

# THE POLITICS OF STANDARDISING AND SUBORDINATING SUBJECTS: *THE NOMADIC SETTLEMENT PROJECT* IN TIBETAN AREAS OF AMDO

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## Abstract

Since 2006, Tibetan nomads have been resettled into centralised urban settlement towns as part of China's effort at 'Building a New Socialist Countryside' in Tibetan areas. The official narrative of this new policy falls very much within the ambit of neoliberal mantras, such as bringing modernisation, economic efficiency, market-oriented personhood, comfortable living and, most importantly, environmental protection and national security to its west. At the heart of such policies is the idea that the west would remain 'backward' and 'unruly' if left alone or uncared for. In this context, this paper aims to elucidate how a sense of backwardness that ostensibly poses a threat to social and political stability is transformed into the spatial and social reorganisation of Tibetan pastoral regions. Drawing on my ethnographic research in the summer of 2012, this paper takes the newly built resettlement village in Jentsa (established in 2009), Amdo, as a case study to explore how a multitude of actors on the ground have come to view, respond, and cope with this new policy by simultaneously relying on and incorporating the new space, and by constituting alternative forms of participation and social space. I argue that, if we are to understand the multiplicity of interactions and actors at play in the process of implementing nomadic settlement project in Tibetan areas in general, and in Jentsa in particular, we need to develop models of understanding these relationships that acknowledge their complexity.

**KEYWORDS:** Resettlement, Development, Education, Xiangmu, Nomads ('brog pa).

## 'Life still goes on...'

Ane Drolma<sup>1</sup> is in her late forties. In 2010, she moved to the newly built settlement town on the periphery of Jentsa County<sup>2</sup> with her husband and their

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1. All names of people in this paper are pseudonyms.
  2. Jentsa is located around 100 miles away from Xining, the capital city of Qinghai province, People's Republic of China, and it encompasses roughly 28,464 hectares of area, which in 2011 contained around 50,000 persons. Tibetans make up

seven-year-old for the purpose of sending their son to a good school. Before Ane Drolma's family moved to the settlement town, they led a nomadic pastoral life, living in an adobe house in winter and a canvas tent in summer and moving with their roughly twenty yaks and 150 sheep – an average flock in these parts – to new pastures as needed. All the adobe houses in Gongri Village<sup>3</sup> are dispersed across wide-open grassland surrounded by mountains. It is not easy life, despite of the romantic portrayal of nomads in poems and films as people with innocent smiles and verdant green grassland. Having grown up in a nomadic family as a child myself, I know that herding yaks and sheep in winter can be very harsh as temperature sinks to minus twenty degrees Celsius. But summer is usually pleasant if there is no drought.

While I was staying with Ane Drolma's family in the summer of 2012, Ane shared with me a mixture of feelings about her new life. She proudly said,

I sell bread in the street these days. Initially, I was shy to just sit in the street and sell bread, especially when I saw people from my village. Now I am getting more and more used to it. I make some money from selling bread to support my family. Since January, I have never asked for any money from my husband.

After a pause, she continued, 'I would not have many complaints about our life here if there was a place for me to make offerings to mountain deities.' Like other Tibetans in Gongri Village, making offerings to mountain deities is an essential part of her life: it brings safety, purity, and prosperity to their families. Yet, we cannot reduce Ane Drolma's concerns here to trivial exotic sentimentality or superstitious beliefs (Chin. *Mixin*), as the Chinese state development

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around 68% of the population (Jentsa Official Website <http://baike.baidu.com/view/928121.htm>, accessed in 2014).

3. Apart from Jentsa, place names in this paper are also pseudonyms. Gongri (pop. 2300, 550 households) is a remote mountain community of semi-nomadic herders who until recently relied solely on livestock as their means of subsistence. Land policies such as the grassland fencing policy of 1999 have greatly altered communal land use and many now seek outside cash income under increasing pressures to resettle in town. However, the majority of Gongri villagers' livelihood still relies on herding yaks and sheep. Unlike nomadic places such as Guoluo and Yushu, Yartsa or caterpillar fungus, an expensive medical herb, does not grow in Gongri, but Yartsa has been increasingly becoming an important source of cash income for many Gongri villagers as many go out to collect it in other pastoral regions every year. In my view, Yartsa economy has made the urbanisation transition for Tibetan nomadic pastoralists somewhat smoother as nomads learn to directly engage in cash economy. However, it is not a stable source of income.

discourse, as well as some of the so-called modern Tibetan New Thinkers,<sup>4</sup> would pompously assume. For Ane Drolma and many other Tibetans with whom I spoke that summer, not being able to make offerings to mountain deities threatens the very core of their personhood, and how they relate to their environment as the world around them changes drastically. Many Gongri villagers express sentiments like, ‘We live right next to the town’s landfill. It’s hard to find a clean place to make offerings with trash from the landfill blowing into to your courtyard.’

