amenable to surplus extraction within the new market economy. The research method for this project is based upon post-structural hermeneutic or interpretive analysis (Dreyfus and Rabinow 1983) applied to state documents as well as published documents from contemporary state grassland scientific management institutions to explore the changing meanings of “free herding” from the establishment of the People’s Republic of China to the contemporary period (1949-2007). Through analysis, the paper explores the change in the meaning of the term through time by relating it to changes in China’s political economy.

As reformers embarked upon the project of socialist land reform in the Maoist period (1949-1976), developing pastoral nomadic animal husbandry was conceived not simply as a technical problem, but as a political problem as well. While today the concept of “free herding” is discussed by officials and scientists in a technical and negative sense of unplanned, unmanaged, and thus unscientific pastoral grassland use, during the early socialist period the discursive concept meant the positive political consensus and democratic politics associated with the establishment of the new political order and land reform. Therefore, this paper demonstrates that linguistic analysis can contribute to our understanding of how the neoliberal order is expressed in new, depoliticized meanings given to state land use policy, and ultimately, local pastoral and semi-subsistence land use systems.

Theoretical Background

In the *Cambridge Encyclopedia of Language* (Crystal 1997), a semantic shift is defined as the variety of connotations and meanings of a word that are added or removed over history. This temporal and discursive transformation thus refers to the way that words of one historical period can mean different things when compared to the same words spoken or written in a previous one. “Free herding” is precisely an example of a discursive concept that has undergone such a semantic shift.

One of the ways that semantic shifts occur is through changes to their denotative objects or signifieds i.e. the object or thing in the world that a discursive unit refers to. For “free herding,” the denotative object is pastoral land use, defined as the social institutions for governing mobile herding of domesticated livestock. Yet, the semantic shift that occurred with “free herding” is not simply the problem of a changed referent, a changed object out-in-the-world, such as the pastoral land use institutions to which it refers. In history, a given language will also extend the semantic field of a word in order to cover new connotations, or implicit associations that words may carry in their new emerging *usages*. Thus, what becomes important in understanding the semantic shift associated with the concept of free herding is the changes in its connotations and usages.

Many authors have produced philological accounts of the ways that words and concepts are transformed through history (Jay 1998). The philosophy of Friedrich Nietzsche and his genealogical method provides an early theoretical model for this approach. In his *On the Genealogy of Morals*, Nietzsche (1967) argues that moral concepts have different meanings at different historical moments. Thus, in Nietzsche's view, scholars cannot understand a discursive concept if they assume that it has always held the same meaning. Because concepts can have different, even inconsistent, meanings, Nietzsche sought to understand what factors drive the transformation of meaning through history. Central to Nietzsche's method is the development of a historical genealogy that articulates the way different concepts have taken form and are transformed through time.

Scholarship in the history of ideas (Lovejoy 1970) suggests that discursive meanings and ideas change in relation to the people and social groups who speak about, write down, and ultimately use them. In this sense, scholars must study the social and political economic context of individual speaker/writers and the groups of which they are part to understand the ways they use language, meanings, and ideas. The responsibility of the scholar is to identify such discursive concepts and describe the social context which makes possible the emergence of their new connotations and usages.

In poststructural thought, many scholars have explored the relationship between language and its major historical and materials conditions of existence, political economy (Dreyfus and Rabinow 1983). In the writings of scholars such as Michel Foucault (2002), the meaning of discursive language is heard or read in light of the modern political economic assumptions it reveals within itself. The work of Foucault (2001) on the language of the human sciences in particular exemplifies the act of illuminating and understanding the implicit social and political

economic assumptions that form the basis for its production and transformation in a succession of different modern discursive systems.

In a more Marxian approach to language, Williams (1976) has demonstrated how discursive concepts are implicated in capitalist ideology, in the language of capitalist activities and their interpretation. Eagleton (1991), Williams' student, demonstrated the ways that language builds systems of concepts and views which denote the world while carrying the connotations and inconsistencies of their specific social interests. Bourdieu (1999) has gone further by developing a political economy of language and meaning and an analysis of how meaning is shaped by the economic relations among groups and classes in different societies.

