

Österreichische Akademie der Wissenschaften / Austrian Academy of Sciences

AAS WORKING PAPERS IN SOCIAL ANTHROPOLOGY

Volume 18

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IN CENTRAL TIBET



Band 18



**OAW**

Österreichische Akademie  
der Wissenschaften

ÖAW ARBEITSPAPIERE ZUR SOZIALANTHROPOLOGIE

**AAS Working Papers in Social Anthropology /  
ÖAW Arbeitspapiere zur Sozialanthropologie**

ISSN: 1998-507X

doi: 10.1553/wpsa18

ISBN: 978-3-7001-6937-6

Wien 2010

**Editors / Herausgeber:**

Andre Gingrich & Guntram Hazod

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# FROM WATER RADISH TO FISH RESTAURANT: RECENT DEVELOPMENTS OF FISHERIES IN CENTRAL TIBET\*

DIANA ALTNER

## Abstract:

Improvement of infrastructure is essential for the realisation of fast modernisation; infrastructural changes mean shorter transportation routes, a speeding up of the sense of time, new economic opportunities and connections to major cities. People initially experience modernisation as a simplification of their everyday lives. Many transformations are not visible at the first moment or hard to be noticed; for example traditional knowledge and skills become redundant or new consumer goods replace local handicrafts. Until the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, yak hide coracles played an important role in Tibetan water transportation systems. These boats are still built in Chun, the last remaining fishing village in central Tibet. Due to road and bridge construction Chun was linked to the local network in 2004. This infrastructural development led to a new mobility of the villagers and fishermen, along with new opportunities for income and economic orientation. The yak hide coracles are about to be transformed as well as the profession of the fishermen – both remaining probably only in the form of small model boats made for tourists or as subcontractors for a newly constructed fish restaurant of the local government. This article examines the ways in which Tibetan fishermen adapted to this fast modernisation and how the economic and cultural niche has changed over the past decades.<sup>1</sup>

## 1. The long way to the first fish restaurant in central Tibet

Fishing culture in Tibet only developed at places where the local residents depended on that source of income or food due to unfavourable environmental conditions, such as the lack of fruitful land. Only few Tibetans ever depended predominantly upon fishing for their livelihoods. The only remaining place in central Tibet where people still live as fishermen is the village of Chun.

Chun is situated on the east bank of the southern part of the Kyichu River, and belongs to the district of Tsarpanang of Chushur County. The Chunpa say that their village was founded around 1,000 years ago. The first reference in Tibetan literature is to be found in a work of the 17<sup>th</sup> century, – in the form of Skyid-smad 'Jun, i.e. Chun of Skyid[-shod]-smad; the latter is the geographical name of the lower part of the Kyichu region (cf. Ngag-dbang Blo-bzang rgya-mtsho, *Gsung 'bum*, Vol. 17: 239). The location of the village resembles an island. Until 2004 it was only possible to reach it by the traditional yak hide boat or coracle. These boats fit perfectly with their environment. They are not only built with local materials, such as yak hide, yak wool and wood, but are also light enough to be carried upon the boatman's back. This mobility was a necessarily aspect of their design because they cannot be navigated upstream.