Later on, I realised that a place to make offerings is not the only thing that Ane Drolma felt she needed as I learned more details of her life in the settlement town. Ane said, ‘There is no toilet here [in the resettlement]. It is a pain to travel to the public toilets on the main street.’ At this moment, I bluntly asked Ane, ‘Why doesn’t your family move back to Gongri, your home village, if there is not even a toilet here!’ Ane mused on this while making some tea on her newly bought electronic plate before replying,

You know Huatse, my family sold all our sheep and yaks very recently. Without any livestock, how could we lead a life back in the village now? Plus, our son can get good schooling here, so it is better to stay. Also people in the village would say that we did not manage to lead a good life here if we go back. At least, I can make some money from selling bread here. It is a tough job, *yet life still goes on, right?* (Tib. ‘*Tso ba de ltar bud ‘gro ni red, de red la?*’)

As Ane Drolma’s narratives suggest, the ongoing resettlement of Tibetan nomads into urban areas under the aegis of the Nomadic Settlement Project (Chin: *Muming dingju gongcheng*) since 2006 has created tremendous changes and challenges for pastoralists.<sup>5</sup> At the same time, such changes are complex co-productions of outsiders’ influence and some insiders’ active embracing of these changes – a point I elaborate later in my argument. Generally, reports by human rights organisations<sup>6</sup> and activists in the West on resettlement among Tibetan pastoralists tend to perpetuate the stereotypical image of Tibetans as either peaceful followers of the Dalai Lama and Tibetan Buddhism or abject

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4. The final chapters of Wuqi’s dissertation, *Tradition and Modernity: Cultural Continuum and Transition among Tibetans in Amdo*, address the rise of Tibetan ‘New Thinkers’ in the late 1990s and early 2000s. These ‘New Thinkers’ espouse the view that Tibetan culture and religion have been a hindrance to Tibetan development and modernity.
  5. The Qinghai Provincial government bureau announced in March 2012 that 270,000 nomads had been relocated into urban settlement towns since 2006 under the campaign to ‘Build a New Socialist Countryside’ in Tibetan areas. There are approximately 2.25 million nomads in Tibet (c.f. Human Rights Watch 2013).
  6. C.f. Human Rights Watch 2013.

victims of Chinese oppression. On the other hand, the exaggerated and triumphant narratives of Tibetan pastoralists enjoying modern and comfortable lives that are ubiquitously featured in Chinese media<sup>7</sup> equally distort the everyday complexities faced by the nomads I met.

My own narrative, therefore, tries to manoeuvre between these bifurcated views, and privileges the narratives of people like Ane Drolma, for whom the policy has had very concrete and ambivalent effects. ‘*Although it is a tough job [selling bread in the street], life still goes on ...*’ After observing the processes of social, spatial and cultural change in Jentsa over a long period of time, I have come to concur with many of my participants’ sense that life not only still goes on – it goes on with hopes and dreams, struggles and hardships, confusions and uncertainties.

In this paper I first aim to explore the sociopolitical ideologies that undergird the changing geographical and cultural space of Tibetan pastoralists. Second, by taking Gongri resettlement village as a particular case study, I examine the role played by local politics, the social and cultural use of the settlement space in practice, and the ways that local officials and local elites as well as ordinary people make use of and appropriate the nomadic resettlement space for their own ends. This paper also pays a close attention to the implementation of this policy, whereby a multitude of actors sought a piece of the pie – the general fund that been allocated to build the resettlement town. The goal of this paper, then, is to develop a model for understanding the complexities of these dynamics on the lives of Tibetan nomadic pastoralists living in a drastically changing world.

The ethnographic material presented in this paper is primarily drawn from three months of fieldwork (from June–August 2012) during which I explored how Tibetan pastoralists from Gongri Village were coping with their new lifestyle after relocation into an urban resettlement village in Jentsa County.<sup>8</sup> Since I grew up in the area, and had returned home every summer for the past several

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7. The Chinese State development narrative, hence all State managed news reports, assume that Tibetan nomads previously lived in a world that is not ‘modern’ and in houses that are crowded and dark as opposed to spacious and bright resettlement houses. On the contrary, international human rights organisations such as Human Rights Watch completely demonise the *Nomadic Settlement Project* by portraying the settlement houses as ‘ghetto-style housing blocks’ and Tibetan nomads as pure victims of such policies.

8. Most of the families in Gongri are engaged in herding. Even if some families have moved to the county town as part of the *Nomadic Settlement Project*, half of their family members most likely still herd sheep and yaks back in the village. The numbers of households that are purported to have moved to the resettlement town on official documents do not translate into anything that is going on in reality. Please see Zhoumaoka (2015) on how nomads use resettlement houses for different

years, this paper also draws partly on my own experiences as well as those of my friends and family. My field methods combined participant-observation of spatial and social change in Jentsa and open-ended interviews with seven village elderly men, six village women, four local government official workers and two local Tibetan teachers; these interviews lasted between one and three hours. I spent most of my time at the home of a relative whose family had moved to the resettlement town in the winter of 2010.

## The art of standardising and subordinating subjects through education and development

Today, pastoralists across the world struggle to balance increasingly demanding sets of relations: state powers that persistently exert an ordering frame through education campaigns and development initiatives, market forces that stress the survival of the fittest and corporations in strategic pursuit of raw materials (Askew 2012, Stasch 2014, Fischer 2014). Tibetan pastoralists are confronted with similar realities (c.f. Lafitte 2013).

