

NEW HOMES, NEW LIVES – THE SOCIAL AND ECONOMIC EFFECTS OF RESETTLEMENT ON TIBETAN NOMADS (YUSHU PREFECTURE, QINGHAI PROVINCE, PRC)

Kenneth Bauer

Settlement undoubtedly improves the lifestyle of nomads, and furthermore, it improves the appearance of local society ... as far as Tibetan areas are concerned these changes are the manifestation of changes from tradition to modernity and great progress.

‘New life in Tibetan areas of Sichuan’ (www.tibetinform.com)

Nomads and their pastoral systems have always been confronted with events that change their lives – droughts that wither grass, winter storms and livestock epidemics that wipe out herds, and tribal wars that displace people and their animals – but the changes nomads are facing today on Himalayan and Tibetan rangelands are more profound and likely to have more significant, long-term implications on their way of life and the ecosystems in which they reside than any previous changes.

Daniel Miller (quoted in Saunders 2003)

Abstract

This paper observes the effects state-sponsored resettlement in two Tibetan nomad counties of Yushu Prefecture, Qinghai Province (PRC). As nomads increasingly move to urban areas, regional and local economies are shifting, as are social relations and the traditional systems that have managed rangeland resources for millennia. Yet few studies have investigated the empirics of life within these resettled communities. This research takes a snapshot of key socio-economic indicators for resettled Tibetans as they transition to urban life and evaluates if and how nomads are benefiting, and what new challenges have arisen as a result of these processes. Drawing from survey and interview data, I suggest that while resettlement offers nomad families opportunities in terms of access to public services such as education and health care, it also entails significant new expenses for households even as their earnings potential contracts; these trends are exacerbated in the case of poorer households and income inequalities are likely to worsen when families move to urban areas. Likewise, while resettlement has resulted in increased purchase of consumption goods, household investment in productive assets has seen a corresponding decline. Even though access to some public services may increase with resettlement,

quality of life in urban areas may suffer with respect to pollution exposure, lack of water and sanitation infrastructure, and increasing prices for basic commodities. With higher rates of school enrollment and the deskilling of the rural labour force, resettlement to urban areas is likely to undermine the long-term economic viability of pastoral production in Tibetan areas of China. Resettlement is also affecting the continuity of social institutions and modes of knowledge transmission, encouraging certain opportunities and closing off other potentialities for nomadic culture. This paper contributes to the literature on development-induced displacement, governance at China's margins, and the adaptability of pastoral production systems amidst state efforts to modernise and assimilate nomads. Leveraging this case study, we can theorise more broadly about the social, ecological, and economic repercussions of resettlement.

KEYWORDS: resettlement, ecological migration, urbanisation, income inequality, Tibet.

Introduction

Increasing resettlement of nomads to urban areas in China demands scholarly attention (Rogers and Wang 2006, Colson 2003, Duan and McDonald 2004). For instance, in China, over 700,000 nomads had been resettled by 2005, with government plans to expand resettlement to include more than one million Tibetans (Saunders 2003, Sino Daily 2007). While some resettlement drives in China are fuelled by state programmes for poverty alleviation, other relocations are linked to ecosystem protection, particularly in the upper reaches of major rivers (Wang et al. 2010). Among other rationale, resettlement is of symbolic value to the state, as authorities see it as a measure of Tibetans' integration into Chinese society and of 'modern' development. Underlying these policies is the assumption that nomads are 'backward' and practice 'inefficient' methods of land and livestock management that are associated with poverty and environmental degradation (Goldstein et al. 1990, Williams 1997).

Study sites

Yushu Prefecture in Qinghai Province, China, is home to approximately 300,000 pastoralists, farmers, and town dwellers. Research was conducted in two counties of Yushu Prefecture – Zhiduo (Tib. '*bri stod*') and Yushu (Tib. '*yul shul*'); both counties are purely pastoral and represent how quickly and completely the material and social circumstances of Tibetan nomads are being transformed by resettlement. In the Yushu County site, more than six hundred

households had been moved into a newly built settlement – dubbed ‘Happiness Village’ by the government – in 2011. In the Zhiduo County site, nomads are giving up their pastures and are being paid as ‘ecological migrants’ to settle into new houses being built for them in the rapidly expanding administrative headquarters of the county.