Thus, this article argues that the study of semantic shifts in linguistic forms and discursive practices must include an analysis of political economy. The article takes the direction of the linguist Gal (1989) on the two forms of relationship between language and political economic relations: indexicality, or the ways that discursive concepts index political economic groups, categories, and activities, and illocution (Austin 1975), or the ways that their usage is incorporated into the political economy as an active practice.

Drawing on this theory, this article will describe the Mandarin Chinese concept "free herding" and relate its semantic shift to the changing history of their pragmatic use. One of the changes seen in this process is pejoration, the development of negative connotations (or sense of backwardness and traditionalism) or loss of positive ones such as egalitarianism and equity. This sense enables the concept to communicate and index significant meanings about the non-linguistic setting of their utterance in ways that its morphological or lexical parts themselves do not. Moreover, as will be shown, their usage is an active component of governing through land reform and management.

The discursive shift that has occurred with the transformation from China's older socialist governance to its modern market technopolitics reflect the reconsolidation of capitalist elites and it is these new political economic relations which can be seen in semantic change. To apply Bourdieu to semantics is to explore how these neoliberal configurations of power and relations among groups and classes in China has shaped and altered the sense and meaning of the discursive concept of "free herding" over time. This is closely in line with Bourdieu's call for a (post) structuralist hermeneutics, "the objective relations (economic and linguistic) which structure practice and representations of practice" (Bourdieu and Passeron 1990).

Historical Background to the Area

Two textual collections, *Pastoral Areas Policy Documents Collection* (Ma et al. n.d.) and *Xinjiang Pastoral Areas Society* (Yang 1988) played a particularly important role in expanding my understanding of the concept of free herding. These collections included materials from the early socialist ethnic minority investigations (M: *minzu shibie*) of pastoral nomadic areas, the early ethnographic reports on the practices of particular groups which categorized and designated pastoralists on imperial China's northwest border as ethnic minorities. Further, these texts contained other kinds of documents such as government policies, speeches, reports, and newspaper articles which made reference to the investigations. The writers of the work are all mostly researchers, journalists and/or official cadre with state affiliation, while the readers and the audience of the work range from other researchers and cadre to the general literate public. The information contained with the reports were disseminated to the public through political meetings.

Xinjiang, the region in which research was conducted is culturally distinct within north-western China, and is inhabited by pastoral nomadic, minority Kazakh and sedentary Uighur population. Kazakh are historically and linguistically connected with the Turks (M. Tujue), the name given by the Chinese to the nomadic peoples who had an empire that reached from Mongolia to the Black Sea, had tributary relations with China, and were later incorporated into the Mongol empire or Yuan Dynasty. After the break up of the Mongol empire, the ancestors of today's Kazakh in China were part of the Golden Horde and the Turkic Kipchak Khanates of the Central Asian steppe. Kazakh, in China today, migrated into the region in the 18th and 19th centuries in response to Russian colonial expansion into the Central Asian steppe as well as internal politics and divisions within the former Kazakh khanate. Today, there are over one million Kazakhs in China, roughly some 200-400,000 are nomadic pastoralists who use grassland throughout the region.

The area of northern Xinjiang was a Chinese imperial frontier (Xin-jiang in Mandarin Chinese is literally new frontier), and vaguely defined in terms of boundaries and sovereignties. Beginning around 1757, the Qing government addressed these new inhabitants of the imperial frontier directly, asking those groups who wanted to settle in Qing territory (so as to control population movements across colonial frontiers) that they should present themselves to the Imperial court (see Benson 1998). The leader of the Kirei, the largest group in Altai, consented to the sovereignty of the Qing on a visit to Beijing, and at their request, was formally granted land and political authority by a Mongolian leader in Khobdo (Qian 1995). This early Qing colonial state was a system of nested hierarchies; Mongols in Altai bestowed formal seals of approval on upper level Kazakh political leaders, but lower Kazakh political

levels were autonomous. Below the upper levels was a system of administrative units that followed older tribal and clan (Kazakh *uru*), as well as extended kin group (K. *aul*) segments and customary law (see Qian 1995).