Since the inception of the central state-led 'Great Develop the West' campaign (Chin. *Xibu da kaifa*) in 1999, the PRC's top leaders have launched large-scale ecological policies and plans in Qinghai Province, a region Tibetans refer to as Amdo. In particular, the 2005 campaign of constructing a 'New Socialist Countryside' promulgated a specific model for building socialist 'villages' in Tibetan areas that ostensibly possess the qualities of 'sturdiness, greenness, beauty, and luster' (Ch. *yinhua, luhua, meihua, lianghua*)<sup>9</sup> as part of the larger mission 'to develop production, enrich livelihood, civilize rural habits, tidy up the villages, and democratise management'.<sup>10</sup>

After the 2008 Tibetan protests, in particular, a series of military crackdowns have paved the way for intensified efforts to privatise Tibetans' land use practices through urbanisation and resettlement initiatives. The official planning document, entitled *Nationwide Nomadic Settlement Construction Project, 12<sup>th</sup> Five Year Plan, 2010* dictates that,

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purposes, in her paper entitled 'Familial and Educational Challenges Faced by Tibetan Nomadic Pastoralists after Resettlement: Taking Rma chu as a case study'.

9. C.f. Agriculture Information Net. URL <http://cmzz.mca.gov.cn/article/zcfg/dffg/qinghai/201201/20120100056423.shtml>. Accessed 2015.
10. Chin. *shengchan fazhan; shenghuo kuanyu; xiangfeng wenming; cunrong zheng-jie; guanli minzhu*. The 'Campaign of Constructing a New Socialist Countryside' was announced at the Fifth Plenum of the Sixteenth Party Congress in October 2005. (c.f. Perry 2011: 35)

The Tibetan high plateau, Xinjiang, and other minority nationality regions are the key areas to combat separatists, impregnation,<sup>11</sup> and vandalistic actions. Through the implementation of the policy of the Nomadic Settlement Project, the production and living conditions of nomads will be improved; the economic development of minorities and social development will be catalysed, thus it effectively resists people's involvement in both internal and external hostile forces by eliminating social instabilities, and maintaining national unity and stability in China's border areas (p. 10).

According to official data, more than 200,000 concrete settlement houses have been built in Qinghai alone since 2009, and more houses are to be built under the new provincial campaign, 'Build One Thousand Villages; One Hundred of Them as Models' (Ch. *Qiancun jianshe, baicun shifan*), which was announced in 2011.<sup>12</sup>

If we examine official Chinese discourse on the resettlement projects, the successes of such initiatives are solely measured in numbers: e.g., since 2009, the government has invested 2.1 billion RMB to construct 3,750 households in Qinghai alone (Qinghai Tibetan News 2012).<sup>13</sup> According to state authorities, such environmental resettlement programmes in Western China will protect the environment *and* eliminate poverty. The focus on poverty alleviation is closely in alignment with the World Bank's policy of resettlement with development (RwD), which advocates treating resettlement operations as opportunities for development (Rogers and Wang 2006). In fact, China's resettlement programmes have received high praise from the World Bank: 'China's RwD has been presented as a model for other developing countries' (Bartolome et al. 2002).

Qinghai was long considered a far-flung, uncivilised frontier, even as it became an object of development longing from the early twentieth century on (Sun 1929, Makley 2011, 2013, 2014). Chinese national planners, both before and after the founding of the PRC (1949), have viewed this western frontier zone as an abstract 'wasteland', requiring heroic and rationalised management through cultivation, naturalising the superiority of agriculture over a subordinated pastoralism (Rohlf 2003). In the broader historical and political context of China's incorporation of the western frontier zone into its national body, land policies have increasingly been used as a tool for nation-building and territorial consolidation. Of course,

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11. The Chinese word *cantou* means penetration or permeation. Here it is used in the sense that the policy of nomadic settlement is designed to prevent Tibetans (Xinjiang people) and other minorities alike from combining with other forces that oppose the CCP regime.

12. To learn more about this new policy, please visit: <http://news.hexun.com/2011-06-05/130277055.html> Accessed in 2015.

13. C.f. Qinghai Nomadic Settlement Project: Happy Life on the 'Land of Happiness.' URL: <http://video.xinhua08.com/a/20121126/1071142.shtml>

policies around land have never been presented as only land policies. In the case of Tibet, land policies such as the large-scale fencing of traditional nomad grazing pastureland with barbed wire in the late 1990s,<sup>14</sup> conservation policies in the early 2000s and, most recently, the Nomadic Settlement Project have been introduced to Tibetans as a package that includes civilising missions such as *educating* the nomads, *modernising* the nomads or *uplifting* (Chin. *tigao*) the human quality (Chin. *suzhi*) of the Tibetan pastoralists.

Specifically, underpinning the policy of the Nomadic Settlement Project is the presumption that overgrazing leads to grassland ‘degradation’, a notion that draws on certain assumptions about the *Tragedy of the Commons* (Hardin 1968), namely that extensive mobile pastoralism based on communal pasture use is not only backward but also inefficient. Even more consequential than this rhetoric of ecological preservation has been the state’s inculcation of civil governance into the everyday ordering of local life, i.e., replacing nomadic ‘ground-shacks’ (Chin: *Diwozi*) with ‘comfortable’ concrete houses.<sup>15</sup> In other words, nomadic previous residences were ostensibly close to collapse in stark contrast to durable and modern brick or concrete houses.