Methods

This research draws upon qualitative methods, specifically household surveys and in-depth interviews, paying close attention to age, gender, and other status characteristics as well as types of resettlement (i.e., state-mandated versus circumstantial). Information was collected from a non-random sample of 62 households in Yushu Prefecture.¹

The guiding questions of this research are economic in orientation. Specifically, this research asks: what does resettlement mean for pastoral households in terms of their income earning and investment strategies? How are patterns of consumption and expenditure changing? How are nomads handling debt burdens from building new homes or investing in new kinds of assets, and what are their sources of savings in the context of declining herd sizes? Does pastoral resettlement generally lead to higher or lower earnings, better or worse access to markets, and greater or fewer opportunities for pastoral households to improve their economic situation?

Survey questions were divided into thematic sections including:

Pastoral Production: impacts of resettlement on pastoral movements, herd structures, and livestock productivity;

Household economics: indicators of income, employment, and assets; interactions with markets;

Development indicators: changes in infrastructure and built environments; access to government services;

Environmental resources: observations on environmental conditions, including solid waste and water quality.

Interviews with nomads addressed issues such as household economic strategies, cultural identity, experiences with education and attitudes towards settled

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1. The sample was non-random for two reasons: (1) households that had been resettled were chosen among other types of nomad families; (2) given the politically sensitive nature of research in Tibetan areas, snowball sampling was used in order to identify subjects who would be willing to share information about their lives in resettlement areas.

living conditions. When available, government data on household income, livestock holdings, employment trends and volume of marketed livestock products were compared with survey and interview data to understand the strategies used by pastoral households to realise economic opportunities consequent to resettlement, and to understand barriers to employment.

Results

The results reported here are drawn from research conducted in Qinghai Province, China. These data provide a window onto the lives of recently resettled nomads and how they have fared economically since moving into urban areas. In Figure 1, the population was divided into quartiles and income is reported for three types of households (‘poorest’, ‘middle’, ‘richest’).

A significant portion of household income is based on harvesting caterpillar fungus, the most important source of income for pastoral Tibetan

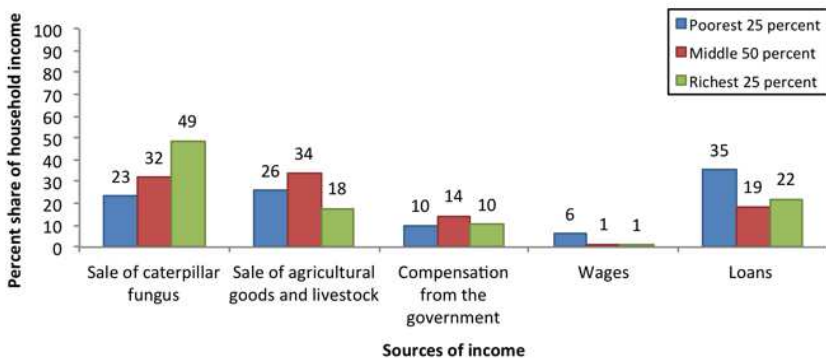


Figure 1. Decomposition of household income in 2010 by income sources

communities.² The price of *Ophiocordyceps sinensis* has risen dramatically – 900 per cent between 1998 and 2008 – an annual average of over twenty per cent after inflation (Winkler 2008). Figure 1 also shows that a significant

2. *Ophiocordyceps sinensis* is a fungus parasitising the larvae of the ghost moth (genus *Thitarodes*), which lives in alpine grasslands of the Tibetan Plateau.