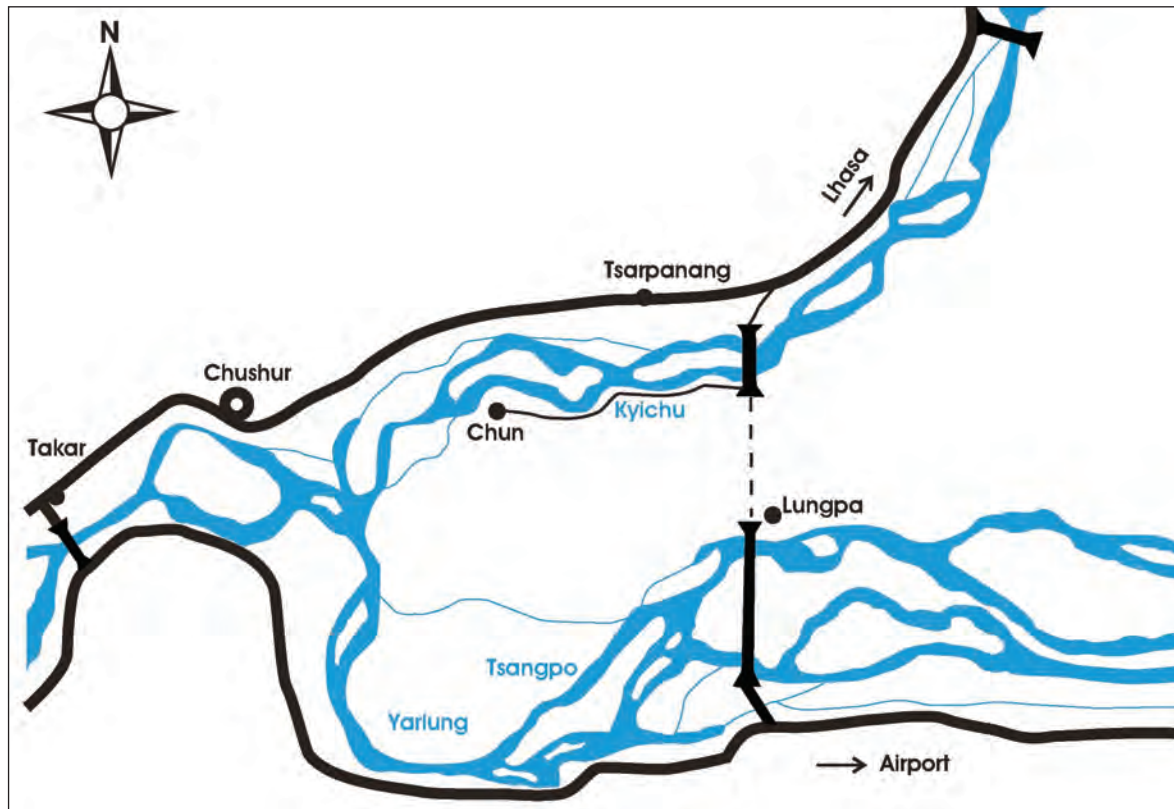
Chun's close proximity to the river was not the only reason for the development of a fishing tradition; there was also a shortage of arable land and therefore the people of Chun have been signi-

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\* The present contribution is based on a paper presented at the Institute for Social Anthropology of the Austrian Academy of Sciences, June 10, 2010. I wish to thank Sven Lange, Kerstin Grothmann and Toni Huber for their comments to this paper.

<sup>1</sup> I draw on personal observations made among the fishermen in southern and central Tibet during 2003, 2004 and 2009. Fieldwork during 2003 and 2004 was undertaken for my PhD project on fishery in Tibet (Altner 2007, 2009a, b). Fieldwork in 2009 was planned and accomplished as a comparative study.

ificantly dependent upon fishing for a long time. Until 1959, they lived largely by providing ferry transport services on both the Kyichu and Yarlung Tsangpo Rivers for the local administration and monasteries, as well as for the central Tibetan government. These services were also the main form of tax payments made by the villagers. Nowadays, approximately 400 people live in Chun in approximately eighty families.



Map. The location of Chun.  
(Design by Jenny Julius)



Fig. 1.  
Overview of a part of Chun Village and the Kyichu in the background.  
(Photo: Diana Altner, 2009)

With modern roads and bridges now rendering the traditional water transportation services of the Chunpa redundant, the contemporary economic life of Chun is based upon a mix of fishery, agriculture, seasonal pastoralism, and handicrafts. Apart from the fact that there is a lack of arable land in Chun, a large part of the available land is also damaged regularly by flooding of the Kyichu

River. Chun's economic situation has improved greatly with the influx of Chinese migrants to the Lhasa urban area over the past decade or so, with the result that the former local subsistence fishing has now developed into a commercial enterprise.