The increasingly negative portrayals of Tibetan pastoralists employed in the State rhetoric reinforce a deep-rooted mentality among officials and ordinary citizens alike that the lifestyle of Tibetan pastoralists is ‘backward’ and that the land in which they live is a ‘wasteland’. To put it differently, Tibetan pastoralists are feared to be anomalies of proper development. For example, one middle-aged female government official at the local Education Department off-handedly remarked, ‘I heard a friend of mine saying that the reason Tibetan society is so backward (Tib. *rjes lus*) is because we have too many nomads. I think he is right.’ Interestingly, even though she is ethnically Tibetan, she disassociates herself from her statement by deferring authorship of her words to a friend, even though she clearly agrees that nomads are the greatest impediment to Tibetan development. From the perspectives of most government officials – ethnically Tibetan, Han and others – the lifestyle of Tibetan pastoralists calls for *management* and *reorganisation* through resettlement *and* education.<sup>16</sup> This very making

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14. In 1999, under the policy of reallocating grassland (Chin. *Cuoyuan fengpei*),

15. See the open official planning document for detailed contrasts between old / ‘soon-to-be collapsed’ nomadic houses and new settlement houses.

16. By Chinese government officials, I do not exclusively mean Han Chinese officials. The Tibetan government officials that I interviewed during my fieldwork also commonly expressed the mentality that Tibetan nomads should be resettled and educated so that their *human quality* (Chin. *suzhi*) can be uplifted, the economy can be developed and quality of life can be raised. Some Gongri villagers told me that the top local government officials support *Nomadic Settlement Project* because they get a lot of money to ‘eat’ in the process of implementing the project.

and remaking of such subjectivities draws a fine, but clear, line between ‘modern’ urbanities and ‘backward’ nomads in time and space. To put it differently, big structural shifts such the grassland fencing policy in the 1990s,<sup>17</sup> conservation policies in the early 2000s and the recent policy of the Nomadic Settlement Project have placed Tibetan pastoralists on the margin of society both politically and socially. For instance, the opening speech made by the township leader at a village meeting that I observed in 2012 highlights this point:

Today, our *zhuyao mudi* (main goal) in coming here is to educate the nomads (Tib: *slob gso gtong gi yong ni yin*). First and foremost, I want to talk about education. Gongri village has a very small pool of students studying at the county level schools compared to other farming villages. Why is that? This has to do with your old thinking (Tib: *bsam blo rnying ba*). Many parents in your village are ruining your kids’ future by asking them to herd animals with you. If you do not want your kids to lead the kind of life that you have had, you have to send them to school, especially schools at the county seat where education quality is better than in the village’s and the people have higher *suzhi*. The nation-state (Chin. *guojia*) has invested a lot of money to build resettlement houses at the county seat for nomads, so I highly encourage you to take advantage of this very good policy and let your kids get a better education at the county...

The speech starts with a Chinese loanword for *purpose*, which draws attention to the speaker’s level of education and social status. Not that every single use of Chinese loanword indexes high status, but the word *purpose* is associated with townspeople, who are, unlike nomads, purportedly purposeful or people with goals. The speaker then states the goal of the meeting: ‘to educate the nomads’. The speaker differentiates himself from nomads and represents himself as an ‘educated’ person or a ‘person from the county’. Here I find Russian philosopher and linguist Mikhail Bakhtin’s notion of ‘voices’ to be a helpful analytic tool for unpacking the multiplicity of agencies in this speech. For Bakhtin, the voices of separate actors are found in the complex rhetoric produced by a single speaker. ‘Voices’ for Bakhtin are not just individuals, but characters or types, who stand for collectives. At stake here is not only one official talking down to nomads, but a collective mentality against nomads for lagging behind in education and, hence, in human development or ‘human quality’. When the speaker shifts his voice to the state, reprimanding Gongri villagers for not moving into the resettlement town to get a ‘formal education’ for their kids, he is voicing the State’s perspective, articulating and reemphasising the patron–client relationship between the ‘benevolent’ state and the ‘unappreciated’ nomads (Yeh 2007). In turn, the State has escalated its efforts

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17. C.f. Bauer (2005) for a historical account of the enclosure movement in pastoral Tibet since 1980s.



to encourage Tibetan nomads to send their kids to schools in urban towns, where they will have the opportunity to get a 'formal education' and to move forward – a strong incentive for Tibetan pastoralists to resettle.

### 'It is very hard to lead a nomadic life these days'

On a rainy day in August 2010, long before Ane Drolma's family moved to the resettlement town, my host father Akhu Tsering, who is in his late forties, returns home from herding sheep on his family's fenced pastureland. His Tibetan robe is totally soaked. His hands and legs are trembling from the cold and his face looks tired. Water drips from the brim of his hat. Ane Drolma swiftly brings him some dry clothes before adding more dung to the stove to keep the house warm. Tsering sits by the stove and drinks his milk tea with hands still trembling. As the flames in the stove grow, the house starts to warm warmer. Then Ane Drolma, Father Tsering and I discuss his arduous day:

'You must be very tired today. You should have come home before the rainstorm', says Ane while serving us more hot tea.

Father Tsering responded somewhat angrily, 'Of course, I would have come home before the rainstorm if I could. But our family's sheep ran to the upper village's pastureland. If I hadn't gone up to drive them back, those families in the upper village (Tib. Dewa gong ma) would have thrown stones at our stray sheep and broken their legs.'

