AMBIVALENT OUTCOMES AND ADAPTATION STRATEGIES

The major findings demonstrated in this study correspond with those of scholars who focus on cultural, social, and economic transformations among Tibetan pastoralists. State-induced development in pastoral areas of western China is, however, far from complete. It is clear that in implementation of sedentarization policies and other development efforts in pastoral areas, severe contradictions remain in relation to aims and the outcomes, conflicts of interest, misinterpretations of policy, and other issues, all of which need to be resolved by both the state and the pastoralists. The failure of often well-conceived development policies to achieve the stated objectives of improved living and economic conditions is not simply the fault of the top-down Chinese policy approach. The differences that exist between project plans and project implementation are often the responsibility of the officials in charge on the ground. Not only are they under enormous pressure to execute state projects effectively within a typically short timeframe, but they often place their own financial and career interests before those of policy recipients, the pastoralists.

National Goals versus Local Expectations

One key issue is the misunderstandings that occur concerning policy aims and policy content. We should keep in mind that the local population is not always regarded as the major beneficiary and that national goals often outweigh local interests, resulting in an initiative’s failure to meet local expectations. In this context, some aspects of the development policy that appear ineffective at a local level start to make sense from a national perspective. The environmental policy aimed at restoring the grasslands, for example, is
not simply about enabling pastoralists to continue their traditional way of life. The objective is rather to ensure that sufficient water supplies from the Tibetan Plateau meet the needs of the rest of China and to prevent desertification and limit the amount of sand brought to the coastal cities by sandstorms. The plans of the Returning Pastureland to Grassland and Ecological Resettlement Projects include the possibility that pastoralists will return to the grasslands and resume animal husbandry after a minimum period of ten years. However, when viewed from the perspective of the pastoralists, the return option is likely to become impossible for many of them, for obvious reasons. These include the fact that the grasslands will become unsuitable for grazing purposes after lying fallow for so long, as well as the high levels of investment needed to acquire new herds. In addition, the younger generation will have spent time in residential schools and will simply be ignorant about the animal husbandry industry.

From a national point of view, the sedentarization process aimed at environmental protection, which removes the pastoralists from the grasslands and provides the opportunity for infrastructure developments, at the same time distorts the social and cultural structures of the pastoralists. Potentially, this might facilitate the integration of the Tibetan minority and lower the risk of resistance. Most probably, the policymakers believe that few pastoralists will actually return to the grasslands after the ecosystem regeneration period and that their time in the settlements will convince them of the benefits of market oriented occupations. However, due to the lack of clear information, many pastoralists believe that the resettlement process, especially in connection with environmental projects, is a temporary measure and that they will one day return to the grasslands. Consequently, they fail to actively seek alternative sustainable sources of income. Promoting economic and existential disorientation is therefore one of the major weak aspects of the development policy.

The Nomadic Settlement Project can be viewed in a similar way. It appears to reflect the desires of Tibetan pastoralists: a comfortable house without the need to renounce land and livestock. The government, however, has taken precautionary steps to allow it to enforce its control over the pasturelands if necessary. Locally, where contracts for the Nomadic Settlement Project exist, they include an additional paragraph that secures for the government the right to request the pastoralists to sell their land at a minimum price at any time (in some parts of Zeku County in 2011, ¥6 per mu was offered). The long-term aims of the Nomadic Settlement and succeeding sedentarization projects also include modernizing Tibetan animal husbandry. Moreover, a
new approach of cooperatives, which includes greater levels of government involvement, is scheduled to replace the traditional and “backward” ways of Tibetan pastoralism. This all suggests that the current sedentarization projects are a clear attempt to move pastoralists away from the grasslands and animal husbandry and toward integration into the urbanized society that is modern China. Pastoralists’ acceptance of projects such as the Nomadic Settlement is also based on the assumption that the pasturelands and livestock will remain available to the pastoralists, not only so that they can access animal products, but also so they can continue to harvest caterpillar fungus. As a result, other occupations are seen as providing only a secondary or temporary income.

