DEVELOPMENT IN ZEKU COUNTY

ZEKU COUNTY WAS FOUNDED BY THE PEOPLES’ GOVERNMENT OF CHINA on December 5, 1953, and since then has become one of the four counties of Huangnan Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture (Ch: Huangnan Zangzu Zizhi Zhou) in Qinghai.¹ The new county town of Zequ was constructed on the edge of the grasslands of the Zequ River Valley, the geographical center of the county.²

The name Zeku is a Chinese phonetic transcription of the Tibetan name rTse khog, which means “basin between the mountains.” The rTse khog area spreads between latitude 34°45’ and 35°32’ north and longitude 100°34’ and 102°8’ east. The total county area is 6,658 square kilometers, which is 37.18 percent of the prefecture area and 0.91 percent of the total area of Qinghai.³ The average altitude of the region is 3,500 meters, and the highest point of the whole Huangnan Prefecture (Zamari ridge, 4,931 meters) also lies in Zeku County. The lowest part of Zeku County is in Maixiu (dMe shul) at 2,800 meters. Grassland comprises 98 percent (6,525 square kilometers) of Zeku County, and of that 94.94 percent labeled as usable grassland.⁴ There were 16,676 people living in 4,143 households when the county was founded. Because of its high altitude, Zeku was traditionally a purely pastoral area. Local grassland quality is described as low, in comparison, for example, with the neighboring Mongolian Autonomous County of Henan (Ch: Henan Mengguzu Zizhi Xian; T: rMa lho sog rigs rang skyong khul or Yul rgan nyin) that lies at a slightly lower altitude. Measured by statistical income, Zeku is one of the poorest pastoral counties in Qinghai.⁵

By 1974 a visible urban area associated with Zeku County town was already connected by road to Tongren and Henan and surrounded by camps housing pastoral communities.⁶ Since the foundation of the local government and incorporation into the Chinese administration system, members of other
nationalities have started to move to Zeku, previously inhabited purely by Tibetans. Groups of Han and other nationalities were sent here by the central government to help start the wave of development and modernization. In 1995 the total population of Zeku County grew to 45,845 people (8,295 households), of which 44,357 people (96.75 percent) were Tibetans.

The development of local infrastructure continued. By 1989 thirty-five electric wire lines had been laid from Tongren to Zeku. Administration buildings, schools, a hospital, and also a market and business center had been constructed. As a purely pastoral county, Zeku did not produce enough income and cash to pay for the new government and public facilities. Although the government started to collect taxes in 1954, heavy subsidies from the central government were still necessary to finance the new infrastructure developments. In 1954 the collected taxes amounted to only 27.79 percent of the total county income of ¥511,000, and by 1995 government subsidies still made up 19.74 percent of the total annual county income of ¥13.9 million.

**Figure 4.1.** Zeku County town, with Zeku TV station, army quarters, and local governmental area, 2007
After the Great Opening of the West began, the central government increased its investment in improving the infrastructure in Zeku County, but significant changes did not appear immediately. In 2005, during my first visit to Zeku County, the county town (figure 4.1) consisted of two streets, with Chinese and Tibetan hospitals, one middle school, two primary schools, a children’s nursery, a bank, a post office, a television station, a government building complex, an army quarters, several stores and motorcycle repair services, a petrol station, a pharmacy, a meat and vegetable market, one abandoned cinema, a small police station, housing for government workers, a sacred hill site, a solitary hotel with a disco, and a prison, which was one of the first buildings to be rebuilt and enlarged as part of the development strategy. In addition to the county town, the only urban areas in the county were small township centers along main roads, with an administration building, few houses, small restaurants, and a school. The rest of the county area was grassland, where the only buildings were the pastoralists’ winter houses and small village primary school yards, often without suitable road access or electricity supply (figure 4.2). There were more than fifty primary schools in the county, one in almost every pastoral community.⁹
From 2007 the government started to rebuild and enlarge some of the school buildings in the county seat and township centers, and in 2011 a second middle school was built in the county town. The primary schools in the grassland areas had to wait for reconstruction or rely on support from non-governmental organizations, in some cases only to be closed in 2011, often soon after their renewal, due to an announcement on rural education modernization.