Economic and social transformations resulting from the reforms implemented under Deng Xiaoping have fundamentally changed life in central Tibet. The new post-1980 policies allowed for a renaissance of traditional Tibetan culture. Restrictions on religious activities were loosened, and traditional customs enjoyed a revival (cf. Goldstein and Kapstein (ed.) 1998: 10). For this reason, activities such as slaughtering once again became regarded as a Buddhist sin, and were stigmatised. The introduction of a free market economy had consequences for the living standard and social organisation of the Tibetans. The development of infrastructure led to an expansion of different economic fields. Individual trading activities were permitted. In relation to all of these factors, the life of the fishermen in Chun has also changed dramatically since the early 1980s.

The inhabitants of Chun regard the year 1982 as the second important turning point in the history of their village. What is regarded as the first progressive change occurred in 1959, with the collapse of the feudal system, when the village ceased to be a dependency of the Drepung Monastery near Lhasa.<sup>2</sup> For the residents of Chun, the 1980s mark the beginning of an improvement in their economic situation due to three main factors: the strong increase in Chinese demand for fish; improvement of fishing technology; and changes in work relations as they began working for Chinese middlemen.

For the fishermen of Chun the late 1980s and early 1990s were the most productive in terms of their actual catch. Since the early 1980s, the demand for fish has been increasing constantly in central and southern Tibet, and this demand could only be satisfied by using modern nets. During the early 1980s, increases in quotas and incomes were the consequences of the "run for fish." In the early to mid-1980s, the rivers still had an abundance of fish and thus the price was rather low. During the late 1980s, the Tibetan fishermen began working for Chinese businessmen. These organisational changes had consequences for the division of labor, the relations and organisation between the fishermen themselves, and the marketing of the catch. Nowadays, the catch is generally collected by the Chinese middlemen at different places and paid for directly. The use of mobile phones allows the fishermen to contact their middlemen and to sell the fish while they are still sitting in their boats on the river. There are several fish markets in Lhasa city. Fish and seafood is offered very fresh, often still alive or frozen. At Lhasa's night market there is also a wide range of different kinds of fish available.

As a result of the rising demand for fish, central Tibetan rivers are becoming rapidly over-fished. Another reason for the decrease of the fish population in the Kyichu and Yarlung Tsangpo rivers is the increasing level of pollution entering these rivers. Although there is not much industry in the region, the wastewater from Lhasa city is polluting both rivers. Another negative effect on the ecology of the rivers and their local fish species has been caused by the introduction of foreign fish species from China. Ritually released fish (*tshé thar*)<sup>3</sup> are competing with the local species for food in the river systems. Before 1980, the fish quota was easily enhanced by increasing the number of boats and nets and that resulted in over-fishing. To satisfy the demand for fish other alternatives have to be found. For the fishermen of Chun this means, for example, widening the

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<sup>2</sup> Chun was subordinated to Drepung Gonpa until 1959. Villagers between eighteen and sixty were liable to pay taxes to the monastery and the central government.

<sup>3</sup> The ritual releasing of lives of animals. Cf. e.g. Holler 2002.

radius of their fishing activities. Although in summer and autumn fishing still takes place in nearby regions, they take the opportunity offered by the cold temperatures in winter to go fishing further afield and to be able to transport the fish back to Lhasa still fresh.

The most significant changes in Chun were introduced by the construction of the new shortcut road between Lhasa and Gongkar Airport, with two new bridges crossing the Kyichu and the Yarlung Tsangpo and a tunnel in between. As a kind of side effect of this big construction project the village was connected to the local road network and can now easily be reached by road transport. This road connection has various consequences. The construction of the new tunnel also produced an interesting by-product: stone. This in turn offered a new source of income: selling stone. Not only does the stone offer a new source of income, the new road also offers a way to transport the stone to the main road. Constructing new houses of stone has become very popular throughout the whole region, even in Chun, and the demand for building stone is very high. While in 2004, when the road had just been completed, the people in Chun started planning to build new houses, and everywhere in the village stone was collected. In 2009 most of the new houses were completed. Another fundamental improvement was the connection of the village to the regional electricity grid. Lifestyle in Chun changed dramatically within these five years: new furniture, all kinds of consumer products beginning with television sets, refrigerators, cars and motorbikes were purchased on a grand scale. Chun adapted to material modernity at high-speed. As in many other villages in central Tibet, Chun now has several shops and restaurant, and people meet at these central places instead of their own houses, and they consume Lhasa beer instead of the home-brewed local chang or barley beer. Some families started to demonstrate their new richness by building bigger or even two-storied houses.