**IMPROVING LIVING STANDARDS BY DESTROYING LIVELIHOODS**

The shift of attention from the local to the national level could also help to explain the major problems that appeared after sedentarization. Being only of secondary interest, the welfare of the pastoralists after they move to the new settlements has largely been ignored. Within both the Ecological Resettlement and the Nomadic Settlement Projects, sedentarization is advertised as being a measure aimed at poverty alleviation and the socioeconomic improvement of pastoralist households. In reality, it is disputable whether the actual socioeconomic situation of Tibetan pastoral households really does improve as a result of the sedentarization process or whether it actually deteriorates. Statistically, the net income of pastoralist households is—due to their traditional subsistence and barter-based economy—significantly below the national average. The general statistics are based mainly on cash incomes and are unsuitable as an indicator of the actual wealth of pastoralist households, which is based on the size of their herds and allocated pastures. By obtaining subsidies, the cash income of many households increases, but the small subsidy amounts and tax releases scheduled do not compensate for the loss of livestock that provided them with dairy products, meat, and fuel, which leads to a hefty increase in daily expenditures. The cost of living rose further as a result of the expansion of the infrastructure, which promoted urbanization and an increase in accessibility to the market and services, accompanied by rampant inflation. Cash is required when paying for children’s education, health care, religious rituals, and also for a variety of new goods appearing in almost every corner of the country as a result of the developing market. Items that were once luxuries have now become
indispensable for the pastoral population. Therefore, although thanks to the subsidies the cash income of the pastoralists might be higher, their living standards might actually be falling.

At the same time, income from traditional livelihoods such as animal husbandry has been curtailed as a result of the expansion of environmental exclosures and infrastructure construction, and can frequently no longer provide this necessary surplus money. Life in the settlements, however, often also does not provide suitable livelihood alternatives. Securing the livelihoods of people moving to the new resettlements and settlements is one of the main issues that feature in almost all of the studies and reports on managed sedentarization in pastoral areas. Poorer households, which are among the first to apply for sedentarization and be selected, move into a town, or more accurately a townlike settlement, in the hope of finding an alternative source of income to replace animal husbandry. These poor households usually lack the means to establish private businesses, and the settlements and small towns do not offer enough other employment opportunities, especially for pastoralists who lack appropriate skills and experience in sectors other than animal husbandry.

The state’s promised free vocational training courses are thin on the ground and usually ineffective, as demonstrated by the example of the cooking course in Duofudun. Other alternative occupation opportunities, as envisioned in the government’s plan for resettled and sedentarized pastoralists in Zeku County, such as tourism, are difficult to realize in practice. Although provincial campaigns seek to entice visitors to explore the exotic features of China’s ethnic minorities and their authentic culture, Zeku is low on the list of tourist destinations. In order to increase Zeku’s tourism appeal, the original prayer flag hill, referred to as the Happy Mountain, was rebuilt by the government. A huge temple building was erected on the summit, together with a new circumambulation path around the hill. Unfortunately, this has not attracted many tourists, though locals have swiftly adopted these constructions as part of their regular rituals. A bright new square, dedicated for public activities, is dominated by a statue of Gesar, a legendary Tibetan hero, which marks the beginning of the stairway leading toward the hilltop. This large new monument was built at the expense of a number of relatively new settlement houses that had been constructed at the foot of the hill only a few years earlier and that had to be demolished to make space for the new square and the circumambulation pathway.

The majority of Chinese tourists demand to travel in comfort, which is difficult for the still-developing tourist infrastructure in Zeku to provide. On the other hand, tourists seeking out native culture and “undeveloped”
Tibetans might well be deterred by the growing levels of urbanization and modernity, the very things being sought by both the government and an ever-increasing number of local Tibetans. To improve access, highways are being constructed in the direction of Zeku. An airport is also being planned for a site directly next to the county town. The income from the slowly expanding tourism industry in Zeku County does not benefit the whole population. Only the government and a small number of families are engaged in providing the most significant and lucrative services. The important families are not the pastoralists arriving from the grasslands as part of the sedentarization initiative but the well-off households whose wealth is usually linked to one member’s having good employment with the state. The exception to this rule are the hoteliers, who have received huge compensation payouts by transferring their land for development purposes, such as the construction of the airport.

