Exile from the Grasslands
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Preface

The twenty-first century brought a series of new challenges for the Tibetan pastoralists in China. Through its targeted development policy, China’s government finally managed to secure full access to the most remote corners of the wide rangelands, both to expand infrastructure and to control the population. China promotes its development policy as finally bringing civilization to the “backward” regions of the Chinese West and providing people with comfortable living and access to consumer markets, private services, and state welfare. Critical Western scholarship, on the other hand, tends to see the implementation of state development policies in Tibetan pastoral areas as an example of forced urbanization and sedentarization that endangers the core of Tibetan culture and identity.

Neither of these two controversial claims is entirely right or entirely wrong. The contemporary state-induced development process affecting the population of Tibetan pastoralists, among others, cannot be reduced to pragmatic integration or forceful assimilation. It is both.

The rural Tibetan population—especially the younger generations—wants better access to the “modern” environment of the cities, to earn more money, and to lead a more comfortable life without the hardships of pastoralism. At the same time, the loss of the grassland connection is the biggest worry of the pastoralists, in terms of both their identity and economic security, as even under the massive contemporary modernization of rural areas, access to pastures continues to offer the most sustainable income for many Tibetan pastoralists. It allows them to herd livestock, gain access to state environmental subsidies, and possibly also harvest caterpillar fungus.

For the state, the rapid development of the high plateau is no less controversial. The new infrastructure offers access to the natural and human resources of China’s West, and the removal of the pastoral population from the grasslands through sedentarization or resettlement offers a quick entry
to planned development areas. However, from a long-term perspective—and economically—the state-induced displacement of the pastoral population, which has undermined both livelihoods and established social structures, has presented a much larger financial burden than was expected. Through its top-down planning and accelerated implementation, the development of the high plateau resulting in mass sedentarization of the Tibetan pastoralists has become a very complex issue.

Writing this book has involved disentangling many parallel, overlapping, and often controversial policies to understand the mechanisms of contemporary Chinese policymaking. I hope this book will help others to orient themselves in this turbulent period of the transformation of China’s West, the socioeconomic and cultural transformation of Tibetan pastoralist society, and Chinese policymaking and decision-making processes at various levels of administration.