Land use by Kazakh tribes and clans was embedded in the Kazakh social and political institutions. While they were integrated into the Chinese state in various ways, there was a great deal of autonomy, with only upper level tribal representatives having relations with the more distant centralized state agency. Each *uru* group had its own collectively controlled territory, the boundaries of which were determined by agreement between the important members of the interested groups. Within these groups, the use of land was allotted by particular families by the {white beard or leader} *aqsaqal*. The Soviet scholar Grodekov said that that the lands were divided among various groups according to the number of their animals, but that there were “frequent quarrels concerning boundaries” (In Hudson 1964:32-33, emphasis added). A large number of local conflicts and wars recorded in the Chinese annals of the period between tribes and clans were said to be brought about between leaders over pasture. So the records of land use and its management directly index these complex political economic groups and their activities.

After a tumultuous and revolutionary first half of the twentieth century, the region came under the control of the new socialist People’s Republic of China (Millward 2007). There had been a lot of resistance to the PRC in northern Xinjiang among Kazakh groups (Benson 1998), and in the resulting civil war, many had been displaced from their pastures. After the pacification of resistance, the land use situation was dramatically transformed. Many *aul* attempted to return to the areas in which they had herded, but found other groups there, and conflicts over land were widely reported by new socialist authorities. In this context, the new socialist government had the problem of social control and order in the context of disputes around customary law and land use rights. Moreover, the ultimate goal of the new government was the reorganization of the local political economy for the socialist collectivization project.

Language, Meaning and Socialist Land Reform

With the establishment of the People’s Republic of China, the new socialist state officials met with Kazakh leaders, held extensive discussions concerning the new state, and began to restore the functioning mechanisms of power that linked the clan and *aul* leaders with the state apparatus. These were the mechanisms whereby the language of socialist policies would be promulgated among the public. Further, meetings were held directly in each extended kin group, in which officials discursively outlined the new socialist state

perspectives and policies, socialist egalitarian theories, concepts of ethnic minority oppression, imperialism, and exploitation, and the ideal future collective political-economic institutions that the state would bring into being. Propaganda (M. xuanchuan, literally, extend or spread, with meanings close to disseminate or publicize) was used to educate, criticize, announce, and generally infuse language and meanings with new denotations and connotations.

This larger body of words and concepts are part of the general semantic field of “free herding”; thus we cannot just talk about the concept and its meaning but have to understand it in relation to other concepts in its field and to which it refers. In my usage, a semantic field refers to a relatively unified part of a language’s lexicon at a given time. This is a structuralist notion that, like phonemes in a syntactic system, discursive concepts only take on meaning within a system of other discursive concepts and a syntax which makes sense of them all. For “free herding,” the syntactic and discursive system of socialist conceptualization helped to give a series of meanings and connotations to the term.

The policy of “free herding,” or the meaning of open access to pasture regardless of any one tribal or clan group’s exclusive claims to access, mitigated many of the problems associated with ideas about the nature of political power and conflict in pastoral nomadic communities. Indeed, Kazakh land tenure, interpreted as a complex form of integrated private and collective property in land, was discussed extensively by socialist reformers, and ideas of “free herding” were important in constituting the new socialist political economic order. Consider this revolutionary period text, a report of the 1st Xinjiang Pastoral Areas Work Meeting (1953):

When pastoral communes are resolving pasture problems,

they must take democracy as the guiding principle and what is advantageous to unity. They must strengthen the unity between tribal and collective groups, and realize free herding.

And in another document from one year later: (1954)

The government has begun the first All Nationality All Circles Representative Meeting to promote the party’s pastoral areas “prosperous people and livestock, free herding, increase and protect livestock, no division or struggle for pastoral leaders, no class division, and realize the advantages for both labor and capital” policy, to inspire

pastoralists to begin animal husbandry production. (Qinghe County Gazetteer 2003: 21)

In these examples, the concept of free herding indexes the class interests of the revolutionary socialists. In the early period of socialist pastoral land reform in Altai (1958), the concept of “free herding” referred to a supposed political consensus and democratic politics associated with socialist reform. It had a positive connotation. In this sense, “free herding” was synonymous with socialist land reform, an act of social transformation that was based in representations of Kazakh land use practices and political institutions within Marxist-Leninist thought.