**PASTORAL PATTERNS AND GRASSLAND MANAGEMENT IN ZEKU COUNTY**

The 2009 population records for Zeku County show 62,044 people, 97.98 percent of them Tibetan. Of all county residents, 56,361 (90.84 percent of the county population) were still involved in animal husbandry. The pastoralists in Zeku alternate their residence between winter and summer pastures. At the winter pasture sites, most families have houses that were built during the 1990s, when the state encouraged the construction of fixed homes after the allotment of pastures to individual households. The majority of these houses are built of stamped earth, the main construction material found in the farming regions of Qinghai as well.

Only in around 2005 did some households start to use new industrial materials, specifically concrete and bricks, to build their houses, using tile to decorate the facades. The winter pastures are now fenced off, and the grasslands have been divided up using long strips of wire netting. These fences are intended to mark the boundaries of the pasturelands allocated to each household after the dissolution of communes in Zeku County in 1983. During the decollectivization process, the land usage rights and livestock were allocated to the pastoralists according to the number of family members in each household. In 1996 local land was redistributed among households, and each person obtained about one hundred mu (approximately 6.7 hectares) of grassland. Afterward, the government ordered each household’s land to be fenced to avoid land disputes and prevent one household’s animals from grazing on a neighbor’s pasture.

Land allocation and fencing usually involves only winter pastures. The summer pastures in Zeku County, which are mostly up in the mountains, are not fenced. They are managed by communities in a manner similar to the way they were administered before the state land reforms. Depending on the weather conditions, families usually move to the summer pastures in early June and depart at the end of August. The location of the summer pastures varies considerably. Some households have summer pastures that
are only several hundred meters from their winter pastures, just on the other side of the road. However, even in such cases these families pitch tents during the summer, camping there rather than staying in the nearby houses. Other households move up to fifty kilometers away in the summer. Recently, the method of traveling between pastures has changed. Nowadays, families load their belongings onto pickup trucks instead of yaks and travel on motorbikes instead of horses. Some households still use the traditional black tent made of yak hair in the summer pastures of Zeku County, but more often they now use white cotton tents, sometimes of a traditional shape, combined with black strips of yak wool, or modern white or green shelters with metal frames in the shape of army tents. In the lower part of the county, in Duo-fudun Township, some households use additional spring and autumn pastures that lie on the route between the winter and summer camps. Families that use such pastures spend about a month there while on their way to and from the summer pastures. These pastures are also unfenced.

Poorer families clearly profited from the land redistribution program since they have retained their land usage rights, even if they possess only a small number of livestock, or even none. Through exercising their usage rights, they thus can obtain additional income by renting out their allotted pastures to households with larger herds in need of additional fodder.

Pastureland fencing has reduced the workload of the herders, but according to my observations, the free time gained through the fencing program is in most cases not used as an opportunity to start new activities or businesses. The older generation uses the time to stay at home, chant, and worry about the youngsters, who in turn prefer to visit towns and spend the day enjoying leisure activities, such as playing pool or drinking alcohol. The fences have also resulted in new responsibilities and financial burdens for pastoralists, who are required to contribute financially to their construction, maintenance, and repair.¹⁴ According to the Qinghai Province Grassland Station, based on the annual budget supplied by the central government, the Qinghai provincial government is currently required to meet only up to 40 percent of the fencing material costs. By the end of 1995, 88,700 hectares of Zeku grasslands (about 14 percent of the area and limited mainly to winter pastureland) had already been fenced off, and the fencing program still remained part of government development policy in Qinghai, at least until 2009.¹⁵