'Yes, they would definitely do that. Good that you managed to drive our sheep back home', Ane replied.

After father had drunk some tea, he talked about his livelihood after all the communal land in his village was reallocated to individual households in 1999.

Huatse, it is very hard to lead a nomadic life these days. All the grasslands are fenced. Animals are not like people. They just go everywhere when they are hungry. But if they go onto another family's pastureland, it causes conflicts between the families. Many families get into serious fights because of that, even among siblings. So we always have to keep eyes on our sheep and yaks. It's very tiring. I seriously want my family to move to the county seat, but my wife disagrees with doing that.

Ane joined our conversation.

'If we moved to the county seat, who would take care of our family's sheep and yaks?'

'If we let my brother's family use our pastureland, I am sure they would help us take care of our animals.'

'Without money, how could we lead a life in the county? People say that you need cash to buy everything, even water.'

‘We could open a small restaurant. Plus, many families in our village send their kids to school at the county seat. We also should think about our little son’s future’, Father Tsering explained.

‘Restaurant ... huh, you know how to run a restaurant? We can send our son to the boarding school in our village’, Ane Drolma insisted.

‘The teaching quality in our village is bad! Good teachers don’t come to teach in a village like ours. Families send their kids to schools at the county. You don’t know such things!’

This brief exchange illustrates how families weighed the positives and negatives of changing their way of life. Above all, it is clear that the policies of land reallocation and fencing in the late 1990s rendered communal grazing unfeasible in most pastoral areas of Amdo. Arguably, grassland fencing almost put an end to the nomadic life in the traditional sense of moving seasonally from place to place even before the Nomadic Settlement Project was introduced. In other words, Tibetan pastoralists in Gongri were acutely aware that, as Aku Tsering observed, ‘It is very hard to lead a nomadic life these days’, even before they heard about the Nomadic Settlement Project.

After the State Forestry Administration and Qinghai Province Government had set up the Three Rivers’ Source Nature Reserve (May 2000), resettlement and other development initiatives commenced in pastoral regions closest to the three rivers’ source (e.g., Yushu and Guluo), and were then gradually introduced to other Tibetan pastoral regions. The Nomadic Settlement Project in Gongri, where I conducted my fieldwork, was conceived in 2009.

As Cencetti (2011) points out, sedentarisation programmes such as the Nomadic Settlement Project are nothing new, but the combination of this form of development with the discourse of environmental protection is novel. Policy documents often refer to resettled Tibetan pastoralists as *ecological migrants* (*shengtai yimin*) and the settlement towns as *ecological migrant villages* (*shengtai yimin cun*). Yet in practice, local Tibetans give them different names. One cannot conflate spatial terms such as *village* in English, *cun* in Chinese and *deba* in Tibetan because each term has its own distinctive cultural and political associations. Not only that, my translation of the *Muming Dingju Gongcheng* policy as the ‘Nomadic Settlement Project’ profoundly elides the part that *dingju* plays in indexing the permanent aspect of settling in one place as opposed to the mobile nomadic lifestyle. In describing construction principles for settlements, publicly available government documents stress the importance of transforming dispersed nomads dwellings into small concentrated villages: ‘Through scientific planning, the layout of nomadic settlements, if the environment allows, should be concentrated in one area by incorporating the surrounding villages into a centralised settlement’ (*Nationwide Nomadic Settlement Construction Project, 12<sup>th</sup> Five-Year Plan*

2010: 12). Drawing upon western social evolutionist theory, communism holds that human history gradually improves as it changes from the most backward and primitive societies (hunting, gathering, mobile pastoralism) to sedentary agriculture and finally to industrial society (Dkon mchog dge legs 2012). In this line of thinking, humans initially live in temporary and mobile places (e.g., Tibetan pastoralists), and then gradually form a fixed settlement or *cun* with the development of production and improvement in living conditions.

The resettlement village at Jentsa is located on the outskirts of the county town, where Tibetan farmers have lived and cultivated grains and vegetables for decades. These farming villages are called *chuma*, meaning lowland or 'close-to-water' villages (*dewa*), whereas farming villages located at higher altitudes are called *rima*, meaning highland or 'close-to-mountain' villages. People herding in Jentsatang are closer to *rima*, but they are first and foremost '*brogpa* (pastoralists) while both *chuma* and *rima* are *rongba* (farmers).<sup>18</sup> Relocating into the settlement town means not only moving closer to the urban county town, but also moving closer to Tibetan farming villages. As Makley (2011) notes, since the Central State launched the *Great Develop the West* campaign in 2001, rural Tibetans have been subjected to state-led development projects seeking to modernise their livelihood and lifestyle. This is particularly true of Tibetan pastoralists ('*brog pa*) in rural areas in Qinghai because they are considered not only to be backward (Chin: *luo hou*) and lagging behind 'educated' and 'civilised' (*wen ming de*) city people, but, more recently, they are also considered to be more 'backward' than Tibetan farmers living in villages located closer to the county seat. We can think of this, in anthropologist Li Zhang (2006, 2010) terms, as the *spatialisation of class*, whereby nomadic pastoralists are spatially placed at the lowest end of society in terms of education, economic development, and most importantly in 'human quality'.