Discourses of socialist land reform, like the socialist ethnic investigations, were based explicitly on the description and analysis of Kazakh political economic institutions. Socialist investigators extensively represented Kazakh political structure and this was used in transformative programs like land reform. Indeed, the notion of “pastoral society” (*M. muqu*) became an important abstraction for socialist reformers and the creation of animal husbandry collectives. Animal husbandry, in terms of livestock and pasture, became the essential category for making sense of pastoral areas, and developing Kazakh animal husbandry was not simply a technical economic problem, but a social and political problem as well.

Chinese reformers developing policies for pastoral areas drew directly on early Soviet research and experience of the revolutionary fifties, particularly their concept of “nomadic feudalism” (*youmu fengjianzhuyi*). Socialist reform, both in the Soviet Union and China, meant the displacement of these local forms of power, and thus the objectives of reform were as much about egalitarian social objectives as they were about coercive, revolutionary goals (Baerhan 1952). Thus, the discursive concept should be understood, not just in terms of indexing class interests and relations, but in terms of intentional language with illocutionary force, the philosopher John Searle’s (Gal 1989; Searle and Vanderveken 1985) notion of how speakers can attempt to get people to bring about a state of affairs described by the propositional content of the discourse and which limits the way a state of affairs can be perceived by them.

For example, early Soviet researchers classified Kazakh as a subsistence economy with the vestiges of an older patrilineal clan economy. By the thirties and the onset of collectivization, these ideas had changed, and they were classified as feudal (see Humphrey 1980, Potapofu n.d., XXMSLD 1963, Nihawanti 1988). The Soviet scholar L.P. Potapov...wrote on the Altaians of the USSR (1953) that:

The feudal relations among the Southern Altaians took a very peculiar form. Their peculiarity consisted in the fact that feudal relations were entangled with patriarchal, clan relations and their survivals... (Humphrey personal communication)

In China, socialist scholars argued that the productive forces and development of pastoral societies were hindered by these feudal political structures, including their class and property relations (Su 1988, Wang 1988). Socialist development would transform these relations, and this transformation was predicated on undermining the older political structure and mode of power.

Feudalism, as a Soviet and Marxist Leninist political economic category, was based on the special power of the ruling class (the aristocracy, *M. muzhu*) based on their control of livestock but with an ambiguous control of land as well. Theorists argued that smaller groups or households developed private property in livestock within a tribe or clan, but each herded on the tribe or clan's communal pasture (Nihawanti 1988). As disparity and population increased, they argued that households or groups with large amounts of livestock developed into an aristocratic class. Thus, class conflict emerged both between groups (between aristocracies) and within groups (between aristocracies and commoners) for control of land. Soon, the extended kin group became administrative units of powerful aristocratic leaders who controlled the majority of livestock and de facto control of common pasture. Thus, these theorists argued that common land ownership in customary law was seen as a relic. Excluding the changes brought about by capitalist penetration into the region, scholars argued that this was the general form of Kazakh pastoral relations that evolved down to the revolutionary period in the region.

Because land had not yet been commodified, socialist theorists argued that monopoly control of land (feudalism, or *fengjianzhuyi*) by the aristocracy was the central means of production and surplus appropriation from households without livestock. As the land was communal property in terms of customary law of pastoralists, clan and aul leaders were said to have usurped communal rights in their own specific class interests.

In one clan's pasture area, the best pastures came to be controlled directly by the aristocracy, and other areas were said to have been more communal, but were allocated to kin groups and households by those aristocrats. When pasture was inadequate (or the livestock of a particular group increased), the pasture of weaker and nearby groups would be appropriated, sometimes by incorporating the group and/or by direct coercion. Socialist reformers (Wang Ji 1988) argued that while customary law may have existed, no written or formal law developed to control the use of communal pasture, and these disputes were often

resolved by violence. Thus, they created a semantic field which represented pre-revolutionary land use as “nomadic feudalism” (youmu fengjianzhuyi) to further their own interests in undermining aristocratic class power and establishing a socialist political economy.