Fig. 2.  
One of the new constructed two-storied houses in Chun.  
(Photo: Diana Altner, 2009)

Along with these infrastructural and economical developments, the social hierarchies in the village also seem to have changed. People started to differentiate between families who still live on fishing and families who do not. Furthermore, they differentiate between people who go fishing for their subsistence living and those who do it for commercial reasons and work for Chinese businessmen. The new road has offered the people in Chun other sources of income. Outsiders such as tourists now find it relatively easy to reach there by road. The unique status of Chun as the only Tibetan

fishing village has made it extremely popular during the last five years. Several articles have been recently published about Chun's boatbuilding and fishing tradition.<sup>4</sup> Chinese tourists in particular show an interest in, and come to visit the so-called "tradition village". The Chunpa even revived a boat dance for the tourists, in which several men dance with coracles on their backs.<sup>5</sup> There appears to be historical precedent for this dance. In pre-modern Tibet, the people of Chun were responsible not only for most of the ferry services on the Kyichu and Yarlung Tsangpo Rivers, but also for the ferry service on the lake behind the Potala when visitors wanted to see the Lukhang temple or search for the *lu (klu)*<sup>6</sup> that they assumed to be in the lake. During the Tibetan Saga Dawa festival, such tours to the temple and on the lake were quite popular. After the end of the festival the fishermen carried their boats on their backs and made a circumambulation on Lhasa's Barkhor around the Tsuglakhang temple.

The success of Chun as a tourist destination led to the establishment of a fish restaurant between the village and the main road. Located around three kilometers from the road it can be reached within two minutes by car. In the beginning it was just meant to offer fish for tourists and local Chinese official who are fond of the different fish dishes. Therefore only a simple little house was erected that functioned as kitchen as well as living room for the fishermen who ran the restaurant. Tables and chairs for the customers were arranged outside under a sunroof and the fish was caught and served fresh every day.

This simple model was so successfully that the local authorities in Chushur decided to construct a kind of amusement park with a fish restaurant at the same place. The plan was to build several houses that accommodate kitchens, dining rooms and lodging. It is even intended to develop a dance floor surrounded by stupas for the tourist-style boat dance. In 2009, the project was still under construction. What



started as a good opportunity to establish a new source of income for the local population led to a project that will be more profitable for the local government than the Chunpa themselves after its completion. There will only be a few Chunpa employed to serve as cooks, to deliver fish or to dance for the tourists.

Fig. 3. The original fish restaurant with tables under the sunroof.  
(Photo: Diana Altner, 2009)

<sup>4</sup> See Zhang Xiaoming 2007a: 34-36; Zhang Xiaoming 2007b: 19-22; Yang Xinan and Yang Jingyun 2008: 266-68; Bsod-chung 2008.

<sup>5</sup> This boat dance became quite popular, during the New Year's Celebration the dance was even performed in TV.

<sup>6</sup> A kind of spirit being that is believed to live amongst others in lakes.



Fig. 4.  
A fisherman from Chun is preparing fresh fish from the river for a fish meal.  
(Photo: Diana Altner, 2009)

## 2. The role of water radishes in the history of fishing in Tibet

To understand the recent situation of fishery in Tibet it is necessary to review the historical background of fishery as a branch of the local economy, the attitude of the Tibetans towards fish as food and the position of the fishermen in Tibetan society. The basic natural and cultural conditions for fishing in Tibet vary greatly. Even though in Tibet there are only ten fish species that are economically valuable – principally trout, carp and catfish – the natural landscape of the Tibetan plateau offers a good potential for fishery. Nevertheless, the cultural conditions tend to oppose the exploitation of the resource.