The allocation and fencing of pastureland is a controversial issue in relation to its environmental and economic benefits and drawbacks. In Zeku County fencing may well have contributed to the impoverishment of some households and has also caused environmental problems. In the 1990s, when fencing was introduced, population density in Zeku was about 6.5 people per
square kilometer. Since then, due to a relatively large native population and the relaxed implementation of family planning policy on the part of the local administration unit, population numbers have been constantly growing, and by 2009 population density had increased to about 9.4 people per square kilometer. The population in Zeku County grew faster than the economy, which led to a growing discrepancy between the number of livestock and the availability of grazing pastures. Livestock growth statistics in Zeku County show that between 1954 and 1995 livestock numbers almost doubled, not only as a result of population growth among the pastoralists, but also as a direct result of government actions. My pastoral informants from Zeku County estimate that during the past twenty years the number of pastoral households has increased by about 30 percent and has resulted in a further shrinking of the pastures available per household. This process has led to a no-win situation: in some parts of Zeku County, where the pastoralists have tried to respect the local grasslands capacity, even when the population increased, the number of livestock decreased because the available pastureland became smaller, leading to a reduced income for such households. In cases where the number of livestock increased to meet household needs, overgrazing was inevitable.

In addition to using fences to mark the boundaries between each household, other kinds of enclosure can be identified as having had an influence on local grasslands management and land availability. In the 1970s, following the example of Inner Mongolia and its experience with fencing, the government ordered the enclosure of “grass reservoirs” on the grasslands, with fences installed to protect areas of degraded pastureland so that the grass could regenerate. Additionally, the fenced-off areas served as reserve grasslands in times of natural catastrophe and for newborn animals. The original aim of this process was to achieve the ratio of one animal to one mu of grassland, with Zeku County serving as a model for the whole province. During the ten years this strategy was in place, 340 such grass reservoirs were created across the entire county. The total enclosed area measured 82,000 hectares, and the surrounding walls, built of sod bricks, totaled 123.4 kilometers in length. According to the livestock statistics at that time, a ratio of one animal per 1.16 mu of land was achieved, which exceeded the original aim of the fencing project. Similar sod walls have also been used to enclose fields in Zeku County. During the period of the people’s communes, large arable fields were established in pastoral areas, though this attempt to grow crops was often unsuccessful due to the high altitude and unfavorable climate. In Zeku County, however, for example in Wangjia and Heri Townships, some fields still remain, farmed by local
pastoral communities and planted with rapeseed. The current sedentarization policy has further encouraged local agriculture development by equipping each Wangjia community that moves to a new settlement with a new tractor and other farming machinery (figure 4.3).

The extensive use of sod bricks to create the walls has resulted in large parts of the grasslands being destroyed. To mitigate the erosion caused by digging up sod to make bricks, iron wire netting has been used as a fencing material since 1981. Wire fences now mark the boundaries of individual pastures and are also used by projects such as the Returning Pastureland to Grassland initiative to exclude degraded grassland areas. In Zeku County, by 2007, the Returning Pastureland to Grassland Project had initiated fencing of 115,100 hectares of grassland. This further limited the available grazing area, which increased pressure on household economies. To address this situation of shrinking animal husbandry production spaces and increasing poverty levels in pastoral areas and to facilitate the regeneration of the fragile ecosystem, the government declared its intention to resettle around 50 percent of pastoralists in Zeku County.
ENFORCING DEVELOPMENT IN PASTORAL AREAS THROUGH SEDENTARIZATION

The second phase of the Great Opening of the West development strategy brought about significant changes in the lives of Tibetan pastoralists in Zeku County, including the first wave of sedentarization, which was environmentally motivated and scheduled for the period between 2003 and 2006.\textsuperscript{22} It targeted 1,093 households (4,985 people), a number generated in accordance with the level of degradation and the then-current grassland capacity in each affected area.\textsuperscript{23} Affected households were required to give up their livestock completely and move to one of the nine new resettlement sites: Laka in Tongren County (Tongren Laka); the Communist Party school in Tongren Town (Tongren Dangxiao); Zeku County Town (Zeku Xiancheng); Longzang Village in Duofudun Township (Longzang); Duolong Village in Duofudun Township (Duolong); Duofudun Township Administrative Center (Duofudun Xiang Zhengfu); Duohemao Township Administrative Center (Duohemao Xiang Zhengfu); Ningxiu Township Administrative Center (Ningxiu Xiang Zhengfu); and Heri Township Administrative Center (Heri Xiang Zhengfu).\textsuperscript{24}