So for socialist reformers, transforming property rights in land would transform class relations (removing the feudal pastoral lord's means of power), displace the existing power formation, and thus open up pastoral societies to socialist development. The collective ownership of pasture was said to be the basis on which these new relations would take form (Zhang 1953). Socialist ideals represented nomadic feudalism as a revolutionary stage of political economy, and deployed concepts of free herding to displace existing Kazakh land based forms of authority and power by undermining their material support – vested clan and tribal landholders who had sole authority, the sovereign power to exclude others, over an area of pasture.

The concept of “free herding,” or open access by anyone regardless of such clan and tribal authorities, is significant because it reflects a displacement of these older modes of political power with socialist power and social control. With the establishment of the socialist People's Republic of China, diverse practices and complicated forms of social organization in pastoral nomadic communities suddenly became enframed, differentiated, and then criticized as exploitative, against which the new socialist modernity, defined as egalitarian and collective, would be articulated. In addition to the use of force and repression of older and emerging political formations in establishing the new Chinese socialist state, this discursive semantic concept helped the state and its personnel to actively imagine and cognitively order new understandings of groups like the Kazakh, so as to enable the perception and experience of their past as exploitative, and the future as liberatory. In this sense, it was used as a part of the new government of the region.

Language, Meaning and Market Reform

While still enmeshed in a semantics of progress, the persistence and continuation of the concept of “free herding” into the period of market reform tells us nothing about its more nuanced shift in meaning. During the period after socialist collectivization, borders between pastoral nomadic collectives and communes were established and herding routines followed fixed boundaries according to individual animal husbandry brigades (groups of about ten households and similar to an aul, or extended kin group). With China's shift to the market economy, the collective pasture lands were decollectivized and re-allocated to individuals

and groups of households; following these allocations, new herding routines, forms of land use and meanings emerged.

In the period of market reform, those groups and classes whose interests were indexed in the language of the old order of socialist land law lost the power to define its connotations, meanings and uses. As the use of land underwent privatization, there were clearly advantages and disadvantages that were distributed unequally across pastoral nomadic communities. In this sense, the redefinition of free herding reflects a new form of political economic action by new emergent classes within a new form of government that emerged. Market reform led to new shifts in power and meaning, much as had occurred in socialist reform; the analysis of this semantic shift can expand our understanding of these changing political economic relations in the period of contemporary neoliberal market reform.

Neoliberal market reform, as recently theorized, refers to the use of governmental power to impose market imperatives and economic liberalization (Hediz 2006, Saad-Filho et al. 2005). In particular, David Harvey (2006) has argued that neoliberalism is characterized by the increasing scope of global capitalist accumulation, as capital has moved throughout the world in search of cheap resources, labor, and markets. In this sense, China's decollectivization of land use and opening to the global market reflects its engagement with the neoliberal political economy, as local forms of production like pastoral animal husbandry are integrated vertically through government into a global division of labor. Harvey argues that the opening to the global market and neoliberal governance has meant a restoration of the class power of elites, widespread social stratification, and the deterioration of living conditions for lower social classes like ethnic minorities.

In neoliberal reform, the semantic field of "free herding" has changed dramatically. The path to alleviating social and economic problems and establishing a progressive social order is conceptualized as increasing the productivity of the economy through science and technology, a technical problem to be resolved by the acquisition of new knowledge and skills. In ethnic minority areas, this means the acquisition of new knowledge and skills related to industrial animal husbandry.

In socialist China, the association with science and technology with bourgeois class history in Europe and an exploitative capitalist, imperialist class in China limited the impact of discursive scientific or technical language on governance. During early socialism, the Chinese state promulgated a binary semantic field of red and expert knowledges (Li 1985). In this field, political ideologies about social relations were as important as abstract scientific knowledge or skills in state policy (Kwok 1965, Hua 1995). In 1978, the stated goal of

modernizing science became central to post-Mao state policy and the new scientific institutions emerged in institutions of the party-state (universities and government bureaucracies) (Deng 1994, Jiang 2001, Goldman 1981, 1984). Yet, the socialist political ideology, or red knowledge, was removed from knowledge or practice of science.