The county town and farming villages had, until recently, never been a site of attraction for Tibetan pastoralists, who had historically been important economic and political players in the Amdo region.<sup>19</sup> The vanishing tradition of *shagpo* illustrates the once intimate connections between farmers and pastoralists. During the summer, farmers from the lowland areas would visit the upper pastoral families to trade agricultural products such as barley, rapeseed oil and vegetables; upon their return, they were usually offered milk, butter and cheese by the pastoralists. Each individual farming family has their own *shagpo*. *Shag* means house or dwelling, while *po* refers to a family or a person. As such, *shagpo* literally means the place where one stays. Hospitality is central

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18. For a detailed historical account of the different lifestyles and connections between '*brog pa* and *rong ba*, see Wu qi (2013).

19. C.f. Stevenson 1999, Pirie 2005, Ekvall 1964.

to forming close friendships between pastoralists and farmers in this region. A few decades ago, the pastoral areas in the mountains were seen as a land of abundance for their milk, butter and cheese surpluses. As an eighty-year-old man from the Gongri pastoral area recalled, when the Jentsa region (both farming and herding areas) used to invite honorary lamas to give Buddhist teachings, it was the pastoralists who contributed the most to such ceremonies, bringing dairy products such as milk and yoghurt to feed the monks.

Nomads have experienced a precipitous fall in status as ongoing development policies target them as ‘backward’ subjects needing education and development. As one woman described the low status of nomads in the eyes of county people, be they Tibetan, Han Chinese or members of other ethnic groups, ‘People here do not view us as people. Nobody likes nomads these days. It’s as if we killed their ancestors.’ This decline in social status has real consequences for Gongri villagers. As one old woman lamented, ‘It is very hard for us even to find low construction work (Chin: *Xiaogong*) here because we do not speak Chinese. My daughter tried for several weeks to look for work. Finally she found a job, but in a week her boss fired her. The only reason was that she couldn’t understand her Chinese boss’s orders.’ Akhu Tsering was right: it is indeed very hard to lead a nomadic life these days. Yet, the sad fact is that finding an alternative lifestyle is also not easy.

### ‘The nomadic settlement project is just another *Xiangmu*’

From the foregoing discussions, it might seem there is little to understand about the cause of the nomadic settlement formation in Tibetan areas in general in Gongri Village in particular beyond the power of the State and its development agendas. Much of what has been described here can also be characterised as the State and/or the local government catalysing change *but not fully driving it* (c.f. Stasch 2013). This point becomes clear as we delve into the details of who initiated the nomadic resettlement village in Jentsa and how it was carried out. As noted earlier, the transformation wrought by the Nomadic Settlement Project in Gongri Village was a complex co-production of outside influence and a few insiders’ active embracing of these changes.<sup>20</sup>

In the remaining space, I aim to present a nuanced account of how the nomadic resettlement village in Jentsa first got started, and who was involved in the implementation process of the project. Naturally this particular case is not

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20. By ‘outside influence’, I mean the development agenda that undergirds the Nomadic Settlement Project; by ‘insiders’, I mean Gongri village elders and officially appointed village heads.

necessarily representative of the Nomadic Settlement Projects in other Tibetan pastoral regions. Yet the general internal logic of the project, the implementation process and the main actors typically involved are more or less the same. In an interview with a local government official, I inquired as to his views on the relationship between the Nomadic Settlement Project and ecological protection. He first burst into laughter and then said, 'Connection with ecological protection!?! Who cares about that? The Nomadic Settlement Project is just another *Xiangmu* ("project").' Doing *Xiangmu* is oftentimes equated with doing *business* in the common language of my interlocutors, which implies a monetary gain for certain group of people. For some village elders and village leaders,<sup>21</sup> township and county government dignitaries, the pursuit of resettlement was, from the beginning, a means of securing *Xiangmu* money. As Tibetan nomads have been introduced to a multitude of policies in the past few decades, indeed there is much *Xiangmu* for County government officials to do. *Xiangmu* are ephemeral. The most important thing from the perspective of the local government is to complete a project so they have something to show when Provincial and Prefectural government officials inspect their work (c.f. Bauer 2005). Many of my interlocutors judged the power of officials by how many (or big) *Xiangmu* they are responsible for. As they say, 'This county official has many *Xiangmu*', to judge one's level of power.

Similarly, resettlement village in Jentsa was first initiated with the purchase by four village elders of a piece of land from a farming village on the outskirts of the county seat in 2009. During my fieldwork, I interviewed two of these village elders, whom I refer to as Donkho and Tashi. Donkho is in his early seventies and Tashi is in his late sixties. Half of Donkho's family is engaged in herding in Gongri village, while the other half had already moved to Jentsa County prior to the resettlement project. His whole family had returned to Gongri village before the establishment of the resettlement town in Jentsa. After the resettlement town was built in 2009, Tashi moved to Jentsa County with his four grandchildren while the rest of his family remained in Gongri village. In an interview, Donkho said:

I realised that there is a new *Xiangmu* of building settled houses (Tib. *Gtan bstod khang ba*) near county towns in other pastoral regions such as Zeku and Henan. I got the idea to have a similar project implemented in our county because so many families from Gongri village have been renting houses at the county seat. Some families moved here to send their kids

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21. Village elders (Tib: *sde ba'i rgan po*) are influential local figures, who have traditionally played an critical role in their communities, e.g., mitigating local disputes, delivering wedding speeches, and initiating religious ceremonies. Village leaders are officially elected and they closely work with township level officials by convening meetings, introducing new policies and distributing government subsidies.

to school. Others moved because they have sick family to take care of. In total, we have 87 families from Gongri who live at the county seat but many do not have houses. So three village elders and I decided to initiate this project.