portion of household income is still derived from the sale of livestock products. This pattern is common among recently resettled households. Keeping ties to land is critical not only for earning income from pastoral production but also because it allows continued access to the all-important caterpillar fungus harvest. Resettled Tibetan nomads in the Qinghai study site are typically dividing their families: older members and school-age children live in resettlement areas, while adults maintain (to the best of their ability, given labor constraints) livestock herds. That this strategy of dividing households is not a long-term solution is manifest: children who are educated and reared in urban areas typically will not return to rural areas and rejoin their lives as nomads. Whether they find gainful employment in urban areas after they have abandoned their subsistence base remains to be seen: current employment patterns do not offer grounds for optimism. As shown in Figure 1, very few nomads earn income from wage labour; in fact, only three out of 211 informants (age 16+) or 1.4 per cent of adults in the sample had found jobs. Also of note is the proportion of household income that is derived from loans and from government subsidies, an unsettling trend, since this signals: (1) a reliance on outside sources with no long-term guarantees; and (2) potential for spiraling debts that cannot be repaid (private loan rates are typically between twenty and thirty per cent per annum, with few options available for lower interest rates from state or commercial banks).

Along with income data, surveys of resettled nomads in Qinghai Province illustrate important patterns with respect to household expenditures, as shown in Figure 2.

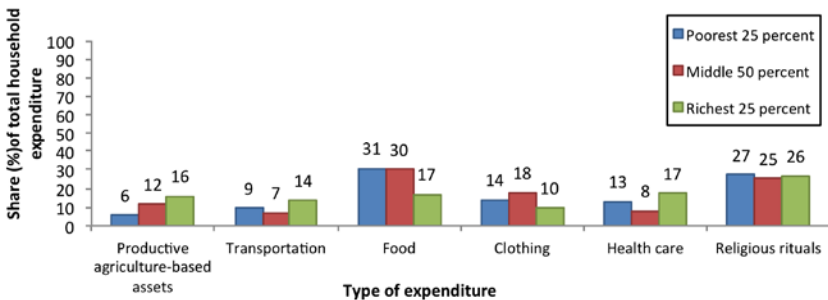


Figure 2. Decomposition of household expenditures in 2010 by income and type of expenditure

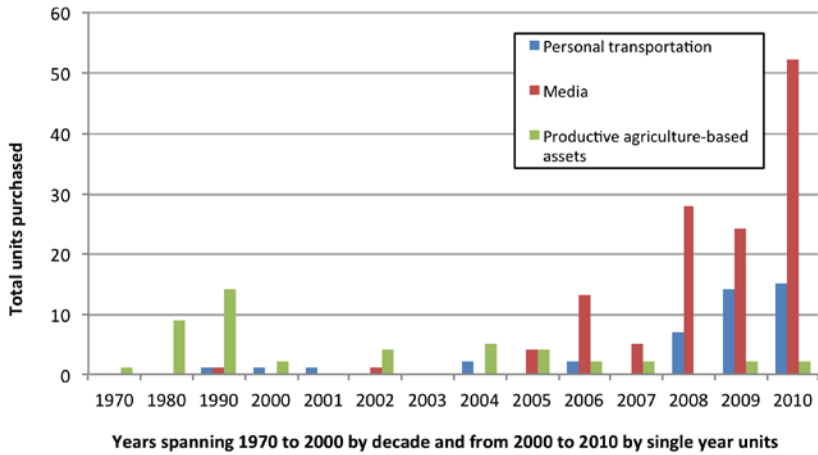


Figure 3. Productive and consumption spending from 1970 to 2010

Total expenditures in 2010 for each household were calculated based on self-reported spending in the following areas: productive agriculture-based assets, transportation, food, clothing, health care, and religious rituals.³ Notably, despite intense and long-term suppression of Tibetan Buddhism in China, resettlement has not significantly altered household spending patterns in relation to religion. Significant and uniformly distributed portions of household income are still dedicated to sponsoring religious rituals. Though one should be careful about imputing too much to any given finding, this indicates that, in their adjustment to rapidly changing material and social conditions, Tibetan nomads continue to respect and adhere to religious traditions that help them define and perpetuate their ethnic identity.