The fishery in Tibet has generally been limited by the lack of a real fish-eating tradition among local people. Tibetans prefer products from the pastoral economy for their daily diet, while animals associated with water often are culturally categorised as dangerous or ambivalent and in consequence best avoided as food. There exist many prejudices against fish as food in Tibet, and the “myth” that Tibetans never eat fish is still maintained. Tibetan Buddhists regard the killing of fish as a very special sin, and justify this with such notions as a fish can make no outcry for help and plea for mercy (see Duncan 1964: 243).

The fact that fishermen were regarded as fish killers meant that their reputation in Tibetan society was never positive. In the pre-modern central Tibetan state, social and religious criteria were used by the elite to define social ranking. Next to butchers, ferrymen, corpse carriers (*ragyepa*; *ragyab pa*)<sup>7</sup> and beggars, fishermen belonged to the lowest level in the organisation of society, as occupational groups who benefited directly from the death of living beings. Fishermen who killed fish and lived at the cost of their lives were regarded as polluted with no hope of a higher rebirth. Social contact with those groups who were “professional sinners,” was generally avoided. The custom of intermarriage between different fishing families became long-standing since there was no chance to find partners from other social classes. Low social class was a heritage that was almost impossible for any members of Tibetan fishing families to overcome.

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<sup>7</sup> The *ragyepa* were responsible for carrying the corpse out of the town in traditional Tibet.



Compared to the predominant agricultural and pastoral culture, fishery can be described as a “niche” in the Tibetan economic system. Tibetan markets for fish have been traditionally small. Fishing is not in favor nor does it constitute an appreciable resource for the population. Although the attitude towards fish as food has changed in the last decades, it does not play an important role for Tibetans in their diet.

The remarkable fish population in Tibetan rivers and lakes was never really used sufficiently as a source of food. The social sanctions against fishermen and the attitude of Tibetans towards fish as food had a hindering effect to the development of a real fishery tradition. Fishermen were regarded as “dirty” and nobody seemed to go fishing voluntarily. Fishing activities were often regulated at the highest level of government in the pre-modern central Tibetan state, and several Dalai Lamas and regents issued proclamations banning fishing. These restrictions did not stop fishing activities completely but had a hindering effect on the development of a substantial tradition. During the times when fishing was forbidden there were always some possibilities to by-pass such prohibitions. Fish was sold in Lhasa as so-called “water radish” (*chu la phug*) during such periods – especially for the duration of the Saga Dawa festival during the fourth Tibetan lunar month. The fish was hidden under blankets and sold secretly. It is said that at night mainly Muslims went fishing and also sold their catch immediately afterwards. When Muslims settled down in Tibet they not only functioned as traders but also as butchers – a comfortable way for the Tibetans to avoid the killing of animals but to enjoy meat as food. The question of who were the buyers of “water radish” cannot be answered.

In southern Tibet, there exists a region where fishery played an important role for the local economy in the past: the northern and western shores of the Yamdroktso. Fishing activities in this region were documented or mentioned by many early western travellers who traversed the region before the 1950s. Until the 1940s, a remarkable number of locally dried fish were exported to Bhutan, but also to Lhasa where a market for these products existed. Fishing activities around Yamdroktso came to a stop in the 1930s and 1940s due to the restrictions of the central government. The first reason was the introduction of the so-called *nya 'bru* (“fish barley”) during the reign of the Fifth Dalai Lama (1617–82). It was a compensation paid in grain to fishing communities for restrictions on fishing. The second reason for abandoning fishing activities in the 1930s and 1940s was the so-called *nya dmar* – a compensation in form of land that was given to villages that depended on fishing. This system was introduced after the death of the Thirteenth Dalai Lama (1876–1933). Fishing activities stopped at the time when the people at Yamdroktso Lake had enough land to survive solely on that. The majority of residents living at the lake are nowadays ashamed of the fishing tradition of their ancestors. There are only a few Chinese and Tibetans left these days who still go fishing there in springtime.

