Foreword

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What happens when people living a largely self-sufficient life as nomadic herders get swept up in the throes of economic growth, nation building, and futuristic social engineering? What do they gain, and what do they lose?

The world knows that China is changing rapidly. Moving from being a poor country struggling to feed itself as late as the 1980s to “the world’s factory” beginning in the 1990s and to a growing tech powerhouse and engine of the global tourism industry at present, China has transitioned from agrarian to industrial, from rural to urban, from plan to market, from isolated to integrated in the world.

Much of the world also knows that Tibet is part of the People’s Republic and that Tibetans and human rights activists around the world have decried Communist policies to restrict religious activity and promote Chinese patriotism among Tibet’s population, and more generally to incorporate Tibet (along with the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region) more closely into China’s economy and society.

What we know less about is how these two trends come together in the lives of ordinary Tibetans, most of whom are not factory workers or religious activists, though they are devout believers in Buddhism and local religions. In Exile from the Grasslands, Jarmila Ptáčková opens a window on a little-known part of China’s and Tibet’s recent history, showing us how Tibetan nomads interact with the Chinese government’s bureaucratic projects that aim to turn them into modern, sedentary, educated citizens.

The drama of sedentarization has played out over the past decade in rTse khog County (Zeku in Chinese) in Amdo (Qinghai Province), a place that Ptáčková provocatively describes as nowhere in particular—no famous monasteries, no stunning scenery, few endangered species, no valuable mineral
resources, no domestic or foreign tourist trade. Just pastures and pastures, where people have run their sheep, yaks, and other livestock for centuries, until the Chinese authorities decided to “Open the West” to development and modernization.

Then everything happened. Plan upon bewildering plan, each administered through a slightly different bureaucracy with different sources of funding, different incentives for supervising officials, different goals, and different timelines, descended upon rTse khog and the surrounding areas. Parts were included in one of the world’s largest nature reserves, the Sanjiangyuan, or Three Rivers’ Headwaters. Scientists blamed pastoralists’ overgrazing for degradation of pasturelands and infestations by cute but destructive little pikas. Most of all, the state built towns for herders to move into when they were dispossessed of their pastures, promising education, medical care, and other services that sometimes materialized, plus jobs that usually did not.

Because she was able to conduct long-term field research in rTse khog and to examine the near-chaos of planning and policy documents relating to the various programs, Ptáčková takes us to the grasslands, the administrative offices, and the new towns appearing overnight in the region and details both the plans and the results when the authorities sort of implemented those plans. The results so far are equivocal. Many pastoralists did get access to education and other services, but a lot of them are spending a lot of time hanging around playing pool and drinking. Young people are often glad for the new opportunities, tenuous as they might be, while older folks miss the grasslands. And in fact, despite all these programs, not everybody has actually even moved.

The story of resettlement on the Tibetan Plateau is a complex one that is far from over. As Ptáčková reminds us, nomadic pastoralism probably was not going to last forever; the herders, or the vast majority of them, would eventually join the settled, connected, built-up world. What matters is how the transition happens. So far, the process has been muddled and has involved unnecessary suffering and frustration. How it will play out in the future is unclear, but Exile from the Grasslands gives us the basis for understanding the part of the story still to be told.

We are delighted to have Exile from the Grasslands as the twenty-fourth volume in our continuing series, Studies on Ethnic Groups in China.