First, in 2003, 128 households (676 people) from Ningxiu Zhigeri were selected to resettle to the Ningxiu Township Administrative Center. Investment costs for the relocation were scheduled at ¥3.8 million. Of this amount, the government paid ¥3 million, ¥670,000 were paid by the involved pastoralists themselves, and ¥200,000 were paid by local modernization funds and other sources. Each household was required to obtain a sixty-square-meter house, a toilet, five mu of land to plant forage, and a one-hundred-square-meter double-use insulated shed, to be used in summer as a greenhouse to plant vegetables such as radishes or onions. According to calculations, each insulated shed was intended to increase household income by up to ¥1,200 through the summer period. In winter these sheds could house two hundred domestic animals and increase the life expectancy of livestock by 3 percent. In the sheds, the animals generally lose less weight—statistically three kilograms per individual beast—which with a price of ¥12 per kilogram (report from 2005), and with two hundred animals in one shed, means a theoretical income increase of ¥7,200 during the winter season.\textsuperscript{25} However, in reality, the double-use sheds/greenhouses were only constructed after a long delay or, sometimes, not at all, and vegetable production in pastoral areas was in most cases unsuccessful, at least during the period of my research.\textsuperscript{26} Moreover, according to an official at the Grassland Station in Tianzhu (Gansu), the method of keeping animals inside sheds usually requires different and more expensive breeds and special fodder, which involves spending
more money. This had the potential to further decrease the net profits from shed-animal production.

In 2004 200 households (750 people) were scheduled to be resettled in the Heri Township Administrative Center, the Ningxiu Administrative Center, and Duolong Village in Duofudun Township from Heri village (100 households), Ningxiu Village (70 households) and Duofudun Duolong Village (30 households). In 2004 the total scheduled investment amounted to ¥8.3 million. This sum was again shared between the government, which paid ¥6.2 million, and the people themselves, who were to pay ¥2.1 million. In the end, the pastoralists paid a total of only ¥1.2 million (¥6,000 per household on average). The construction of 200 60-square-meter houses began in June 2005. According to the report, by July 2006, 168 houses and double-function greenhouses had been completed, and the pastoralists had started to move in.27

In 2005 an additional 665 households (3,109 people) from Zeku County were assigned for relocation, a number that included 441 households from Duofudun Township and 224 households from Duohemao Township. Some 125 households were resettled at the Laka site, and 162 households at the Communist Party school site in Tongren County. Further, 51 households were assigned for resettlement at Zeku County town, 47 households for Duolong Village, 71 households for Longzang Village, 69 households for Duofudun Administrative Center, and 176 households for Duohemao Administrative Center. During this period, the resettlement of 433 households (2,018 people) took place as part of the implementation of the Ecological Resettlement Project, introduced in Zeku County in 2005. Another 232 households from Zeku County (1,091 people) were to be resettled through the parallel Returning Pastureland to Grassland Project. The total scheduled investment for both projects amounted to ¥31.2 million. Government investment accounted for ¥23.4 million, the investment made by the people involved was scheduled to be ¥7.8 million. However, the final amount was only ¥6.3 million. Each household had to pay ¥30,000 for an apartment in a multistory housing project in Tongren or ¥3,000 for a bungalow in a rural resettlement site. Construction started in May 2007 and was completed in September 2008.28

In 2006 a further 100 households (450 people) from Xibusha Township and Ningxiu Village were scheduled to be resettled at Laka in Tongren County and at Ningxiu Administrative Center. The new houses offered to selected households were to have an area of sixty square meters and were built in rows. It was planned that some of them would also be equipped with a greenhouse, a small piece of land to grow fodder grass, and a toilet. The total scheduled investment for the year 2006 was ¥5.5 million. Here the
government share amounted to ¥3.5 million, and the pastoralists again only paid ¥3,000 per household (altogether ¥300,000), from their originally proposed share of ¥1.8 million.  

Here also, the construction started in May 2007 and finished in September 2008. The reduction in the scheduled investment amount required from participating pastoralists explains why simple house constructions were used in comparison with houses in settlements in other resettlement and settlement sites, for example in Sichuan. Zeku pastoralists’ lesser financial resources required higher state engagement levels, which also had negatively affected the amount of subsidies paid out.