In conjunction with new neoliberal market policies, scientific and technical economic development policies subjected residents to new capitalist food and textile industries. As China has re-engaged with neoliberal discourse, the local county government was under pressure within Xinjiang's regional economic policies to increase foodstuff production for a growing urban population of wage laborers. Due to rises in income, regional residents in urban centers like Altai City, Turfan, or Urumqi have greatly increased their consumption of meat products. Regional politicians want to keep supplies plentiful and the market price of meat low. This has meant a policy of increasing animal husbandry production. Furthermore, regional economic planners hoped to increase the quantity and quality of local commodities and eventually develop an export economy. As had been envisioned years before (Luova 2006), they had plans for a transnational export economy using refrigerated railcars that would ship meat produced by Muslims for Muslim markets across Central Asia to Europe and Turkey. Indeed, Central Asia's largest slaughterhouse is planned for the regional capital of Urumqi and would be owned by private capital.

This policy was reflected in the construction of permanent villages of brick homes and a sedentary animal husbandry based on irrigated plots and the cropping of improved varieties of feed resources such as alfalfa and the enclosure raising of improved varieties of livestock. Economic development policy focused on animal improvement schemes, veterinary science, and developing a feed industry. Officials directly linked the improvement of livestock breeds and the increase of available feed resources through the implementation of science and technological initiatives. The idea was that such poverty alleviation and economic development programs will increase the discipline, efficiency, and competitiveness of ethnic minority residents in producing animal husbandry commodities like meat and fiber for the market. Village policies and programs which intervened around these notions and were changing local behavior included settlement programs, village committee meetings about using science in production, the provision of a variety of state veterinary services, and livestock breed improvement programs. Moreover, grassland management policies were also crucial in attempts to transform pastoral animal husbandry into industrial animal husbandry.

In this contemporary historical and material context, scientific discursive practice, while freed from its association with the bourgeois class, was seen to be closely associated with the legitimation of neoliberal state policy (Greenhough 2003). Market reform, like socialist reform, reflects efforts to control, transform, and remake the productive activities of the countryside – a shift in the form of government of population through science and technological initiatives. In the contemporary reform period, problems with rural areas – particularly concentrations of poverty in ethnic minority areas - are associated with their traditional economy and land use (defined as primitive and backwards). The present government advocates a modernization model based on scientific knowledge and technical expertise, and reflect what Timothy Mitchell (2002) calls a modern technopolitics, whereby the art of government becomes framed in terms of science and technology, modernization, and economic development.

In the wake of grassland reform and a new National Grassland Law which decollectivized grassland use, a new set of institutions and bureaucratic structure of government, specifically the Grassland Work Station and the Grassland Supervision Office, emerged. The Grassland Supervision Office had the responsibility, duty, or obligation to implement and monitor adherence to the National Grassland Law, its livestock stocking rates, and the supervision of grassland use. They are also responsible for research on grassland conditions, mapping, statistics, and archival work. The Grassland Work Station was responsible for constructing artificial and natural grassland, devising yearly plans and projects for grassland management, and increasing the availability of livestock feed. At the regional and national levels, the Ministry of Agriculture established a grassland research office, university departments in grassland science, and a scientific committee and conference was established including a research journal called China Grassland. Many of the new graduates of these institutions began to fill the new natural resource bureaucratic institutions of the government. Like the upper echelon of the food and textile industries, these new officials were part of the educated, technical elite that had taken power in reform China.

The process whereby grassland management institutions, as a new distinctive domain, has grown signifies new forms of power in China associated with a shift from a Leninist/Maoist style of politics (when the process began to coalesce) to the governmentalization of the post-Mao state (Greenhalgh and Winckler 2005). The concept of “governmentalization” refers to the increasing emphasis on the control and regulation of individuals and populations to optimize state power by institutions not always recognized as the state (such as grassland scientists) and which are distributed throughout the social body (Horn 1994, Mitchell 1988,

Rabinow 1989), what Michel Foucault termed (1979) “governmentality” or government rationality. Clearly, shifts in the meaning of “free herding” as used by these institutions exemplifies this shift in politics.