The majority of sedentarized pastoralists have not, therefore, had many options regarding alternative employment. For those with access to certain grasslands, caterpillar fungus constitutes the best chance of economic security. Others rely on their savings, work as drivers, or find employment on state construction sites in the area, where they can earn between ¥80 and ¥100 per day. The idea of providing shops on the ground floors of settlement houses does not prove efficient in small towns. Where such shops exist, they often offer the same products as their neighbors, for example, sweets, drinks, and small utility items, and the local demand for such items fails to cover the outlay.

In these conditions, the state should do more than organize the building of new houses. More focus should be placed on providing pastoralists with customized support that matches their abilities. Insufficient government assistance in the new urban environment contributes to the inability of many pastoralists to fully adapt. Unable to swiftly find new sources of income that maintain their traditional standard of living, it is no wonder that they begin to resent the sedentarization initiatives.

Suggestions appear in the official reports regarding how to improve the sedentarization policy and thereby ease the transition process. These include increasing subsidy levels and extending the support period. For example, in 2007 the Zeku County Sanjiangyuan office recommended raising the government subsidies for house construction from ¥30,000 to ¥60,000 within the county and from ¥35,000 to ¥100,000 for households that agree to resettle in a different county. Additionally, it suggested an increase in the production support amount to ¥30,000, pointing out that it is insufficient to provide only ¥5,000, a walking tractor, and a greenhouse and expect pastoralists...
to immediately begin a new life that brings in an adequate income. Finally, this report proposed an extension of the period of the ¥3,000 state subsidy from ten to at least twenty-five years.\(^9\)

Although the major failures concerning economic adaptation after sedentarization have been noticed and described by an increasing number of scholars, both abroad and in China, the Chinese government has not dealt with the problems either swiftly or effectively. As a result, the number of challenges connected to the implementation of sedentarization projects grows swiftly, as does the financial burden for the government trying to resolve them. The question remains whether this kind of development policy was truly designed to benefit the pastoralists or whether other motivations were more important.

**BUILDING A HARMONIOUS SOCIETY BY CREATING DISCONTENT**

The discourse of a harmonious society is currently being emphasized as the long-term goal guiding state development efforts.\(^10\) According to former Communist Party of China General Secretary Hu Jintao, a harmonious society is synonymous with a “democratic society ruled by law, fair and just[,] . . . stable and orderly and maintaining harmony between man and nature.”\(^11\) The current sedentarization initiative in Tibetan pastoral areas, however, looks more like an attempt to create a harmonized society, that is, to reduce cultural differences in order to create a homogenized society less prone to political unrest. Through the introduction of policy measures such as the Nomadic Settlement Project, the central government has sought to secure its control over the Tibetan pastoralist population in a nonviolent way. The Nomadic Settlement Project has attempted to speed up the relocation of Tibetan pastoralists from the grasslands into villages, for example in Qinghai, where it has targeted the remaining pastoralist households.\(^12\) The offer of a comfortable house under the surveillance of a nearby police station, along with the enhanced access provided by infrastructure projects, has made possible an additional demonstration of the state’s authority and the capacity to quickly deploy troops to the remote corners of the grassland areas in the event of a political emergency.

The national interest with regard to this political objective does not appear to have been fulfilled. On the contrary, the measures aimed at increasing state control and involvement in everyday matters of Tibetan society, together with the fact that the development measures associated with the mass sedentarization have led in some cases to lower living standards, have the
potential to become a source of discontent with the state’s approach and policy. Instead of melding with China’s objective of achieving a harmonious society, the extreme and orchestrated development measures may lead to the radicalization of opinions and the stressing of cultural differences, thus generating social and political disturbances. The feeling among pastoralists that they have lost control of their future is strengthened as a result of the ever-changing program titles, agendas, and rules and the frantic pace of sedentarization project implementation—an approach aimed at maintaining momentum and the impression that local people are involved in aspects of development and overall transformation while concealing the failures of the mass sedentarization program.