Despite the original plan, a county update from 2006 states that between 2003 and 2006 in Huangnan Prefecture, including Zeku County, only four hundred households were actually relocated according to the above-mentioned schedule. The successful relocation during this first sedentarization period occurred at the resettlement sites in Ningxiu and Heri Townships, which had been partly finished by the end of 2005 and 2006. Construction work on the remainder of the scheduled resettlement sites was not started until May 2007. According to the official report, one of the main reasons for the delay was that there were management problems with the new Sanjiangyuan office that had been established to supervise the resettlement. Officials rotated in and out of the Sanjiangyuan office while still holding other posts. The lack of a stable staff responsible for the implementation of the resettlement program and the construction work caused organizational difficulties and, inevitably, delays.

In addition, the assigned construction company, originally from Gansu Province, was not able to fulfill its contract and was later replaced by another company from Qinghai. The price of the building plots needed for resettlement sites in the Tongren area was also significantly higher than had been estimated, and the budget did not cover expenditures. As a result, the facilities designated for each resettlement site could not be completed in accordance with the schedule. According to the original plan, government support for pastoralist house construction was estimated to be ¥30,000 per house in resettlements within the county and ¥35,000 per house in resettlements outside the county. Each household had to pay an additional ¥18,000 to participate in the house construction initiative. However, pastoralist households in Zeku County are comparatively poor, and the households that were to take part in the relocation process were among the poorest, often owning no livestock. For this reason, it was decided that in Zeku County the resettlement construction cost to be contributed by the pastoralists would only be ¥3,000 per household, which of course caused further financial pressure for the government construction plan. In addition to receiving a
new house, over a ten-year period the resettled households in Zeku County were also to obtain an annual grain and fodder subsidy of ¥3,000, plus an additional ¥500 for fuel. Households who moved into resettlement sites between 2005 and 2006 also received a one-time payment of ¥5,000 to help them establish an alternative income base in the new location.\textsuperscript{36}

In addition to livestock reduction and Grazing Ban Resettlement, a rotational grazing policy linked to the Returning Pastureland to Grassland Project, the Ecological Resettlement Project, and Resettlement Community Project (Ch: Yimin Shequ Peitao) were introduced during the Eleventh Five-Year Plan. The pastoralists were required to use only half of their pasture and allow the other half to lie fallow. Grasslands where vegetation roots remained intact were to stay unused for a period of six months to one year. In places where the roots had already been damaged, the land had to remain fallow for three years. The grassland protection measures, together with livestock reduction and the subsequent resettlement measures, were financed through the Sanjiangyuan environmental policy projects.\textsuperscript{37} In Huangnan Prefecture, 26,234 hectares of grassland was reserved for seasonal herding, and the total livestock number was reduced by 24,619 sheep units.\textsuperscript{38}

A total of 274 households inhabit the so-called ecological constructions provided by the Ecological Constructions for Semi-confined Feeding Initiative (Ch: Juju Ban Shesi Shengtai Jianshe). The total investment involved in this measure was ¥28.2 million.\textsuperscript{39} Even in the first resettlement phase in Zeku County, the government designed opportunities for establishing new income sources for the resettlers. These included activities such as farming, trading, demonstrating Tibetan traditions to tourists, and planned vocational training. Consequently, the pastoralists who were resettled near Tongren County were encouraged to concentrate on farming, while those moving to the prefecture town were advised to secure income by collecting caterpillar fungus and engaging in trade. The remaining resettlements in the Zeku area were to concentrate on tourism.\textsuperscript{40} Unfortunately, at least during the period of my research until 2017, most of these plans were not converted into action, either at all or not in an effective way.

