Common to most of the Tibetan ethnographic region is the local categorisation of certain people as being *rigs btsog pa*—that is, as being of an unclean kind. These people are workers in traditional skills or the kin of such workers whose conduct is seen to constitute wrong-doing within the Buddhist moral code, such as blacksmiths, butchers, corpse-cutters and beggars. Membership of this unclean social stratum is by ascription, and the *btsog pa*—the uncleanliness—is perceived to be inherent in the patrilineage (*rus brgyud*). Accordingly, three central taboos need to be observed by others in order to minimise the risk of contamination: the avoidance of ‘mixing of mouths’ (sharing bowls), the avoidance of sharing of clothes, and most importantly, the avoidance of sexual contact. Although social interaction with commoners is possible provided that these taboos are observed, we know that, to varying degrees, workers in these traditional skills have been stigmatised and restricted from participation in village and communal life for centuries.

Among Tibetans it is what they understand to be the polluting nature of the work in which the *rigs btsog pa* engage that defines their social position as low. The butchers kill, the blacksmiths make knives that kill,\(^2\) the corpse-cutters deal with dead bodies, and the

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1 The fieldwork on which this paper is based was conducted in Lhasa from September 1995 to June 1996 and from January to April 1997, and in Panam from September to December 2002, and in July 2004. The study was generously funded by the Norwegian Research Council, the National Gift to Chr. Michelsen and the Fr. Stang’s Fund, and made possible by the Network for University Co-operation Tibet-Norway. I thank Samdrup from Tibet University for excellent co-operation in Panam, and I thank the audience at the IATS X conference and the editors of this volume for their valuable comments.

2 In addition to blacksmiths, silversmiths and goldsmiths are also considered low-ranking and polluted. An explanation that is often heard for this is that they extract minerals from the ground, an action that might lead to a decrease in the fertility of the land. This view should therefore not be interpreted in terms of a Buddhist moral system.
beggars are thought to do anything available, including all of the activities mentioned above. However, only very few actually engage in their traditional occupation today, and in fact most of the younger generation of these families have never learnt these skills. This is particularly the case in the urban centres. This paper deals with the changing perceptions of *rigs btsog pa* that have ensued following the introduction of reforms in Tibet and other areas in 1980–81, when the communes were disbanded and all households were given land to cultivate, their members thus becoming farmers on equal terms. It discusses in what ways the abandoning of supposedly polluting labour has affected the relevance of this *rigs*, or typification, to a person’s inherent constitution

**MODERNISING FORCES OUTSIDE THE URBAN CENTRES**

In the last few years we have seen a remarkable rate of economic growth in the Tibet Autonomous Region (TAR), said to have been as much as 13 per cent each year. The growth has been fuelled by government spending in the region, which increased by 75 per cent from 2000 to 2001 (TIN 2003). This spending reflected extensive financial support from Beijing and is part of a larger project to modernise Tibet.

Critical voices argue that economic development in Tibet benefits Chinese settlers rather than Tibetans and point to the fact that some 80 per cent of the Tibetan population live in rural areas, that is, areas outside the centres of economic growth (see for instance TIN 2000, TCHR 2000). The Chinese government, on the other hand, claims that progress is being made in the rural areas as well as in the urban centres (Goldstein *et al*. 2003). Xinhua, the official Chinese news agency, has, however, acknowledged that growth in the productive sectors of the economy in the TAR, here meaning agriculture and industry, has been far lower than in other sectors. According to the TAR Statistical Yearbook 2002, the average annual income in rural Tibet in the previous year was 1,325 yuan (Yeh 2004: 127, n. 10), a number much lower than in urban Tibet and lower than China in general.

The debate concerning rural development is highly politicised and has been dominated by the lack of first hand data. In a