3. Productive agriculture-based assets comprise livestock purchases and associated maintenance costs (i.e. animal medicine, ropes, fence, salt, and fodder). Household costs for transportation include expenses associated with any of the following modes of transportation: motorbikes, cars, tractors, and buses. Consumables considered within the category of ‘food expenses’ are barley, cooking oil, butter, wheat flour, rice noodles, meat, tea, salt, vegetables and instant noodles. Health costs were calculated as the sum of treatment costs, costs associated with transportation to and from doctors’ visits and annual health insurance costs minus any reimbursements from government-supplied health insurance. Income dedicated to sponsoring religious rituals included costs for ceremonies done in the home as well as ones sponsored at local monasteries.

Finally, data collected in Qinghai Province gives a sense of how spending patterns are changing among resettled Tibetans. Nomads have recently (and increasingly) invested in consumption items as opposed to productive assets, as shown in Figure 3.

Taken together, these results should prompt concern for the long-term economic viability of nomad households in that they indicate the emergence of a virtuous cycle (positive feedback) of declining subsistence capital, dependence on government handouts and loans that undermine self-sufficiency and increasing investment in consumption goods rather than productive assets that could enable a successful transition from nomadic production to wage labour and engagement with the market economy.

Discussion

Despite the upheavals of collectivisation and the subsequent privatisation of livestock and rangeland resources in China during the twentieth century, pastoralists have provided consistent returns from livestock production in culturally relevant ways. As a consequence of resettlement, however, millions of children will grow up without the pastoral traditions and the environmental knowledge



Figure 4. Yaks grazing near recently completed resettlement houses in ‘New Happiness Village’ (Yushu Prefecture, Qinghai Province). Photograph: Kenneth Bauer, October 2011

of their predecessors, making a return to that lifestyle difficult, if not impossible. The loss of this place-based knowledge may affect the ongoing viability of communal forms of socioeconomic organisation and the reproduction of traditions that have sustained these communities for millennia.

Furthermore, resettlement is changing incentives – particularly in terms of labour allocation and investment strategies – hampering nomads' ability to make socially consonant and ecologically adaptive decisions. While resettlement provides ready access to consumer goods, the earning potential of the nomads surveyed here has not markedly improved because families are increasingly strained to maintain viable livestock operations and have difficulty finding alternative sources of income. A significant portion of rural Tibetans' household income is dependent on harvesting caterpillar fungus, a commodity whose value and availability year-to-year is subject to volatility (Sulek 2008). Likewise, survey data show that households have quickly and substantially increased their expenditures on consumer items (e.g., mobile phones, media technology, clothes, etc.) in the post-settlement period. However, few have found off-range employment even as inflation – especially in the cost of staples and health care – continues to squeeze rural Tibetans (Tibetan Review 2010). Tibetan nomads are, through resettlement, becoming more dependent on the government (Perrement 2006). Interviewees shared a strong sense of reliance on the government and expected the state to compensate for losses in their household assets and income as a result of resettlement. Moreover, survey data and interviews also reveal that Tibetans do not have basic skills to compete in the labour market and to access new forms of employment in urban areas.

The changes noted here in terms of income earning, spending and investment strategies are likely to increase households' vulnerability in the shift from subsistence to a cash-based economy. As more children are educated in urban areas (with concomitant expectations of future lives in cities), labour constraints will be exacerbated and likely lead to declining numbers of animals per household, redoubling pressure on households to find alternative sources of income. The effects of resettlement are likely to interact with, if not precipitate, ongoing demographic shifts: resettlement may hasten a broader fertility transition that is already well underway in nomadic communities (Ekvall 1972, Childs et al. 2005). Coupled with mandatory schooling, declines in fertility may result in a depopulation of rural areas, undermining the long-term viability of pastoral production.