### **3. Material culture in change: The invention of model yak hide boats**

While the fishing culture at Yamdroktso disappeared, the fishermen in Chun adapted to recent infrastructural and economic changes in various ways without giving up their fishing activities completely. Besides agriculture and fishing local handicrafts became increasingly important for the village – as they have done for many other villages in the area. The most impressive cultural product of Chun is the yak hide boat. Encouraged by NGOs from Lhasa the villagers produce mainly leather products, such as bags. While the traditional boat building is only done by a few elder people, some Chunpa started to build model boats for the growing tourist market in Lhasa – a

product that is unique to this fishing village. The boats can be purchased in several shops in Lhasa, such as those of the Tibet Museum, the Norbulingka or in small local handicraft shops.<sup>8</sup>

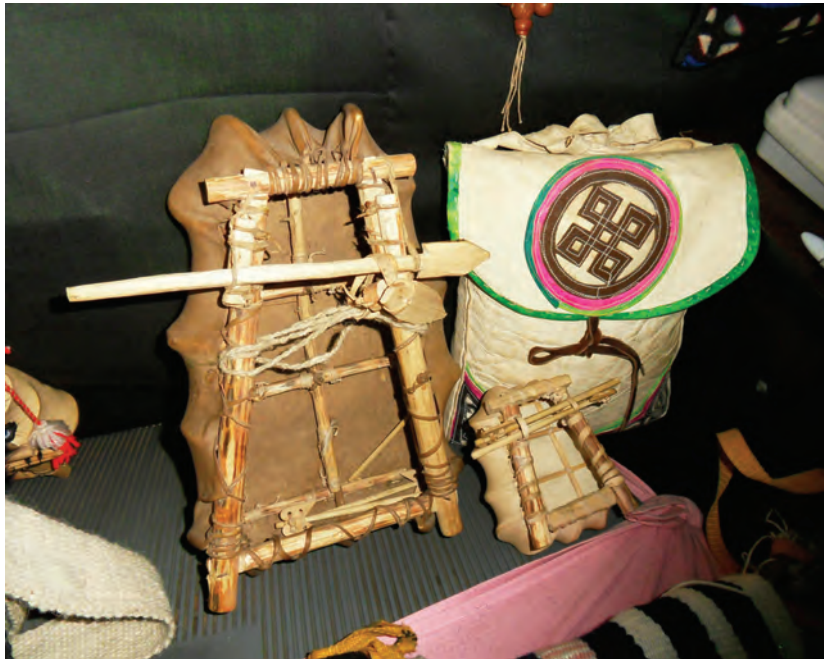


Fig. 4.

Model boats offered in a shop for local handicrafts in Lhasa.

(Photo: Diana Altner, 2009)

What was the idea behind these little boats? In the village I was told that a boat builder made a tiny boat for his little son as a toy and that the boy was so happy about his boat that he took it with him wherever he went. One day he joined his father on a trip to Lhasa to sell his leather products there. A tourist noticed the miniature boat and wanted to buy it. This was the beginning of the model boat story. The more interesting question is whether these little boats are the end or the future of the original yak hide boats? Can these little boats be used as an indicator for the changes Chun was confronted with in the last decades? In the case of Chun the missing connection to the local network suggests the idea that all utensils in the villages had to be carried there by boat – even billiard tables and little tractors. In the course of the increasing development of infrastructure and the connection of the village to the road network by bridges, the former ferry and transport function of the yak hide boats became increasingly redundant and their number is now decreasing dramatically. Even the size of the boats decreased compared to those made up to the 1940s. The construction method of the boats did not change but the way they were used did. While in former times the boats had to be carried by men on their back, nowadays it is possible to transport the boats on cars. Marches of miles carrying the boats belong to the memories of the past. While using old fishing nets it was necessary to go with two boats and six people. With the new gill nets only one boat and two people are needed.