The pastoralists’ discontent with the sedentarization projects also stems from more concrete issues, such as the government’s failure to provide the promised facilities and the overall poor quality of the new houses in the resettlement and settlement areas, especially where house construction is supervised by the government, as in Zeku County. Amenities in the settlements, such as streets, and water and electricity supplies are rarely delivered. In Zeku County, it is normal to carry water from open streams, as in the past, as the construction of drinking water supply networks is typically delayed by several years. Even when installed, the water is only available in public places and does not reach every house.

Electricity supply networks and public toilet facilities experience similar delays or are not provided at all, leaving pastoralists to live in an environment that is clearly neither developed nor modern. Nonexistent waste disposal systems only increase the unhygienic conditions that prevail in the settlements.

The buildings themselves lack insulation and have no bathrooms or even plumbing systems. The “Tibetan” ornaments required by the project agenda in Zeku County settlements and resettlements are made of poor-quality material and are only glued onto the top of the facade. After as little as one year, these parts tend to fall off, exposing the basic brick and concrete walls. Simultaneously, the ever-changing government policies encourage some pastoralists to avoid investing in the maintenance of their homes, which adds up to the fast deterioration of the housing conditions in the settlements and resettlements. Many settled and resettled people are simply unable to make the necessary repairs because they lack the funds to do so. Thus, the maintenance of the new settlements often remains the responsibility of government officials, who must design yet more projects and release additional funds to deal with these problems.

The issue of providing and maintaining public urban spaces is a problem not only in the new villages but also in the majority of townships and county
seats in the Qinghai grasslands. This is often the case even with other urban construction projects elsewhere in China. Thus, it is not only the contradiction between the promises the government makes to the relocated population and the actual situation on site, but also the contradiction between the objective of promoting speedy development toward urbanization and the slow process of developing the necessary urban infrastructure. Due to the numerous failings, such as the poor quality of settlement houses, the irregularity of subsidy payments, the lack of facilities such as water, electricity, and communications infrastructure, and the difficulty in accessing education in some of the settlements, it is estimated that 20 percent of the resettled pastoralists in the Sanjiangyuan area return to the pastures totally or at least as seasonal migrants during the summer.15

Furthermore, the aim of modernizing or urbanizing the population, integrating the minorities into Han society and developing the landscapes through infrastructure and industrial networks, is in contradiction with the discourse on multicultural and traditional China, which addresses potential tourism, both home and abroad. Some people argue that the sedentarization process presents a challenge to the objective of preserving Tibetan culture. This is demonstrated, for example, in the lack of public religious spaces.16 The situation in Qinghai reflects this trend, as the majority of the visited new settlements, with the exception of some of the most recent ones near Guide County, did not include facilities for the completion of daily religious rituals. There are no communal temples, stupas, or labtses, nor are there places to worship mountain deities, the local protectors of Tibetan communities. Moreover, the protector deity is bound to its mountain, tied to the original place, and can therefore not easily be shifted along with the resettled community. There are some cases where the original labtse has been brought to the new village by community members after a number of years, such as in Guinan County, but according to my other informants who left their place of origin through resettlement, people usually must travel back to their former pastures to perform labtse rituals.17 Also, for those who have attuned their lifestyle to the demands of the market economy or have found employment, it is not always possible to participate in the traditional rituals. Further some new settlements do not provide space for the performance of traditional Tibetan sky burials. As a result, the dead must often be cremated, and the funeral cannot be completed according to Tibetan traditions. Traditional burials involve at least seven monks who read various sutras for forty-nine days. Through relocation, the community may move too far from their monastery (such as in the case of the rMa stod resettlement)
and the monks may not be willing to travel long distances to conduct the rituals.\textsuperscript{18}

The ending of certain pastoral traditions can be seen as a sign of modernization—the adoption of the lifestyle and values of an urban and global society. But on the other hand, the disappearance of certain aspects of Tibetan culture, especially when enforced involuntarily, can also be perceived as a threat to the entire notion of Tibetan identity.