Donkho and Tashi, who also invited two village elders and a village leader to join their group, came up with a scheme to buy land from a semi-urban Tibetan village called Gramthang, located on the outskirts of Jentsa county. Initially, Donkho and Tashi told Gongri villagers that they planned to buy a piece of land and then request *Xiangmu* money to build settlement houses. Donkho told me that the primary goal of this project, or *Xiangmu*, was to provide houses for families from Gongri village that rented small rooms at the county seat so that they could send their children to school or take care of the medical needs of relatives. At the same time, he said, 'Our (referring to his cohort) interests are interlinked with the goal of building houses for families without homes at the county seat.'

Once Donkho and his cohort had bought a piece of land large enough to build 87 houses, they named it, 'the land of village elders' (Tib: *rgad po tsho'i sa*). Their plan was to sell parcels of land to each family for 5,000 RMB (around 900 US dollars), and then use that money to pay Gramthang village for the land. Since 5,000 RMB was not a large sum of money for land, many families initially showed great interest. But this process became more complicated as Donkho and his cohorts tried to garner support from the County government to build settlement houses on the land. According to Donkho and his cohorts, this was not because Gongri families did not want houses to be built on the land that they bought, but because one County Government head, whom I call Zoba here, condemned Donkho and his cohorts' project, telling Gongri villagers that they did not need to pay for the land.

Donkho and his cohorts finally managed to buy a piece of land from Gramthang Village and they requested a *Xiangmu* to build resettlement houses for Gongri villagers on this land. They charged each family 5,000 RMB and demanded an additional 5,000 RMB family contribution to the local County Government. In 2009, 87 settlement houses were built. But did those families who did not have houses at the county seat, who had been mentioned in Donkho's initial request for this *Xiangmu*, receive resettlement houses? The answer is far more complex than 'yes' or 'no.'

Donkho, repeatedly insisted that he and his cohorts bought this land for the sake of Gongri families lacking houses at the county seat; however, as our conversation continued, he also admitted that this was also a kind of business (Tib: *tshong*).

We had promised that we would provide houses to poor families as long as they paid for it. Having made our primary goal clear, everyone knew we

also had our own personal interests in doing this project. So we asked these families to support our business.

Indeed, their project turned out to be quite a business. In the process of buying the land, garnering support from top county government officials and building resettlement houses, Donkho and his cohort spent more than 2,000 RMB making offerings to mountain deities to avoid obstacles;<sup>22</sup> they also bribed<sup>23</sup> local government officials to get the *Xiangmu* money to build the settlement houses. Once resettlement houses were built, houses were allocated to families who could afford the 5,000 RMB for land and 5,000 RMB for a family contribution. Only a few families that did not have houses at the county seat could afford such costs.

Donkho and his cohort have close personal connections with the high county government officials. Moreover, there were more than a dozen of local Tibetan entrepreneurs who bought houses in the settlement town and managed to sell them for a higher price, mostly to Tibetans residents from farming areas near the county buildings. Dongrub, the local businessman whom I interviewed, used the household registers of other families (mostly his relatives) to buy seven houses at the settlement town. Speculation that real estate close to the county town will get more and more expensive as the county town expands created a short-lived but lucrative market for settlement houses in Jentsa in 2010, even though the location of the resettlement town is adjacent to the county's biggest open landfill.

In 2010, Donkho and his cohort sold all the land that they bought from Gramthang. As many villagers from Gongri attested, Donkho and his cohort greatly benefited from this project, as did some high county leaders. In my interview with Donkho, his remarks on their goals in buying the land from Gramthang implied that their personal interests were entangled with what he calls 'our business' (Tib: *nga tsho 'I tshong*). Village elders and village leaders can be self-serving, as can top county officials, but they do not necessarily

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22. *Obstacles* here should be understood in the context of Tibetan's relationship to land. Land, houses and bodies are essential 'containers' (Tib. *gnod*) of 'vital essences' (Tib. *bcud*) and the 'abodes' (Tib. *gnas*) of various empowered beings such as ubiquitous earth-gods (Tib. *sab dag*) and water-gods (*klu bdag*). These supernatural beings have the power to harm as well as protect human affairs. On the one hand, Donkho and his cohort made offerings to the mountain deities to win the protection of mountain deities. On the other hand, they bribed top local government officials to help them realise their project. In these ways, local people are responding to the project of *Nomadic Settlement* with hybrid notions of authority, time and space.

23. Cash, expensive alcoholic beverages, meat (sheep or yak), butter, yoghurt and milk are commonly offered as bribes to top local government officials (personal communication).

offend all villagers. The Gongri villagers who created and lived in the resettlement town have done so more through processes of consensus formation among themselves, rather than under the direct influence of a single actor, be it the local county government or village elders. However, it should be clear by now that it is mainly village elders and leaders who have the close connections with top township and county government officials, county government officials who are good at competing for *Xiangmu*, and that local Tibetan businessmen who have entrepreneurial prowess ‘ate’ big portions of the resettlement *Xiangmu*.