The redefinition of free herding reflects a new form of political action upon residents by a new governmental elite that emerged with market reform. For example, consider this statement from a specialist text, *Grassland Studies*, published by the Beijing Agricultural University (BND 1986: 23):

Free herding is unplanned use of grassland. Livestock herds do not have organized management, and herds can go anywhere over the entire pasture, choosing {only} their preferred forage grasses. It is a primitive method.

The meaning and language conveyed by this text indexes new elite class interests. Moreover, it represents the illocutionary force of those governmental officials who are in the process of remaking ethnic minority pastoral animal husbandry into capitalist, industrial animal husbandry.

The first goal in this semantic shift is the redefinition and delegitimation of collective property arrangements. The existence of the problem of “free herding” has been attributed by grassland science experts to unclear tenure rights and tradition. Since there are no exclusive rights, residents move freely across the pasture, say the new grassland science experts, despite local routines of land use. Experts have also called “free herding” a “grassland iron rice bowl” (*caoyuan daguofan*), a reference to the socialist system of guaranteed lifetime employment in state enterprises, in which the tenure and level of wages were not necessarily related to neoliberal notions of economic productivity, but socialist ideas of political economic egalitarianism.

For these new bureaucrats struggling to manage “grassland,” local lease rights to land had become an obstacle in governing land use. This broader semantic field is closely related to the privatization of the use of pasture land, the construction of artificial and improvement of natural grassland, the devising of yearly plans and projects by grassland managers, and increasing the availability of livestock feed for an expanding livestock industry and market.

In order to both continue to increase production, ease grassland degradation, and raise incomes, officials and experts in China use a number of policies to transform the area’s pastoral nomadic “free herding” or “open access herding” (*M. ziyou fangmu*) into a planned and intensive animal husbandry system based on modern grassland science. Primitive

herding methods, not politics, have caused a “tragedy of the commons,” a metaphor for the socialist public goods or free rider problem where residents are said to enjoy the benefits of a public good without bearing its cost.

Secondly, the responsibilities of both of these institutions are the modernization and industrialization of the animal husbandry sector. This ultimately is a project of socio-economic and ecological engineering, meant to increase Kazakh production of primary raw materials like natural fibres like cashmere and meat like lamb and mutton, to guide the development of specialized animal husbandry production areas, as well as the establishment of grassland ecological reserves and more diversified land use such as for recreation and tourism by urban residents.

Thus, new forms of government and the groups of bureaucrats which implement it redefine land use policy in terms of science and technology, in terms of the utilitarian and instrumental goals of increasing animal husbandry production while conserving grassland. Grassland concepts such as “free herding” are thus remade into a fundamentally modern political technology, introducing a whole new series of knowledges and norms into government. Despite its surface of economic and environmental language, the semantic shift of free herding is thus related to broader changes in Chinese politics and policy-making.

Conclusion

To summarize, China’s engagement with global capitalism and neoliberalism has clearly made possible new forms of meaning that are discernible in the government’s discursive efforts to control, transform, and remake the productive activities of the countryside and develop the animal husbandry economy. In attempting to transform traditional land use and economy in pastoral areas of Xinjiang, government officials and scientists label ethnic minority pastoralism as free herding, a concept that refers today to the extensive and semi-subsistence character of mobile, pastoral practices.

The interesting aspect of the case of the concept of “free herding” is its historical depth; during the revolutionary, socialist period, “free herding” was also used by government in an illocutionary sense, but rather to establish consensus among pastoral tribal groups in land reform, use, and access. In the period of capitalist reform, there is an indexical relationship between the concept and the world, as the term refers to the existence of pastoral practices, that in its negative connotations is also political and illocutionary, attempting to sanction and transform such practices into ones that are more productive, valuable, and thus amenable to

elite surplus extraction. It is potentially most dangerous when there is this conflation between the concept as denotation and its political power as illocution.

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