**AN EXAMPLE OF RESETTLEMENT FOR PASTORALISTS FROM RMA STOD**

After 2006 the pastoralists of Zeku County were able to acquire additional resettlement experience at a new site constructed on the border between Zeku and Tongde Counties. Built as part of the Ecological Resettlement Project, this site was reserved for 735 pastoralists (189 households) from Maduo
County (Ch: Maduo Xian; T: rMa stod) and Guoluo Prefecture (figure 4.4), and its planning and construction led to several incidents with local inhabitants of Zeku and Tongde, which ensured that project implementation was initially blocked.\textsuperscript{41}

The grasslands of rMa stod had become quite severely degraded, and snowstorms had killed many animals in previous years. Locally affected pastoralists had little choice but to look for new living opportunities elsewhere.\textsuperscript{42} Their resettlement site consists of bungalows with small courtyards and a row of two-story houses with a business unit on the ground floor and a residence on the second floor, situated along the main road. This site has its own school and a small number of additional communal facilities, for example an activity room for young people. The resettlement participants were from among those affected by the environmental challenges. None of the rich households with sufficient livestock took part in the resettlement project. Due to the high level of grassland degradation in rMa stod, the

\textbf{Figure 4.4.} Ecological Resettlement of rMar stod pastoralists providing two-story apartment complexes, with commercial units on the ground floor and living quarter at the upper level, Tongde County, May 2007
government also decided to relocate most of the pastoralists to relieve the pressure on the grassland. The task of the local government was to persuade a targeted number of pastoralists to leave.

The relocated rMa stod pastoralists received the houses for free, as well as an annual subsidy of ¥8,000 per household. However, the living conditions in the resettlement site do not appear to have improved the living standards of the pastoralists in any significant way so far. They have courtyards to plant vegetables but lack the necessary skills to conduct more intensive farming. Due to the high altitude, the vegetables remain small, even if planted and tended correctly. In any case, vegetables certainly cannot satisfy a household’s demand for food.

The business units situated along the main road are intended to enable several households to open shops, restaurants, or other services for passing travelers. However, because of a lack of experience and required knowledge on the part of the rMa stod pastoralists, most of these units are run by people, who come from nearby Wangjia or Heri Township centers. The most radical change the resettled have had to face is that suddenly everything, including food, must be paid for; without livestock they are unable to produce anything (except a few vegetables) to eat. Unfortunately, the government subsidy is not enough to cover daily expenses. Sixty-seven-year-old Lobsang, a herder relocated to the resettlement site for rMa stod pastoralists, described the situation after resettlement as follows:

Why did I come here? In rMa stod the pastures are getting worse and worse; there are many pikas. They told us that the grass must rest for twelve or eight years, then we would be able to return. When we came here, we sold all our animals for a very low price. If I wanted to buy new livestock now, it would be really expensive. Here, we do not have any pastures. A small number of families have a few goats. People able to work cannot find jobs. The only option is to collect caterpillar fungus or go to other places to find work. We must buy everything, all our food. Therefore, we must earn money. But there is nothing to do here, no work. We have no experience in such life and work. There is a school here. In rMa stod it was not easy to attend school and it was expensive. We were told that if we moved here, it would be easier for the children to attend school. They told us it would be good and advantageous for us to move, but it is not really good here. The good thing here is the easy connection to communications. It is easier to travel, to visit a doctor.
Pastoralists who have resettled here no longer own livestock and have temporarily transferred usage rights on their pastureland back to the government. After spending ten years in the resettlement site, these pastoralists will be able, at least theoretically, to apply for return authorization to their original grasslands. The young people who are too old to attend school are unemployed and spend their days drifting. Tashi, a twenty-five-year-old informant, said he would prefer to return to the grasslands immediately, since he would be able to herd animals there rather than spend his life doing nothing:

The grass in rMa stod was bad and there was not enough to feed all the animals. Then, a snowstorm came and many animals died. That is why we came here. I cannot say if I like it here or not. I prefer the grasslands in rMa stod. Here, I have nothing to do. I do not have the required skills to take part in the opportunities provided here. That is the reason why I prefer my own pastures. . . . If I could, I would return. . . . We cannot go back and continue to live as pastoralists. Once we come here, the government does not allow us to return. Only when the government considers it to be a good idea to do so, would it be possible to return to the mountains and be pastoralists again, otherwise there is no chance.45

Between 2003 and 2006, the majority of Zeku County pastoralists considered the resettlement issue to be something that they might have heard of but that did not affect or concern them directly. The rMa stod resettlement site on the Zeku border became an attraction where young pastoralists from the rTse khog grasslands could spend their days enjoying themselves, as it offered several small shops that sold alcohol and held a few pool tables.