## Conclusion

It was a very hot day. The blistering sunshine was heating up the concrete streets of Jentsa. Ane Drolma sat in the broiling air of the market where she sells bread each day. At noon, I went with her to buy a hat to counter the heat. We entered a shop and she tried on several, making the smartly dressed Muslim shopkeeper impatient. ‘If you’re not going to buy one, don’t try on all my hats!’ she scolds in Tibetan, as if Ane Drolma was a troublesome teenager. In response to this rudeness, Ane threw the hat she was trying on back at the shopkeeper and began to walk away.

‘You nomads!’ The shopkeeper exclaimed with contempt.

‘So?’ replied Ane. ‘Aren’t nomads people too?’

How have Tibetan nomads like Ane Drolma come to live in a world where they feel constantly scorned and embattled? What does it mean to be identified as ‘nomad’ even if you make a precarious living by selling bread in the street? In this paper, I’ve tried to answer these questions by viewing the Nomadic Settlement Project as a project of standardising and subordinating nomads, for example, by presenting *education* as a panacea for Tibetan nomads to ‘catch’ up with ‘civilised’ urban dwellers in terms of human and economic development. As Ane Drolma related, people in the county seat often scolded her as she pushed her handcart through the streets to sell her bread, ‘You nomads do not know how to walk properly!’<sup>24</sup> In these small moments, we become aware of how big structural shifts, such as the developmentalist ideologies of the last few decades, have placed Tibetan nomads on the margin of the society. Tibetan nomads are increasingly treated as the *objects* of modernising efforts to the extent that the bodies of *nomads* became isomorphic with their related

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24. C.f. Huatse Gyal (2013) for a detailed account of Ane Drolma’s everyday life of selling bread and the challenges she faces in her everyday life.



materialities (i.e. equating nomads with their residence, ‘poor ground shacks’ – *jianlou de diwozi*), arousing visceral disgust among many Chinese government officials.<sup>25</sup> As noted earlier, this narrative of modernising nomads seeps into all spheres of social life. Hence, even Tibetan urbanities and public figures such as Khenpo Tsulkhrim Lodro<sup>26</sup> take up and assume the terms of the official development discourse and view nomads as a hindrance to Tibet’s development (Wuqi 2013).

Many of the above-outlined strands of ethnography in this paper might seem familiar. One might even get the impression that there is little to understand about the Nomadic Settlement Project beyond ‘state domination’ and ‘developmentalist ideologies’. However, there are also distinctively Tibetan elements intertwined with these processes of hegemonic transformation, such that it would be a mistake to give an account centred only on State. Not all Gongri villagers are victims of the Nomadic Settlement Project. For example, people like Donkho and his cohort enjoyed elevated status and frequently mingled with the managerial and political elites of the county government. At the same time, ordinary nomads like Ane Drolma faced many challenges and discrimination in day-to-day life. Moreover, even those who did not move to the settlement town in Gongri have found themselves marginalised, disconnected and persecuted on many levels: they are constantly described as ‘backward’ villagers, needing education and human quality (*Suzhi*) that will only be possible if they move into an urban settlement town or send their children to schools at the county headquarters. Towards the end of my fieldwork in 2012, I spend some time with a Gongri family that did not have a settlement house at the county seat and was ambivalent about buying one. I joined Rtado while he was herding on a windy afternoon. After he had watered his animals, we came home to have lunch with his family. While enjoying some milk tea, Rtado was

25. By ‘Chinese government officials’, I do not exclusively mean Han Chinese. The Tibetan officials I interviewed also commonly expressed these ideas: that Tibetan nomads should be resettled and educated so that their *human quality* (Chin. *suzhi*) can be uplifted, the economy developed, and the quality of life raised. Many Gongri villagers told me that the top local government officials support *Nomadic Settlement Project* because it is a big *Xiangmu* and they can ‘eat’ a lot of money in the process. ‘Eating money’ (Tib. *Sgor mo za*) is a common expression used by Gongri villagers for corruption.

26. In the booklet entitled, ‘Introduction to Ten Virtuous Acts’ (Tib. *Dge bcu’i srol gyi rnam gzhag bzhugs so*), Khenpo Tsulkhrim Lodrol writes that all nomad men have a terrible habit: they do not work hard (Tib. *Goms srol shin tut ha chad cig*). According to Tsulkhrim Lodrol, they are very lazy people, meaning that they do not do wage labour work, such as construction; it seems that herding does not count as ‘work’ (Tib. *Las ka*). Portraits of nomads as indolent are ubiquitous in official rhetoric.

absorbed in thought. Then he turned to me and asked, ‘Huatse, do you think it is a good idea to have a settlement house at the county seat? I am thinking about buying one now.’ This was the hardest question I encountered during my fieldwork. Maybe at an academic conference, one could parry this question with a studied expression: ‘That depends.’ But Rtado was looking for a clear ‘yes’ or ‘no’ to resolve his brooding ambivalence around this issue. After some time, I responded, ‘Maybe you should.’ In the end, I would pose this question to you as well: do you think it is a good idea for nomads like Rtalo to have a settlement house?

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