Nomad resettlement into urban areas presents the Chinese nation-state with complex challenges. Amidst rapid growth in urban areas, China must meet its citizens' needs for employment, housing, and services while also trying to balance rural-urban and regional inequalities. Even as urban growth generates new employment opportunities and creates economies of scale with respect

to delivering government services, it also raises the risk of increasing air and water pollution, poor sanitation, and overall congestion. If the Tibetan case is any guide, resettled nomads will become increasingly dependent on external resources as the internal socio-cultural resources that traditionally handled their quotidian needs become depleted. Chambers and Conway (1992: 1) define a sustainable livelihood as one that ‘can cope with and recover from stress and shocks, maintain and enhance its capabilities and assets, and provide sustainable livelihood opportunities for the next generation’. Based on the evidence presented here, resettlement in Tibetan areas appears not to meet these criteria.

To be sure, resettlement is precipitating important changes in household dynamics and economic strategies among the Tibetan population surveyed. Resettled nomads are faced with the challenge of settling into a new environment and assimilating the cultural references that are bound up with it. We are left to ask: can those who have been resettled recreate a living, functioning community that provides support for its inhabitants in spite of increased economic and centripetal social pressure? Studies in other pastoral regions have shown that resettlement precipitates difficult social and psychological adjustments (Bascom 1998, Chatty 1980, Cisse 1980). Longstanding social interactions based on economic exchange of livestock products undergo significant changes with resettlement. What is most striking about the layout of urban areas (apart from the obvious proximity of houses and *ger* to one another) is that they offer few possibilities for gatherings on common ground.

There is comparatively limited scholarship on the ways resettlement changes subjectivities and livelihood strategies. While in a broader sense there is considerable literature on social networks and a sustained interest in the idea of social capital, it remains unclear what particular effects resettlement may have on social bonds and cultural reproduction in these contexts. Arguably, nomads risk losing their capacity to self-manage through social networks and informal exchange. Greater risk of impoverishment as a result of resettlement stems not only from the loss of natural or man-made physical capital but also attrition in human capital, as patterns of social organisation are dismantled. The importance of social networks lies not just in promoting personal relationships, but also in their utility in terms of availing individuals of resources and financial support. What is lost, then, is not only cash income, but also the savings that are accumulated in the form of cultural status and identity. In urban settlements, social institutions like mutual aid, collective activities and food sharing may give way to more individualist attitudes that facilitate social disorders like alcoholism, drug addiction, violence and suicides.

Further, resettlement diminishes the importance of place in the construction of individual and community identities. The consequences of losing such place-based attachments – and the knowledge embodied by living in these

landscapes – may be profound (Malkki 1992, Brun 2001). Resettlement thus creates risks of impoverishment in that it dismantles indigenous production systems built upon particular environments (Tan and Yao 2006). The high prestige of the elders, a product of their intimate knowledge of the land and traditional production practices, is likely to wane in urban areas, where pastoralists' skills have little utility. There is a very real risk of bankrupting rural communities, destabilising their long-lived resource use practices, and sun-dering the social fabric that has allowed nomads to utilise very large areas of China's rangelands, which have few alternative uses.

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Kenneth Bauer is a lecturer in Anthropology and the Asian and Middle Eastern Studies Program at Dartmouth College. He is also Coordinator of the Human Development Program at Dartmouth's Dickey Center for International Understanding. His research addresses a number of development challenges facing Tibetan nomads: resettlement, shifting property regimes, biodiversity conservation, and climate change. In addition to academic research, he has consulted for a number of development organisations in China, including The Poverty Alleviation Fund, Winrock International and the Trace Foundation. He co-founded a non-profit organisation, DROKPA (www.drokpa.org), that partners with communities in Tibet and the Himalaya to catalyse social entrepreneurship and implement grassroots development.

Email: kennybauer@gmail.com

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