The yak hide boat's function as a souvenir is a completely new one. The model boats are not really yak hide boats because the hide would be too thick for this purpose; they are made of sheepskin. Although the model boats are only built as souvenirs they are produced with all necessary equipment, such as oars and carrying straps – the original being copied as closely as possible. In different ways, both products – the yak hide boats and the souvenir boats – serve to support the means of subsistence for the people of Chun. While the big yak hide boats that were in action on the rivers of Tibet until the

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<sup>8</sup> Their price is varying between 80 and 160 Yuan. The craftsmen in Chun get 40 Yuan for each boat, it takes them around one hour to built one.



Fig. 5a, b.

A Chunpa is building a little boat.

(Photo: Diana Altner, 2009)

middle of the 20<sup>th</sup> century were completely replaced by smaller boats of the same construction, the little souvenir boats exist parallel to these full-sized yak hide boats that are built today in Chun and that are used for fishing. Although Sarat Chandra Das stated of the yak hide boats: “Indeed, Tibetans seem perfectly ignorant of the art of boatmaking“, and while many early Tibet travellers described this means of water transport as “primitive”, the Tibetan yak hide boats were much more than a means of communication and transportation. They were also means of production, to earn livelihood and comply with tax obligations, and they were proof of the technical ingenuity of their builders. In the context of fishery, and by analysing their construction technology, we can also explain the relationship that Tibetans have to their environment and reveal a richness of cultural motives and symbolism.<sup>9</sup>

#### 4. Conclusion

The prospect for the fishery business was never a positive one in Tibetan society. Although the natural conditions – especially the fish population – offered good chances for using this resource for subsistence or additional income, they have been over exploited in recent decades such that this chance is fading more and more.

The social status of fishermen within Tibetan society has not really changed in recent decades: fishermen are still regarded as sinners. Although the demand for fish has not stopped, the social expressions of the values that are derived from Buddhism seem to form a kind of balance to the law of the market. Fishing is still a lucrative business for fishermen, however many also look for new opportunities. For the first time there is a viable economic alternative to fishing for the people of Chun. This will be supported by a revival of Buddhist religion and values in modern Tibetan society, and it fosters the wish of fishermen to stop their traditional business and perhaps offers their descendants a chance to live without the “pollution” deriving from fishing. Infrastructural improvement, followed by a high speed adaptation to the fruits of modernity by the fishermen, led to a new economic orientation of the villagers. The new generation now rejects the fishermen’s lifestyle provided there are real alternatives for income. Village youth are not really interested in learning the traditional craft; they at most join in the boat building as a social event but nothing more.

<sup>9</sup> See also Ivanoffs comments of the Moken boat (Ivanoff 1999: 3).



Fig. 6.  
Reparation of an old yak hide boat in Chun.  
(Photo: Diana Altner, 2009)

As a result of changing orientation towards other economic sources, both the Tibetan fishermen's handicraft and their material culture strongly connected to this profession are on the way to vanishing – yet another example of an on-going global trend. M. Estellie Smith has described this process in her book on maritime anthropology: „As the dependency on manufactured equipment increases, individuals lose the knowledge of creativity; the boats, nets, and sails, as well as the lore of sailing, weather conditions, currents, behaviour of the biomass – all are being replaced ...“ (Smith 1977: 16.). If we take a look at the fishermen of Chun, we discover that their handmade nets have now been completely replaced by industrial produced gill nets. In direct relation to this replacement, the knowledge concerning the production of traditional fishing equipment will soon be lost. If we regard fishing as an expression of technological ingenuity, we realise that the technological knowledge of using these nets to catch fish will fade out, as well as that concerning the construction process of the boats if they should also disappear one day. With the going of the boats, so too the skills of river navigation and boat-craft will disappear. It will surely be interesting to revisit the people of Chun in a generation from now to observe exactly what, if any, of this local knowledge system still remains.

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