\textbf{SUMMARY AND FUTURE PROSPECTS}

The current approach to the sedentarization of pastoralists extends beyond the urgent need to relocate communities in order to alleviate the effects of poverty and restore the environment. It also reflects the desire to address the backwardness and underdevelopment of pastoral societies and integrate them more fully into the national economy.\textsuperscript{19} In order to better assimilate the inhabitants of the Tibetan Plateau and to secure stricter controls over China’s western regions, the government’s aim is to transform the pastoralist way of life into a more settled one, eliminating the current form of Tibetan pastoralism.

Lifestyle change is a natural process based on environment transformation, development choices, and other extra-regional factors. With the transformation of the Tibetan Plateau as an outcome of the Chinese drive for modernization and global influence, changes in Tibetan pastoralists’ lifestyles are inevitable.\textsuperscript{20} The important issue is that this societal change process should operate in harmony with the needs and abilities of particular groups. Many Tibetan intellectuals fear that a hasty and compulsory lifestyle change, as witnessed in the case of state-directed mass sedentarization, might lead to the loss of important cultural aspects of Tibetan pastoralist society, those connected with their life on the grasslands.

In addition, there is a danger that mass sedentarization will lead to severe problems for the Chinese government. Currently, the challenge is how to deal with a society that, while appearing to be “backward,” has nevertheless been economically self-sufficient, due to its ownership of land and livestock. The overly rapid sedentarization of Tibetan pastoralists aimed at meeting the requirements of scheduled development projects, together with the removal of these households’ income base without replacing it with an alternative source of income, might result in Tibetan pastoralists being further forced to the margins of society and becoming financially dependent on the Chinese government. In turn, this situation could again stimulate new tensions
within Tibetan society and be counterproductive in relation to the Chinese government’s objective of securing improved political stability. Furthermore, the rapid changes in the lifestyle of the pastoralist society might also have a negative impact on the environment. The lack of mobility caused by enclosing the living spaces of both people and livestock through grasslands management and sedentarization only exacerbates the situation where the grasslands have become severely degraded.21

The question is not simply about the merits or demerits of the modernization and development of the Tibetan Plateau, or even the sedentarization of Tibetan pastoralists. There certainly exist valid arguments for and against the process emanating from both the pastoralists and the government. It is particularly important to consider how best to initiate and realize these changes in order to bring about the greatest benefit for the affected participants without endangering cultural and economic sustainability.22 This aspect is the weakest point within the specific projects presented in this book, providing an important reason for skepticism regarding current sedentarization efforts. Moreover, the pastoralists’ extraordinary identity and general worldview further adds to the complexity of the adaptation challenges they face within “modern” environments and urbanized and sedentary society. This requires exceptional patience and support on the part of the state.

In redeveloping both landscapes and people in accordance with the present Chinese concept of modernity, the Great Opening of the West has severed the sustainable relationship between pastoralists and their land. The implementation of the settlement and resettlement projects in Tibetan pastoral areas has, however, only recently reached its peak and still continues. Some households made the move a number of years ago, while others, especially those involved in the more recent projects, have experienced the settled life for only a few years, or are even just about to start life in a new village. Although it will only be possible to evaluate the definitive impact of the mass sedentarization process after one or two decades’ time, it will most likely not mean the complete demise of pastoralism on the grasslands of the Tibetan Plateau. Although both statistics and the existence of large settlement units across the Tibetan grasslands might suggest this, human factors, as represented by participating pastoralists and officials, as well as the ineffective implementation process, provide a more complex picture.

Moreover, at least for the near future, access to the grasslands will continue to play an important role in pastoralists’ household economy. If not used for herding directly, the grassland can still offer income from caterpillar fungus, it can be rented out or qualify the pastoralists for environmental
subsidies, and in the most recent case of countryside cooperatives, it secures the holders of the usage rights a share from the communal income.

Whatever the final outcome of the current sedentarization policy, the ability of the pastoralists to cope with the current state-induced development in general will have a decisive influence not only on the development of pastoralism but also on involvement of Tibetans in the decision-making processes regarding the future development of their society and homeland.